

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE AZTECS

Susan Kellogg's history of the Aztecs offers a concise yet comprehensive assessment of Aztec history and civilization, emphasizing how material life and the economy functioned in relation to politics, religion, and intellectual and artistic developments. Appreciating the vast number of sources available but also their limitations, Kellogg focuses on three concepts throughout – value, transformation, and balance. Aztecs created *value*, material, and symbolic worth. 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*, a balance often threatened by spiritual and other forms of chaos. The book highlights the ethnicities that constituted Aztec peoples and sheds light on religion, political and economic organization, gender, sexuality and family life, intellectual achievements, and survival. Seeking to correct common misperceptions, Kellogg stresses the humanity of the Aztec women and men and problematizes the use of the terms “human sacrifice,” “myth,” and “conquest.”

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To Caleb – with much love

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	page	viii
<i>List of Maps</i>		x
<i>List of Tables</i>		xi
<i>Preface</i>		xiii
<i>Key Periods and Dates</i>		xxv
1 Introduction		1
2 Living in the Aztecs' Cosmos		38
3 Communities, Kingdoms, "Empires"		81
4 Creating Value: Producing, Exchanging, Consuming		121
5 Sex and the Altepetl: Gender, Sexuality, and Aztec Family Values		158
6 Resilience: Part One: Aztec Intellectual Life		202
7 Resilience: Part Two: Trauma, Transformation, Tenacity		246
<i>Glossary</i>		285
<i>Bibliographic Essay</i>		294
<i>Index</i>		352

FIGURES

2.1	Schematic drawing of the Templo Mayor	<i>page</i> 50
2.2	Classifications of major deities and translations of their names	61
3.1	Abbreviated genealogy and approximate dates of rule of Mexica tlatoque of Tenochtitlan	87
3.2	Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's palace with council meeting and courtrooms	93
3.3	Coyolxauhqui relief image	115
4.1	Major categories of Aztec clothing	138
4.2	Women selling goods in a marketplace	153
5.1	Image of Itzpapalotl (Obsidian Butterfly)	162
5.2	Piercing children's ears by age four	165
5.3	Parents training and disciplining children	167
5.4	A woman tlacuilo (painter/writer)	169
5.5	Wedding scene	174
5.6	Commoner housing	180
5.7	What a tlatoni and his palace might have looked like	181
6.1	Ilancueitl's name written in the Aztec writing system	211
6.2	Phoneticism in Aztec writing	213
6.3	Drawing of Coatlicue statue	231
6.4	The Calendar Stone and its images of time and space	232

List of Figures

6.5	The Venus of Tetzcooco	240
6.6	Aztec tripod plate	243
7.1	Tlaxcalteca leader meets Cortés in the <i>Lienzo de Tlaxcala</i>	251
7.2	Malintzin translating	252

TABLES

2.1	The twenty day signs and thirteen numbers of the Aztec tonalpohualli	<i>page</i> 44
2.2	The eighteen months of the solar year	45
4.1	Some price equivalencies in the sixteenth century	151

MAPS

1.1	Basin of Mexico with important Postclassic altepeme	<i>page 2</i>
1.2	The five lakes in the Basin of Mexico, major altepeme near them, and chinampa areas	24
3.1	Map of the extent of the empire at the height of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's reign	111

PREFACE

The Aztecs respected their elders and saw themselves reflected in them. That idea is meaningful to me as I reflect on the past that brought me to this book. I have always felt fortunate for the way I came to the field of Aztec ethnohistory. I first learned about the Aztecs as an undergraduate in the 1970s at SUNY Buffalo in a class on Mesoamerican archaeology taught by Warren Barbour. Prof. Barbour invited Edward Calnek from the University of Rochester to speak to our class. That day I began to learn what ethnohistorians could do with documents, the way they might employ theories and concepts from cultural anthropology and archaeology to analyze historical documents. I wish I could say that I was so persuaded of ethnohistory's appeal that I immediately decided to pursue its study at the graduate level, but I still intended to pursue the study of archaeology, preferably with René Millon at the University of Rochester, where Ed also taught, a big plus in my eyes.

Happily, I was accepted there and began to study both archaeology and what the non-archaeologically, non-ethnohistorically inclined members of that department called social anthropology. Those folks were idiosyncratic but also very rigorous thinkers. From them, I learned a lot about the British and American roots of anthropology and its deeply colonial origins as well. Naively, in those days I understood little about that aspect of what I was

Preface

learning, something that in time I would come to think much more about in relation to the past and present. But the social anthropologists imparted a lot of information about anthropological theories of their time, along with ethnographic methods. The social and other anthropologists did not get along, to say the least. Despite a tense atmosphere, I was entranced by everything I was learning, not least by René Millon who was brilliant, funny, charming, an intimidating presence, yet such an excellent teacher.

I thought I wanted to study the archaeology of Teotihuacan, which I planned to do until I realized in the summer of 1977 that dirt and I were not meant for each other. That same summer I stopped by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City to look at a few documents for Ed who had convinced me, rightly so, that learning paleography was essential if at some point I wanted to do ethnohistorical research. In the archive, I gazed at and handled sixteenth-century documents in wonder and remembered that libraries had been my favorite places since I was a young child; I realized that I loved the archive. Ed, a more informal teacher than René, with an exceptional mind and an encyclopedic knowledge about what was then the canon of Mesoamerican written sources, Aztec and Maya, became my dissertation supervisor. Ed was one of several scholars pioneering a turn in Mesoamerican ethnohistory, taking research out of the libraries with published sources and into archives with different kinds of documentation that anthropologists could fruitfully analyze. He had moved on to legal documents concerning property to reconstruct more about the physical layout and economy of the Aztec

Preface

capital city Tenochtitlan and its sister island city Tlatelolco. He was examining how that layout affected the environment, food supplies, population, and household structure of those cities. I picked up on the demographic and social aspects of Ed's research and decided to examine household arrangements, family organization, and kinship structures in greater detail.

That is how I ended up at the AGN later in 1977 and 1978 studying sixteenth-century documents. But after moving away from archaeology, there would be another big swerve, influenced by what surprised me in the documents, four people I met in Mexico City, and emerging intellectual trends. What surprised me, first, in the legal cases I was reading was how present women were as litigants, witnesses, testators, and actors in the family histories before and after the Spanish invaded. Their visibility helped explain how people came to own properties over which lawsuits were occurring. Second, I was not prepared for how many documents in Nahuatl would be part of sixteenth-century litigation. How fortuitous it was that I was able to study the language with Thelma Sullivan – brilliant linguist and translator, warm and wonderful woman – who died too soon. I've never stopped missing her. Around the same time as I began studying with Thelma, I got to know Luis Reyes and Teresa Rojas Rabiela and appreciate their deep knowledge of the Nahuatl language, sources, and archives. Both shared information and advice so generously. In the archive, I met Jim Lockhart. A larger-than-life figure with so much intellectual energy, Jim's knowledge of Nahuatl and ability to find voluminous amounts of Nahuatl-language documentation was an impressive sight. That

Preface

he would build on the work of Mexican scholars such as Angel María Garibay and Miguel León-Portilla and lead the way to the turn in Mesoamerican and Aztec ethnohistory toward the New Philology, an Indigenous language-centered approach that focuses on what native peoples had and have to say about their own histories and societies, came as no surprise. This sharp move away from highlighting Spanish voices was crucial to the way the ethnohistory of Mesoamerican peoples has developed since the late 1970s.

As the New Philology defined itself, there were two other scholarly trends that would influence my thinking: one was Women's Studies. Finally, the time had come to give much more attention to the half of the world's population whose contributions to societies all over the world had yet to be fully rendered. The other was social history, which included many different approaches and methods for looking at people – women, people of color, working classes, and Indigenous language speakers – to whom historians had not paid nearly enough attention. I knew then as I know now that history is made as much from below as it is made from above. Insofar as we can grasp how people understand their worlds and how those understandings shape their actions and how actions can influence perceptions and the narratives through which we make sense of the world, we can gain a much fuller understanding of the past as it was actually lived.

While staying true to those ideas, all intellectual trends shift and change, and there are recent trends that have also been influential. This book represents a return to my initial interest in the Indigenous population of Mesoamerica before Europeans arrived, as much of my

Preface

research and writing after my dissertation became focused on the impact of colonialism on native peoples, especially Aztecs. The intense discussions over types of colonialism that have taken place in recent years raised the question of whether the Spanish invasion was the precursor to extractive colonialism or settler colonialism, and how that early, violent, and exploitative period led to postcolonial colonialism (also known as neocolonialism) and helped me think more about both Aztec and Spanish imperial projects, both of which involved colonizing efforts and impacts, even if colonialism itself is not a focus of this book.

Another recent trend focuses on the archaeology of the everyday. This approach moves beyond household archaeology to look at the use of space within houses, the material residue of rituals performed at the household level, and how the life cycle might influence the nature of remains and be used to better differentiate among imperial, local, and household practices. All these themes helped deepen my understanding of the economic, religious, and social interactions within and beyond Aztec households and moved me to appreciate more the differences between life as experienced in the larger urban centers and life in smaller places and rural communities. An archaeology focused on the everyday can be seen as tied to another recent archaeological trend, one influencing ethnohistorians as well, and that is known as materiality studies. These involve examining how humans, things, and places interact, especially in the realm of ritual. Materiality offers a way to bring together older and newer scholarship, synthesizing material and cultural approaches.

Preface

An outgrowth of the New Philology, a further trend is one in which scholars seek to learn more about the intricate construction of colonial Indigenous-language texts. The intense focus on the production of these writings has not only enabled ethnohistorians to translate many new sources, either previously unknown or greatly underused, but also led to a much fuller grasp of the complex nature, polyvocality, even chronology of many texts. More is known now about who the authors of many primary sources were and the several or sometimes many voices to be found in writings long assumed to have a single author. Understanding the complicated authorships and chronologies allows scholars to trace the cross-influences among a variety of sources.

While this book synthesizes many secondary sources – the articles and monographs produced by brilliant scholars of the Aztecs across a number of generational cohorts – I have also relied heavily on a wide variety of primary sources. The bibliographic essay at the end of this book provides references for these sources. The New Philologists, and here I use the term as broadly as possible to refer to scholars on both sides of the border and beyond, brought great attention to the beauty and complexity of the Nahuatl language. In hopes that students and instructors will find it helpful to know about the texts and objects important to the various topics taken up in this book, these are discussed in the introductory chapter as well as in the opening section of each chapter's entry in the bibliographic essay. What I want to emphasize here is that Indigenous-language sources have offered a world of insights that Spanish-language texts, useful as they still are (I rely on some in this book), cannot. Where appropriate,

Preface

I use Nahuatl-language terms to identify and explore Aztec ideas, means of perceiving, and categorizing their world to introduce readers in a small way to some of the words and concepts through which they understood that world.

This point brings up two issues for those using Nahuatl terms, to be precise, the Classical Nahuatl spoken and written by Aztecs during the sixteenth century. One issue is spelling. While specialists will be sensitive to issues of vowel length (long or short), glottal stops (a consonant little used in English made by quickly closing the vocal cords), and spelling differences in the way Nahuatl sounds and words were rendered in sixteenth-century alphabetic writing, as an introduction to Aztec history and lifeways, I largely make use of conventional spellings that students and instructors not versed in current renditions of Classical Nahuatl would find across a variety of sources and many scholarly writings. I do follow two contemporary usages. I spell the word for lord (which can also be a part of deity names), *teuctli*, in this more accurate way, instead of *tecutli* or *tecubtli* as was common in both early alphabetic texts in Nahuatl and in colonial and modern descriptive writings. Second, I dispense with accent marks often found with Nahuatl-language terms. These tend to indicate a pronunciation more appropriate to Spanish than Nahuatl. In the latter language, the emphasis is always on the penultimate syllable; therefore, an accent mark provides no useful information and represents a practice irrelevant to the period before Europeans arrived in Mesoamerica. One last style note: virtually all dates, whether I am describing periods before the arrival of Europeans or even after, are approximate. Archaeologists generally provide dates that offer

Preface

ranges of time, not specific beginning and ending years, and Aztec calendars can only be approximately correlated with dates in the Gregorian calendar.

In thinking about languages, there is another aspect of the linguistic that should be explained. There are three words associated with the Aztecs whose usage is near constant and that reinforce their highly negative, even barbaric, popular image, an issue taken up further in the first chapter. Those terms are “myth” (a word widely associated with native peoples), “sacrifice,” and “conquest.” Storytelling, knowledge-creating, and worldview-explaining are human activities that occur across all societies. Myth and history relate to all three activities and are not opposed forms of knowledge. Both relate to the world as it was or is, and all people subscribe to myths to explain how their world came to be as it is. As religious studies scholar Kay Read explains, myths “describe the actual world in terms that we are not used to, using unusual analogies to model what is true – fantastic creatures doing strange things to impart true messages, or ordinary people acting in extraordinary ways.” While I use the word “myth” in places, I do not subscribe to the idea that “they,” Indigenous people, explain the world through myths, whereas “we,” westerners, explain the world through history and science. Indigenous knowledges cut across all domains of life; the use of Indigenous-language texts represents an effort to explore those forms of knowledge in their cultural and historical contexts. To further highlight Aztec history and chronologies, a listing of key events and dates follows at the end of this preface.

Another term, “sacrifice,” occurs frequently in descriptions and explanations of Aztec history and ways of life.

Preface

The word is almost always used in the form of “human sacrifice,” a topic covered in Chapters 2 and 3. For the Aztecs, sacrifice was about providing precious offerings to nature and to deities. Foods, animals, blood from blood-letting, all could be offered and made up the majority of sacrificial offerings. Nevertheless, violent killing rituals have come to be so closely associated with the Aztecs, even though ritual killing long predated their civilization, that the association has become almost definitional.

The idea that the Aztecs were a conquered, defeated people whose largest city had been destroyed and much of its population perished is similarly ubiquitous still. But “conquest,” too, is a loaded term. It implies a definitive end to a sovereignty in which the ruler Moteuczoma collaborated. But the story of this conquest is much more complicated than often assumed. Just as Aztec societies warred with and defeated other Aztec societies, so the Spanish defeated the Mexica, one among many Aztec peoples. Both Aztecs and Spaniards learned that their wars, violent and trauma-inducing, led to tenuous subjugation that required reinforcing efforts, not always successful, and that traumas could be survived through the tenacity of people who have endured waves of change over the centuries. Yet Aztec ways of thinking, forms of expression in spoken and written language, and means of organizing daily life have persisted, not in a pristine, timeless fashion, but nonetheless there has been survival.

I considered using scare quotes each time the words myth, sacrifice, or conquest occur but ultimately decided such a usage would greatly interrupt the flow of the text that follows. I do use such quotation marks in a few places to highlight a stereotypical usage that reinforces

Preface

misperceptions and misinformation. And about translations: translations from the Nahuatl are mine; from Spanish-language texts, if an accessible English translation exists I have made use of it, otherwise the translations are mine.

My scholarly debts are many; I have already mentioned the earliest ones about people who taught and inspired me and whose work remains part of scholarly conversations, even when particular points have been rebutted as viewpoints shift and knowledge accumulates. There are many others whose names appear throughout the bibliographic essay to whom I am so very grateful, some I know, and others I do not. Aztec scholarship is highly multidisciplinary. I identify the fields of many scholars mentioned in the pages that follow to demonstrate that point. I have tried to read widely and deeply and to render ideas faithfully though filtered, of course, through my own long-term thinking about Aztec ways of living.

I also have personal debts. My husband, Bill Walker, offered staunch support and insights throughout the years I have worked on this book, even though his fields of expertise are far from my own. My two longest-lasting friends, Susan Deeds and Robin Vogel (Robin and I met in fifth grade), have listened to me about many things Aztec and other over the years as have my sons and daughter-in-law – Seth, Sean, and Lisa Mintz. A profound thanks as well to an anonymous reader who brought me up short by reminding me that for all my efforts to be careful in my use of both language and concepts, at times I uncritically employed terminology that can promote colonialist ideas and harmful stereotypes. Thinking about those comments made me realize that we are, to some

Preface

degree, captive to the generations of scholars who trained us and to those we came into academic life with, but that we must strive to understand, contemplate critically, and make space in our thinking for new facts, ideas, and interpretations. Finally, I am very grateful for the editorial insights of Cecilia Cancellaro, her assistant Victoria Phillips, and Natasha Whelan, content manager at Cambridge University Press, who helped with matters large and small in the editing and production of this book. Fiona Cole, exceedingly talented copy editor, must also be mentioned as must F. Franklin Mathews Jebaraj for overseeing production and Donald Howes for his work on the index.

After I retired, it had been my hope to travel to many more libraries and attend more conferences than I had been able to while still teaching. Then Covid intervened. The internet has served me well but so have particular libraries, mostly online, sometimes in person. At the University of Houston and its Special Collections, their unfailingly helpful librarians and eclectic holdings were essential. The majority of my years in academia were spent at that university. I remain appreciative of the History Department, my undergraduate and graduate students, the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, and the university as a whole for the opportunity it afforded me to teach, research, and write about that which interested me most. My students proved receptive, which suggests how ancient and early modern periods of history indeed have meaning for people seeking to understand the global issues that confront us today. The University of New Mexico's Zimmerman Library, which is exceptionally generous in its lending policies to

Preface

residents of the state and those area scholars not affiliated with the university, houses the Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections. The library and the center have rich collections of materials on Latin America, especially Mexico. These were vital for this project. Finally, the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, perhaps because I lived in Texas for so long, with a collection now over a hundred years old, remains a library with particular meaning for me. Its staff has excelled in giving advice over the years and has been making more and more of their manuscripts, maps, photographs, and other materials widely available through digitization. May all these libraries and their rich holdings continue to be available for the next hundred years and beyond.

KEY PERIODS AND DATES

Note: Please bear in mind that dates before the arrival of Europeans are approximations by archaeologists and historians. Archaeologists use a variety of scientific methods to categorize periods of time. But these do not indicate exact years. While written sources used by historians may provide dates (in either the Aztec or European systems, depending on when they were written and by whom), dates remain approximations because correlating Aztec calendars with later European calendars cannot be exact. Aztec calendars varied by region or community, and sources not infrequently provide varying dates.

Formative Period 1800 BCE–150 CE (all dates after this refer to the Common Era, so CE is not repeated)

Classic Period 150–650

Epiclassic Period 650–900

Postclassic Period 900–1519

Teotihuacan 1–650

Xochicalco 650–900

Tollan 900–1200

Migration period 1100–1325

Mexica reached Chapultepec 1300

Mexica settled and built Tenochtitlan 1325 on

Founding of Tlatelolco, late 1550s

Acamapichtli became first dynastic ruler of Tenochtitlan
1372, ruled to 1391

Key Periods and Dates

- Huitzilihuitl, ruled 1391–1415
 Chimalpopoca, ruled 1415–1426
 Nezahualcoyotl, Tetzcoco, ruled 1429–1472
 Itzcoatl, ruled 1426–1440
 Mexica and Tetzcoca defeated the Tepaneca 1428
 Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, ruled 1440–1468
 Axayacatl, ruled 1468–1481
 Nezahualpilli, Tetzcoco, ruled 1472–1515
 Defeat of Moquihuix and Tlatelolco, 1473
 Tizoc, ruled 1481–1486
 Ahuitzotl, ruled 1486–1502
 Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, ruled 1502–1520
 Last New Fire ceremony before Spanish invasion, 1507
 Hernández de Córdoba and Grijalva expeditions,
 1517–1518
 Cortés expedition arrived and began invasion, 1519
 Death of Moteuczoma, Cuitlahua ruled briefly followed
 by Cuauhtemoc, 1520
 Cuauhtemoc captured, Mexica defeated, August 13, 1521