Richard F. Townsend

The AZTECS

WITH 143 ILLUSTRATIONS

THAMES AND HUDSON

Ancient Peoples and Places
FOUNDING EDITOR: GLYN DANIEL

For Pala

Author's note

The Aztecs spoke Nahuatl, a language that was transcribed into Roman script by the Conquistadors during the early colonial period. Thus the vowels and most consonants are generally pronounced as they would be in modern Spanish. Exceptions are the Nahuatl *x*, pronounced with the sound of the English *sh*; and the voiceless consonant *tl*, pronounced much like the Welsh *ll*. In Nahuatl, word stress always falls on the penultimate syllable. Accents denoting this have been omitted in the following pages. The correct Nahuatl form "Motecuhzoma" has been adopted for the third and seventh Aztec kings, in preference to inaccurate variants such as "Montezuma" and "Moctezuma."

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FRONTISPIECE: The masked figure of Xochipilli, "flower prince," seated upon a throne-like dais with flower and butterfly symbols.

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9 · The Family and Education

Birth and childhood

The Aztecs were devoted to children, and parents were expected to take special responsibility for their discipline and instruction. From the day of birth, children were brought up to respect their elders, to revere the deities, and to be obedient, well-mannered and productive. While Aztec society offered opportunities for individuals to rise socially and professionally, especially in the military and priesthood, children tended to inherit the profession and status of their parents. Education did not emphasize individualism as it is understood in Western culture. Rather, the individuality of a person was always subordinate to the life of the family, the school, the *calpulli*, the professional organization, and society as a whole. In this respect Aztec culture more closely resembled that of traditional China or Japan.

The arrival of a newborn child was a special occasion. Upon delivering the baby, the midwife shouted war cries to honor the mother for having fought a good battle, for having become a warrior who had "captured" a baby. The midwife then spoke to the baby, as if addressing an honored but tired and hungry traveler, exhorting it to rest among its parents and grandparents, and telling it of the transitory nature of life. The umbilical cord of a male child was kept and eventually taken by an adult warrior to be buried on a distant battlefield; the female cord would be buried by the hearth. The ceremonial cutting of the cord was also accompanied by formal speeches describing the roles of men and women and exhorting the infant to work hard and do its duty. Then followed the child's first bath, during which the midwife spoke in a low voice to the baby about the purifying water deity, Chalchiuhtlicue:

> Approach thy mother Chalchiuhtlicue, Chalchiuh Tlatonac! May she receive thee! May she wash thee! May she remove, may she transfer, the filthiness which thou hast taken from thy mother, from thy father! May she cleanse thy heart! May she make it fine, good! May she give thee fine, good conduct![1]

More speeches were given by the midwife as she proceeded with the first ritual cleansing, and then she spoke to the mother as many guests from the extended family arrived. Aunts and grandmothers would speak in turn, honoring the midwife, and the midwife would reply. In these

speeches there is always a sense of reverence for the mother and especially for the infant. Such speeches were an essential aspect of the midwife's professional training and qualifications.

Among the nobles or wealthy merchants, the arrival of a child was the occasion for even more elegant speeches and visits. Many pages from Bernardino de Sahagún's texts are devoted to these ceremonial addresses, which often include admonitions to the baby as a responsible member of the ruling classes.

The most powerful families would receive visitors – even ambassadors – from near and far, sometimes for as long as 20 days after the birth of a child. The most important guests would be greeted with gifts of fine clothing – beautifully woven capes, skirts, or shifts, as many as 20 or 40. And even the most humble visitors would be given food, drink, or pulque (a mildly alcoholic drink made from the fermented juice of the maguey cactus). But at all levels of society, the hosts would provide for visitors in proportion to their economic status.

One of the most important events after childbirth was the visit of soothsayers, who would be summoned with their Book of Days, the *tonalamatl*. They were responsible for reading favorable or unfavorable day signs, and for determining the configuration of cosmic forces that would affect the child's life. It would be important to know the very instant in which it was born; the books would be opened and, if it were a bad day, perhaps the dominant ill effects would be modified by other, more beneficent signs associated with that moment. The soothsayer would then assign a time four days hence for the baptismal rite to take place. But if that time also had bad auguries he would skip to find another day. In this way the soothsayers sought to ameliorate adverse conditions and to exert a measure of control over the hidden forces affecting each child's destiny. In the readings it would be pointed out that unfavorable signs could be compensated for by the child through hard work and dedication. The *tonalamatl* was thus regarded not so much as a book of fate or predetermination, but rather as a guide to action.

The final episode in the new-born's rite of passage was the formal baptism. This differed from the first washing mentioned before. The baptismal ceremony was prepared by placing a basin of water upon a reed mat, and by laying out instruments appropriate to the sex of the baby. If male, there would be a miniature bow and arrow laid upon a "shield" made from a tortilla of amaranth-dough; or there would be the tools of the carpenter, featherworker, scribe, goldsmith, or potter, according to the family profession. If a girl was to be bathed, they laid out a spinning wheel, a batten, a reed basket and spinning bowls, and other weaving instruments, as well as a miniature skirt and shift. The Codex Mendoza depicts this layout and other aspects of the baptismal rite. The midwife is shown walking counterclockwise around the basin, talking to the child. The child was bathed, massaged, and presented four times to the sky and

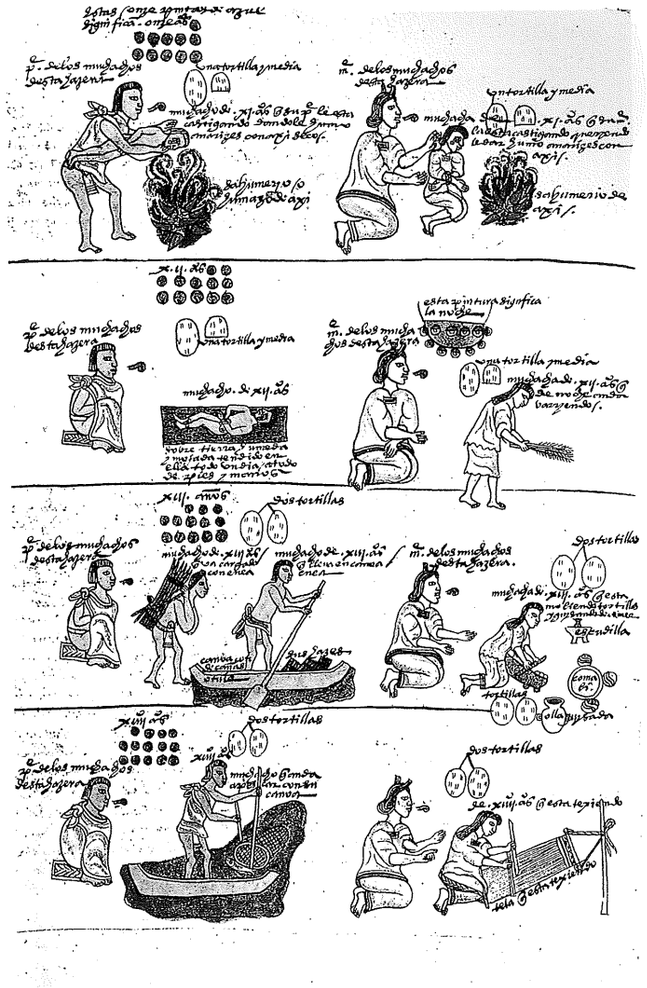
to the cleansing water. Older children would then run through the streets crying out the name of the new child; and the baby was returned to the cradle. A great feast and gifts were then offered by the parents to the assembled relatives.

The Codex Mendoza also shows that between the ages of three and four, children were introduced to basic household chores. Boys carried light loads of water and girls were given elementary instruction in weaving or the preparation of food. Later, boys carried heavier bundles, and by the age of six or seven they were involved in activities outside the home, such as practicing with fishing nets or gathering reeds. Knowledge of specialized crafts such as pottery, metal-working, and basketry was transmitted from father to son and mother to daughter, beginning between the ages of eight and ten. Disobedient or recalcitrant children were not (in theory) severely punished until this time. The Codex Mendoza depicts pinching the arms or ears, or more unusually, pricking with maguey thorns. In extreme cases children could be spanked, held over a fire of roasting chile peppers, or bound and left to lie outside in the cold or on muddy ground.

Schools and education

Children were promised to schools when they were still infants, but the formal entrance and presentation did not take place until they were of age (variously estimated to have been at seven, ten, or fourteen). Both the promising and the actual entrance ceremonies were marked by lengthy admonitory speeches, in which the children were urged to obedience, deportment, diligence, humility, self-discipline, and cleanliness. There were two types of school, neither of which was co-educational, for they were designed to perpetuate sexual and social distinctions. The first type of school was the *telpochcalli*, "youth house." Each ward or *calpulli* had its own *telpochcalli* attached to the local temple. These schools were for the education of commoners. Emphasis was placed on basic moral and religious training, knowledge of history, ritual dancing and singing, as well as rhetoric. Public speaking was very important in Aztec life, and both men and women were expected to be proficient in this art. Boys entering the *telpochcalli* would be given military training, while girls would learn to participate in the religious cults they would serve in later life.

The second type of school was known as the *calmecac*. Its purpose was to train the most promising boys and girls from the nobility for leadership in religious, military, or political life. Rarely, some of the most intelligent children of the lower classes were chosen for this school. There was only one *calmecac* for boys and another for girls in each city. Discipline was strict, obedience was enforced, and students underwent periods of rigorous abstinence with penances, prayers, and ritual baths. The atmosphere was akin to that of a military academy or a monastery. Since religion was a



103 The upbringing of Aztec children emphasized discipline and hard work. This page from the Codex Mendoza shows how children between the ages of 11 and 14 (signified by the rows of dots) endured such punishments as inhaling the fumes of roasting chiles; on the left boys are taught by their fathers to carry loads and fish, while on the right girls are trained in the arts of cooking and weaving.

pervasive force in all aspects of Aztec life, the curriculum included basic calendrical calculation and the use of the *tonalamatl*; the significance and timing of the annual *veintena* festivals were taught, and students were expected to learn a range of ritual performances and how to address the deities. History, arithmetic, architecture, astronomy, agriculture, and warfare were also part of the curriculum. Since *calmecac* graduates were to be appointed as judges and to other key administrative posts, instruction included knowledge of the law.

The art of speaking was interwoven with the teaching of all these subjects, because the learning of technical skills, accounts of history, the reciting of stories and poetry, the conduct of lawsuits, and bargaining, were all primarily accomplished through oral means. To be educated was to be a master of expression, a dialectician, and an orator. An educated person had to be able to deliver artful or moving speeches on a diversity

of occasions with all the etiquette prescribed by the highly formalized pattern of Aztec life.

There were no books in the sense of today's textbooks, no manuals, no histories or novels. Aztec hieroglyphic writing had a restricted field, where individual glyphs appear embedded in large pictorial compositions, communicating names, places, dates, and tallies. We have seen examples of this form of writing on pages of the Codex Mendoza, and on the relief sculpture of the Tizoc Stone. The viewer's ability to read the complex messages encoded by such combined graphic elements depends on an ability to grasp the interrelationships between all components. The Coronation Stone of Motecuhzoma II provides a clear example of this interconnectedness of hieroglyphic, figural, and sculptural forms. The rectangular block of basalt is carved on all sides. It was originally placed flat upon a floor and the composition was developed accordingly. The bottom was carved with the day sign 1 rabbit, alluding to the first day of the origin time. The sides depict squatting earth deities. The top face of the rectangle features the well-known hieroglyphs of the five "eras" or "suns," plus the year-cartouche 2 reed, and a day-sign 12 alligator. In the Christian calendar this date corresponds to 11 June 1502. The coronation of the emperor Motecuhzoma II was the principal event of that year, and this monument is a commemorative marker. The monument may be paraphrased as follows: "On 11 June 1502, when Motecuhzoma II was crowned, he became the ruler of the four quarters of the world in the time of the 'earth-movement sun', which was created on the day 1 rabbit, having been preceded by the four earlier eras, jaguar-sun, wind-sun, rain-sun, and winter-sun; thus Motecuhzoma's title stems from the time of origins and is legitimized by the sacred earth itself." To a certain extent such "texts" on monuments and in painted manuscripts had a mnemonic function, for their complex messages were meant to be filled out, amplified, or otherwise qualified by knowledge transmitted orally.

Memorization played a critical role in this oral mode of learning. It was facilitated by repetitive rhythms and the percussive beat of musical instruments as well as by the meter and cadence of poetry and song. Such devices also helped to recall this information during delivery of a speech. To be thoroughly literate also implied knowledge of hundreds of metaphors, set phrases, and sequences of repetitive verses or strophes.

Poetic language, music, and dance

Metaphors had a mnemonic function as well as being the very substance of Nahuatl poetry. The Nahuatl language employed a particular form of extended metaphor which has been curiously likened to the "kennings" of old Norse poetry.[2] An example of this convention is the term Chalchiuhtlicue, "jade skirt," which we have already seen as the name of the deity of lakes, springs, and rivers. If we say "the lake's water is

104,105 The Coronation Stone of Motecuhzoma II, proclaiming the ruler's title to the earth. LEFT Glyphic signs of the five cosmogonic ages appear in counter-clockwise order. The square cartouche contains the date 2 reed (1502), year of Motecuhzoma's coronation. ABOVE The rear, originally face down, is carved with the sign 1 rabbit, the mythical date marking the beginning of the present era.

like jade," we are making a simile or direct comparison; if we say "the lake's jade water," we are making an implied comparison, or metaphor, by not likening the water to jade, but calling it jade; however if we say "jade skirt" without mentioning either the lake or the water, then we are making a comparison by substitution, or kenning: the water *is* "jade skirt" and by implication it is personalized as "she." To understand the meaning of this extended form of metaphor the listener must know that in ceremonial or courtly language it is customary to refer to the water of lakes, rivers, or springs as "skirts of jade." Among the Aztecs, the names and attributes of deities and heroes were expressed in many such extended metaphors and were often translated into plastic form as hieroglyphic or figural elements. Thus, sculptural effigies of Chalchiuhtlicue would be shown wearing a jade-covered skirt or, as in the Codex Borbonicus, the skirt would be painted jade-green. When a ritual performer appeared as the personification of lake water and the female deity, their skirt would thus visually name Chalchiuhtlicue. In Aztec society everyone witnessing the performance would know how to "read" the element of ritual costume.

In his book on the life of Netzahualcoyotl, ruler of Tetzcoco, Jose Luis Martínez points out that Nahuatl poetry routinely used extended metaphors, not only for the names of deities but also for places, actions, heroes, and objects or concepts of special significance.[3] Thus, Tenochtitlan was variously known as "the place where darts are made," "the place of

the white willows," or "the place of the eagle and the cactus." Warfare was "the song of shields," "where the smoke of shields diffuses," or "flowers of the heart upon the plain." Huitzilopochtli was spoken of as "the blue heron bird," "the lucid macaw," or "the eagle." Something precious or valued was "precious stones, gold, jade, flowers, fine feathers." Poetry was "flowers and song." The place where poetry was recited was "the house of flowers," "the house of springtime," "the flowering patio," and so on. Scores of other metaphors were employed in ceremonial speech and in the visual metaphoric language of manuscripts, sculptural monuments, and ritual costumes.

Many of the hymns and speeches recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún have archaic and hermetic forms of metaphor that seemed so unclear that he commented, "they would sing without understanding what was said." Durán, on the other hand, recognized that these forms of expression masked age-old mysteries and had a liturgical purpose:

> All the songs of these [Indians] are composed of metaphors so obscure that there are only few who understand them, without taking pains to study and discuss them to grasp their meaning. I have given myself the purpose of listening with great attention to that which is sung, and between the words and terms of the metaphors, while they may first seem nonsense, but afterward, having spoken and conferred, they are admirable sentences, as much in the divine ones they compose as in the human songs composed.[4]

It would be difficult to underestimate the importance of music, song, and dance in Aztec society, and the *telpochcalli* and *calmecac* took pains to instruct students in these subjects. Everyone from the *tlatoani* down to individual family members took part in dances held on all festival occasions. The Spanish friar Gerónimo de Mendieta attests:

> One of the principal things that was in all this land were the songs and dances, both to solemnize the feasts of their demons which they honored as gods and for private enjoyment and solace. Each lord had in his house a chapel with composer-singers of dances and songs, and these were thought to be ingenious in knowing how to compose the songs in their manner of meter and couplets that they had. Ordinarily they sang and danced in the principal festivities that were every twenty days, and also on other less principal occasions. The most important dances were in the plazas; on other occasions in the houses of the lords, as all the lords had large patios; they also danced in the houses of the lords and magistrates. When there had been some victory in war, or when a new ruler was assigned, or when a marriage was made with a high-ranking lady, or for any other novel event, the master would compose a new song, in addition to the general ones they already had for the festival of the demons and the deeds of antiquity and of past lords.[5]

Music and dance

106–108 ABOVE The Lordly Dance, from the Tovar Manuscript. LEFT A carved wooden *panhuehuetl* drum, similar to that being played in the picture above. BELOW A two-note *teponaztli* drum, carved in the shape of a coyote, which would have been struck with rubber beaters.

Mendieta also refers to the careful rehearsals of songs and dances, and Durán describes the trouble taken in giving instruction to girls and young ladies. Teachers would set their drums in the center of the patio and the children, often paired, would dance around them. Extra instruction was given to those who could not follow the steps or body movements. The dancers were simultaneously required to sing, and rhythms and speech were guided both by the percussion and the tones of the singing. The Aztec songmasters modeled themselves on the Toltec ideal: artists who knew that the most creative levels of expression welled up from the deepest personal sources:

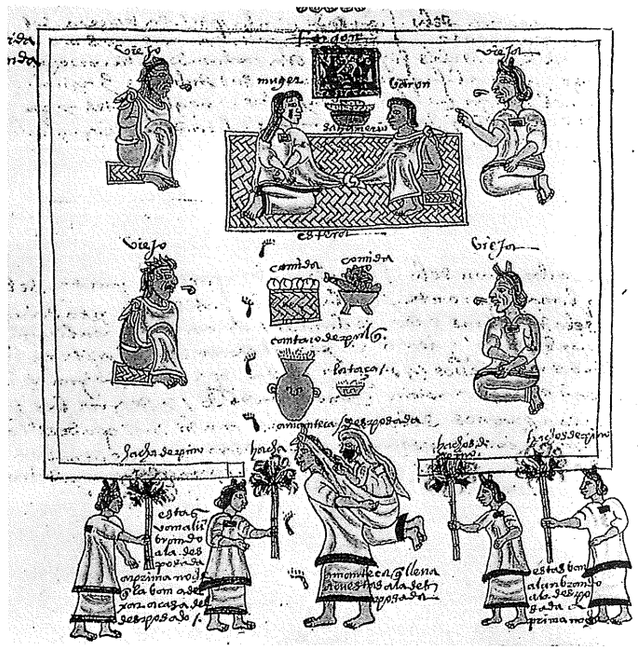
> The Toltecs were truly knowledgeable,
> they knew how to speak to their own hearts . . .
> they sounded the drum, the rattles,
> they were singers, they composed songs,
> they made them known,
> they learned them by memory,
> they made divine with their hearts
> the marvellous songs they composed.[6]

In the *telpochcalli* schools, which were located by the *calpulli* temples, a special patio with surrounding rooms was designated as the *cuicacalli*, "house of song." Here were taught the songs of heroes, elegies to princes, lamentations, war songs, love songs, and all that might fall under the classification of "profane." In the *calmecac* schools, on the other hand, emphasis was placed on songs and dances of a ritual nature. The role of music, dance, and ritual performance was to become increasingly important as adulthood and marriage approached.

Marriage

Marriage took place in the late teens or early twenties. When a youth arrived at the marrying age, his parents looked about for a suitable partner. A meal was prepared and the young man's schoolmasters were invited, to be told that his schooldays were over. Then another council was called and the assembled kinsmen decided which young woman was the most eligible – perhaps indeed someone who had already taken the youth's fancy at one of the great public festivals. Matchmakers were sent to the parents of the maiden to solicit her hand in marriage. The next day they would go again, and so on until the fourth day when her parents would give an answer.

As in all other rites of passage the marriage ceremony was preceded by elaborate preparations: cacao was bought, smoking tubes were prepared, flowers were secured, sauce bowls and pottery cups were purchased. Then maize was ground and tamales (corn husks filled with a mixture of meat and corn dough) were made, sometimes over two or three days, and honeyed



109 A marriage ceremony, from the Codex Mendoza. The bride is carried to the groom's house (bottom), and (above) the garments of the couple are knotted to signify union.

pulque was bought for the elders. As the evening of the appointed day approached, the bride was ceremonially bathed, dressed, and pasted with red feathers on her arms and legs; her face was painted with glittering pyrites. She was then counseled by her kinswomen and one of the strongest bore her on her back in a torchlight procession to the house of the groom. The Codex Mendoza depicts the arrival of the bride. Once inside, the bride and groom were seated upon a mat. A fire was lit in the hearth and copal incense laid out. After gifts of fine clothing were given by the mother of the groom, the elder matchmakers tied the groom's cape to the shift of the bride. Then the groom's mother fed the bride four mouthfuls of tamales in a special sauce, and another four mouthfuls to the young man. After that the bride and groom were led into their bedchamber. Four days of feasting followed, at the conclusion of which the elder women of the groom's family admonished and counseled the bride as to diligence, humility, and trust, and the bride's mother spoke to the groom of his duties and obligations, exhorting him to hard work, conscientiousness, and self-sacrifice. These speeches, preserved in the writings of Bernardino de Sahagún, provide us with an admirable picture of the ideals of an Aztec upbringing, if not always of the reality.

11 · Priests, Warriors, and Kings

The priests: servants of the gods

When the Spanish expedition first came to Tenochtitlan and Cortés and his party were shown the sacred precinct, they were shocked by the sinister appearance of the Aztec priests. Bernal Diaz del Castillo writes:

> They wore black cloaks like cassocks and long gowns reaching to their feet. Some had hoods like those worn by canons, and others had smaller hoods like those of Dominicans, and they wore their hair very long, right down to the waist, and some had it even reaching down to the ankles. Their hair was covered with blood, and so matted together that it could not be separated, and their ears were cut to pieces by way of penance. They stank like sulphur and they had another bad smell like carrion. They were the sons of chiefs and abstained from women. They fasted on certain days and what I saw them eat was the pith of seeds. The nails on their fingers were very long, and we heard it said that these priests were very pious and led good lives.[1]

What Bernal Diaz described were priests engaged in special duties, requiring long penances and behavior "contrary" to normal life, in the course of service to the deities. Behind these bizarre figures there lay an organization that was heir to a tradition of great complexity and sophistication, for religion was a unifying and pervasive force in all manifestations of Aztec life. From birth to death the stages of a person's development were marked by ceremonial activity. Divination charted the course of one's life just as it determined the most auspicious time for the planting of crops. A multitude of deities and cults were honored in the great cycle of public festivals, which were attended by thousands of people and patronized by different professional groups, by the *calputin*, and by other social divisions. The concept of sacrifice was deeply tied to the practice of war, and the *tlatoani* himself was required to make blood offerings upon pyramids and mountaintop shrines. The priesthood that supervised the religious establishment and all its activities also directed Aztec intellectual and artistic life. They governed the schools, they managed the cults, and coordinated and choreographed the public rites and performances.[2]

At the top of the priestly hierarchy was the *tlatoani*, for in Aztec society religion and state could not be separated. The *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan

130 Priestly duties included burning incense and playing the drums. From the Codex Mendoza.

was invested with a certain measure of divine power at the time of coronation. Although he was not considered a god, his priestly responsibilities included presiding over the annual rites for rain on Mt Tlaloc, and he also made regular appearances in all the most crucial festivals held in the annual cycle. The maintenance and renewal of society was an integral aspect of the ruler's larger responsibility for the annual rain and the renewal of nature. His titles included *yiollo alteptl*, "the heart of the city," and *inan, ita altepetl*, "the mother, the father of the city." He was obliged to perform penances and retreats in caves, and to observe the stars for favorable or inauspicious signs. Various taboos surrounded the *tlatoani*: he was required to eat alone, no one could look him in the eye, and his spiritual power was periodically renewed by means of special sacrificial ceremonies.

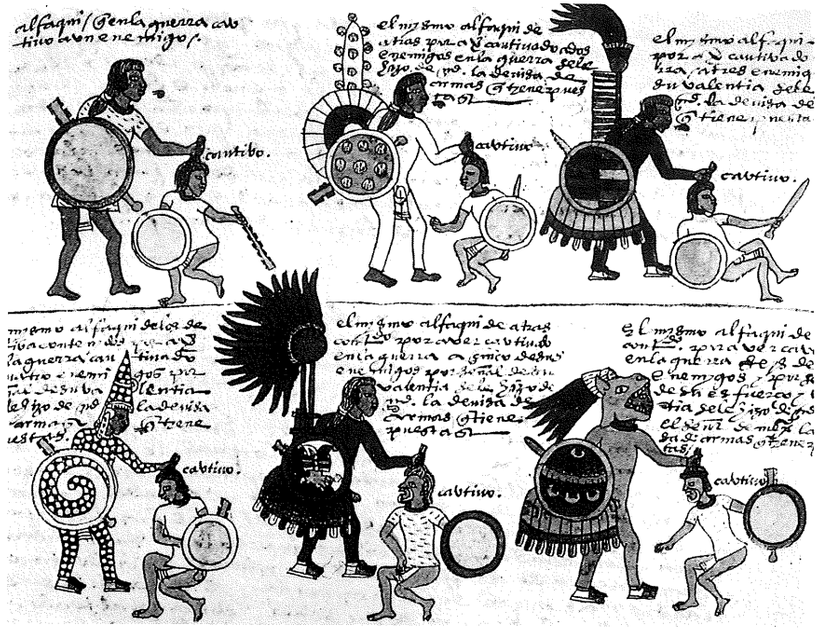
As chief priest the *tlatoani* headed a vast organization that reflected the pyramidal, tiered structure of Aztec society. Although priests could come from any social class, even the poorest levels, the highest priests were drawn from the ranks of the *pipiltin* – the hereditary nobility. Immediately under the ruler were two supreme priests whose titles and dual functions reflect a pre-Aztec system of organization. The *Quetzalcoatl totec tlamacazqui* and *Quetzalcoatl tlaloc tlamacazqui* were respectively associated with the cults of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. Quetzalcoatl was an ancient title, and totec was similarly an old cult name from a time before the Aztecs in the Valley of Mexico. Tlamacazqui was simply the term for priest. The

second priest's title included the name Tlaloc and was clearly connected to the long and prominent history of that deity in Mesoamerica. The dual high priesthood may find its roots in an old moiety type of social division, in which the cult responsibilities alternated according to the dry and rainy seasons.

The next priestly rank was the *Mexicatl Teohuatzin*, described as a general commander and overseer of ritual, and the superintendent of the *calmecac* school. He was assisted by the *Huitznahua Teohuatzin* and *Tecpan Teohuatzin*, who governed the rest of the priestly orders. The latter were in charge of particular temples and attending to the communal festivals and worship pertaining to the cults of their temple deity. They had important duties in administering the temple lands, *teopantlalli*. They oversaw the selection of deity-impersonators who wore the sacred masks and other regalia in public performances and processions, and they might also on occasion wear the regalia themselves. Certain priests were also warriors, and their duties included carrying the effigies of deities in the vanguard of Aztec armies during campaigns. The warrior-priests also captured enemies, and made the appropriate sacrifices in the field. Women fulfilled priestly duties, especially in connection with the numerous earth-mother cults, and their responsibilities included the instruction of young girls and women in the service and impersonation of these deities and the various maize goddesses.

All such priestly officials were assisted by students from the *calmecac* and by postulants to the priesthood. In the *calmecac*, postulants lived under strict supervision. Meditation and the learning of prayers were accompanied by periods of fasting. Long vigils were kept and marked by periodic offerings and purifying baths; food was usually taken in meager amounts at midday and midnight. Special occasions demanded auto-sacrifice; blood would be drawn by pricking the legs and arms with maguey spines, by cutting the earlobes with obsidian blades, or by running a cord through the tongue or the penis.

As in the monastic orders of Europe, the Aztec priesthood had a place for every kind of talent and interest. Some priests were codex painters and scribes. Specialized knowledge included the reading and interpretation of almanacs in connection with calendrical calculations and the observation of the night sky and the sun's travels from north to south and back again during the course of the year. The progression of the sunrise each day along the eastern horizon was the index to naming the right day for festivals and to attuning the vast apparatus of religious life in Aztec cities to the regular movements of the heavenly bodies. Certain priests engaged in prophesies and the interpretation of visions: these could be induced by psychotropic plants – jimson weed, *Psilocybe* mushrooms, or peyote cactus buttons. Perhaps the most highly esteemed priests were the teachers called *tlamatini*, a term which may be translated as "wise man." Bernardino de Sahagún's informant speaks eloquently of these individuals:



131 Warriors were graded according to the number of captives they took, and each new rank entitled the warrior to wear a more elaborate costume; the highest ranking officers are at the bottom. From the Codex Mendoza.

> The wise man [is] exemplary. He possesses writings; he owns books. [He is] the tradition, the road; the leader of men, a mover, a companion, a bearer of responsibility, a guide.
>
> The good wise man [is] a physician, a person of trust, a counsellor; an instructor worthy of confidence, deserving of credibility, deserving of faith; a teacher ... He lights the world for one; he knows of the land of the dead; he is dignified, unreviled.[3]

The warriors

As in the case of the priesthood, the *tlatoani* stood at the top of the military hierarchy. He was the commander-in-chief of the army, and his prowess as a warrior was of critical importance to the Aztec state. His first military task was to conduct a campaign as part of the coronation procedure – a performance regarded as ritually symbolic and a pragmatic demonstration of his abilities. The *tlatoani* was closely advised by the *cihuacoatl*, "Woman serpent;" this office was occupied by Tlacaelel from the reign of Itzcoatl and the Atzcapotzalco war in the 1420s to the reign of Ahuizotl in the 1480s. As adviser to five *tlatoanis*, Tlacaelel must be

regarded as one of the most influential thinkers and men of action that shaped the expansion of the Aztec empire.

The structure of the Aztec military hierarchy has been outlined by Ross Hassig.[4] A supreme council of four noblemen governed the army, fulfilling a function roughly analogous to that of a general staff. These high officials were the *tlacochcalcatl*, the *tlaccatecatl*, the *etzhuanhuanco*, and the *tillancalqui*. There is evidence to suggest that the *tlaccatecatl* and *tlacochcalcatl* were titles in use long before the Aztecs and that, like the titles of the two chief priests, they reflect an older system of social organization. At Tenochtitlan the members of the council of four were all brothers or close relatives of the *tlatoani*. One would be heir apparent, usually the *tlaccatecatl*. The Codex Mendoza depicts these officials in regalia of state. The next levels of office were held by warriors either from the nobility or commoners, for although sons of the nobles tended to be more successful in the military by virtue of their education and general privileges, men from the lowest classes could attain all but the highest positions.

The two highest military societies or orders were the *otontin* "otomies" and the *cuauhchique*, "shorn ones." Only the most daring battlefield veterans could be admitted, for it was required to have taken many captives and to have performed at least 20 deeds of exceptional bravery. The highest military commanders such as the *tlaccatecatl* and *tlacochcalcatl* were members of these two orders. All the soldiers in these societies (such as the eagle- and jaguar warriors) were entitled to wear attire appropriate to their rank. Headgear, jewelry, cloaks, and other accessories and emblems were strictly prescribed, and were personally handed to the warriors during special ceremonies held for that purpose, sometimes by the *tlatoani* himself. The war suits given to commoners were of animal skins, while those of the nobility were woven with feathers. The Codex Mendoza depicts warriors capturing one, two, three, and four enemies, and the special attire that was awarded in each case (ill. 131). Even commoners achieving these feats were given special privileges, such as the right to wear cotton clothing and sandals in the royal palaces, to drink pulque in public, to keep concubines, and to dine in the palace. On ritual occasions the warriors ate human flesh taken from the arms or thighs of their sacrificed captives. The great mass of common warriors wore body paint for identification and maguey cloth mantles, a breechcloth, and no sandals.

Military training for young boys began during their schooling. Martial exercises were actually conducted on the premises of the eagle- and jaguar-warriors' meeting-houses, where youths assembled for instruction on the handling of arms, basic drill and maneuvers, and on discipline, military hierarchy, history, and battlefield lore. Although early Spanish colonial histories speak of military houses in the royal palace, archaeological evidence indicates that the *cuauhcalli*, "eagle house," was located in the main ceremonial center. Platform bases with eagle sculptures on the moldings gave access to rooms surrounding two inner patios. Impressive

life-size ceramic sculptures of eagle warriors were recovered from this setting, and a low bench running around the wall of one of the inner patios was found to be sculpted in low relief with processions of warriors converging on a sacrificial implement. The motif and style of this processional scene was "quoted" directly from the art of Toltec and late Maya centers. The intention was to evoke the memory of those "ancestral" warrior-nations. The students gradually became adept in managing the obsidian-bladed clubs, stabbing javelins, and round shields with protective leather fringes. Atlatl or spear-throwing also demanded practice: this ancient implement was grooved to hold a dart, and its length gave additional power and accuracy to the throw. While training in the patios of the warriors' meeting-houses, the youths had ample opportunity to see the colorful and impressive regalia of their seniors, and to hear of their battle-exploits. The novices' first experience of campaigning was to carry loads for the warriors. There was much vying by the youths' families to find a warrior of the best possible qualifications for their boy to serve.

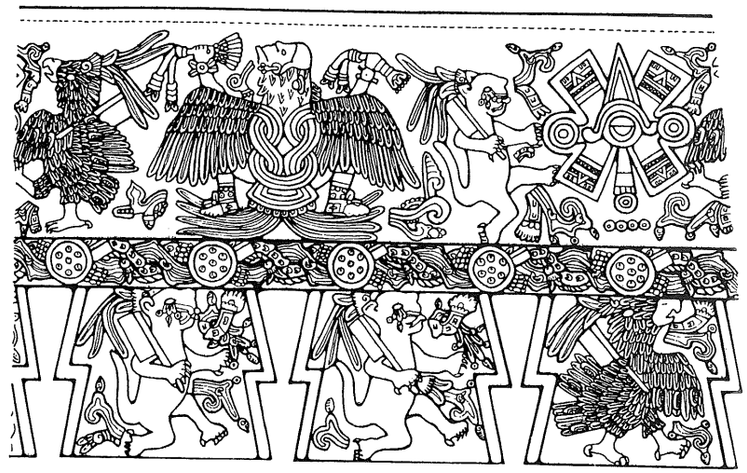
There was no standing army as exists in the modern world. Rather, troops were called up for specific campaigns. The organization of the army was in units from local *calpultin*, or towns. In Tenochtitlan, each *calpultin* was required to contribute 400 men. Each unit marched under its own standards and was commanded by its own community leaders. There were probably several subdivisions of 200 to 100 men, much like platoons or squads. The large basic unit of the Aztec army consisted of 8,000 men, roughly like a battalion. Long distance expeditions might involve as many as 25 units, equaling 200,000 warriors, plus porters to carry supplies and equipment. The various divisions were identified by banners or standards strapped on the back of a bearer, who was usually positioned in the middle of a unit. As in modern armies, these standards were objects of great pride to the group, and were as strongly defended as they were aggressively sought by the enemy as trophies.

When the *tlatoani* and the supreme council decided to carry out a campaign, orders were given to collect supplies. Tribute-towns were obliged to send maize cakes, maize meal, toasted maize, beans, chile, pumpkin-seeds, pinolli, and salt. Indiviual warriors also carried as much food as they could to supplement the basic rations. When all was prepared and the conch-shells were sounded, the first units set out. Roads in ancient Mexico were maintained by local towns, but they were barely wide enough for two people to pass. The first to depart were the scouts, followed by warrior-priests carrying sacred effigies, who marched a day ahead of the force. Then came the veteran warriors and members of the prestigious military orders, including the *tlacochcalcatl* and *tlaccatecatl*, and the *tlatoani* himself if he was personally to direct the campaign in the field. The third great contingent of warriors from Tenochtitlan followed, with units spaced out at regular intervals. Then came contingents from Tlatelolco, Tetzcoco, Tlacopan, and other allied cities, again formed in

long columns stretching for many miles. Hassig has calculated that a basic unit of 8,000 men would stretch as far as 15 miles, or even 20 miles along winding trails. The final units of warriors in the march came from subject towns as a form of tribute-payment. Camp was set up with reed mats for shelter, or tents for the high nobility, while the ordinary warriors slept in the open wrapped in their mantles.

Battlefield practices have been outlined in the chapters on the Spanish Conquest and the Aztec imperial expansion, but no discussion of Aztec warriors can fail to mention the curious military ritual known as *xochiyaotl*, "flower war" (referring to the battlefield where finely-attired warriors would fall like a rain of blossoms). Flower wars were staged by previous mutual agreement between opposing communities for the sole purpose of capturing prisoners for sacrifice. Those formal ritualistic encounters may be another custom transmitted from an ancient past, but precedent has yet to be firmly traced. An early reference says that the conflict between the Tepanec-Mexica and the Chalca began as a *xochiyaotl* in 1376. By the 15th century flower wars were regularly held between the members of the Triple Alliance and Huexotzingo, Atlixco, and other towns in the Valley of Puebla. A generation ago, scholars assumed that they were a unique Mesoamerican phenomenon, but parallels have now been drawn with head-hunting tribal societies elsewhere in the world. Warfare among these peoples was not primarily waged for booty or land. Even among the Aztecs, who conducted regular campaigns to acquire tribute, ritual sacrifice invested their enterprise with a strongly religious character.

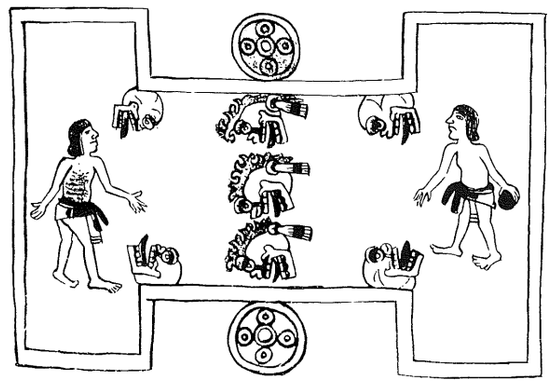
Among the Toltecs and the late Maya, ballgames involving human sacrifice were played as a form of jousting and a substitute for armed conflict. The popularity of such games persisted under the Aztecs. Divination may also have been strongly featured in the outcome of such games, as it was in Classic Maya centers where ballgames were held during rites of passage. As Johan Huizinga speculated in his imaginative book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, war may find its origins in the sense of play.[5] Waged with limiting game-like rules between equals or antagonists with equal rights, warfare in many early societies was conducted according to a way of thought that was deeply concerned with fate, chance, judgment and contest as different expressions of the sacred. Flower wars may be seen as a type of mock-war with a still unknown past in Mesoamerica, that continued to be practiced intermittently within the larger pattern of Aztec warfare. Although flower wars grew disproportionately to include hundreds, even thousands, of warriors in response to the need for prisoners for display and status, their original intention was to make offerings for the renewal of society and nature.

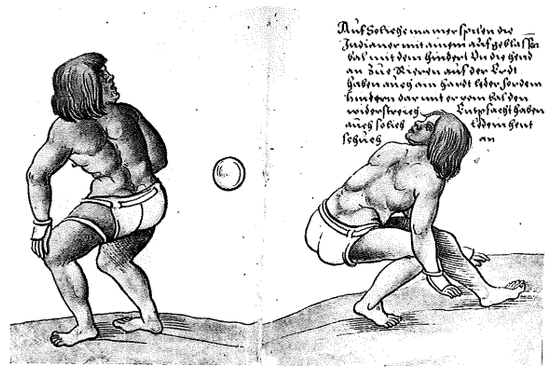


137,138 LEFT and ABOVE A wooden drum (*panhuehuetl*) from Malinalco, carved with eagles and jaguars dancing and uttering the cry for war. The iconography of these anthropomorphic figures echoes that of the rock-cut temple at Malinalco and is related to Aztec military imagery.

War games

139,140 RIGHT This scene from the Codex Magliabechiano shows a two-man ballcourt. The popular ballgame – dating back to the beginnings of civilization in Mesoamerica – was played for sport and gambling, for resolving disputes, and as a form of divination. The skull markers indicate that the game could be played "to the death." BELOW RIGHT The hips and shoulders were used to hit a solid rubber ball.





Aztec kingship: a tlatoani takes office

The idea of kingship in Aztec society cannot be understood in political and economic terms alone, for the *tlatoani* was also the focus of religious activities by which the prosperity and continuity of the community were ensured. We have seen that he stood at the summit of the social pyramid, embodying the functions of the chief priest and commander of the armed forces. When a new *tlatoani* was initiated into office, he became the central protagonist of a ritual drama that engaged the whole nation.[6]

The election of a new *tlatoani* at Tenochtitlan was not based on primogeniture. As the old ruler neared the end of his life he would confirm his choice of a successor. In effect this would have already been prearranged, for the man to be *tlatoani* held the office of *tlaccatecatl* in the supreme military council of four. Officially however the appointment depended on the approval of the council; the *cihuacoatl*'s advice was also important, and in some cases the rulers of Tetzcoco and Tlacopan were consulted. The candidate always came from a very restricted group of princes. Two pre-imperial *tlatoani* were sons of the rulers, but after Itzcoatl we find a succession of brothers, nephews, and grandsons belonging to an extended family oligarchy. The selection and election process was only the beginning of a rite of passage by which the prince would be transformed into the semi-deified, supreme source of authority in the Aztec state.

The rites of kingship at Tenochtitlan were organized in distinct episodes, featuring elaborate processions, speeches, prayers and performances carefully staged for dramatic effect. The Great Pyramid formed the central stage and point of reference. The building was at once the manifestation of Tlaloc's "mountain of sustenance" and Huitzilopochtli's mythic Coatepetl. Consecrated by a multitude of artifacts and offerings from previous reigns, the building was conceived as a cosmic symbol and a sign of the ancestral past. The royal rites of passage unfolded in a sequence of four phases: (1) separation and retreat; (2) investiture and coronation; (3) the coronation war; and (4) confirmation.

Separation and retreat

During this phase society was in a state of suspension following the death of the previous ruler. The ruler-elect withdrew from all usual social contact as a ritual detachment from his former status and functions. The separation began when he was formally stripped of his finery and all emblems of rank and authority. Wearing only a loincloth, he was led by the rulers of Tetzcoco and Tlacopan to the base of the Great Pyramid stairway. Feigning weakness as a sign of humility, he was supported by two other noblemen on his climb to the Huitzilopochtli shrine. On the high platform he was dressed in a dark green cape with skull and crossbones designs. This attire signaled his withdrawal from ordinary life in order to return to a "primordial" state, a ritual time of the beginning of things. Dressed

in the garb of fasting and penitence, and in the company of nobles who were similarly dressed, he burnt incense before Huitzilopochtli's shrine and then descended the stairway. All movements were deliberately slow and solemn, and the assembled crowds were silent. The ruler-elect and his entourage now entered the building known as the Tlacochcalco, a military headquarters and armory in the central precinct. Here began a four-day, four-night retreat, with fasting and penitential observances. Every noon and midnight a silent procession revisited the Huitzilopochtli shrine, where incense was burnt and the ruler offered drops of his royal blood pricked from his calves, arms, and earlobes. The mood was somber and reflective, and afterwards everyone went to bathe in a ceremony of religious purification. During this time of betwixt and between, the prospective ruler contemplated the meaning and burdens of his office and the responsibilities of command. The orations delivered during this period were quiet and struck a tone of humility. The ruler stood bowed while speaking, and the very devout stood naked. One of the most significant speeches was addressed to Tezcatlipoca, whose metaphoric titles "wind," "night," "lord of the near and the nigh," respectively suggested the breath of life, invisibility, and pervasiveness. Tezcatlipoca was a cult of Toltec origin and was especially identified with royalty. By invoking Tezcatlipoca while standing before the Huitzilopochtli effigy, the rulers expressed a bond between the older cult and that of the deified Aztec warrior-hero. For this reason Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli were sometimes referred to as "brothers."

Investiture and coronation

The brilliant investiture and coronation of the new ruler contrasted with the somber mood of the retreat. This second episode demonstrated the ruler's return to society and the assumption of his new social role. Now the ruler and his entourage processed from the great enclosure to one of the royal palaces. Within the palace he stood surrounded by nobles to be dressed in royal attire by the *tlatoani* of Tetzcoco. This dressing in the regalia of state signaled the taking of command as the first step in reconstituting Aztec society after the dissolution of the retreat.

> The tlatoani of Tetzcoco took the crown of green stones, all worked in gold, and placed it upon the new ruler's head, and piercing the septum of his nose he inserted a green emerald as thick as a quill pen, and in his ears two round emerald earplugs in gold settings, and on his arms from elbow to shoulder two very resplendent gold bracelets, and on his ankles, anklets with dangling gold bells, and the [Tetzcocan] King shod him with jaguar-skin sandals all elegantly gilded and clad him with a precious mantle of hennequen-like fiber, very thin and shining, all gilded and painted with elegant pictures; and he put a waistband around him of the same, and taking him by the hand he led him to a throne

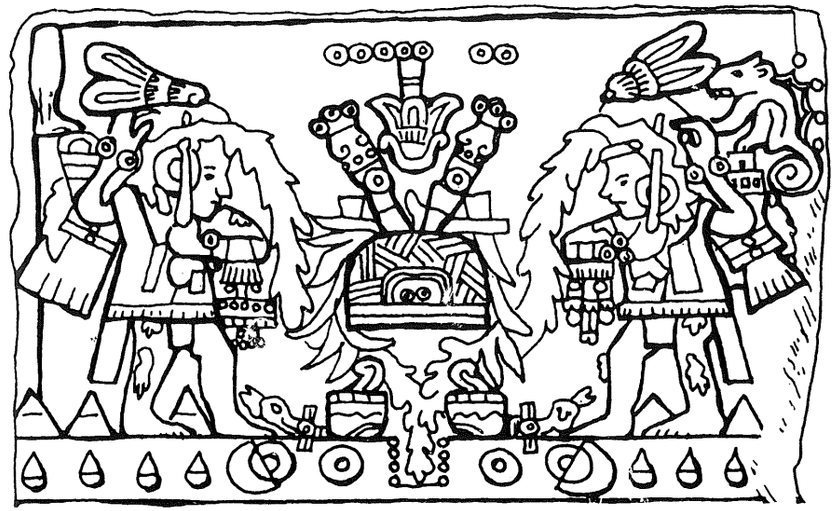
that they called the *cuauhicpalli*, meaning eagle-seat, also named jaguar-seat, for it was decorated with eagle feathers and jaguar-hides.[7]

This ceremony was at once an investiture, a coronation, and an enthronement. Many speeches were made by members of the nobility, both admonishing and praising the new ruler, who replied to each in turn.[8]

Once crowned, dressed, and seated, the ruler was carried to the Great Pyramid on an eagle and jaguar throne placed upon a litter. This first public appearance, with all the symbols of authority, contrasted markedly with the previous phase of withdrawal. Atop the pyramid, in Huitzilopochtli's shrine, the new ruler was presented with a jaguar's claw for sacrificial bloodletting from his ears and legs. This autosacrifice was followed by more admonishments, prayers, and sermons, and quail were also offered to affirm the bonds between the ruler and the ancestral deity, Huitzilopochtli.

The procession then descended from the pyramid to go to another place, described in some accounts as the location of an "eagle vessel" carved with a receptacle, while other accounts mention a "sun-stone." A magnificent eagle-vessel was recovered during the Great Pyramid excavations, and a fine example of a sun-stone exists in the Philadelphia Museum. Standing before such sculptured monuments (both types may have been displayed together, for the eagle was a solar symbol) the *tlatoani* again offered drops of royal blood from his arms and legs and he also sacrificed quail. Another covenant was thereby made to confirm his rule at the center of the world in the present "sun" or era of creation. From this site the ruler was carried in the royal litter to a building known as the *coateocalli*, the "house of (foreign) gods." There, within a darkened chamber, the captured religious fetishes and paraphernalia of foreign nations were kept. These tokens of Aztec triumphs were also symbolic hostages of the religious identity of tributary peoples. In the *coateocalli* the ruler once again offered blood sacrifices to affirm his obligation to attend to the cycle of religious festivals.

The final station in the ritual enclosure was the earth-temple known as Yopico. The inner chamber had a sunken receptacle in the floor for offerings during the springtime planting festivals of Tlacaxipehualiztli and Tozoztontli. The rites of the deity Xipe Totec housed in this temple were primarily agricultural, but they also assumed a military nature in the confirmation ceremony of young Aztec warriors who had captured prisoners for the springtime sacrifice. Here the connection between war and agriculture was vividly demonstrated. Yopico was a symbolic architectural cave, an entrance to the earth related to the rock-cut Malinalco temple. The circular opening in the floor of the Malinalco temple and the sunken receptacle at Yopico were places for ritual communication with the earth. It was through sacrifice to the earth that the transfer of power to the new *tlatoani* was consecrated and made legal. The idea of transferring power from a deceased ruler to his successor is evident in the Dedication



141 Detail from the Dedication Stone of Tizoc and Ahuizotl. The deceased king Tizoc (left) confronts his successor Ahuizotl (right). Dressed as priests, they draw blood from their earlobes with bone awls: the transfer of power from the dead to the living is legitimized by sacrifice to the sacred earth.

Stone of Tizoc and Ahuitzotl: the centrally positioned mask immediately below their feet represents the earth as a sacred entity and as the land of the Aztecs. Emerging from Yopico after offering his blood, quail, and incense, the *tlatoani* was spiritually "reborn" into his new social role.

Returning to the palace, the new ruler was seated for the ceremony of speeches, which marked the conclusion of the investiture and coronation. In each speech made by the elders, nobles, and chiefs, the new ruler was admonished and encouraged to perform as expected of a person in his office. At one point the ruler was reminded that he now enjoyed sacred status.

> Although the common folk have gladdened thee, and although thy younger brother, thy older brother have put their trust in thee, now thou art deified. Although thou art human, as are we, although thou art our son, our younger brother, no more art thou human, as are we: we do not look upon thee as human. Already thou repentest, thou replacest one. Thou callest out to, thou speakest in a strange tongue to the god, the lord of the near, of the high. And within thee he calleth out to thee; he is within thee; he speaketh forth from they mouth. Thou art his lips, thou art his jaw, thou art his tongue, thou art his eyes, thou art his ears. He hath provided thee thy fangs, thy claws.[9]

We must remember that in Nahuatl the term *teotl* means "something sacred" and does not necessarily imply that the ruler was deified as a god.

In response the *tlatoani* exhorted the population to war and to cultivate the land. Finally, the ceremony of speeches was closed with an address from a representative of the common people, acknowledging the ruler's discourse and showing that his commandments had been understood.

The coronation war

Before the *tlatoani* could be considered fully confirmed as the commander of the Aztec nation, he was required to prove his leadership in battle, to win tribute, and to capture prisoners for sacrifice in the final ceremony of confirmation. The fortunes of Tizoc and his successor-brother Ahuizotl illustrate the importance of this military test. In contrast to Tizoc's unsuccessful coronation war, Ahuizotl's campaign in Xilotepec was a resounding success. His return to the capital was the occasion of a grand triumph, and the booty obtained in the campaign went far to finance the lavish display laid on for his confirmation ceremony.

Confirmation

This was the final step in the rites of kingship. Proclamations were made and invitations sent to allies, administrative officials, and important rulers including those of enemy nations. As the time drew close, all chieftains, traders, and treasurers were expected to send gifts – failure to do so might well lead to loss of rank or even exile. In due time the presents began to arrive. Cloth and clothing, jewelry, bundles of feathers, loads of corn, of cacao, and baskets of fruit, flocks of turkeys, deer, quail, and fish of many kinds were brought across the causeways in astonishing abundance. Within the city, artisans and craftspeople including lapidary workers, jewelers, featherworkers, and potters also made preparations. Masons and plasterers set to work repairing old buildings and constructing new ones.

The feasts that were to follow were offered by the *tlatoani* himself, in a striking expression of his personal control of wealth. The central act of this ceremony was the personal distribution by the new ruler of insignia of rank to every official. This procedure began on the first day, when the allied rulers of Tetzcoco and Tlacopan were formally presented with regalia of office by the new *tlatoani* – thus also making clear to all the supremacy of Tenochtitlan over its two allied cities. The rulers were then dressed and waited to attend a spectacular dance. The singers and musicians began the rhythm on a great *huehuetl* drum in the patio of the palace, and the *tlatoque* of Tetzcoco and Tlacopan led the 2,000 assembled nobles, chieftains, and high-ranking warriors in a stately dance. At a prescribed moment the new *tlatoani* made his triumphal entrance. Enveloped in the smoke of copal incense, the splendidly attired victorious *tlatoani* was encircled by the dancing lords. Standing by the commanding drum, he was converted to a living icon – the heir to Huitzilopochtli – reaffirming his virtue and his warlike purpose at the center of the Aztec world.

Returning to the throne, the new ruler continued his personal distribution of insignia. All high officials including nobles, warriors, and priests, as well as elders from the *calpultin* wards of Tenochtitlan, provincial governors, tax collectors, and chieftains, received gifts and emblems of authority. In the early years of Aztec expansion each town within the empire had had its own internal hierarchy, but few mechanisms existed to establish the rank of one particular community leader in relation to the chief of another or to Aztec officials. The growth of the empire afforded Aztec chiefs increasing authority and it became necessary to create a more general and widespread ranking order. In this respect the function of the confirmation rite, which was originally a validation of the ruler's authority, changed by the end of the 15th century into a demonstration of his absolute superiority within Aztec society, and of Aztec society vis-à-vis the rest of the world. The confirmation events thus symbolically established the reintegration of the social order. The long process that had begun with the death of the former ruler was concluded with the sacrifice of the prisoners taken in the coronation war. With this act the rites of kingship concluded.

In Aztec society the idea of kingship embraced two principal functions. The first was rooted in an ancient chthonic religion and its creation-mythology, personified by the *tlatoani* as a magical rainmaker-king in the annual rites at Mt Tlaloc. In this capacity he was responsible for scheduling and performing the sacrifice for agricultural renewal. The other notion of kingship was linked to this first conception: the *tlatoani* as an invincible warrior, embodying the image of Huitzilopochtli. Both roles may be identified in the kingship rites performed at Tenochtitlan, but the latter was particularly important, because for an island people who had never possessed their own farmlands, war had become the principal means of accruing wealth and power. In this respect the inauguration of a new *tlatoani* reflected the unique history of the original Mexica population.

7 · The Aztec Symbolic World

Since remote times the rhythms of life in highland Mexico had been deeply embedded in the land and the changing seasons. The annual alternation of rain and drought – periods of life and death – determined the cycle of farming peoples and hunter-gatherers before them. The pragmatic business of obtaining food went hand in hand with a sense of periodicity, rhythm and cyclic recurrence, and with the notion of belonging to the land. To the Aztecs, this interaction of humankind with nature was of profound significance, and was affirmed through a calendar of cyclic festivals performed at a network of sacred places in cities and throughout the natural landscape. The religious status and functions of rulers were critical in these relationships, for the Aztec *tlatoque* and their priestly minions were obliged to ensure, by means of traditional rituals, the regularity of the seasons, the productivity of the land, and the fertility of crops and animals.

The Aztec deities

When the Chichimec tribes first entered the Valley of Mexico, each town already had its own religious cults centered on nature-deities, deified ancestors, and legendary heroes. There was no concept of a "family of gods" as in ancient Mediterranean civilizations, but a host of deities each identified with the various spheres of the universe. The 16th-century Spanish historian Juan Bautista Pomar remarked that "they had many idols, and so many that almost for each thing there was one." As the Aztec empire expanded, the principal deity of a conquered community was incorporated into the Aztec pantheon. Indeed, the very process of conquest could be represented as the "capture" of the tutelary deity of an enemy town: as we have seen (ills. 49,50), the Stone of Tizoc portrays Aztec *tlatoani* Tizoc wearing the emblems of Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca and leading his minions in the capture of deities, each identified by the place-glyph of a particular town. In Tenochtitlan, a special building in the great ceremonial precinct – the *coateocalli* – was assigned to house the captive cult paraphernalia and fetishes of conquered communities. The deities thus captured were extraordinarily diverse, but their fundamental characteristics often show strong similarities, for they were ultimately linked to the land and the sky. When the Spanish friars called a meeting with the leading Aztec priests to inform them that their

old religion was to be renounced, the leading priest responded with words that characterized their most basic perception of these deities:

They [the ancestors] said
That it is through
The sacred spirits
That all live...
That they give us
Our daily fare
And all that we
Drink, all that
We eat,
Our sustenance,
Maize, beans,
Amaranth, chia.
They we supplicate
For water
For rain,
With which
Everything flourishes
On earth.

An exhaustive study of the Aztec religious system has not yet been undertaken, but Henry Nicholson's research has greatly illuminated the worship of the Aztec deities. Nicholson pointed out that most, if not all, the cults can be grouped in basic clusters, which can be named for the dominant deity of that complex (see list of principal gods and cults).[1] The following discussion represents a modified version of Nicholson's approach.

Tezcatlipoca, "Smoking Mirror" (obsidian), is often characterized as the most powerful, supreme deity of the ancient pantheon, and was associated with the notion of destiny or fate. He probably embodies the idea of a mana-like numinous power inherent in all things. His quintessential emblem, an obsidian mirror, was an implement associated with divination and may ultimately reflect shamanistic origins, but there can be little doubt that this cult was particularly identified with royalty, because Tezcatlipoca is the object of the most lengthy and reverent prayers in the rites of kingship.

Tonatiuh, the sun, was another of the supreme forces worshiped in ancient Mexico. The emblem of Tonatiuh was the solar disk, sometimes worn on the back of ritual impersonators, but more often carved on sculptural monuments. The sun was perceived as a primary source of life whose special devotees were the warriors. The warriors were charged with the mission to provide the sun with sacrificial victims. A special altar to the sun was used for sacrifices in coronation-rites, a fact which signifies the importance of the deity.

Principal Gods and Cults of the Aztecs

	NAME	TRANSLATION	MAIN ATTRIBUTES
PRIMORDIAL CREATORS	**Ometecuhtli** **Omecihuatl** also known as **Tonacatecuhtli** **Tonacacihuatl**	Two Lord Two Lady Lord and Lady of Sustenance	Primordial male-female creative principle
FATE, DESTINY	**Tezcatlipoca**	Smoking Mirror (Obsidian Mirror)	Omnipotent deity, associated with fate, both beneficial and destructive. His other metaphoric titles include **Moyocoyani** (Maker of Himself), **Titlacauan** (We His Slaves), **Yaotl** (Enemy), **Ipalnemoani** (Lord of the Near and the Nigh), and **Tloque Nahuaque** (Night, Wind). **Tezcatlipoca** figures prominently in coronation speeches and prayer and must be considered especially associated with rulership
SKY	**Tonatiuh** **Metztli** **Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli**	He Who Makes the Day Moon Dawn Lord	The sun Venus (the Morning Star)
WIND	**Quetzalcoatl** **Ehecatl**	Quetzal (feathered) Serpent Wind	Windstorms that bring rain (see also deified heroes and ancestral deities)
FIRE	**Huehueteotl** **Chantico** **Xiuhtecuhtli**	Old, Old Deity In the House Turquoise Lord	Fire The hearth fire Fire
EARTH	**Popocatepetl** **Ixtaccihuatl** **Mt Tlaloc and Tlalocan** **Tetzcotzingo** **Matlalcueye** **Tepeyollotl** **Toci** **Teteoinnan** **Tonantzin** **Coatlicue** **Itzpapalotl** **Tlaltecuhtli** **Tlazolteotl** **Ilamatecuhtli**	Smoke Mountain White Woman Place of the Rain (God) Honorable Place of the Bald Rock (?) Blue Skirt Heart of the Mountain Our Grandmother Mother of the Deities Honored Mother Serpent Skirt Obsidian Butterfly Earth Lord or Lady Sacred Filth Eater Old Mother Deity	Sacred mountains whose cult embraced various others associated with the earth, rain, ground water, and vegetation Locus of the earth's regenerative powers Female deities variously associated with the earth and its fertility

Principal Gods and Cults of the Aztecs

	NAME	TRANSLATION	MAIN ATTRIBUTES
RAIN, WATER	**Tlaloc**	That Which Lies Upon the Surface of the Earth (referring to clouds forming around the mountaintops)	The rain deity, also associated with the earth's fertility
	Tlaloque	Little Tlalocs	
	Tepictoton	Little Old Hills	
	Chalchiuhtlicue	She of the Jade Skirt	Deity of springs, rivers, lakes, and the sea
	Huixtocihuatl	Huixtotin Lady	Deity of salt
MAIZE, VEGETATION	**Xilonen**	Young Maize Ear	Deity of first tender maize
	Centeotl	Deified Maize *or* Divine Maize Ear	Late-ripening maize
	Chicomecoatl	Seven Serpent	Seed corn
	Xipe Totec	Our Flayed Lord	Vegetation deity (especially seeds)
	Mayahuel	Maguey Plant	Maguey plant deity
	Octli Deities		Variously named deities of pulque (fermented drink of maguey juice)
	Xochipilli	Flower Prince	Deity of flowers, plants, and patron of song and dance
	Xochiquetzal	Flower Quetzal	Goddess of flowers, grains, patroness of weavers
	Macuilxochitl	Five Flower	Deity of flowers, plants, song, dance, and games
THE LAND OF THE DEAD	**Mictlantecuhtli**	Lord of Mictlan (land of the dead)	Deity of death, darkness, the subterranean regions
	Mictlantecacihuatl	Lady of Mictlan	Female counterpart of **Mictlantecuhtli**
DEIFIED HEROES AND ANCESTRAL DEITIES	**Huitzilopochtli**	Hummingbird on the Left	Mexica-Aztec ancestral tutelary deity, patron of war, associated with the sun
	Quetzalcoatl	Feathered Serpent	Ancient wind and storm deity. His name also a title of rulers; historically associated with a celebrated ruler of Toltec Tula. At time of Spanish Conquest, this cult was seated in Cholula
	Yacatecuhtli	Lord of the Nose	Tutelary deity of traders
	Mixcoatl	Cloud Serpent	Ancient tribal deity of the hunt. Especially revered in Tlaxcala, Huexotzingo, and other communities in Puebla Valley
	Camaxtli	Lord of the Chase	Chichimec deity whose cult was centered in Huexotzingo

Huehueteotl, the "old, old deity," was one of the names of the cult of fire, which was among the oldest in Mesoamerica. The idea of sacred fire stems from its most basic function in the domestic hearth. Ceramic and stone effigies of an old man bearing a brazier on his back have been found at Teotihuacan, and were also excavated from the circular pyramid of Cuicuilco, dating from *c.*300 BC. Among the Aztecs, the maintenance of sacred fires in the temples was a principal priestly duty, and as we shall see, it was only during the last hours of the old year that the flames were extinguished. The renewal of fire was identified with the renewal of time itself.

The cult of Tlaloc, the rain deity, was another of the oldest and most universal cults in ancient Mexico. Although the name itself may be Aztec, the idea of a storm god especially identified with mountaintop shrines and with life-giving rain was certainly as old as Teotihuacan. The goggle-eyed mask of Tlaloc was as ubiquitous in that ancient city as it was at Tenochtitlan, 1,000 years later. The name Tlaloc derives from the word *tlalli*, "earth," and the suffix *oc* which implies "something lying upon the surface." This alludes to the familiar sight of clouds welling up from canyons and collecting around mountaintops during the rainy season. Impersonators of Tlaloc would wear the distinctive mask and heron-feather headdress, and often carried a cornstalk or a symbolic lightning-bolt wand; another symbol of Tlaloc was a ritual water-jar. Tlaloc was manifested in the form of boulders at shrine-sites, and in the Valley of Mexico the primary shrine to this major deity was located atop Mt Tlaloc.

Chalchiuhtlicue, "she of the jade skirt," was the deity connected with the worship of ground water. Her shrines were therefore by springs, streams, irrigation ditches, or aqueducts, the most important of these shrines being at Pantitlan, in the center of Lake Tetzcoco. Sometimes described as the "sister" of Tlaloc, Chalchiuhtlicue was impersonated by ritual performers wearing the green skirt that identified the deity. Like that of Tlaloc, this cult was intimately linked to the earth, fertility, and the regeneration of nature.

The name Quetzalcoatl, "quetzal (feather) serpent," had dozens of associations. It was the name of a nature-deity; it was a royal title; it figured in Toltec times as a military title and emblem; it was the name of a legendary priest-ruler; it was a title of high priestly office; and it was the patron cult of the *calmecac* schools described in Chapter 9. Without attempting to review the complex manifestations of this major cult, we may point to an image that perhaps best explains its most fundamental significance. This is the sculpture of a plumed serpent coiled in conical form, rising from a base whose underside is carved with the symbols of the earth-deity and Tlaloc (ills. 63,64). The image of the serpent rising from the earth and bearing water on its tail is echoed by a description of Quetzalcoatl from a text by Sahagún which describes the rise of a great thunderstorm with wind sweeping down, raising the dust before the rain.[2]

The cults of the earth were as protean as those of the sky. In its most basic form the earth was referred to as Tlaltecuhtli (earth-lord or earth-lady) and was represented as a crouching figure with an upturned, grinning mask, often wearing sacrificial symbols and a skull as a symbol upon its back. Serpents, spiders, and centipedes were also depicted as creatures close to the earth. The earth was not only a giver of life, it was also the ultimate recipient of all that grows and moves on its surface. Other images alluding to the earth's regenerative powers depict the earth-womb, as in the famous Chicomoztoc page from the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (ill. 33). Ritual impersonators of the earth-mother were especially identified with procreation and agricultural fertility. Their names, Teteo-innan, Tlazolteotl, Tonantzin, Itzpapalotl, Cihuateteo, and others, described the earth's various powers as portrayed in its many cults. There were also many links between the costume and other symbolic elements associated with the earth-mother and those of the maize deities.

Maize was portrayed in feminine terms, and three deities were especially important. Xilonen, "young maize," was portrayed as an adolescent girl with the first tender corn of the rainy season harvest worn on her headdress. Chicomecoatl, "seven serpent," was the title given to dried seed corn, which was harvested and kept for the next year; priestesses bearing ears of this seed corn appeared at the onset of the planting season. Cinteotl, "sacred maize-ear," was the more general term for corn eaten after the fall harvest season.

Other important cultigens were represented in the Aztec pantheon, amongst which the maguey agave was particularly important. In central Mexico these great cacti are still to be seen bordering the corn fields. They were the source of octi (pulque), a mildly fermented beer-like drink which, consumed in moderate amounts, was a staple of highland diet. The plant is also a source of fiber and was used to make cloth, netting, ropes, bags, and many other useful products.

Among the cults of deified ancestors, that of Huitzilopochtli was pre-eminent in Tenochtitlan. We have already recounted the story of this legendary hero, and discussed the possibility that he was actually a composite entity, fabricated by the primitive Mexica from other such figures identified with older towns in the Valley. In any event, the custom of deifying heroes or outstanding rulers can be seen in Tetzcoco, where the ruler Netzahualcoyotl was worshiped posthumously at Tetzcotzingo, his effigy having been carved in the rock among other shrines to nature-deities. This is an instance of a "founder-father" figure gradually attaining the status of a deity among the local population.

The concept of teotl

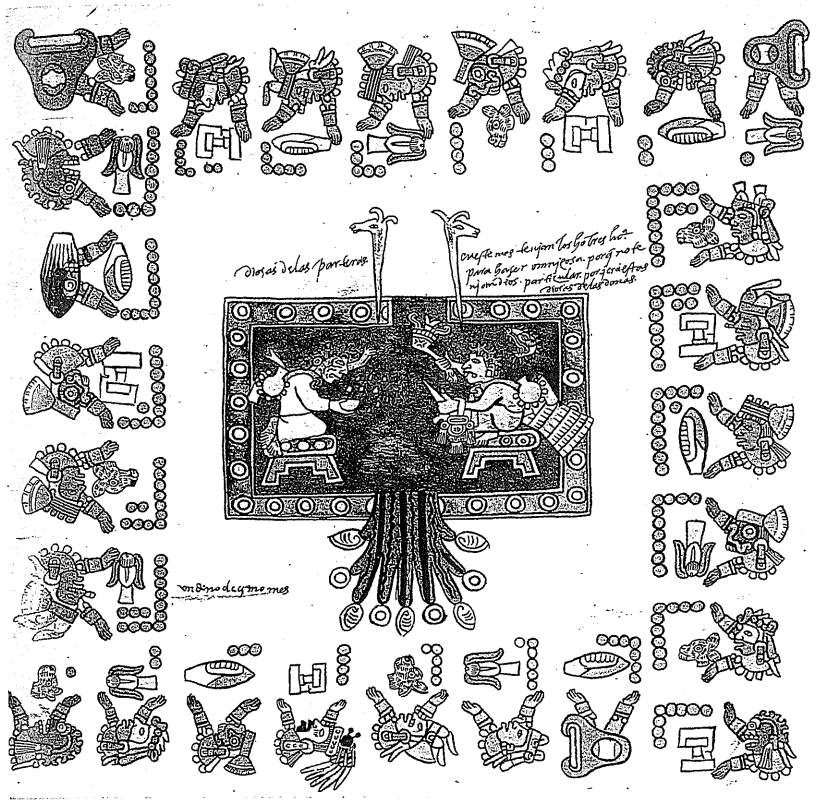
A basic concept of Aztec religious thought was expressed by the word-root *teo*, often written with the *tl* suffix as *teotl*. Difficult to translate, the

word was recorded by the Spanish as "god," "saint," or sometimes "demon." Studies of the word *teo* show that it appears in Nahuatl texts in a variety of contexts. Sometimes it accompanies the names of nature-deities, but it was also used in connection with human impersonators of those divinities, as well as in association with their sacred masks and related ceremonial objects, including sculptured effigies of wood, stone, or dough. Such words as "mana," "numinous" or "sacred" have been used to suggest its significance. But the word *teo* may similarly be used to qualify almost anything mysterious, powerful, or beyond ordinary experience, such as animals of prey, a remote and awe-inspiring snowcapped mountain, a phenomenon of terrible power such as the sun or a bolt of lightning, or the life-giving earth, water, and maize, or even a great *tlatoani* at the time of his coronation. Nor was its application restricted to good or ethical things, for malign phenomena might also be designated by *teo*.

The diverse contexts of the word *teo* suggest that the Aztecs regarded the things of their world – both transitory or permanent – as inherently charged to a greater or lesser degree with vital force or power. This reflects an outlook widespread among peoples of the "pre-modern" world, in which the things of the physical environment were endowed with wills of their own, and even given, on occasion, a sense of personality. Aztec rituals offer many examples of this mode of perception. For example, during Ahuizotl's reign in the late 15th century, he inaugurated a new aqueduct bringing water from Chapultepec to the center of Tenochtitlan. On that occasion his priests were dressed as the female water-deity Chalchiuhtlicue, "jade skirt." Attired as the deity, the priests waited by the channel to welcome the first flow of water. As the water rushed in they reached down to present incense, turquoise, and sacrificed quail to the life-giving element, and spoke to the water itself as the living object of the offering. This rite illustrates the curious, inextricable equivalence of the deity, deity-impersonator, priest, and the natural element – an association utterly alien to modern Western thought.

The myths of creation

The Aztec myths of creation were gathered in variant but related versions by the 16th-century Spanish friars, who worked in different locations within the Valley of Mexico and neighboring regions. The cosmogonic myths describe the primordial beginning of the world and the ensuing sequence of eras whose transformations led to the present earth and its animal and human inhabitants. An understanding of the myths helped to explain the origin of the earth and the regularity of such phenomena as the sun, the moon, the rainy season, as well as the cycle of vegetation and human beginnings. It also provided a way of learning sacred history and the principles governing cosmic and social existence. On many transmutable levels of meaning, the myths established themes by which

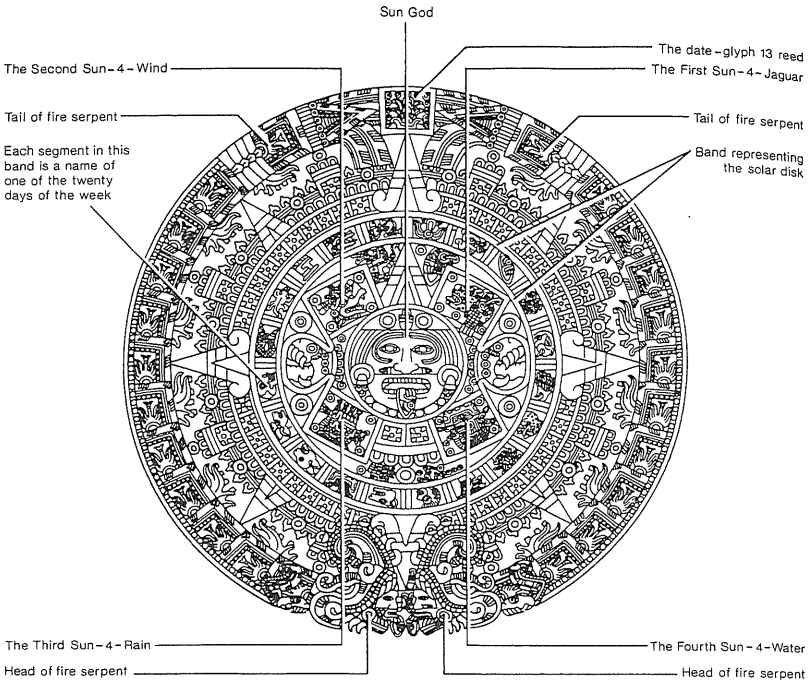


69 One of the central pages of the Codex Borbonicus, showing the creator god and goddess, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. They sit in a sacred enclosure from which water flows, surrounded by day signs and a series of associated ruling deities.

the Aztecs created and maintained relationships based on the integration of man and nature.

The primordial male and female force

According to one important text, before the world appeared there were primordial masculine and feminine creative forces, named *ome tecuhtli* "two lord" and *ome cihuatl* "two lady." They resided in *omeyocan*, "the place of two" (this is often mistakenly translated as "the place of duality;" but as will be seen on the following pages, the concept of dual *opposing* forces was not a strong feature of Aztec cosmological thought). The masculine and feminine forces were also known as *Tonacatecuhtli* and *Tonacachuatl*, "Lord and Lady of our flesh and sustenance," names which show their close connection to the creation of food. A page from the Codex Borbonicus depicts the primordial couple seated within a rectangular



70,71 ABOVE and RIGHT The Aztec Sun Stone, found beneath the central plaza of Mexico City in the last decade of the 18th century. Carved at its center is the face of the sun, or perhaps the earth monster, Tlaltecuhtli. The monument is not a fully functioning calendar, but commemorates the five mythic world-creations ("suns"). The date-glyph cartouche 13 reed at the top denotes the mythical beginning of the present sun, but also marks the calendrical year 1427, when Itzcoatl rose to power. The conjunction of a sacred date and the historical year sanctified the authority of the Aztec rulers and established a vital link between the cosmos and human society.

precinct surrounded by calendrical glyphs; they speak about time to each other. The two personified primordial forces had four sons, each of which was identified with one of the cardinal points. They were respectively colored red, black, blue, or white according to direction. Thus, the horizontal plane of the world was defined as having a living creative center around which the quadrants were symmetrically placed. Other cosmogonic accounts describe the vertical dimension of space, conceptually defined by an axis connecting the center of the plane of the earth to the celestial sphere above and the world below. The heavens were divided into a series of layers – thirteen by some descriptions, nine according to others – and the underworld was similarly arranged. There was no juxtaposition of heaven versus hell in this cosmological schema, for the levels of the sky and those of the lower world carried no moral value. The outer perimeter of the world was conceived as a circle (or sometimes a square), where the surrounding sea, *ilhuica-atl*, met the inverted bowl of the sky. One of the most ancient cosmological beliefs preserved by the Aztecs likened the earth to an alligator floating in the primeval sea, with the scales and corrugations of its back corresponding to mountains and valleys.

The five ages

The original creation of the earth was followed by its destruction, and a succession of four imperfect creations leading to the present fifth era.[3] (The idea of multiple, imperfect creations was very old and widespread in Mesoamerica, for it is recorded in the sacred book of the Quiché Maya, the *Popol Vuh*.)[4] In the Aztec texts each of the five creations formed an age called a "sun." The sequence of eras officially accepted in Tenochtitlan is recorded on such famous sculptural monuments as the "Stone of the Five Suns," formerly known as the "Aztec Calendar," and the Coronation Tablet of Motecuhzoma II (ills. 104,105). Among the Aztecs the first era was called "four jaguar." At that time, giants walked the earth but did not till the soil or sow maize, only living by gleaning wild fruits and roots. This imperfect era ended when a jaguar devoured the giants. The

hieroglyphic sign for the era was therefore a feline head. The second era, "four wind," was also flawed, and was destroyed by hurricanes that magically turned the existing men into monkeys – humanlike, but not fully human creatures. The sign of this era was the mask of Quetzalcoatl, lord of the winds. The third imperfect era ended in a rain of fire, and its people either perished or were changed into birds. This happened on the day "four rain," therefore the sign of this sun was the mask of Tlaloc, lord of the rain. The fourth era was one of rains so abundant and frequent that the earth was deluged and people were changed into fish. This was the reason that its sign was the head of Chalchiuhtlicue, "jade skirt," deity of lakes, rivers, springs, and seas. The fifth, or present era, was prophesied to end in earthquakes, and its sign was the hieroglyph *Ollin*, "movement" (of the earth). It was at the beginning of this era that the actual sun, moon, and human beings were finally created.

As the eminent Mexican scholar Alfonso Caso originally pointed out, this succession of ages is quite unlike the Judeo-Christian concept of an original paradise, followed by the fall and expulsion of the first human beings.[5] Instead, the image of the Aztec creation myths is of a progression of worlds, as the creator-forces and deities strove to find a formula for a more perfect world and humanity. There is also the sense of a search for progressively better foodstuffs: in the first era the giants ate roots and wild fruits; the second era lists *acocentli*, pine nuts; the third era names *ace centli*, millium; and the fourth names *cencocopi*, or *teocentli*, a wild grasslike plant with seeds similar to that of primitive maize.

The creation of the sun and moon

An account of how the sun was created at the beginning of the fifth era was recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún:

> It is told that when yet [all] was in darkness, when yet no sun had shone and no dawn had broken, it is said – the gods gathered themselves together and took counsel among themselves there at Teotihuacan.
> They spoke; they said among themselves: "Come hither, O gods! Who will carry the burden? Who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?[6]

In answer to this question, two gods volunteered to sacrifice themselves to become the sun. In preparation, the one named Tecuciztecatl laid out a sacrificial kit of the most costly materials. His fir branches were of quetzal feathers; his grass balls were of gold; his maguey spines were of greenstone; while the reddened bloodied spines were of coral. His incense, moreover, was of the best kind. The other volunteer, an impoverished deity named Nanauatzin, could only afford green rushes, pine needles, actual maguey spines, and his own blood; and for incense, the scabs from his sores. Four nights of penance were spent atop the Moon Pyramid and the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan. On the fifth night the two

volunteers were ceremonially dressed and brought before a great hearth where a bonfire was blazing. It was midnight and the assembled gods said to Tecuciztecatl: "Take courage O Tecuciztecatl; fall – cast thyself – into the fire!" But the immense heap of glowing coals and the furious flames cast a heat so unbearable that four times he tried to throw himself in, only to turn away. Then Nanauatzin was called and, gathering his courage, he quickly cast himself in; then Tecuciztecatl took courage and followed.

> After this, when both had cast themselves into the flames, when they had already burned, then the gods sat waiting to see where Nanauatzin would come to rise – he who fell first into the fire – in order that he might shine [as the sun]; in order that dawn might break.[7]

In all directions the gods looked, and kept turning about, until those who looked east saw the first sunrise. The poetic parallel with the heat of the sacrificial bonfire the night before is especially striking:

> And when the sun came to rise, when he burst forth, he appeared to be red; he kept swaying from side to side. It was impossible to look into his face; he blinded one with his light. Intensely did he shine. He issued rays of light from himself; his rays reached in all directions; his brilliant rays penetrated everywhere.[8]

Then, afterward, Tecuciztecatl rose as the moon, and to darken its first brilliance one of the gods threw a rabbit in his face – which is why in ancient Mexico the moon was perceived as having the imprint of a rabbit. But the sun and moon were still stationary: and it was only after all the gods had sacrificed themselves and Ehecatl (another name of Quetzalcoatl, the lord of the wind) blew and blew, that the sun and the moon were sent on their paths by day and night respectively.

The creation of humankind

The final episode of the creation myth was preserved in yet another account by Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta.[9] This describes Quetzalcoatl descending to the underworld regions of the dead, where he gathered a great heap of bones from past generations. These he sprinkled with his own blood and ground them up to create a new humanity.

It must not be imagined that myths such as these were told to provide entertainment or to exercise personal fantasy. Much less were they intended as rationally consistent and objective explanations of cosmic or human happenings. The stories provided a metaphoric expression of the truths and principles that formed an underpinning to life and experience. The image of primordial male and female figures seated within an enclosure, suggests a duality which arises from a primal unity of equally necessary generative forces. The myths describing a succession of cycles of creation and destruction show that death was but a condition for the inevitable rebirth. The deities that offer themselves to the raging bonfire

to be transformed into the sun and moon speak of the necessity of sacrifice to bring forth new forms of life. Similarly, the creator-god who offers his blood to be mingled with bones from the ancestors shows how something of value had to be offered to make something of greater value. These mythic events took place in a hallowed time when models were established for subsequent actions. Thus the rising of the sun was seen as a sacred event because it was identified with the original sacrifice. And just as darkness was transformed into daylight, so too countless other changes experienced in the natural world could be traced to prototypes described in the mythic creation-time. The annual change from drought to rain, and the rebirth of vegetation; the passage of one stage of human life to the next, as in birth, puberty, marriage, and death; or the accession of a great chieftain, passing from a lower social role to a higher one – all reflect a basic aspect of the Aztec world view, which was marked by a tendency to focus on things in the process of becoming another.

Aztec cosmogony stands in contrast to that of ancient Mesopotamia, which stresses the struggle of dual powers of light versus dark, order versus chaos, life versus death, or good versus evil. In ancient Mexico by contrast, the myths seem not to lose sight of the observable seasonal process of birth, growth, maturity, and death, followed by sacrifice to ensure rebirth and renewal. As we shall see, it was the kings who were ritually responsible for making the offerings essential to bring about new life: in the vast schema of cosmic events portrayed in Aztec myths, humankind was only a small part, yet it played a critical role in ensuring the progression of the seasons, the movement of heavenly bodies, and the periodic regeneration of nature as well as communal life. Whatever cosmic dualism existed in Aztec thought, it was a dualism of complimentary forces in continual process of change, not a dualism of opposing forces struggling for each other's destruction.

The ritual calendar

Before describing Aztec religious festivals and buildings, it is important to discuss their calendar system. The arrangement of time governed all important activities of individual life as well as the scheduling and performance of state-organized events. Like many other peoples of antiquity in the New World and the Old, the Aztecs did not experience time as a succession of uniform movements, stretching monotonously from the indefinite past into the indefinite future. Nor was their time of indifferent, uniform quality. It would be impossible to overstress the fact that time for the Aztecs was full of energy and motion, the harbinger of change, and always charged with a sense of miraculous happening. The cosmogonic myths reveal a preoccupation with the process of creation, destruction and recreation, and the calendrical system reflected these notions about the character of time.

There were two aspects of Aztec time-counting, each with different functions. The first was the curious *tonalpohualli* "counting of the days," a 260-day cycle used for the purpose of divination. This repeating round of days formed a sacred almanac, widely used among Mesoamerican peoples long before the Aztecs. It is speculated that the *tonalpohualli* may have originated as far back as the Olmec period in the first millennium BC, or even further. The second division of the calendrical system was a 365-day solar count, known as the *xiuhpohualli*, "counting of the years," which regulated the recurrent cycle of annual seasonal festivals. These two counts were simultaneously in operation. They have often been explained as two engaged, rotating gears, in which the beginning day of the larger 365-day wheel would align with the beginning day of the smaller 260-day cycle every 52 years. This 52-year period constituted a Mesoamerican "century." The change from one 52-year period into the next was always the occasion of an important religious festival.

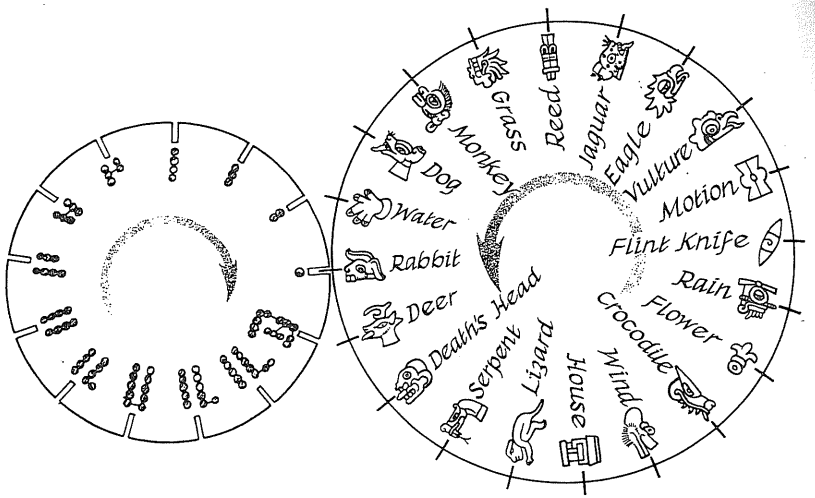
The 260-day count

It is thought that the 260-day *tonalpohualli* count originated in an observed astronomical phenomenon. Archaeoastronomers today have noted that the sun, on its annual passage from south to north and back again, crosses a zenith point at a latitude near the Classic Maya city of Copán, in modern Honduras, at a 260-day interval. Did this interval determine the original planting-to-harvest season at an unknown time in history? Did it acquire a prestigious significance, hallowed from antiquity and preserved by custom as a time-count in later religious traditions? Answers to these questions are beyond our present purpose, but what may be described in greater detail is the organization of the *tonalpohualli* and some of the functions it served in ordering the lives of Aztec people.

The 260-day cycle was composed of 20 groups of named and numbered days. Each day received a name, such as rabbit, water, flint knife, alligator, jaguar, etc, which was visually represented by a hieroglyphic sign of the particular animal or object. The cycle of 20 days intermeshed with a rotating cycle of numbers, 1 to 13, each number denoted by dots. After every complete rotation, each number was engaged with a new day. Thus, within the 260-day period each day was identified by the combination of one of the 20 day names with one of the 13 numbers ($20 \times 13 = 260$).

The sacred 260-day cycle was then divided into 20 "weeks" of 13 days each, called *trecenas* by the Spaniards. Every *trecena* began with the number 1 and the day-name which came up in the sequence of rotation. Thus, each combination was unique within the *tonalpohualli* cycle, for no day in any one week could be confused with that of another.

The *tonalpohualli* counts were kept in screenfold books called *tonalamatls*. The books were made from a long strip of *amate* bark paper, from which the word tonal*amatl* derives. This paper was coated with white gesso upon which the fine drawing and brilliant painting were done. One

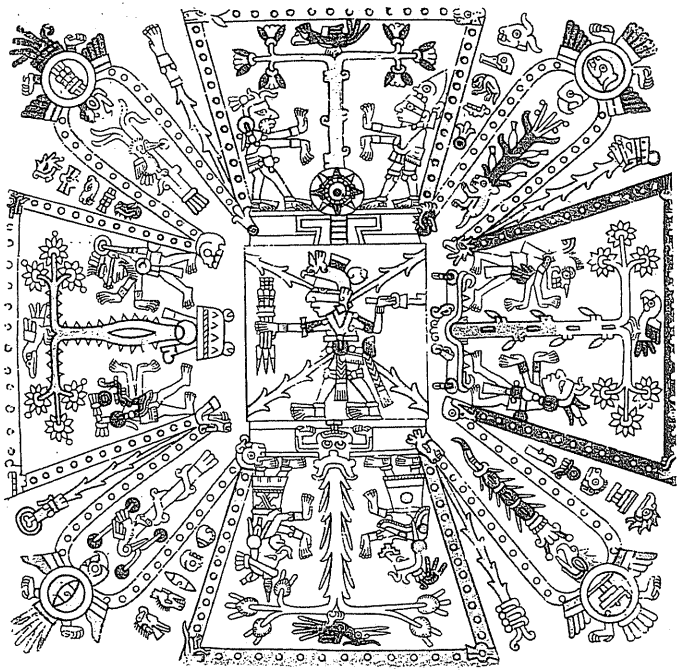


72,73 ABOVE Schematic representation of the 260-day Aztec *tonalpohualli* calendar. The 20 named days intercalate with the numbers 1 to 13. RIGHT The first page of the ritual almanac, the Codex Fejervary-Mayer, shows Xiuhtecuhtli (god of fire) in the central panel as the vertical axis mundi. The East lies at the top, where the sun-disk rises; West is at the bottom, shown as an earth-monster where the sun sets. The unbroken outer border consists of the 260 positions of the Calendar Round: the 20 day signs appear at intervals of 13.

of the most famous of these screenfold books is the Codex Borbonicus. The Codex was made in Tenochtitlan or in the vicinity of Ixtapalapan-Culhuacan, very soon after the Spanish Conquest. At some time during the colonial period it was taken to Spain, where it rested in the library of the Escorial Palace, near Madrid. It was removed to France probably around 1823 and bought by the Library of the Chamber of Deputies in the old Bourbon Palace in Paris: hence the name Borbonicus. The Indian artist worked in a virtually pure pre-Hispanic style, but spaces were ruled off to receive commentary written by the Spanish using Roman script.

Each of the screenfold pages in this Codex is devoted to a 13-day *trecena*, and is also divided to show a dominant deity or regent presiding over the *trecena*. The individual days are shown in rectangular subdivisions, each with its own associated deity: there were 13 Lords of the Day, each with a particular bird or butterfly, and 9 Lords of the Night. These deities recur throughout the *tonalpohualli* in independent, repeating cycles. The *tonalpohualli* is thus revealed to be more than a system of numbers and days, for each *trecena* was influenced by a dominant deity, and each day was influenced by its own day-lord and night-lord.

It is clear from the writings of the Spanish chroniclers that the influences displayed by the *tonalpohualli* were interpreted by professional diviners. These specialists were called upon to make prognostications for newborn



children, to give advice for different endeavors according to auspicious or inauspicious days, or to determine the best days for planting and harvesting.

> These characters [of the *tonalamatl*] also taught the Indian nations the days on which they were to sow, reap, till the land, cultivate corn, weed, harvest, store, shell the ears of corn, sow beans and flax seed. They always took into account that it had to be in such and such month, after such and such feast, on such and such a day, under such and such a sign. All this was done with superstitious order and care. If chili was not sown on a certain day, squash on another, maize on another, and so forth, in disregard of the orderly count of the days, the people felt there would be great damage and loss of any crop sown outside of the established order of the days. The reason for all this was that some signs were held to be good, others evil, and others indifferent, just as our almanacs record the signs of the zodiac.[10]

Quotation 67 Diego Durán

We may suppose that such prognostications were made in conjunction with known weather patterns and other environmental conditions, as well as social and economic factors. Unfortunately, most of the immense accumulated body of orally-transmitted knowledge that accompanied the *tonalpohualli* was lost or diffused amid other recorded information during the Spanish colonial period. Nevertheless, Bernardino de Sahagún's Book

Four, *The Soothsayers*, and Diego Durán's *Book of Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar* contain valuable records.[11]

Divination, the art of foreseeing future events or discovering hidden knowledge through supernatural means, was a standard feature of official and private life in many other ancient civilizations. All peoples seek to know the unknowable, to control the uncontrollable, or to make a confident choice about a difficult decision, and divination has been one of the mechanisms by which this is attempted. Like the Greeks, the Romans, and the Chinese, the Aztecs believed in the portentous meaning of omens and auguries in the natural world. The pattern of diverse hidden phenomena which appear to coincide were perceived as highly meaningful – auguring good or evil, success or failure for a proposed endeavor. In Greece, no king or commander would dare take a major course of action without consulting one of the many famous oracles, such as that of Delphi; Alexander's career was deeply affected by the Libyan oracle at Siwah. Roman generals regularly sacrificed bullocks in order to read, from the configuration of their livers, the supernatural circumstances foretelling triumph or defeat in an impending campaign. Similarly in Shang China, oracle-bones of tortoise shell or the shoulder-blades of buffalo were carefully prepared, inscribed, and exposed to heat, so that cracks developing on the surface would reveal a hidden pattern of cosmic phenomena that could be interpreted. Another analogy to help understand the divinatory functions of the *tonalpohualli* is provided by the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*, also known as the *I Ching*.[12] This book of wisdom was already old when Confucius wrote his commentaries on it around 500 BC, yet it continues to be widely consulted in the present day. To use the book, a question is posed and yarrow stalks (or coins) are thrown, to produce a pattern which is recorded as a linear diagram. This in turn is interpreted according to the *I Ching* texts. The texts present a series of images describing changes and relationships observed in natural forces, interpreting them in terms of social circumstances. Thus, when a question is posed, those forces affecting the question at the moment it was formed can be taken into account in deciding a course of action. The *I Ching* texts, which reflect knowledge accumulated since great antiquity, are not intended to foretell fate as in ordinary soothsaying or fortune-telling. What they offer the questioner is a picture of the cosmic circumstances surrounding a particular problem, and counsel for what may be done to arrive at the right course of action.

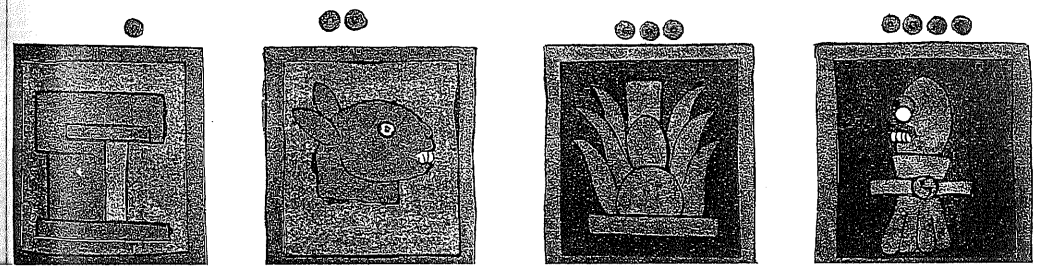
Another avenue to understanding the possible uses of the Aztec *tonalpohualli* is presented closer to Central Mexico. Today, a traditional form of calendrical divination is still practiced by Maya Indian diviners, called "daykeepers," at mountain shrines in Guatemala.[13] At such sacred places, candles are lit and copal incense is burned as an offering. Using coral seeds and crystals the daykeeper will make arrangements in lots of four, counting out the days of the 260-day calendar. One day is assigned to each lot, starting from the current day or the day the client's problem began. This is the beginning of a complex process of interpretation, through which the daykeeper's client will receive counsel on the course of action revealed by the time-count and the pattern of seeds and crystals.

Did the lost oral tradition accompanying the Aztec *tonalpohualli*, which was probably rooted in a very old agricultural cycle, have similar functions to those presented by these analogies? At present it is possible to say only that as a sophisticated system of divination, the *tonalpohualli* was undoubtedly the carrier of tradition and authority, a system woven into the fabric of Mesoamerican thinking. The *tonalpohualli* played an especially important role in the daily lives of the Aztecs, from the solving of personal perplexities, and serving the needs of rulers searching for counsel in matters of state, to prescribing the appropriate times for carrying out planting and harvesting.

The 365-day count

The annual ceremonial calendar of the Aztec state was governed according to the 365-day solar count, the *xiuhpohualli*. This period was divided into 18 "months" of 20 days each, called *veintenas* by the Spanish, plus a 5-day period between the old year and the new. The latter was a dangerous and inactive time of transition called *nemontemi*. Each *veintena* had its own special festival, closely correlated to the agricultural year. The years were named after the "year bearer," one of four possible day-names of the *tonalpohualli* which could begin a new year with its accompanying number, according to the system of rotation. The possible year-names were rabbit, reed, flint knife, and house. The years were distinguished by their numbers – thus 1 rabbit, 2 reed, 3 house, 4 flint knife, until the 13 numbers and the 4 day- and year-names began to repeat themselves every 52 years (13 × 4).

Curiously, the succession of 52-year cycles was not calendrically differentiated. It is as if our centuries were not distinguished as being before or after Christ. Thus the voyage of Columbus would have been recorded as '92, or the meeting of Cortés and Motecuhzoma as '19, or the end of the Second World War as '45. In the Aztec system, only a knowledge of historical events would allow one to place them in the appropriate 52-year cycle. It was customary in writing, or in sculptured inscriptions, to indicate year-names and their numbers by enclosing them



74 Four of the eight year signs: 1 house, 2 rabbit, 3 reed, and 4 knife. From the Codex Magliabechiano.

in a square cartouche, as may be seen on the Coronation Stone of Motecuhzoma II. Day-names were ordinarily left unenclosed.

The conclusion of a 52-year cycle and the beginning of a new one was the occasion for special ceremonies. At that time the "binding of the years" took place, marked by the ceremonial tying of a bundle of 52 reeds, the *xiuhmopilli*. Stone sculptural representations of one of these objects have been recovered from Aztec ruins in the vicinity of the cathedral in downtown Mexico City. One example in the National Museum is carved with its date-hieroglyph corresponding to the year 1508, when a New Fire ceremony was also celebrated to ensure the beginning of a new cycle (see Chapter 8). Special importance was placed on the completion of two cycles (104 years), for at such times the solar count, the *tonalpohualli*, and the 52-year cycle coincided.

As mentioned above, there was an annual cycle of 18 festivals associated with the eighteen *veintena* "months" of the 365-day solar year. These festivals were basically of three types: those directed to mountains and water in order to ensure rain; those directed to the earth, the sun, and maize, to ensure fertility and an abundant harvest; and those directed to special deities, particularly those identified as patrons of different community groups or of the community as a whole. The latter festivals usually had various purposes, among which the particular historical and cultural identity of a given group might be a special concern.

Just as the *tonalpohualli* seems to have functioned in a similar way in all areas, so too the same order of *veintena* festivals has been recorded in the ethnohistoric texts. Nevertheless there was great variation in the local practice of these festivals, due to different geographical and cultural conditions. For example, in the Valley of Mexico and its environs there are many micro-environments where rain may arrive at somewhat different times and with different intensity, or where the time for harvest may be subject to variation due to altitude, local frosts, and so on. Such environmental factors would affect festivals concerned with agriculture. In addition, political factors and cultural change strongly affected ceremonial events, as the rulers of empires adapted old practices or invented new variations to express the new political, religious, and social needs. In this way, traditional agricultural ceremonies were often invested with new military and imperial themes. Old myths were thus fitted with new rites, and new myths might be created to accommodate old ritual procedures. Many such changes were occurring in the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Spanish arrival. But no uniform practice of the festival cycle had yet been devised, hence the variety of descriptions recorded by the Spanish.

The chart of festivals found at the end of the book outlines the principal cult themes and local deities. But the festivals are best understood in the context of the landscapes, temples, or urban settings where they were celebrated. For this reason we shall now turn to the Aztec ordering of space, to see how the land was organized and equipped with monuments.

8 · Sacred Landscapes

It is difficult for many who live in large cities today, removed from the natural environment that supports us, to grasp the interconnectedness between ourselves, the land, and the seasons. But among Amerindian peoples there was a strong tendency to see the forms of the land as primary, sacred entities that came before the historic forms of their many deities. In central highland Mexico the most significant places were identified with some special spiritual presence. Many such places used by the Aztecs had already accumulated mythical and historical meanings from centuries of earlier occupations. Topographical features and man-made symbols were joined at certain points to form a ritual network for religious communication between the people who embodied the social order, and the natural forces, deities, and ancestral heroes. This was the structure of a sacred geography. As we will see below, the hill named Huixachtlan, the great urban pyramid of Tenochtitlan, the ritual Hill of Tetzcotzingo, and the shrines upon the heights of Mt Tlaloc and at Pantitlan in Lake Tetzcoco were principal icons of Aztec sacred geography, designed to manifest the inherent power of things seen and unseen in the natural environment.

The need to develop a system of sacred places was given impetus by an unprecedented natural disaster that affected the highlands between 1452 and 1454. This period marked the end of the 52-year cycle begun in 1402. The calamity began in 1450, when a four-year sequence of frosts and droughts produced a terrible famine. In those years the clouds that usually appear on mountaintops failed to form and to bring summer rain and renewal. The long dry season that begins in late September and lasts until mid-June stretched into July and August. In the withering heat of the sun, most of the scanty showers evaporated before reaching the ground, and maize fields yellowed soon after sprouting. The dry season continued through the following year, and was repeated the year after that. At first, stocks of food were sufficient to ameliorate the worst effects, but soon the disproportion between reserves and the prolonged demand for them became frighteningly evident. The drought affected a large highland region and tribute alone could not feed the entire population. The unfruitfulness of the earth forced farmers and their families away from the desolate fields into the mountains in search of game, or to the lakeshores where they