

## Migrants, Mendicants, and Mary

### *Anahuac to New Spain*



Relatively few of the friars' innovations were entirely new to the Mesoamericans. It was because of such things as their own crafts and writing systems, their tradition of sumptuous temples as the symbol of the state and the ethnic group, their well-developed calendar of religious festivities and processions, their relatively high degree of stability and nucleation of settlement, that they could quickly take to similar aspects of the Spanish heritage. (Lockhart 1992:4)

#### 1 THE SCOPE OF THIS SURVEY

This study presents details on many religious elements of both Aztec and Spanish practices in the 15th Century before their contact and then in the first century of Spanish culture in New Spain. There are already excellent studies of 16th-century Spanish Catholicism and of the religion of the Aztecs. Histories of Catholic missions have mapped the processes of evangelization in New Spain with each of these fields of investigation committed to methodologies of its guild. Yet these studies also end up presupposing an “insider” and “outsider.” We undertake an investigation that attempts to give each “side” an equal voice.

In this introductory essay we build an overview of late medieval / early modern Catholicism and the pantheism of central Mexico, the organization of Mexica society, and Spanish governing and ecclesiastic superstructure; visit the conquered city of Tenochtitlan; and explore the native and missionary experience in the first century of the conquest, 1519 to 1600. Dozens of key concepts are then detailed in the second part of this work. The 118 keyword entries do much to show native and Spaniard perspectives on each topic and to highlight the agency of each during the 16th century.

A word here about “religion.” Our focus is not exclusively on “belief,” though it is impossible to talk about cultic practices without the spectre of belief haunting our entries. Our work is influenced by David Chidester’s definition of religion as an arena of human activity marked by concerns of the transcendent, the sacred, the ultimate – concerns that enable people to experiment with what it means to be human” (Chidester 2005). Religion is a human attempt to place oneself in the world, often in relation to supernatural beings. The relationship between belief and practices is multifaceted and often recursive. In light of that, the relationships expressed in these “concerns of the transcendent” are cultural

products that influence all arenas of human life. This understanding facilitates the comparative, cross-cultural approach we develop in the keyword entries.

A further influence on our approach to religion stems from David Carrasco's analysis of ceremonial life in Tenochtitlan that demonstrates the Aztecs were oriented toward the sacred, producing culturally and politically meaningful activities (which we refer to as ritual and/or cultic activity) and institutions that continually reinforced their relationship with the sacred (Carrasco 1999). The Aztec use of sacrifice, including human sacrifice, was central to "their beliefs about how the cosmos was ordered" and an "instrument of social integration that elevated the body of the ruler and the potency of the gods" (Carrasco 1999:3). Following Chidester and Carrasco, we recognize that religion is an anthropological category, a cultural expression that permeates human thought and action, and we recognize its problematic colonial legacy. For 16th-century indigenous people and Europeans alike, the supernatural required devotion, supplication, and sacrifice. Using this conception of religion has implications for assessing common categories.

The keywords that we highlight in this book spotlight cultic practices. Devotion expressed through cults (e.g., surrounding Mixcoatl or the Immaculate Conception) is the hallmark of pre- and post-conquest Mexico and of Spain. In fact, the cultic organization of both religions at this time of encounter, we believe, was the single most salient aspect in the transfer of Catholicism to New World people. Small-scale community, family, and personal devotions were the mode of operation in both cultures with significant impact in the economic system of both. Both cultural systems revered bones and relics, shrines, and the pomp that accompanied feast days. The term "cult" is loaded in the 21st century, usually associated with religious movements that are beyond the comfort zone of modern society. However, in the realm of religious practices, particularly in the centuries we are examining, cults and cultic devotion recognized the supernatural in persons, objects, and places beyond institutional control, and were products of local devotion across multiple arenas, from cities, guilds, clans, and individuals. "The sacred is not a stable lexicon with universal correlations; it is produced through intensive, on-going and extraordinary attention, through processes of interpretation, attending to minute detail, which are always overdetermined in their proliferation of meanings" (Chidester 2012:8). It is this proliferation of meanings that we explore in the following pages.

Mesoamerica was a macroregion of diverse groups, a world system, with all of the social groups linked through trade, politics, theology, and religious practice (Kellogg 2011:153; Smith 2014). For this discussion we have chosen to focus on the ethnic groups encompassed with the cultural geography term "Anahuac" (or *anahuatl*, disk surrounded by water), that region of tribute-paying peoples conquered after 1473 by the Mexica, who were the infamous occupants of the island city of Tenochtitlan in highland central Mexico. The Mexica were one of several lineages known as Aztecs, people who traced their origins to a watery place called Aztlan, most of whom were living within Anahuac. Much research has been focused on the Mexica, for they and other groups within Anahuac – Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Tlaxcaltecs – created a large corpus of historical and divinatory texts before and after the Spanish arrived, before and after their final leader, Quauhtemoc. Many groups spoke languages of the Uto-Aztecan language family, most notably Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica and other Nahua tribes and used by

administrators in conquered towns. The similarities in religious beliefs and practices among these groups can be seen in the “International Style” and shared symbol sets used in calendrical and religious life that permeated a vast area of central and southern Mexico after the 12th century (e.g., Boone and Smith 2003).

The Mexica were recognized by the Spaniards as “people much like themselves” (Boone 1994:19). Spaniards compared Anahuac’s cities to Rome and Venice and their destruction to Jerusalem. The two cultures shared political structure, urbanism, agricultural development, kingship, state religion, writing, and many ritual practices, most significantly the practice of religion in cults led by celibate priests in temples. Furthermore, contemporary scholarship points to the importance of the Mexica Aztec worldview for the development of Mexican Catholicism, particularly during this first century when natives speaking various languages were congregated by missionaries into settlements and addressed through the Mexica language of Nahuatl. Nevertheless, much of what is said from the native perspective would ring true if the focus of our work were on Totonacas, Zapotecas, Otomis, or Huastecs. Many authors have commented on the pan-American cosmovision that resulted in thousands of cultures spread over thousands of miles of the New World having very similar ideas about the cosmos and how to interact with the supernatural.

We specify Spanish Catholicism because, as the 15th century drew to a close, Spanish Popes, the conclusion of the Reconquista, and the awarding of the New World mission to Spanish royalty left a mark on early modern Catholicism that is often distorted toward the negative despite the importance of Spain in the preservation of Catholic relics, Catholic resistance to Protestant reforms, the earliest debates about slavery and human rights, and nascent development of modernity (see Mignolo 2008). *Convivencia*, the particular social situation of tolerance in the multireligious, multicultural world of Spain, involved Jews, Christians, and Muslims living sometimes in close proximity. While always a relationship between unequals, of two minority religions often living with a majority religion, *convivencia* “embraced a complex web of social, economic, political, and familial relationships” that brought religious worldviews closer together in ways not seen in other European countries (Poole 2006:15). While *convivencia* “ended” in 1502 with the conquest of Granada and then the forced baptism or expulsions of the remaining Muslims in Spain (Jews had been expelled in 1492), both Fernando II and Carlos V issued proclamations that “Islam would remain legal in Valencia and the other kingdoms of Aragon” (Hamann 2020:39 fn 82).

The year 1469 marks the union of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon (Figure 1) and the start of the Spanish monarchy through the marriage of Fernando and Isabella. With the January 1492 defeat of the Muslims in Granada, and the annexation of Navarra in 1512, “the Spanish monarchy obtained the territory that nearly corresponds to the present holdings of Spain [Navarre, Castile-León, Aragon, Portugal, and Granada] and further pursued centralization under the Castilian initiative” (Matsumori 2019:19; (Figure 1)). This consolidation, coupled with the success of the Reconquista, provided Spain a privileged position to further expand its boundaries.

For nearly one hundred years after Columbus’s fateful landing in Hispaniola, no other European country founded colonies, let alone established missions, in the New World



Figure 1 Iberian Peninsula kingdoms in 1453. (Image and permission provided by TimeMaps Ltd.)

(with the short-lived exception of the French colony in La Florida). The educational foundation of many of the early missionaries and Spanish officials in the New World is found at the University of Salamanca in Castile-León, the third-oldest university in Europe and the first university in the Hispanic world. This institution shaped Augustinian, Dominican, Franciscan, and eventually Jesuit missionaries and their ideas about conversion and religious accommodation. Salamanca's theological influence was felt throughout the evangelizing enterprise (Matsumori 2019).

Lastly, we focus on Spanish Catholicism because Protestantism and other reform movements of the 16th century did not find fertile ground in Spain. The Spanish Inquisition managed to keep early Protestant incursions into the Peninsula at bay, and by the mid-century, Felipe II restricted both visitors from and Spaniards who wanted to go to Protestant lands. Through the 16th century, Spain remained both militantly and Inquisitorially Roman Catholic and housed many of Europe's relics preserved from Protestant iconoclasm.

The information assembled here can be used to address a number of topics of concern to contemporary scholars: knowledge creation in New Spain; indigenous resistance; the malleability of religion; the mechanisms of mestizo/creole religiosity; and the role of religion in the expansion of empire among others. This project also sheds light on the ways that the indigenous people negotiated Christianity, themselves appropriating, accommodating, and assimilating Catholic religious elements. This material helps clarify the role that religion played in the emerging modern/colonial world-system at its birth in the 16th century. Our approach exposes agency on the part of individuals in these groups, illuminating the process of continued creative blending by agents of both religions in the encounter.

As the conquest advanced and Christianity became part of the fabric of colonial life, a new Catholicism developed, much as it had in 4th-century Ireland or 9th-century

Germany. By focusing on the first 100 years of contact in the New World, we are able to trace some of that development. What we believe to be key to understanding the religious encounter is the cult-based structure of both religions, facilitating both accommodations and substitutions. This exploration not only adds to our knowledge of both Aztecs at the time of the conquest and early modern ecclesiastical strategies and practices but also increases our understanding of the pliability of religion and the mechanisms of mestizo/creole religiosity (Gruzinski 2013). Our work is not about interrogating the category or status of “conversion” for indigenous people nor is it about determining a valid expression of Christianity. Rather, along with Graham (2011), we are willing to say that if the individual thought she was a Christian, then we will accept that.

Religion’s role in the expansion of empires and the colonial encounter, particularly for those studying Mesoamerica, is traditionally understood as either the underlying motivation for the expansion of Europe into the New World (convert natives) or overt justification for expanding empires through God-given rights to possess land and resources based on Genesis and a Christianization of Aristotle’s formulation of natural law, which in 16th-century juridical discourse was the principle of command and obedience (Matsumori 2019; Mignolo 2008). The idea of comparative religion arose in the 16th century when Europeans attempted to integrate into their understanding of “religion” the beliefs and practices of peoples discovered in New Spain, looking for signs of nascent Christianity within the religion of indigenous peoples (Ammon 2011). What our study does is add nuance to the ways scholars think about the plasticity of religion in this particular contact zone, highlighting the ways Mexica and Spaniards made religious meaning in a period of cultural conflict and transformation. Missionizing practices, Christian understandings of natural law, the role of slaves, and what constitutes barbarism are important factors, but these ideas encompass neither the variety of religious worldviews nor the symbols and metaphors that make those religious worldviews meaningful. While the natives were under pressure to become Christian, the Spanish and native understanding of that term and what it might mean to “be” a Christian is not clear (Graham 2011).

Many studies of the first century of Spanish colonization focus on mission strategies or theological treatises in order to explore the challenge of communication and conversion. But the task of converting someone of one culture, language, and cultic allegiance into a different culture, language, and cultic allegiance was incredibly complex. Language was a significant issue, precisely because the cultural system was so multifaceted and the nodes of religiosity so many. We illuminate many opaque and seemingly minor elements in the communication of one religion to the practitioners of another particularly in the key-words section as well as the major points there and in this essay.

One cannot fully grasp the extent of Indio-Catholic thought in 1599 expressed in “Catholic” architecture, art, or cults without a background in the symbolism and spiritual potential residing in the animals, plants, topography, and sky of Mexico and for native peoples. For this reason, our exploration of religion in 16th-century Mexico includes topics that rarely appear in scholarship about Christianity. These differences in the acknowledged spiritual potential of the physical world mean that some concepts recognized by the Mexica that are minor or insignificant in mendicant Catholic Spain take on

new potential for accommodation, understanding, or inquiry. Some examples of these keywords are bee, blue, cave, insect, mountain, spring, and tree. But a study of Catholicism that overlooks the long history of these very same elements, particularly as it was practiced in 15th-century Spain, will also miss many points of important interaction in the missionizing process. In other words, what we examine here are symbolism and metaphor, important in both cultures and suffused with meanings not necessarily shared yet potent ingredients in the shape and structure of their religious lives that laid the groundwork for connection between the two cultures.

It is clear to us that all scholars would be greatly served by a reference work that brings religious information together from both Spanish and Aztec cultural milieus when assessing the nature, success, and effect of conversion. Our reading of the history of these two world religions is that both were fluid rather than fixed, each incorporated elements of religion from conquered peoples. It is our opinion that what developed in the 16th century in New Spain was a Catholicism infused with elements far beyond the Iberian core. Historically, Christianity has appropriated, borrowed, recast, and innovated through cultural encounters, from Norway to Ireland to Germany, leading to culturally distinctive forms of a tradition that, while locally specific, is also globally connected. If we can be permitted to distill part of what that global connection might mean to a Roman Catholic on the eve of the 16th century – beliefs in Jesus, Mary, God, the Devil, original sin, the immaculate conception, penance, baptism, confirmation, charity, efficacy of saintly intercession and relics, purgatory and Hell – then it can be asserted that there were thousands of natives of Anahuac who were Catholic at the close of this century. Scholars have erred in thinking that there was one Catholicism, although this was certainly the goal of the Inquisition, the Vatican, and many councils. We turn now to an overview of the history of both religious systems and the first century of their interaction.

## 2 AZTEC RELIGION

Although the various Aztec groups can be identified as far back as the 12th century, their deities, creation stories, temple shrines, feasts, and other ritual components of their religion are much older than that (The Glossary contains some Nahuatl words and deities to assist the reader).

### 2.1 The Ancient Foundation of Aztec Religion

Two key elements of Mesoamerican religion were pyramids and human sacrifice. Earthen mounds/pyramids first appeared 6,000 years ago on the northern Gulf of Mexico coastal plain in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas, with the most significant ceremonial center, Poverty Point (1800 BCE–1100 BCE), in northern Louisiana. Human sacrifice is documented as early as 8,000 years ago in the Ohio Valley with numerous cases of four and five people violently killed in one grave uncovered over the next 4,000 years and, then again, from 1,000 to 500 years ago. The early mass graves seem to be indicating an ancient observance of a hunt god rite with elements quite similar to that surrounding the



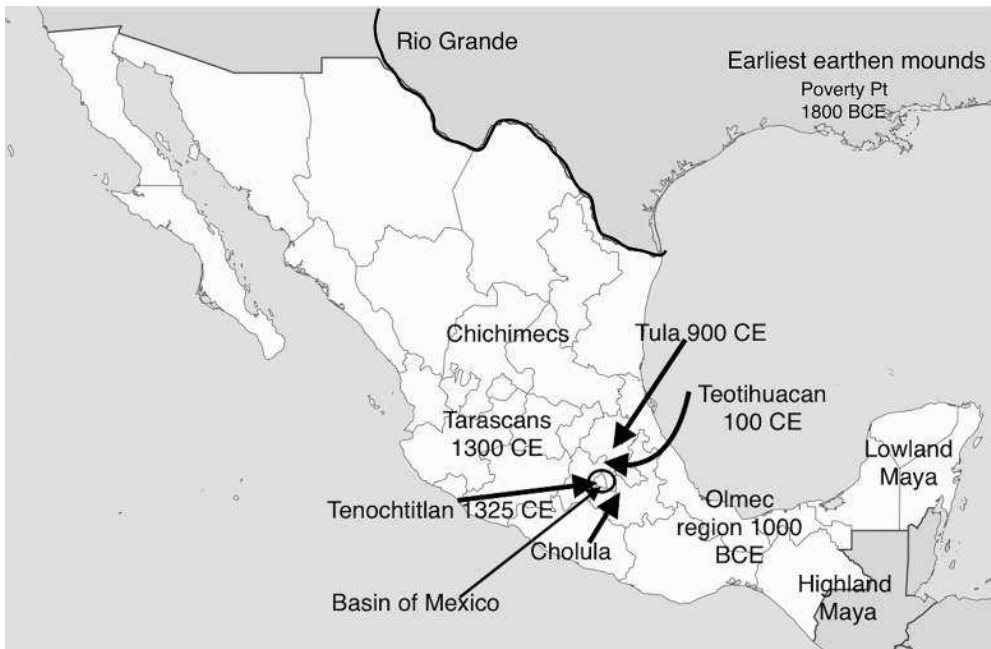


Figure 2 Cultures of Mexico discussed in text. (Mexico States Blank map created by Yavidaxiu used under Creative Commons SA 4.0 license. Annotated by C. Claassen) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4851727>

cult of Mixcoatl/Camaxtli, one of the oldest of Mesoamerican deities (Claassen 2015). Remarkably, the story of Mixcoatl and Itzpapalotl and their acts of Creation are laid out in numerous rock art panels found along the Rio Grande (Figure 2) dating as early as 4,000 years ago (Boyd 2016).

### 2.1.1 Olmecs

Unlike the earlier ceremonial cult centers of pyramids and mounds on the northern shores of the Gulf of Mexico, pyramids in Mesoamerica (Mexico City southward to Honduras and El Salvador) were associated with urbanism, state government, monocropping, and markets – characteristics archaeologists call civilization. Some 3,000 years earlier than the Chichimec migrations, civilization appeared on the Gulf of Mexico coast in the modern Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco (Figure 2). The Olmecs, as the first civilization is known, deployed the plaza-temple complex with pyramids as mountains and astronomical alignments, and had monolithic sculpture, markets, priest-kings descended from Underworld deities, and three successive city-states with a class society. The Olmecs assembled astronomical observations into two calendars and invented the ballgame; employed deity embodiment (*teixiptla*) in rituals; recognized a rain god, a maize god (with characteristics like the Aztec's Centeotl), and death god, as well as a sky serpent and earth serpent deities, and jaguar and caiman as earth lords; practiced

bloodletting (probably for rain calling); developed an origin story about their emergence from the watery underworld; and conducted rituals in caves. Late in their history, their scribes were using a proto writing system. They faded from view around 500 BCE, but before that they had forged “a powerful, unitary religion that had manifested itself in an all-pervading art style” (Coe et al. 2019:89). Olmec religious beliefs and practices are obvious among the Maya cities in the Yucatan, on the Pacific slope in Guerrero, and in later city-states that appeared at Monte Alban (Oaxaca), Cuicuilco, and Cholula followed by Teotihuacan.

### 2.1.2 *Teotihuacan*

The huge urban center of Teotihuacan (Figures 2–4) is located in the northeastern sector of the Basin of Mexico. This urban ceremonial center appears to have been sited for its surrounding mountains, the diggable soil, and a greenish-gold obsidian outcrop. Aztec legend told that when the Gods were banished from paradise (Tamoanchan), they reconvened in This World at Teotihuacan, to start the Fifth Sun.

Saburo Sugiyama (2019) now believes that a single individual founded and initially controlled Teotihuacan. By the 3rd century, following a master plan, all of the monuments at the site had been built. Using the 260-day, 365-day, and 580-day (Venus) calendars, and a standard unit of 83.0 centimeters, the northern half of the center (defined by a rechanneled stream that cuts the city into halves) was laid out using the solar calendar, while the southern half of the main precinct was devoted to Venus. The two



Figure 3 Teotihuacan center, looking north from the Pyramid of the Sun on the east side of the Avenue of the Dead to the Pyramid of the Moon. Numerous temples and housing compounds lie on either side of the avenue. Model on display in the Museo de Teotihuacan 2008. (Photo by Wolfgang Sauber used under Creative Commons License 2.0, rendered in black and white and cropped) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4202249>





Figure 4 Facade of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl in Teotihuacan. Quetzalcoatl is emerging from the underworld through a feathered portal wearing a Tlaloc/Cipactli warrior mask. At this moment, the Fifth Sun begins. (Photo by Arian Zwegers used under Creative Commons SA 2.0 license, rendered in black and white)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Teotihuacan,\\_Citadel,\\_Temple\\_of\\_the\\_Feathered\\_Serpent\\_\(20686669345\).jpg#/](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Teotihuacan,_Citadel,_Temple_of_the_Feathered_Serpent_(20686669345).jpg#/)

huge pyramids dedicated to the sun and to the moon in the northern sector aligned with the eastern and northern cardinal points. The Pyramid of the Sun was surrounded by a moat visualizing the concept of water mountain or *altepetl* and was erected over an artificial tunnel ending in an artificial cave. The Pyramid of the Moon, an artificial “sustenance mountain,” mimics the natural Cerro Gordo that is directly behind it (see Figure 44) and apparently was dedicated to a mother goddess. The Pyramid of the Moon was remodeled six times.

The Temple of Quetzalcoatl (Figure 4) and its enclosure, the “ciudadela” (numerous connected platforms forming a quadrangle), were located in the city’s southern sector. This temple covered an artificial cave and tunnel containing numerous Venus images and offerings. Mass graves were positioned around the base of the temple at the cardinal points. The males sacrificed were foreigners while the women were locals. Many men were buried with warrior items and the images of snakes on the facade of the temple have Tlaloc warrior masks (Coe and Koontz 2013:112–113).

By the middle of the 4th century a program creating craft-specific barrios with aqueducts and latrines housing artisans from throughout Mesoamerica was underway. Murals in all barrios and on most civic buildings conveyed essential information about

the patron deities and indicated that religion was practiced in cults. A colony in modern Zacatecas, called Alta Vista, situated along a trade route and at a jade source is known (Townsend 2019:23). At its peak in the 5th century, 125,000–200,000 people lived within Teotihuacan, while the surrounding Basin of Mexico was nearly empty of settlements (Coe and Koontz 2013). Field and chinampas agriculture, tribute, and the obsidian trade as well as pilgrims supported the city. Contemporary centers had ball courts and glyphs, although ball courts have not been found at Teotihuacan.

Documented in the ruins of Teotihuacan are many elements of later Aztec religion. Concepts such as snake mountain, pyramids as sustenance mountains, the Tlaloc cult, a Chalchiuhtlicue cult, Xipe totec cult (Flood n.d.c), and a Feathered Serpent cult all with a large priesthood are found here. Venus, goggle-eyed Tlaloc, warfare, tribute, slavery, craft barrios, four city sectors, human sacrifice, heart receptacles, and murals are present, as is the important religious association of Tlaloc with Quetzalcoatl and both with warfare (Townsend 2019). Many of these items and motifs, as well as Teotihuacan pottery, were scavenged by the later Aztecs and incorporated into architecture and offerings.

After 650, the hegemony of Teotihuacan was broken by internal strife and neighboring opportunistic Chichimecas. In the post-Teotihuacan era (700–1100), it was the Feathered Serpent religion that tied together a wide swath of Mesoamerica. West Mexican concepts and symbols embellished shrine centers from central Mexico eastward to the Yucatan linked physically by trade and pilgrimage routes. The earliest of these shrine centers were the central Mexican city of Cholula and possibly El Tajin in Veracruz. Secondly, shrines at Xochicalco and Cacaxtla – both fortified with walls and ditches – in central Mexico and Uxmal in the Yucatan were developed. Many of the towns in the Mixtec region of southern Puebla were founded with Quetzalcoatl sacred bundles or reference to ancestral ties to this Feathered Serpent as recorded in the *Codex Nuttall* (Ringle et al. 1998).

Ringle et al. (1998) attribute the attraction and spread of the Feathered Serpent cult to the emphasis on the Feathered Serpent's role in creation (of this Sun, of the earth, of humans), his role in the founding of the 260-day calendar, and the role both played in political legitimation. Military alliances and influence from pilgrims, traders, and mercenaries contributed to its spread as well. The practices associated with this version of the cult invoked Venus/Tlaloc/Feathered Serpent warfare, the Feathered Serpent as wind deity, and human sacrifice, through worship principally at stepped pyramids (*coatepetl* snake mountains) and round wind deity (coiled snake) temples. Sacred bundles, pulque drinking, the ballgame, *cipatli* or earth/Tlaloc warfare masks, and skull racks were also highlights of religious practice. Jaguar and eagle warrior societies were present by the 8th century. Symbols of the cult – known as the International style and symbol set (Boone and Smith 2003) – were a shield with three darts, a bloodletter, two staffs, a fire stick, broad-brimmed hats, feathered circular banners, twinning snakes and ollin glyphs, friezes with skulls, incised jade beads/tokens, a human face emerging from a maw, and a descending god/Venus image. A 50 percent decrease in pyramids by 850 indicates a religious consolidation period. The arrival of the Nahuatl-speaking Tolteca-Chichimecas in central Mexico between 850 and 1100 led to greater political stabilization (Ringle et al. 1998). They occupied seven regions to the east of the Basin and in the Basin, unified by