

CHAPTER I

DISCOVERING, UNCOVERING, AND INTERPRETING THE AZTEC WORLD

Then he [King Ahuizotl] called the stoneworkers and ordered them to finish the temple of their god as quickly as possible. Without delay they began to work on the stones that were lacking and carve the figures I saw in a painted manuscript, which were, in this manuscript, a sharp sacrificial stone and next to it an image of the goddess called Coyolxauh; and on the corners of the temple two statues with cruciform mantles, these made of rich feathers.

Diego Durán 1994: 328; originally written 1581

This temple sat at the very heart of the Aztecs' empire, the *axis mundi* of their known world (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Soon to be dedicated, in the year AD 1487, this version of the Huey Teocalli, or Great Temple, was the fifth full expansion of a humble construction erected in AD 1325. That first modest temple, built of reeds, wood, and mud, was the effort of a small, bedraggled, and unwelcome group of Mexica who had recently arrived in the Basin of Mexico in search of a new homeland and, in their eyes, their destiny.

The temple would experience one more expansion, in 1502. This was the temple seen and climbed by the Spaniard Hernán Cortés in his epic visit to the Mexica capital city of Tenochtitlan in November 1519 (Figure 1.3). Less than two years later, in August 1521, the great city fell to the Spanish conquerors, to be recast as Mexico City in the Spanish Empire's colonial jurisdiction of New Spain.

Those nearly two hundred years, from the settlement of Tenochtitlan in 1325 until its demise in 1521, saw the rapid growth of this immense urban center, from which radiated the greatest empire in the history of Mesoamerica. During its final hundred years this was a world politically and militarily dominated by the Mexica. Nonetheless, others in Mesoamerica (whether allies, subjects, or enemies) shared a similarly sophisticated civilization.

Drawing on their accomplished predecessors, the Mexica and their neighbors constructed massive temples and palaces, engineered astonishingly accurate public works such as aqueducts and a dike, and employed precise astronomical and mathematical knowledge in their city planning and architecture. They

created remarkable objects from stones, metals, feathers, shells, and myriad other materials for use in their personal and public lives. They applied clever cultivation techniques to increase food production and offset years of agricultural catastrophe. In addition to providing them with a cornucopia of useful resources, their knowledge of the natural world offered them a remarkable medical pharmacopoeia. These were a practical people, yet their beliefs extended well beyond the empirical universe into a teeming world of powerful gods and goddesses, enthralling myths and legends, and flamboyant public ceremonies. They wrote books based on a glyphic writing system and amassed impressive libraries. And the Mexica and their allies organized themselves socially, politically, and militarily to the extent that they dominated much of central and a part of southern Mexico by the time of Cortés's arrival.

With the Spanish conquest, this world was in part destroyed, in part transformed. Mexico City grew atop Tenochtitlan, viceroys supplanted Aztec kings, Spanish priests and ceremonies replaced their Aztec counterparts. Introduced Spanish industries, crops, and economic priorities took precedence over native ones. These and other traumatic events, impositions, and changes left only fragments of Aztec life behind to be discovered, uncovered, and interpreted over the successive five hundred years.

DISCOVERING AND UNCOVERING THE AZTEC WORLD

Those fragments of the Aztec world include pictorial codices, recorded oral histories and other accounts of the native survivors, massive and portable material objects, public and private architecture and engineering feats, and burials. Still today, about 1.5 million people speak the Nahuatl language, and additional features of native life have survived, some of them in remarkably sound fashion, most persistently in outlying areas of the Aztec realm. In all, these cultural elements experienced variable survival rates, depending initially on such factors as Spanish colonial policies, interests, and activities; native adaptations to the new lords of the land; geographical location; and happenstance. Later on in Mexican history, to the present time, more and more of the ancient Aztec world was uncovered and revealed through systematic archaeological, historical, epigraphic, art historical, linguistic, and ethnographic investigations based on evolving scientific techniques and theoretical approaches to understanding the past. And still, happenstance played (and continues to play) a role.

All of these approaches depend on a solid foundation of data, and the following section offers a brief (and necessarily selective) foray into the most important of these sources.¹ Students of Aztec civilization are particularly fortunate in having at their disposal a vast and diverse array of source material, ranging from primary written manuscripts, to stationary and portable physical remains, to the practices and beliefs of present-day Aztec descendants. It is,

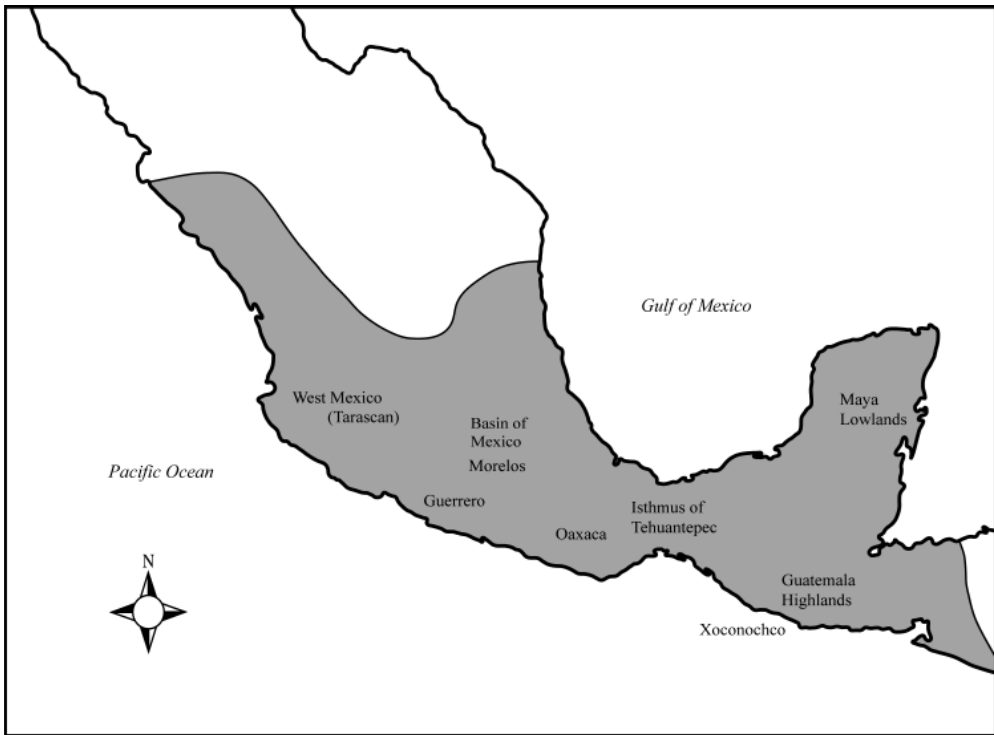


Figure 1.1. Regions of Mesoamerica: Postclassic period. (Drawing by Jennifer Berdan.)

indeed, a comforting reality that so many different sources of information can be pressed into service to unravel the intricacies and enigmas of Aztec life.

Pictorial Codices and Other Historical Documents

PICTORIAL CODICES

The Aztec elite were literate and produced vast numbers of pictorial codices. They had specialized books, professional scribes, and sophisticated techniques for recording their histories, cosmologies, ceremonies, calendrics, geography, royal genealogies, and economic matters. Only a handful of these pre-conquest manuscripts still exist, having survived the ravages of conquest and inquisition. In the Basin of Mexico, arguably only a single pictorial codex can claim a pre-conquest origin: the *Matrícula de Tributos* (Berdan 1980; Batalla Rosado 2007).² However, some other now-lost codices reappear, copied and modified, in the colonial period (such as the first two parts of the *Codex Mendoza*, the *Tira de la Peregrinación*, and the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*).³ Innumerable others, now lost, peek through early colonial narratives and histories, having been seen and used by some of the most prolific sixteenth-century Spanish and native writers in Mexico. Diego Durán, quoted at the beginning of this



Figure 1.2. Aztec-period Basin of Mexico city-states mentioned in Chapter 1. (Drawing by Jennifer Berdan.)

chapter, is quite specific about his examination of such a codex, as are Juan de Torquemada (1969: vol. 1, 75, 77), Motolinía (1969: 2), Bernardino de Sahagún (León-Portilla 2002: 144–145, 163; Nicholson 1997: 4), and Alonso de Zorita⁴ (1994: 87; see also Glass 1975: 20; Robertson 1994: 49). Native chroniclers of the colonial period such as Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1965: vol. 2, 173–181) and Chimalpahin (Schroeder 1991: 16, 21) also relied on these pictorial manuscripts for much of the content in their textual accounts.

The great majority of extant pictorial codices derive from colonial times, and there are scores of them (Boone 2000a: 11; Robertson 1994; Glass 1975; Glass and Robertson 1975). Although composed after the Spanish conquest, these manuscripts reveal much about the pre-Spanish Aztec world. Some explicitly recount Aztec life before the conquest, the historical ones moving almost seamlessly through



Figure 1.3. Existing steps of the final two stages of Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor. (Photograph by Frances Berdan.)

the conquest itself into the new colonial experience (e.g., Quiñones Keber 1995; Boone 2000a: 229, 247). Others record colonial matters that reflect continuing Aztec knowledge and practices concerning local histories, traditional community rights, maps and boundaries, family relations, naming, economic production, tribute duties, political order, herbal medicine, and even aspects of forbidden religious beliefs (e.g., Boone 2007, 2000a: 248; Glass 1975; Robertson 1994; Montes de Oca Vega et al. 2003; Prem 1974; Gates 1939; Berdan and Anawalt 1992; see Case 1.1). Most of these colonial pictorials are enhanced by the addition of handwritten glosses or explanations in Nahuatl and/or Spanish. These amplify and reinforce the glyphic presentation with textual details, although occasionally mistakes do creep in.⁵ Nonetheless, the pictorial images themselves were composed largely by native scribes, trained in native traditions and projecting native styles (Robertson 1994: 9–10; Boone 2000a: 11–12). The extent of retention of native style and content is impressive considering the close Spanish supervision of the production of many of these codices. So, although composed in colonial times, this large pictorial corpus, viewed critically, offers valuable insights into pre-conquest Aztec life.

A particularly monumental colonial effort, resulting in an “ethnographic codex,” was that produced by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his Nahua collaborators and scribes during the middle to late sixteenth century. Combining Nahuatl text with pictorial imagery, this vast corpus of the *Florentine Codex* and *Primeros Memoriales* contains detailed information on matters such as gods and rituals, myths, rulership, kinship, ethnic groups, economic production, markets, natural history, and the Spanish conquest from the native point of view – indeed, anything (and more) that might be found in a modern-day ethnography (Sahagún 1950–1982, 1993; Baird 1993; León-Portilla 2002). While the images contain Spanish artistic and substantive elements (such as perspective and Spanish clothing and tools), they also are enriched throughout with Aztec glyphs that embellish the images with intriguing details⁶ (Figure 1.4).



Figure CI.1. The founding of Tenochtitlan as depicted in the *Codex Mendoza*. (From Berdan and Anawalt 1992: vol. 4, folio 1r.)

CASE I.1 How It Survived 1: The Codex Mendoza

Precious little is known of the provenience of any of the pre-Columbian and colonial codices. However, the partially known and rather haphazard history of one pictorial manuscript exemplifies the conditions under which such documents have survived – and highlights the astounding fact that any have survived at all.

It was twenty years after Tenochtitlan fell at the hands of Hernán Cortés and his thousands of native allies. King Charles I of Spain (Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor) demanded to know more precisely what his military forces had recently acquired. Like other conquered areas in the Americas, his new territory in central Mexico, now the colonial world of New Spain, must be governed, its

resources exploited, and its native people converted to Christianity. To obtain necessary information, the king's representative in New Spain (Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza) commissioned the production of a pictorial codex, which consisted of three parts: a history of Aztec conquests, tributes paid to the Aztecs by geographical province, and an account of Aztec daily life, from cradle to grave.

A probable history of this *Codex Mendoza* can be re-created, although "the evidence is often ambiguous and conflicting" (Nicholson 1992: 10). The year was most likely 1541, and the place was colonial Mexico City, built atop the vanquished Mexica capital city of Tenochtitlan. The manuscript's creation relied on several skilled native scribes, who copied the first two parts from pre-conquest pictorials but possibly developed the third part anew. Their efforts were overseen by one or more Spanish clerics, who discussed the pictorial content with the scribes and added glosses in Nahuatl and Spanish, and somewhat more extended explanations in Spanish.

As time passed, the job became more hurried, since it was necessary to send the document by mule train from the highland Basin of Mexico down to coastal Veracruz in time to catch the scheduled sailing of the treasure ships to Spain. As fate would have it, somewhere on the high seas the ship was set upon by French men-of-war; the French succeeded in taking the Spanish ship along with the *Codex Mendoza* and unknown other treasures. The next we know, the codex was in the hands of the French king's cosmographer, André Thevet, who twice signed the manuscript in 1553. It then appears that the codex was purchased in 1587 by the Englishman Richard Hakluyt for 20 French crowns – Thevet and Hakluyt were acquainted, both being avid collectors and disseminators of travelers' accounts. Hakluyt retained the codex until his death in 1616, willing it to Samuel Purchas. When Purchas died in 1626, his son inherited the document, which somehow passed by 1654 to Purchas's friend and collector, Englishman John Selden. Five years later it entered the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England, with two other of Selden's Mexican manuscripts. There it languished until seeing the light of publication in Lord Kingsborough's *Antiquities of Mexico* (1831–1848). It resides in the Bodleian still.

Beyond the pictorial, much of the oral and written record of this partially lost, partially transformed world became embedded in a variety of Spanish and Nahuatl documents produced in great abundance during the colonial period in Mexico. While sometimes augmented by pictorial images, these documents were primarily textual and were composed in the alphabetic writing introduced by the Spaniards.

SPANISH DOCUMENTS

Written sources reflecting Aztec life but composed in the Spanish language include eyewitness accounts of the Spanish conquest, early colonial chronicles and histories, and censuses and other administrative, legal, and economic documentation. The five letters of Hernán Cortés (1928) and the "true"⁷ history of the conquest by one of his soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1963), are well

known and have been heavily mined for information on the Aztecs. Cortés's letters-dispatches were written to the Spanish monarch as the conquest itself was going on; Díaz del Castillo's account was composed by memory by the aging *conquistador* more than forty years after the events he describes. Although both of these contain their own biases, they also provide the discerning reader with intriguing details of Aztec life at the point of contact with the Spaniards. These accounts are augmented by the shorter and less-used relations of Andrés de Tapia (1993), Francisco de Aguilar (1993), and an "Anonymous Conqueror" (1971), whose actual participation in the conquest has been questioned (Warren 1973: 67–68).

Shortly after the conquest and throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Spanish friars began accumulating and recording detailed information on indigenous history and culture, with the primary purpose of aiding their conversion activities. A pioneer among these was Andrés de Olmos, whose *huehuetlatolli*⁸ and 1547 grammar (1972) are all that has survived – his compendious works were already lost in the sixteenth century. However, he provided the inspiration for later sixteenth-century writers such as Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía 1969, 1971), Jerónimo de Mendieta (1980), Juan de Torquemada (1969), and our renowned Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún, who also wrote an extended paraphrase of his monumental Nahuatl-language work (1956). Another track of sixteenth-century colonial writers who drew on each other's work (or some earlier sources) included Diego Durán (1971, 1994), a Dominican friar who compiled an Aztec imperial history as well as an account of native gods and rituals; Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc (1975a, 1975b); José de Acosta (2002); and Juan de Tovar (Kubler and Gibson 1951).⁹

A great deal of secular writing produced in the colonial sixteenth and seventeenth centuries considerably augments our understanding of pre-conquest Aztec life. These range from the lawyer and judge Alonso de Zorita's relation written "to give the Spanish Crown information regarding the government and tribute system of the Indians" (Warren 1973: 73) to the *protomédico general* Francisco Hernández's wide-ranging natural history (1959). This latter investigator traveled in New Spain from 1571 to 1577 recording descriptive information on native plants and animals, interspersing interesting details on native customs along the way.¹⁰ Another particularly useful collection of documents is the *Relaciones geográficas* of the latter half of the sixteenth century (1578–1585); some of these textual sources include interesting and informative maps (Mundy 1996). The Spanish crown was understandably interested in the nature and value of its new holdings across the sea, and these geographic relations were designed to inform and enlighten the Spanish Council of the Indies. They consisted of a standard questionnaire carried by Spanish officials to communities throughout Spain's new realm. Some of the most relevant questions (and responses) pertained to local demography and history,

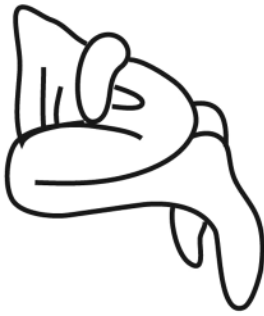


Figure 1.4. A feather prepared for an elaborate mosaic by a skilled featherworker is identified as that of a green *tzinitzcan* (trogonorus) bird by the inclusion of a human rear end, representing the sound *tzin-*. (After Sahagún 1950–1982: book 9, illus. 108. Drawing by Jennifer Berdan.)

others to regional resources and trade, and still others to religious inclinations (Acuña 1982–1988; Cline 1964). Beyond these relations, the archives are bursting with other official reports, tax records, and legal records that embed “the complaints and pleadings of indigenous litigants, drawings of domestic compounds, genealogies, wills, and the testimony of hundreds of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Indians” (Kellogg 1995: 36).

Some mestizos wrote important historical chronicles in Spanish in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Foremost among these were Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1965), a descendant of the pre-Hispanic rulers of Texcoco; Juan Bautista Pomar (1891), likewise a Texcocan royal descendant; and Diego Muñoz Camargo (1947), a Tlaxcallan noble. Each of these was interested chiefly in promoting the historical legitimacy and contemporary primacy of his own city-state under the new colonial political regime.

NAHUATL DOCUMENTS

The Spanish friars were diligent in teaching native nobles the alphabetic style of Spanish writing. By a decade following the conquest, literacy among the natives took a new form, many Aztec scribes having made the transition from glyph and oral rendition to alphabet. As a result, an impressively large and rich corpus of documents was composed alphabetically in the Nahuatl language. Major chronicles, histories, and oral literary forms were transcribed into this format, Christian catechisms and scripts were produced for purposes of conversion, and myriad Nahuatl-language documents recording day-to-day matters such as lawsuits, censuses, land disputes and other complaints, inheritance, town council meetings, market taxes, and even personal letters found useful niches in the colonial world.

Three particularly significant histories, as chronicles or annals, survive in the Nahuatl language. The most extensive of these was produced in a series of documents by a Chalcan with the formidable name of Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin – Chimalpahin for short (Schroeder 1991; Lockhart et al. 2006). The *Codex Chimalpopoca*, hailing from the more northerly Basin of Mexico town of Cuauhtitlan, provides a year-count record from the perspective of that town (Bierhorst 1992), and Fernando

Alvarado Tezozomoc's *Crónica mexicayotl* (1975b) extols a Mexica historical perspective. Like the Spanish-language chronicles, each of these writers promotes his own community, its image, and its supreme importance.

The Aztecs relied on rich oral traditions, often prompted by reference to specific pictorial codices. Beyond the *huehuetlatolli*, which have been preserved in several early sources, Aztec oral renditions have survived in the form of songs and poems. The longtime master of this genre is Miguel León-Portilla, who has suggested identifications of several notable Aztec poets (1992). The poems and songs, some of which would have been accompanied by music and dance, provide a window through which to glimpse some of the deeper aspects of Aztec culture – the people's delights and dreams, their fears and fates. And since the native people often collaborated with Christian friars in producing Catholic catechisms and other texts, Nahuatl metaphors and imagery, reflecting indigenous cultural themes and priorities, frequently peek through much of this literature and find niches in elaborate colonial theatrical productions and spectacles (Burkhart 1996, 2011; Sell and Burkhart 2004; Motolinía 1969).

An altogether different style of documentation involves notarial or civil records written in Nahuatl – and there are a great many of these. Ranging from wills to censuses to town council minutes, these documents enrich our understanding of such matters as family relations, social status rules and tensions, land use, and moral expectations. Through these sources we are able to enter the lives of a broad range of individuals, entwined in a great variety of relationships and enmeshed in very human circumstances of the “daily life” genre. So the exasperation of a father with his errant son emerges in the father's will, the frustration of nobles with uppity entrepreneurial commoners appears in a town council's minutes, and anger over the behavior of an allegedly abusive priest is reported in a formal complaint: all of these and more were composed in the Nahuatl language and provide an enormous corpus of fascinating data documenting colonial life and also revealing patterns harking back to pre-conquest times (Anderson et al. 1976; Lockhart 1992; Lockhart et al. 1986; Haskett 1991; Cline 1993; Cline and León-Portilla 1984; Schroeder et al. 1997; Horn 1997; Wood 2003).

ASSESSING THE DOCUMENTARY RECORD

Each of these styles of documentation has its advantages and cautions. The most obvious advantage is the richness, depth, abundance, and diversity of the documentation, allowing for fruitful investigations into almost all walks of Aztec life. We can learn of nobles and commoners (and the relationships among them), of agriculture and crafts, of men and women, of adults and children, and of people associated with different ethnicities. We can map out the marketplace, perceive the dynamics of palace life, envision flamboyant ceremonies, meet the gods and goddesses, comprehend sophisticated calendrics and medicine, understand the moral underpinnings of daily social life, and appreciate the richness

of the Nahuatl language through speeches, poetry, and songs. Fortunately, some of the documents are hybrids. For example, some pictorial codices composed with native glyphs (such as the *Matrícula de Tributos*) were later (or at the same time) augmented by Nahuatl and/or Spanish alphabetic glosses or explanations. Another example is Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, which is based on information provided orally and pictorially by knowledgeable Nahuas and contains alphabetically written Nahuatl text with accompanying pictorial images, all of this later augmented by a Spanish version also prepared by the good friar. These and other additions help clarify meaning and reduce ambiguity, although one must beware of possible mistakes (see note 5).

On the downside, all written records are produced for a reason, and in those reasons we frequently find biases. Documents can be biased in a number of ways. Some documents serve as instruments of purposeful manipulation and promotion: this expectedly occurs in the letters of Hernán Cortés to the Spanish monarch and later in counter-statements presented by one of his *conquistadores*, Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Biases are frequently explicit in Spanish religious documents condemning indigenous religious practices and beliefs. Biases can also take the form of perspective: Alva Ixtlilxochitl necessarily writes from his noble Texcocan viewpoint, Chimalpahin from his noble Chalcan one. Much of our documentary record derives from politically dominant centers and reflects the interests and perspectives of an urban and elite stratum of society. Related to this is another imbalance, an ethnic one. For instance, we know how the Mexica perceived the neighboring Otomí (as "blockheads," they said), yet we do not know if the Otomí characterized the Mexica in similar terms. Nonetheless, recent work with Nahuatl civil records and the occasional emergence of regional documents such as the *Códice de Xicotepec* (Stresser-Péan 1995) help balance this state of affairs.

In another vein, there is some danger in generalizing from specific statements. Chronicles, histories, and other relations necessarily derive from specific localities and groups – to what extent do the conditions they relate pertain to other communities and groups? And, on a somewhat different scale, when we learn that Aztec merchants were sent by King Ahuitzotl to coastal regions to trade his precious goods, was this a onetime event or representative of a frequent occurrence? The documentary record is fragmentary and thus unclear on many of these issues. Finally, since some sixteenth-century records derive from one another, as previously described, their relationships must be clearly understood before being considered corroborative sources.

There are some disappointments. For instance, by his own admission, Bernal Díaz del Castillo states, "Do not be surprised, however, if I do not describe them [the great temple's surroundings] as accurately as I might, for I had other thoughts in my head at the time than that of telling a story. I was more concerned with my military duties and the orders my Captain had given me" (1963: 238). His circumstances were understandable.

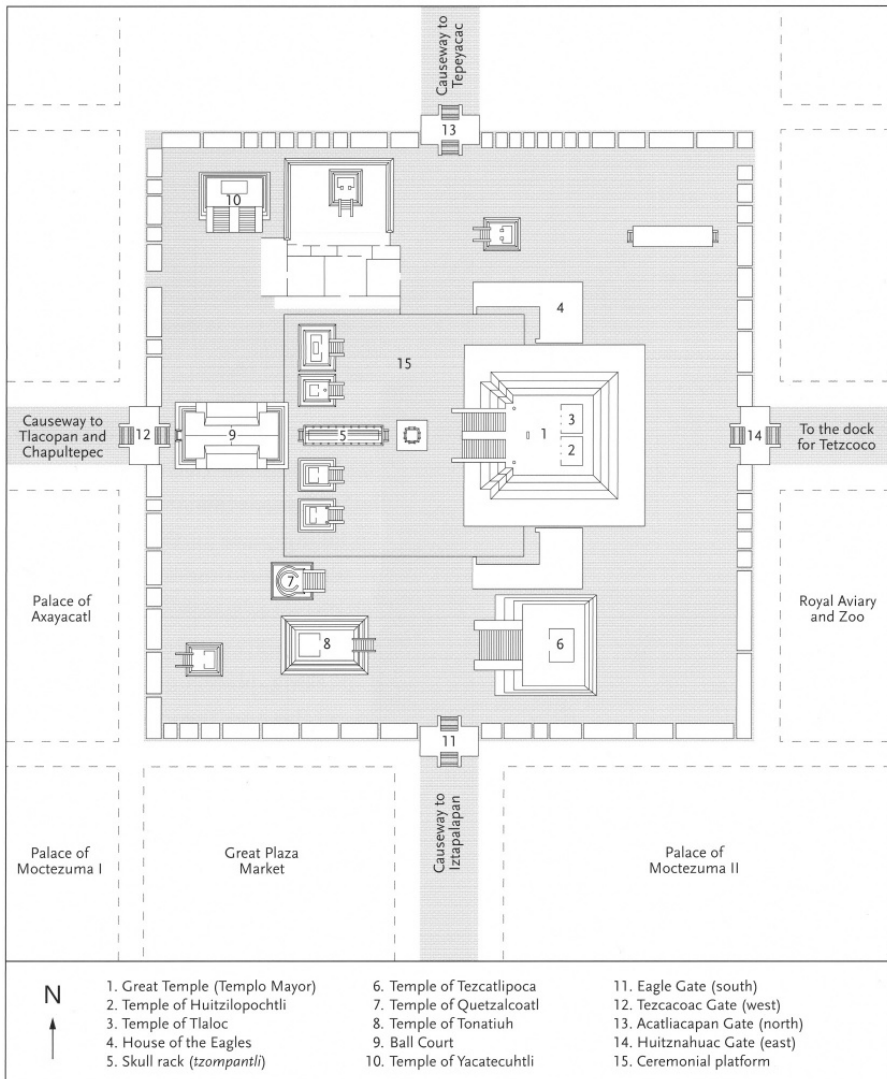


Figure 1.5. Schematic layout of Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct. (From McEwan and López Luján 2009: 132. Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.)

Despite its limitations, this rich ethnohistoric record has yielded a wealth of information on Aztec life, especially for the time immediately prior to the Spanish conquest. Ethnohistoric research has a long and distinguished history in Mesoamerica generally (see Cline 1973; Nicholson 1975). During the past two decades, previously untapped documentary sources have come to light, and many known documents have become increasingly available, most with new translations and extended commentaries. With this expanded data base, ethnohistorians have turned their attention to more sophisticated contextual analyses of pictorial manuscripts and textual records; to unraveling the nature of indigenous cultures both before and after the Spanish conquest; to a better understanding of the

Spanish conquest itself, and to formulating interpretations of native life based on evolving perspectives in anthropology, history, and art history (Berdan 2009b). For instance, the ethnohistoric record now has sufficient depth (especially with post-conquest documents) to make the application of agency theory¹¹ a viable approach, enabling researchers to “examine the potential and constraints of specific cases where agency, structure and power intersect” (Johnson 2004: 246).

Approached critically, the rich and diverse written record has the potential to capture much of the ancient Aztec way of life, almost ethnographically. However, it is still an incomplete and unbalanced record. Fortunately, additional and quite different sources of data are available from archaeological and art historical research on immovable physical remains and portable artifacts, from the physical anthropological examination of human remains, and from ethnographic and linguistic studies of present-day descendants of the ancient Aztecs and their neighbors.

Physical Remains: Architecture and Artifacts

ARCHITECTURE

Stationary physical remains constitute an important source of archaeological information. Fortunately, the Aztecs were builders on a grand scale. And their cities proudly exhibited many monumental public buildings. These stone structures inevitably included temples, palaces, ballcourts, shrines, and altars (Figure 1.5).¹² Large sacrificial stones, sweatbaths (*temazcalli*), skull racks (*tzompantli*), and pavements were also common features in urban settings. Tenochtitlan, atypically large, contained additional buildings such as a priestly school (*calmecac*) and warriors' assembly chambers in its central sacred precinct. Rarely, these ceremonial and political districts were walled, separating them from the more mundane realms of urban life. Large and small settlements contained residential areas with either stone housing (for elites) or houses constructed of less resilient adobe bricks or wood and thatch (for commoners).

Often public and private stone structures retain sufficient structural integrity to reveal information on matters such as building periods, functions, associations with other structures, astronomical orientations, and building materials and techniques. Some also retain sculptural elements and/or mural fragments, yielding further cultural information and affording a look at the building's decorative presentation.¹³ In the case of lower-status housing, only the foundations remain, nonetheless yielding data on matters such as housing plans and layouts, domestic activities, and building materials (Smith 2008: 163–166).

The Aztec (indeed, Mesoamerican) preoccupation with controlling water is evidenced by the massive efforts expended on constructing aqueducts, canals, check dams, and hillside terracing. Various remnants of these still exist; an idea of the scale and sophistication of Aztec hydraulic engineering can be appreciated today at the pleasure gardens of Tetzcotzinco (Parsons 2002).

THE FATE OF MATERIAL OBJECTS

Other pre-conquest remains are more or less portable artifacts, to be uncovered or recovered archaeologically, or found unprovenienced in museum or other collections. From the perspective of one art historian, artistic material remains can be classed as monumental sculpture (see Case 1.2), codices, stone sculpture, lapidary arts, wood sculpture, featherwork, textiles, and objects made from clay, gold, dough, resin, and paper (Pasztesy 1983: 74–79). These were prominent in the more public and elite environments. Just as significant are objects of more common, everyday use such as spindle whorls, stone blades, stone and ceramic food-processing implements such as *manos*, *metates*, and *molcajetes*, and all manner of utilitarian ceramics such as plates and drinking vessels (Figure 1.6).

Whether extravagant or utilitarian, objects uncovered in situ and often associated with ancient structures range from the thousands of objects found in the more than 162 ritual deposits (Figure 1.7) around Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor (López Luján 2005, personal communication 2010), to concentrated obsidian blades and associated debitage in an Otompan household workshop (Charlton et al. 1991), to cooking pots, spindle whorls, and ceramic figurines in a Morelos commoner house (Smith 2008: 167–170). These and other controlled excavations have uncovered material remains with careful attention to context and chronology. Other professional archaeological research endeavors have recovered artifacts through extended surface surveys, appropriate in cases where settlement patterns and other issues are investigated over broad areas (see Sanders et al. 1979; Nichols 2004). In both types of research, data on material objects are meticulously recorded to squeeze out the greatest amount of information on their context, history, function, and meaning and to provide the greatest potential for reconstructing ancient lifeways.

Many objects, however, have no clear provenience or history. Some of these, such as the nine turquoise mosaics in the British Museum, the three feathered masterpieces in Vienna, and the *Matrícula de Tributos* in Mexico City, are rightfully renowned as both cultural pieces and objects of fine art. Others are less well known but no less significant in the cultural record despite their lack of provenience.

The Spanish conquest itself contributed to the dispersal of many high-end Aztec-produced objects. Cortés (1928: 381–382) lists the many precious objects he sent to King Charles during the conquest. Also, at the end of the conquest, he states that “[a]mong the other booty taken from the city were many golden shields, crests and plumes, and other such marvelous things that they could not be described in writing nor comprehended unless they were actually seen” (ibid.: 229).¹⁴ He decided to send these treasures as a whole to the king. At least some major objects were displayed in an exhibition in Brussels in the year 1520. They were described with awe by the well-known artist Albrecht Dürer, who “marveled at the subtle intellects of men in foreign parts” (Keen 1971: 69).



Figure 1.6. Vessels for drinking *pulque* (left) and cacao (right). (Courtesy National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, nos. 002635 and 178070. Photograph by Jennifer Berdan.)



Figure 1.7. Golden eagle bones and decorated knives in offering 125, Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor precinct. (Photograph by Leonardo López Luján. Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.)



Figure C1.2. The renowned Aztec Calendar (or Sun) Stone. (Drawing by Emily Umberger. Reproduced with permission.)

Case 1.2 How It Survived 2: The Aztec Calendar Stone

Archaeologists excavating intact sites enjoy the luxury of discovering and unearthing ancient materials that have been largely untouched since they were deposited. In short, they are found much as they were left behind: in situ and conveniently provenienced. Not so, however, with a great many valuable artifacts that have found their way into museums or other collections with little known of their origins, history, or cultural affiliations.

To some extent, this is the case with one of the most famous of all Aztec monuments, the so-called Calendar Stone or Sun Stone. Today it resides in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, and its history is no less fascinating and circuitous than that of the *Codex Mendoza* (Case 1.1).

A reconstructed history of this monument goes rather like this (based on the meticulous research of Leonardo López Luján 2008 and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Felipe Solís 2004). The Calendar Stone first came into schol-

arly view on December 17, 1790, approximately halfway through its long history. During leveling and repaving work on Mexico City's Zocalo, it was discovered facedown just west of the Viceregal Palace. It was pulled to a vertical position, where it was first examined by archaeologists. It stayed there only until July 2, 1791, when it was moved to the cathedral. There it was set into the southwest tower, facing west, where it could be easily viewed. Such ready accessibility brought extensive wear and tear to the monument, and it clearly suffered from exposure to the elements (both human and natural). So in August 1885, this national icon was removed to the early Museo Nacional, where it held pride of place in the monolithic gallery (a journey that required considerable human effort and ingenuity, fifteen days, and 600 pesos). On June 27, 1964, it was finally transferred to the new Museo Nacional de Antropología in Chapultepec Park (this journey took only one hour, fifteen minutes). It rests there today, prominently displayed.

This portion of the history of the Calendar Stone is well documented. But what about its prior life, before 1790? What do we know about its manufacture, use, and meaning during Aztec times? The early centuries of Calendar Stone history depend heavily on historical records, interpretations, and speculations.

On the basis of the specific type of stone and documentary suggestions, it is likely that the stone originated in the southern Basin of Mexico, from which it was dragged 12–22 kilometers to Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct. This probably occurred in the middle years of the Aztec Empire, perhaps during the reign of Axayacatl (1469–1481). Tenochtitlan's imperial ruler surely had the power to acquire and transport such a mammoth stone (weighing in at 24.5 tons and measuring 3.5 meters in diameter), and its sculptural style is representative of the Aztec imperial period. It must have been located prominently in the ceremonial precinct, laid horizontally and associated with ritual human sacrifices on a nearby *temalacatl* (stone whorl, or base for gladiatorial sacrifices). It has been suggested that it was used either as a *quauhxicalli* (eagle vessel, or depository for sacrificial hearts) or as a base for the final sacrifice of a wounded gladiatorial combatant (Matos Moctezuma and Solís 2004: 37). Its exact location at that time is unknown, but apparently it was moved a few hundred meters south of the precinct just after the Spanish conquest: the Spaniards laid it faceup near the Viceregal Palace. Considered a bad influence by Spanish religious officials, the stone was buried facedown sometime between 1551 and 1572, where it lay until it was discovered in 1790. While there is considerable history here, the stone's origins, imperial history, and context are lost. Where was it carved: on site or in Tenochtitlan? Was this really the rock moved from the southern Basin of Mexico recorded in the colonial histories? Where did it sit in the ceremonial precinct? How was it used? While answers to these questions evade us, the value of the monument is nonetheless inestimable. In particular, studies of its sculptural style and symbolism have been legion and have served as a window into the worldview of the Mexica (see Nicholson 1993).

Not only Cortés sent booty home – his compatriots also sent large quantities of precious Aztec objects to individuals and religious institutions in Spain. The objects themselves and their subsequent histories are mostly lost (Saville 1920: 8–104). Also lost or unidentified in collections are the great many objects unearthed by Spaniards in the aftermath of the conquest as they laid the foundations for their new buildings in place of the Aztec ones:

[W]hen the ground was excavated to lay a foundation, gold and silver and chalchihuites ... were found in great quantities; and a settler in Mexico who built on another part of the site found the same. The officers of His Majesty's Treasury demanded this find as rightfully belonging to the King, and there was a lawsuit about it. I do not remember what the outcome was, only that they asked for information from the Caciques and dignitaries of Mexico. (Bernal Díaz del Castillo 1963: 238–239; writing ca. 1568)

This is largely the world of “treasures,” but less spectacular artifacts, including massive quantities of pottery sherds and other utilitarian objects found in structures, trash heaps, and corn fields also yield significant cultural information and have captured archaeological interest more recently. Many of these objects help reconstruct the everyday lives of nonelite members of the society.

ASSESSING THE REMAINS

As with the ethnohistorical documents, the archaeological record has advantages and cautions. A major advantage is that, unlike documents, archaeological remains are “quite unlikely to be manipulated by individuals with bias or vested interest” (Barber and Berdan 1998: 260). That is, a palace may be designed to display wealth and impress others at the time of its actual use, but once it has fallen into disuse and covered by subsequent structures, its essentials will be found much as they were left behind. A commoner trash heap was not intended to impress or deceive, and the archaeologist will find it much as it was deposited in antiquity.¹⁵ Nonetheless, consideration should be made for the possibility of “structured deposition,” or the deliberate deposition of items that may appear as trash or rubbish (Cool 2006: 13–14). In analyzing remains, modern archaeologists have at their command a variety of productive research strategies, including controlled excavation, intensive survey and surface collection, materials analysis, household archaeology, and ethnoarchaeology (Nichols 2004: 275).

A further advantage is the time depth afforded by archaeology and the ability to construct meaningful chronologies based on sequential deposits of material remains. Finally, archaeology focuses on material remains; actual structures and objects can yield information neglected or recorded only scantily in historic documents (see Case 4.1). These include matters such as detailed technological processes and tool uses, patterns of trade, standards of living under changing conditions, and economic investments in ritual activities. For instance, Michael Smith (2008: 172–173) has ascertained on the basis of house construction and

artifact assemblages that an Aztec rural peasant's life was not so different from that of an urban commoner. We can guess this from the documents, but they cannot tell us this with as much assurance as can the material record.

Yet, like the documentary record, the archaeological record is incomplete and unbalanced. A full archaeological record of a complete Aztec site remains a dream. Indeed, Aztec city-states with reasonably intact monumental architecture (such as Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco) tend to lack available and preserved residential remains; on the other hand, where residential areas are accessible and have been excavated (such as at Otompan and Huexotla), few if any monumental architectural remains are available (Smith 2008: 20–21). Much of this is due to the impact of subsequent occupations: beginning with the Spaniards, new residents readily built their settlements atop existing Aztec cities and communities (sometimes reusing stones from Aztec structures), and many of these ancient locales are buried beneath today's cities, towns, plazas, and roads. Accessibility is an issue. On a February morning in 1978, it was happenstance that opened a substantial portion of downtown Mexico City to archaeological investigation, soon to reveal the phenomenal Aztec Templo Mayor and much of its surrounding ceremonial precinct. This project continues to unveil stupendous and surprising remains (e.g., Figures 1.7 and 7.2; Matos Moctezuma and López Luján 2007).

A further imbalance in the archaeological record involves perishability – some materials like textiles and feathers are particularly fragile, and objects made of these materials rarely survive in the environmental conditions of central and southern Mexico. Indeed, of the countless objects of exquisite featherwork produced by the pre-conquest Aztecs, a mere seven can be counted in museums today.¹⁶ Balancing this loss is the fact that many native activities, such as featherworking, continued in colonial times – the iconography changed, but the technology persisted, and we have many extant examples of colonial featherwork. Additionally, the archaeological record tends to come up short in “abstract realms of beliefs and language, social realms of activities and relations, ephemeral events such as market days (where the plaza is swept clean after every event), and everyday matters such as personal hygiene and styles of greeting” (Berdan 2005: 18). Archaeological information is also selective in another way: we may ask, for instance, how representative of a household's activities are the remains left behind in its trash heap. What other items, perhaps more valuable to the householder, are we missing?

Archaeological control of ancient Aztec artifacts is a fairly recent accomplishment, and many objects were removed from their contexts during the preceding five centuries. Nonetheless, we spend a good deal of time and energy with these objects trying to determine their places of origin, chronologies, and cultural associations. Some objects, such as the so-called mantle of Moctezuma and a spun feather textile have sat, misidentified, in museums for long periods of time.¹⁷ Often accompanied by a great deal of speculation, lack of clear

Figure 1.8. Bark beater currently in use in San Pablito, Puebla, Mexico. (Photograph by Frances Berdan.)



provenience of such objects (and they are astoundingly numerous) diminishes their overall role in reconstructing ancient life. However, they should not be dismissed, as they carry other important information, such as details on technological processes and examples of abstract symbolism.¹⁸

Human Remains

Quite different information can be gleaned from actual human remains, deposited as offerings or burials. These are particularly informative in the recent excavations at Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor and at Tlatelolco's central precinct. In the Tenochtitlan excavations, offerings included some burials of elite personages who were ritually buried following cremation. But the majority of human remains consisted of sacrificed individuals, beheaded and some with their throats cut (López Luján 1999: 39, 42, 46; 2005: 180–183, 202–209). One

Templo Mayor offering (number 48) included the remains of some forty-five children sacrificed to the god Tlaloc (González Torres 2003: 40). The Tlatelolco project has yielded thousands of human burials, ritually deposited or sacrificially offered (López Luján 1999: 34; Guilleim Arroyo 1999, 2008a; Matos Moctezuma 2008; Roman Berrelleza 1987, 1991). And excavations at Late Postclassic Zultepec, northwest of Tlaxcallan, have yielded fourteen human skulls with perforations indicating that they were displayed on a skull rack (Martínez Vargas 2003).¹⁹ Human remains deposited in the ceremonial precincts of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco have yielded valuable information on the circumstances of life and death of the individuals involved: their age, gender, medical conditions, and context and manner of death. They shed particular light on the Aztec practice of human sacrifice.

Modern technology has made it possible to recover and identify biological remains of a different type – human blood. Evidence of human blood residue in the House of Eagles in the Tenochtitlan ceremonial precinct point to blood-letting activities in these military chambers (López Luján 2006).

The Value of Ethnography

Some ingredients of native life have survived the centuries in remarkably sound fashion, primarily in outlying areas of the Aztec realm. These can be (and have been) documented ethnographically. This is particularly true in the cultural realms of language and technology. Today, about a million and a half people still speak Nahuatl or Nahuat, albeit with some expected modifications, such as the addition of Spanish loan words and constantly changing colloquialisms. The amount of rich cultural data embedded in language cannot be underestimated; for instance, the use of metaphors, kinship terms, and curing techniques all reveal long-standing traditions (e.g., Lewis 1951; Sandstrom 1991; Ruiz Rivera 2001). But the most overt relations with the past can be seen in the material, technological world – in the *manos* and *metates* for grinding maize, in the backstrap looms for weaving cloth, in the bark beaters for making *amate* paper, in the hoes and digging sticks for work in the agricultural fields (Figure 1.8). While the use of these traditional tools (many of them modified)²⁰ is on the wane in this industrial age, their continued use offers valuable cultural details on long-standing traditions (see Case 1.3). The obvious advantage of ethnographic data is its depth and subtlety of information, the ability to discover particulars not present in the archaeological or ethnohistorical records. In addition to well-known ethnographic pitfalls such as informant bias and self-interest, the most obvious caution here involves the changes wrought by time. Five hundred years of sometimes dramatic cultural, economic, social, and political changes in Mexico have left their mark on even the most remote indigenous villagers, and all are integrated into the global, industrial world.²¹

Figure C1.3. A twentieth-century Nahua woman weaving on a backstrap loom in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico. (Photograph by Frances Berdan.)



Case 1.3 How It Survived 3: The Backstrap Loom

The backstrap loom is an ancient tool in Mesoamerica. Seen on Jaina (Maya) figurines as early as the Classic period, illustrations of women weaving on the loom are found often in Postclassic codices and colonial pictorials. While informative, sculptures and pictures are static; they are limited in the information they can convey about just how one went about weaving on such an apparatus. And being essentially bundles of sticks, looms leave little behind for the archaeologist. Fortunately, many women today in indigenous communities in Mexico and Guatemala continue to weave on backstrap looms and provide us with a font of information on how this process works (and how it was likely to have worked in the past).

The production of cloth on backstrap looms exhibits a great deal of continuity from pre-Columbian to modern times. Women are the weavers, then and now. Using a backstrap loom, they easily incorporate weaving into their other household activities and responsibilities (i.e., the work can be readily put down and picked back up). The loom equipment used today closely resembles that depicted in the sixteenth-century pictorial codices. What is missing in the early images, however, is information on matters such as the actual process of production, the time involved in weaving a piece of cloth,

the learning process, weaving terminology, and symbolism in woven designs. Using a technology resembling that of past weavers, today's weavers can enlighten us about these matters. For instance, the sixteenth-century *Codex Mendoza* (see Case 1.1) states in a Spanish gloss that a girl mastered weaving skills at age 14. How general is that statement, and when did the girl begin to learn to weave? The answers are suggested ethnographically: when I asked contemporary villagers at what age they became good weavers, they consistently (and independently) answered "age 14." This was consistency beyond my wildest dreams! They also said that they began learning at age 5, information not available in other documentation. On another dimension, when asked about the time involved in weaving a certain length of cloth, the women were uncertain, as weaving was so fully integrated into other household activities – they had difficulty arriving at a figure and, interestingly, did not think the matter particularly important. This may reflect long-standing, traditional approaches to the relationship between time and economic production. And as for designs, some animal figures woven into the cloth were identified as *nahualli* (animal spirit companions), an ancient concept. Yet five centuries have passed since weavers worked in the time of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin. How closely does the contemporary scene resemble the Aztec past? While remarkably tenacious, as we have seen, this bit of culture has undergone changes over that time. Most of the thread is now store-bought rather than hand-spun, wool has been added to the looms, new designs have been incorporated into the weavers' repertoires, and fewer and fewer girls are learning the skills. Yet these are details compared with the fundamental retention of the basic technology, process, and approach to backstrap weaving. Ethnographic research reveals much about this (and other) arenas of life, expanding and enriching our understanding of the ancient mode of living.

INTERPRETING THE AZTEC WORLD

Our vision and understanding of Aztec culture have changed dramatically since the "first encounters" between Europeans and Aztecs. Inescapably, scholarly interpretations of growing mounds of data on this civilization have been influenced by changing theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches embedded in the fields of archaeology, ethnohistory, art history, and ethnography. These interpretations cluster around four major themes: complexity, diversity, interaction, and causality.

Complexity

Proposals about the nature of Aztec society entered the anthropological world in the nineteenth century when Lewis Henry Morgan (1878) described it

as a “clan-based military democracy in the middle stage of barbarism” in his conceptualization of general evolution (Carrasco 1971). Adolf Bandelier furthered Morgan’s conclusions, continuing to portray Aztec society as a tribal democracy, and it was not until the 1930s that Aztec scholars began to consistently dispute this claim. Nonetheless, some vestiges of this intellectual legacy persisted, and in the mid-twentieth century the complexity of the Aztecs remained a lingering issue. Adding to this persistence was Gelb’s (1952) characterization of the Aztec writing system as a “forerunner of writing” and even Gibson’s (1964) designation of major ethnic groups in the pre-conquest Basin of Mexico as “tribes.” Another contributing factor has been the near invisibility of archaeological evidence for an Aztec presence beyond the Basin of Mexico. Today, however, intervening decades of problem-oriented interdisciplinary research have revealed the Late Postclassic Aztecs as a full-blown civilization, state, and empire, with a demonstrable social hierarchy, political centralization, economic specialization, and urbanism. This is now generally accepted, with the caveat that Aztec complexity increased during its own history and these people exhibited less complexity in earlier times than later on.

This does not mean that there was a necessary progression in all of these central Mexican societies toward increasing hierarchical depth and political centralization. An “alternative pathways to complexity” theoretical approach has proved especially useful in revealing variations in the complexity of political developments in the central Mexican highlands and the realm of the Aztec Empire generally (see Chapter 5). This approach allows us to think outside the box of singular “vertical political hierarchies” and toward a recognition of variation in political styles. And political variation was indeed a significant feature of central Mexico during the Late Postclassic period (Fargher et al. 2011a: 306).

Diversity and Variation

The very use of the term “Aztec” suggests commonalities and uniformities throughout central Mexico during Late Postclassic times. In recent years, this term has been used with increasing caution and in restricted contexts (see note on terminologies at the beginning of this book). We may speak of the “Aztec Empire” in the same sense that one speaks of the Roman Empire or the Inca Empire: it denotes those in power. The term “Aztec” also has utility in referring to archaeological periods, as well as applicability in terms of broadly shared cultural features. Yet in the realm of actual relationships and behaviors, in everyday life and on the ground as it were, individuals and groups did not refer to themselves as “Aztecs,” but rather took their identities from their *calpolli*, *altepetl*, or ethnicity (Chapters 2, 5, and 6). In accordance with relatively recent trends in anthropology generally, it has become more and more common (and useful) to refer to Late Postclassic central Mexican peoples according

to their own emic designations – especially neighborhoods, city-states, and ethnic affiliations (see Chapter 2; Lockhart 1992; Berdan et al. 2008).

This is a particularly meaningful approach: not only does it allow for the insider's perspective, but it also has led to a clearer understanding of local and regional variations and relationships among groups that clearly identified themselves as distinct from their neighbors. This focus on variation now allows us to see that the Tlaxcallan state was organized according to significantly different principles than the Mexica one (although people in both states spoke Nahuatl; see Case 8.3; Fargher et al. 2011a, 2011b). Throughout central Mexico, matters such as dynastic successions, marriage alliances, community layouts, and religious celebrations varied in principle and specifics across city-states and regions (Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 7).

Indeed, local and regional variation has emerged as a major theme in Aztec studies. It has derived from archaeological, ethnohistoric, and art historical investigations, and has significantly refined questions (and answers) about cultural dynamics, economic production and distribution, social arrangements, and political relationships in this complex world. Archaeologically, the first major breakthrough in documenting Late Postclassic cultural diversity in central Mexico was the broadly constructed Basin of Mexico survey project (Sanders et al. 1979), which accumulated vast amounts of data on settlement patterns, intensive agriculture, population dynamics, and social organization. This project reinforced William Sanders's (1956) conceptualization of a "Central Mexican Symbiotic Region"²² construed in cultural ecological terms and based on environmental complementarity. This set the stage for subsequent regional studies highlighted by the regional analysis approach exemplified by Richard Blanton and his colleagues (1993). It also led archaeologists to focus on rural households as well as urban entities (e.g., Smith 1996a; Evans 1988; summary in Nichols 2004) and to incorporate ethnographic findings into their investigations (e.g., Parsons 1996, 2006; Parsons and Parsons 1990). In recent years, Basin of Mexico archaeological research has revealed significant variation in, for instance, the distribution and organization of economic specializations (e.g., Charlton 1994; Nichols 1994; Brumfiel 1980, 1987; Spence 1985; see Chapter 5), as well as the size, layout, and structure of city-states (Smith 2008). According to Nichols (2004: 275), "The most striking finding from the recent and ongoing research is the heterogeneity of Aztec city-states and their socio-economic complexity."

Similarly, in recent years ethnohistorians have become increasingly attuned to regional variations, which have become incorporated into their writings as a matter of course (see, e.g., Lockhart 1992; P. Carrasco 1999; Schroeder et al. 1997; Offner 1983; Harvey 1984; Boone 2000a; Smith and Berdan 2003c). One result of this approach is a refinement in documentary analyses. It has become increasingly important to associate specific documentation with specific locales, since matters ranging from dynastic successions to community layouts to the

structure of noble houses to land tenure rules varied from locale to locale and region to region (e.g., Pohl 2003). This is not always possible: according to Harvey (1984: 84), “One important deficiency in the general descriptions of land tenure in the sixteenth century is that there is rare mention of the locality or region to which a description applied.” Harvey echoes current recognition of the need to include regional and local variations in our cultural reconstructions. Much the same applies to art historical research, where the identification of distinctive art styles has contributed substantively to our understanding of culture change and interactions (e.g., Umberger 1987, 1996, 2008).

The approaches, data, and conclusions of these multidisciplinary research efforts, with their recognition of diversity and variation, permeate this book.

Interaction

Focusing on city-states (*altepetl*) as the building blocks of the Aztec Empire has contributed to a clearer understanding of regional and super-regional interactions and relationships. A hallmark of Late Postclassic times was its political and economic vitality, a vitality achieved through complex and competitive relationships. Some of these interactions were hostile, as in the nearly constant wars. Others were friendlier (but still competitive), for the flip side of warfare was alliance, and alliances were frequently forged. Both types of relationships tended to be unstable and strained (see Chapter 5). Complementing warfare and alliance were ties established through intricate webs of commerce (Chapter 4) and through shared symbols and styles (Chapters 7 and 8). And atop the numerous city-states hovered the imperial structure of the Aztec Triple Alliance. How can these diverse forms of interaction, between conqueror and conquered, enemy and friend, merchant and consumer, be described and explained? And what was the extent of these interactions?

Robert Barlow mapped the geographic extent of the Aztec Empire in 1949, basing his map on documentary sources. Since that pioneering effort, a great deal of ethnohistoric and archaeological data have been uncovered, stimulating substantial refinements of both the map and the administrative nature of the Aztec Empire (Berdan et al. 1996). These refinements recognize the diversity of polities throughout the Aztec realm, as well as variable strategies employed by the imperial powers as they extended their dominion. The Empire pursued not just direct economic exploitation, but also diplomatic arrangements. It built on preexisting commercial relations and expanded them with state support. It fostered social and political interactions through alliances and elite marriages (Chapters 4–6). All the while, city-states embedded in this hegemonic imperial realm conducted their own wars, alliances, marriages, and commerce. Some of these interactions engaged long-standing Aztec enemies. In other words, the rather straightforward view of imperial life presented in Barlow’s time has emerged as quite a bit more complex (and interesting) in today’s conceptions.

Our understanding of these relationships has been further enriched and expanded by the application of a modified world systems model (Chapter 8). This approach addresses interactions on a grand scale and highlights changing relations within and beyond the imperial borders (Blanton and Feinman 1984; Smith and Berdan 2003; Wells 2006). The model, as modified in Smith and Berdan (2003), recognizes that these relations were not just economic, but also embraced social, political, and symbolic interactions.

Dynamics and Causality

The Aztec Empire was a secondary state and civilization, not a primary or pristine one, and the models set forth to explain the latter entities do not apply in this case (see Charlton 2000). By Postclassic times, Mesoamerican people had a great deal to draw on from a succession of prior civilizations (see Chapter 2 for an elaboration of this theme). They reaped the benefits of the vast amount of knowledge and the many experiments and mistakes of earlier peoples. They were definitely familiar with these prior civilizations, and in some cases revered them highly and drew on them for political and symbolic legitimacy.

This Late Postclassic world was dynamic and rapidly changing, experiencing a surge in population, agricultural intensification, urban growth, expanded commercial activity (with increases in both the volume and diversity of trade goods), and greater interactions in symbolic and stylistic realms (see Chapter 8). Well-argued correlations among some of these dimensions have been offered (see Sanders et al. 1979; Nichols and Evans 2009), but can we also suggest forces generating these changes?

William Sanders and his colleagues (1979: 236–281), basing their approach on the cultural ecological model, see close correlations between the Postclassic population growth and agricultural intensification. Michael Smith further suggests that relatively good living standards among Aztec peasants were achieved “through the intensification of household agricultural and craft labor beyond the needs of subsistence in order to participate actively in the market system,” although he recognizes that this is “difficult to confirm with existing data” (1996a: 385).

Overall, there is little consensus about the forces driving the Late Postclassic population surge, the proliferation of small polities and urban centers, the importance of markets and commerce, and the distribution of economic specializations (Nichols 2004: 275). For instance, some researchers see market growth as the primary actor in the prominence of city-states (e.g., Blanton et al. 1993); others give pride of place to politics in the Postclassic world of urban–rural relationships (e.g., Brumfiel 1980, 1983, 1987). This latter position suggests that imperial forces were at work in generating local-level changes (e.g., tribute flows into the imperial capitals encouraged neighboring city-states to shift from craft specializations to agriculture). Political economy approaches

contribute to an understanding of these dynamics, especially in considering aspects of the economy as “variously contingent on changing social, political, and ecological conditions” (Wells 2006: 268; see Hirth 1984, 1996).

Questions about many Late Postclassic changes revolve around the impact of the Aztec Empire on conquered peoples as well as the responses of those people to their conquered status. For instance, in Morelos overall living standards decreased following imperial conquest, and agricultural terracing increased (suggesting a need to support a growing population and/or meet imposed tribute demands) (Smith 1994; Smith and Heath-Smith 1994). Elsewhere, possible impacts might have involved shifts in productive activities (e.g., from craft specializations to agriculture, as previously noted) and political influences on economic exchange (e.g., posited control by Tenochtitlan of its northern Basin of Mexico subjects; see Hodge 1998). On the other side of the coin, Chance and Stark (2007) consider the options of conquered peoples and polities under imperial rule (see Chapter 5). These options lead us to consider the matter of agency in cultural and political change.

Aztec-period Mexico was a time of immense and rapid change; the Empire itself spanned only about three generations of people. These people experienced noticeable changes in their own lifetimes and in turn affected the trajectory of change. Investigating the role of these lives is the realm of agency theory, as “[m]odern archaeologists want to study how individuals experience material conditions and how new beliefs and meanings are inscribed in individual lives, especially in times of social change” (Yoffee 2005: 113). Modern ethnohistorians seek the same goal. While the lives of the elite are most visible (see Case 5.1), equally important are the social roles and decisions of any person in the society (Yoffee 2005: 113–114; see Chapter 8). Agency theory brings our imperial reconstructions to the individual level: What did it take to live like an Aztec? How did one wend one’s way through the demands and fortunes of everyday life? What led various people to make their various decisions? Questions such as these can lead to profound cultural understandings.

These themes of complexity, diversity, interaction, and dynamics appear repeatedly throughout this book. Also permeating the book is a focus on connections. While individual chapters address particular realms of life, no self-respecting Aztec would have divided up his or her life in this manner. Aztecs’ lives were a complex mosaic of everyday practical and ritual expectations and demands geared toward living in the present, depending on the past, and preparing for the future. In short, this book examines the nature, dynamics, stresses, and anchors of Aztec culture and society from a holistic anthropological perspective.