



David Carrasco
THE AZTECS
A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction

VERY SHORT INTRODUCTIONS are for anyone wanting a stimulating and accessible way in to a new subject. They are written by experts and have been published in more than 25 languages worldwide.

The series began in 1995, and now represents a wide variety of topics in history, philosophy, religion, science, and the humanities. The VSI library now contains 300 volumes—a Very Short Introduction to everything from ancient Egypt and Indian philosophy to conceptual art and cosmology—and will continue to grow in a variety of disciplines.

Very Short Introductions available now:

ADVERTISING Winston Fletcher
AFRICAN HISTORY John Parker and
Richard Rathbone
AGNOSTICISM Robin Le Poidevin
AMERICAN IMMIGRATION
David A. Gerber
AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES
AND ELECTIONS L. Sandy Maisel
THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY
Charles O. Jones
ANARCHISM Colin Ward
ANCIENT EGYPT Ian Shaw
ANCIENT GREECE Paul Cartledge
ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY Julia Annas
ANCIENT WARFARE Harry Sidebottom
THE ANIMAL KINGDOM Peter Holland
ANGELS David Albert Jones
ANGLICANISM Mark Chapman
THE ANGLO-SAXON AGE John Blair
ANIMAL RIGHTS David DeGrazia
ANTISEMITISM Steven Beller
THE APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS
Paul Foster
ARCHAEOLOGY Paul Bahn
ARCHITECTURE Andrew Ballantyne
ARISTOCRACY William Doyle
ARISTOTLE Jonathan Barnes
ART HISTORY Dana Arnold
ART THEORY Cynthia Freeland
ATHEISM Julian Baggini
AUGUSTINE Henry Chadwick
AUTISM Uta Frith
THE AZTECS David Carrasco
BARTHES Jonathan Culler
BEAUTY Roger Scruton
BESTSELLERS John Sutherland
THE BIBLE John Riches
BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY
Eric H. Cline
BIOGRAPHY Hermione Lee
THE BLUES Elijah Wald
THE BOOK OF MORMON
Terryl Givens
THE BRAIN Michael O'Shea
BRITISH POLITICS Anthony Wright
BUDDHA Michael Carrithers
BUDDHISM Damien Keown
BUDDHIST ETHICS Damien Keown
CANCER Nicholas James
CAPITALISM James Fulcher
CATHOLICISM Gerald O'Collins
THE CELL
Terence Allen and Graham Cowling
THE CELTS Barry Cunliffe
CHAOS Leonard Smith
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
Kimberley Reynolds
CHOICE THEORY Michael Allingham
CHRISTIAN ART Beth Williamson
CHRISTIAN ETHICS D. Stephen Long
CHRISTIANITY Linda Woodhead
CITIZENSHIP Richard Bellamy
CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY Helen Morales
CLASSICS
Mary Beard and John Henderson
CLAUSEWITZ Michael Howard
THE COLD WAR Robert McMahon
COLONIAL LATIN AMERICAN
LITERATURE Rolena Adorno
COMMUNISM Leslie Holmes
THE COMPUTER Darrel Ince
CONSCIENCE Paul Strohm

CONSCIOUSNESS Susan Blackmore
CONTEMPORARY ART Julian Stallabrass
CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY
Simon Critchley
COSMOLOGY Peter Coles
CRITICAL THEORY Stephen Eric Bronner
THE CRUSADES Christopher Tyerman
CRYPTOGRAPHY
Fred Piper and Sean Murphy
THE CULTURAL
REVOLUTION Richard Curt Kraus
DADA AND SURREALISM
David Hopkins
DARWIN Jonathan Howard
THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS Timothy Lim
DEMOCRACY Bernard Crick
DERRIDA Simon Glendinning
DESCARTES Tom Sorell
DESERTS Nick Middleton
DESIGN John Heskest
DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY
Lewis Wolpert
DICTIONARIES Lynda Mugglestone
DINOSAURS David Norman
DIPLOMACY Joseph M. Siracusa
DOCUMENTARY FILM
Patricia Aufderheide
DREAMING J. Allan Hobson
DRUGS Leslie Iversen
DRUIDS Barry Cunliffe
EARLY MUSIC Thomas Forrest Kelly
THE EARTH Martin Redfern
ECONOMICS Partha Dasgupta
EGYPTIAN MYTH Geraldine Pinch
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
BRITAIN Paul Langford
THE ELEMENTS Philip Ball
EMOTION Dylan Evans
EMPIRE Stephen Howe
ENGELS Terrell Carver
ENGLISH LITERATURE Jonathan Bate
ENVIRONMENTAL
ECONOMICS Stephen Smith
EPIDEMIOLOGY Roldolfo Saracci
ETHICS Simon Blackburn
THE EUROPEAN UNION
John Pinder and Simon Usherwood
EVOLUTION
Brian and Deborah Charlesworth
EXISTENTIALISM Thomas Flynn
FASCISM Kevin Passmore
FASHION Rebecca Arnold
FEMINISM Margaret Walters
FILM MUSIC Kathryn Kalinak
THE FIRST WORLD WAR Michael Howard
FOLK MUSIC Mark Slobin
FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY David Canter
FORENSIC SCIENCE Jim Fraser
FOSSILS Keith Thomson
FOUCAULT Gary Gutting
FREE SPEECH Nigel Warburton
FREE WILL Thomas Pink
FRENCH LITERATURE John D. Lyons
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
William Doyle
FREUD Anthony Storr
FUNDAMENTALISM Malise Ruthven
GALAXIES John Gribbin
GALILEO Stillman Drake
GAME THEORY Ken Binmore
GANDHI Bhikhu Parekh
GENIUS Andrew Robinson
GEOGRAPHY
John Matthews and David Herbert
GEOPOLITICS Klaus Dodds
GERMAN LITERATURE Nicholas Boyle
GERMAN PHILOSOPHY Andrew Bowie
GLOBAL CATASTROPHES Bill McGuire
GLOBAL ECONOMIC HISTORY
Robert C. Allen
GLOBAL WARMING Mark Maslin
GLOBALIZATION Manfred Steger
THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE
NEW DEAL Eric Rauchway
HABERMAS James Gordon Finlayson
HÉGEL Peter Singer
HEIDEGGER Michael Inwood
HERODOTUS Jennifer. T. Roberts
HIEROGLYPHS Penelope Wilson
HINDUISM Kim Knott
HISTORY John H. Arnold
THE HISTORY OF
ASTRONOMY Michael Hoskin
THE HISTORY OF LIFE Michael Benton
THE HISTORY OF
MEDICINE William Bynum
THE HISTORY OF TIME
Leofranc Holford-Strevens
HIV/AIDS Alan Whiteside
HOBBS Richard Tuck
HUMAN EVOLUTION Bernard Wood
HUMAN RIGHTS Andrew Clapham
HUMANISM Stephen Law
HUME A. J. Ayer

IDEOLOGY Michael Freeden
INDIAN PHILOSOPHY Sue Hamilton
INFORMATION Luciano Floridi
INNOVATION
 Mark Dodgson and David Gann
INTELLIGENCE Ian J. Deary
INTERNATIONAL
 MIGRATION Khalid Koser
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
 Paul Wilkinson
ISLAM Malise Ruthven
ISLAMIC HISTORY Adam Silverstein
JESUS Richard Bauckham
JOURNALISM Ian Hargreaves
JUDAISM Norman Solomon
JUNG Anthony Stevens
KABBALAH Joseph Dan
KAFKA Ritchie Robertson
KANT Roger Scruton
KEYNES Robert Skidelsky
KIERKEGAARD Patrick Gardiner
THE KORAN Michael Cook
LANDSCAPES AND
 GEOMORPHOLOGY Andrew
 Goudie and Heather Viles
LATE ANTIQUITY Gillian Clark
LAW Raymond Wacks
THE LAWS OF THERMODYNAMICS
 Peter Atkins
LEADERSHIP Keith Grint
LINCOLN Allen C. Guelzo
LINGUISTICS Peter Matthews
LITERARY THEORY Jonathan Culler
LOCKE John Dunn
LOGIC Graham Priest
MACHIAVELLI Quentin Skinner
MADNESS Andrew Scull
THE MARQUIS DE SADE John Phillips
MARX Peter Singer
MARTIN LUTHER Scott H. Hendrix
MATHEMATICS Timothy Gowers
THE MEANING OF LIFE Terry Eagleton
MEDICAL ETHICS Tony Hope
MEDIEVAL BRITAIN
 John Gillingham and Ralph A. Griffiths
MEMORY Jonathan K. Foster
MICHAEL FARADAY
 Frank A.J.L. James
MODERN ART David Cottington
MODERN CHINA Rana Mitter
MODERN FRANCE Vanessa R. Schwartz
MODERN IRELAND Senia Pašeta
MODERN JAPAN Christopher Goto-Jones
MODERN LATIN AMERICAN
LITERATURE
 Roberto González Echevarría
MODERNISM Christopher Butler
MOLECULES Philip Ball
MORMONISM Richard Lyman Bushman
MUHAMMAD Jonathan A.C. Brown
MULTICULTURALISM Ali Rattansi
MUSIC Nicholas Cook
MYTH Robert A. Segal
NATIONALISM Steven Grosby
NELSON MANDELA Elleke Boehmer
NEOLIBERALISM
 Manfred Steger and Ravi Roy
THE NEW TESTAMENT
 Luke Timothy Johnson
THE NEW TESTAMENT AS
LITERATURE Kyle Keefer
NEWTON Robert Iliffe
NIETZSCHE Michael Tanner
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN
 Christopher Harvie and H. C. G. Matthew
THE NORMAN CONQUEST
 George Garnett
NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS
 Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green
NORTHERN IRELAND Marc Mulholland
NOTHING Frank Close
NUCLEAR POWER Maxwell Irvine
NUCLEAR WEAPONS Joseph M. Siracusa
NUMBERS Peter M. Higgins
THE OLD TESTAMENT Michael D. Coogan
ORGANIZATIONS Mary Jo Hatch
PAGANISM Owen Davies
PARTICLE PHYSICS Frank Close
PAUL E. P. Sanders
PENTECOSTALISM William K. Kay
THE PERIODIC TABLE Eric R. Scerri
PHILOSOPHY Edward Craig
PHILOSOPHY OF LAW Raymond Wacks
PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE Samir Okasha
PHOTOGRAPHY Steve Edwards
PLANETS David A. Rothery
PLATO Julia Annas
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY David Miller
POLITICS Kenneth Minogue
POSTCOLONIALISM Robert Young
POSTMODERNISM Christopher Butler
POSTSTRUCTURALISM Catherine Belsey

PREHISTORY Chris Gosden
PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY
Catherine Osborne
PRIVACY Raymond Wacks
PROGRESSIVISM Walter Nugent
PROTESTANTISM Mark A. Noll
PSYCHIATRY Tom Burns
PSYCHOLOGY
Gillian Butler and Freda McManus
PURITANISM Francis J. Bremer
THE QUAKERS Pink Dandelion
QUANTUM THEORY John Polkinghorne
RACISM Ali Rattansi
THE REAGAN REVOLUTION Gil Troy
REALITY Jan Westerhoff
THE REFORMATION Peter Marshall
RELATIVITY Russell Stannard
RELIGION IN AMERICA Timothy Beal
THE RENAISSANCE Jerry Brotton
RENAISSANCE ART Geraldine A. Johnson
RISK Baruch Fischhoff and John Kadvany
ROMAN BRITAIN Peter Salway
THE ROMAN EMPIRE Christopher Kelly
ROMANTICISM Michael Ferber
ROUSSEAU Robert Wokler
RUSSELL A. C. Grayling
RUSSIAN LITERATURE Catriona Kelly
THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
S. A. Smith
SCIENCE FICTION David Seed
SCHIZOPHRENIA
Chris Frith and Eve Johnstone
SCHOPENHAUER Christopher Janaway
SCIENCE AND RELIGION Thomas Dixon
THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION
Lawrence M. Principe
SCOTLAND Rab Houston
SEXUALITY Véronique Mottier
SHAKESPEARE Germaine Greer
SIKHISM Eleanor Nesbitt
SLEEP
Steven W. Lockley and Russell G. Foster
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
John Monaghan and Peter Just
SOCIALISM Michael Newman
SOCIOLOGY Steve Bruce
SOCRATES C. C. W. Taylor
THE SOVIET UNION Stephen Lovell
THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR Helen Graham
SPANISH LITERATURE Jo Labanyi
SPINOZA Roger Scruton
STATISTICS David J. Hand
STUART BRITAIN John Morrill
SUPERCONDUCTIVITY Stephen Blundell
TERRORISM Charles Townshend
THEOLOGY David F. Ford
THOMAS AQUINAS Fergus Kerr
TOCQUEVILLE Harvey C. Mansfield
TRAGEDY Adrian Poole
THE TUDORS John Guy
TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN
Kenneth O. Morgan
THE UNITED NATIONS
Jussi M. Hanhimäki
THE U.S. CONGRESS Donald A. Ritchie
UTOPIANISM Lyman Tower Sargent
THE VIKINGS Julian Richards
VIRUSES Dorothy H. Crawford
WITCHCRAFT Malcolm Gaskill
WITTGENSTEIN A. C. Grayling
WORLD MUSIC Philip Bohlman
THE WORLD TRADE
ORGANIZATION Amrita Narlikar
WRITING AND SCRIPT
Andrew Robinson

Available soon:

FILM Michael Wood
MAGIC Owen Davies
THE CONQUISTADORS
Matthew Restall and
Felipe Fernández-Armesto
CHINESE LITERATURE
Sabina Knight
ITALIAN LITERATURE
Peter Hainsworth
and David Robey

For more information visit our web site
www.oup.com/vsi/

This page intentionally left blank

David Carrasco

THE AZTECS

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2012 by David Carrasco

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Carrasco, David.

The Aztecs : a very short introduction / David Carrasco.

p. cm. — (Very short introductions)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-537938-9 (pbk.)

1. Aztecs. I. Title.

F1219.73.C354 2011

972—dc23

2011025597

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain
by Ashford Colour Press Ltd., Gosport, Hants.
on acid-free paper

*To the archaeologists who excavate the Great Aztec
Temple and to Friedrich Katz, who first taught me
about Aztec civilization*

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

List of illustrations xii

Preface xiii

- 1 The city of Tenochtitlan: center of the Aztec world 1
- 2 Aztec foundations: Aztlan, cities, peoples 16
- 3 Aztec expansion through conquest and trade 38
- 4 Cosmovision and human sacrifice 61
- 5 Women and children: weavers of life and precious necklaces 78
- 6 Wordplay, philosophy, sculpture 92
- 7 The fall of the Aztec empire 102
- 8 The return of the Aztecs 112

References 121

Further reading 127

Index 133

List of illustrations

- 1 Engraved map of Tenochtitlan **2**
Praeclara Ferdinandi Cortesii de Nova Maris Oceani Hispania Narratio (Nuremberg, 1524)
- 2 Chicomoztoc (Place of Seven Caves) **18**
Atlas de Durán, from the 1880 Jules Desportes lithograph facsimile edition
- 3 Map of the Basin of Mexico, ca. 1519 **22**
© Scott Sessions
- 4 Frontispiece of the *Codex Mendoza* **41**
MS. Arch Selden. A.1, fol. 2r. © Bodleian Library, Oxford, England
- 5 Model of the Great Aztec Temple **54**
© Leonardo López Luján, Museo Templo Mayor, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
- 6 Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin's reign and conquests in the *Codex Mendoza* **56**
MS. Arch Selden. A.1, fol. 15v. © Bodleian Library, Oxford, England
- 7 Aztec Calendar Stone **70**
© Salvador Guil'liem Arroyo, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
- 8 Coyolxauhqui Stone **72**
© Salvador Guil'liem Arroyo, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
- 9 Aztec mothers teaching daughters in the *Codex Mendoza* **81**
MS. Arch Selden. A.1, fol. 60r.
© Bodleian Library, Oxford, England
- 10 Aztec wedding scene in the *Codex Mendoza* **95**
MS. Arch Selden. A.1, fol. 61r.
© Bodleian Library, Oxford, England
- 11 Doña Marina, redrawn from the *Florentine Codex* **105**
From Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (Madrid: Hauser y Menet, 1905)
- 12 Day of the Dead altar **119**
© Scott Sessions

Preface

Writing a Very Short Introduction to the Aztecs includes a long journey back through the more than two-thousand-year history of the rise of urban life that they inherited and reformulated between 1300 and 1521 CE. It involves adjustments in the use of the popular names “Aztec” and “Montezuma,” names that the population who lived in and in relation to the city of Tenochtitlan never used. “Aztec” is a Nahuatl-derived term meaning “people from Aztlan,” the revered place of origin of the various ethnic groups who eventually dominated central Mesoamerica in the century before the arrival of Europeans. The people we call Aztecs, however, identified themselves with such terms as “Mexica,” “Acolhua,” and “Tenochca.” It was through the immense popularity of William H. Prescott’s *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) that the name “Aztec” came to identify forever the various groups that made up the Mexica kingdom. In this book I use the terms “Mexica” and “Aztec” interchangeably because of the popularity of the latter and the accuracy of the former. The two Mexica rulers we call “Montezuma” were named Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina and Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin respectively. It was the latter who ruled between 1502 and 1520 and entered the popular imagination of the English-speaking world and the West as the king who ruled the “Halls of

Montezuma.” I use the Nahuatl version to link these personages again to their real names.

Many thanks to three scholars who assisted me in the writing of this book: Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Leonardo López Luján, and especially my collaborator of many years, Scott Sessions.

Chapter 1

The city of Tenochtitlan: center of the Aztec world

When Hernán Cortés led a Spanish army of five hundred soldiers, accompanied by several thousand skilled, allied native warriors, into the Aztec capital on November 8, 1519, the Europeans were filled with wonder by the enormous, splendid city in the middle of Lake Tezcoaco. One of these soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, left this initial glimpse:

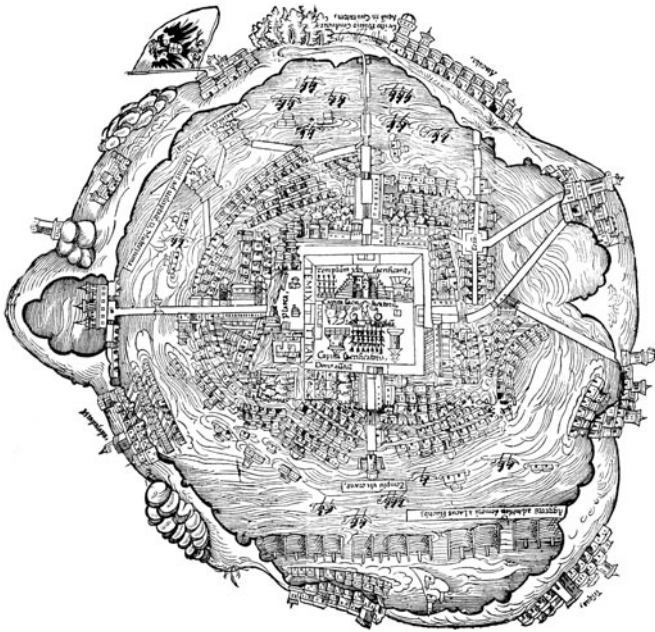
[W]hen we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level Causeway going towards Mexico, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadís, on account of the great towers and pyramids rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream...the appearance of the palaces in which they lodged us! How spacious and well built they were, of beautiful stone work and cedar wood, and the wood of other sweet scented trees, with great rooms and courts, wonderful to behold, covered with awnings of cotton cloth.

The size of the buildings and the great crowds who welcomed these strange-looking visitors left the Spaniards astonished. They saw huge palaces “coated with shiny cement and swept and garlanded... adjacent to great oratories for idols,” some of which were covered with blood. The Aztec island capital, Tenochtitlan,

was at that time one of the largest cities in the world with nearly 200,000 inhabitants. Seville, the largest city known to most of the conquistadors, had 60,000 people, while London had closer to 50,000. The largest cities on earth, Paris and Constantinople, each had roughly 300,000 inhabitants.

Tenochtitlan, the “Great City of Mexico” as the Spaniards referred to it, was the supreme settlement of a political and economic empire made up of more than four hundred cities and towns spread through central Mesoamerica and extending into several distant southern and eastern areas. Tenochtitlan was the dominant sacred and political settlement of a Triple Alliance,

The Aztecs



1. Engraved map of Tenochtitlan, embellished with several European pictorial conventions, from the first edition of Cortés's letters, printed in 1524.

which included the city-states of Tezcoco and Tlacopan. Together these three polities strove to control more than five million people spread over an area of more than 77,000 square miles. Yet this city's population, social complexity, and power was concentrated on an island of only 4.6 square miles, which actually combined the two separate settlements of Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan into one core settlement. Radiating out from this island capital were more than a half-dozen causeways that linked it to nine smaller urban settlements on the nearby mainland and pushed the population of this megalopolis closer to 300,000 people. As the Spaniards quickly learned, the Aztec capital was both a garden city of great agricultural productivity and the center of a tributary empire that attracted and redistributed vast supplies of foodstuffs and commodities. This powerful economic system made Tenochtitlan the focus of Spanish envy and hopes for wealth and political domination. The centrality of the city and its linkage to a much wider ecological and political world became evident as the Spaniards toured the city. If we had been part of that tour in November and December of 1519, here is some of what we might have seen.

As the Spaniards walked along a major causeway toward the central ceremonial precinct, they saw the many bridges under which passed scores of canoes carrying people and goods to various neighborhoods and markets. They were soon greeted by "many more chieftains and caciques [who] approached clad in very rich mantles, the brilliant liveries of one chieftain different from those of another, and the causeways were crowded with them." Eventually the visitors saw the entourage of the ruler Motecuhzoma (He Who Grows Angry Like a Lord) Xocoyotzin (the Younger) approaching them. Known in Nahuatl as the *tlatonani*, or chief speaker, the king appeared "beneath a marvelously rich canopy of green-colored feathers with much gold and silver embroidery and with pearls and *chalchihuites* suspended from a sort of bordering, which was wonderful to look at." The "Great Montezuma" was adorned from head to foot as a

The city of Tenochtitlan: center of the Aztec world

living man-god who wore bejeweled sandals with soles of gold that never touched the earth, for other lords swept the ground and spread cloths before him. Surrounded by eight other richly dressed chieftains, four of whom supported a canopy over his head while the rest attended his every move and protected this man-god from intruders, the Aztec ruler greeted the Spaniards. Cortés, however, made an initial *faux pas*. He dismounted his horse and stepped forward with his arms outstretched to embrace the Aztec ruler. But as he neared Motecuhzoma's body several of the ruler's assistants strongly restrained him. The scene quickly recovered its sense of order through elaborate speeches of welcome by Motecuhzoma (aided by doña Marina—Cortés's Indian translator and mistress), which made it clear who was in charge and that the Spaniards were welcome guests. Soon the Spaniards were conducted to their quarters within the capital city. Motecuhzoma exchanged gifts with Cortés, giving him "a very rich necklace made of golden crabs, a marvelous piece of work, . . . and three loads of mantles of rich feather work." Cortés reported in his letter to the king of Spain that he took off a necklace of pearls and cut glass that he was wearing and gave it to Motecuhzoma. Motecuhzoma spread his wealth around to Cortés's captains in the form of golden trinkets and feathered mantles, and gave each soldier a woven mantle.

In the following days the Spaniards visited "the great house full of . . . books" (actually screenfold codices on which were painted the calendrical, historical, and geographical records of the empire) and then the royal armories "full of every sort of arms, many of them richly adorned with gold and precious stones, . . . shields great and small, . . . two-handed swords set with stone knives which cut much better than our swords." They then proceeded to an enormous aviary filled with countless species of birds "from the royal eagle . . . and many other birds of great size, . . . quetzals, . . . from which they take the rich plumage which they use in their green featherwork." Spanish admiration turned to repulsion when they were led into the great "Idol House" containing not only

“fierce gods” but many kinds of beasts of prey, including jaguars, wolves, and foxes, being fed with the flesh of other animals. Díaz del Castillo then added this ominous report: “I have heard it said that they feed them on the bodies of the Indians who have been sacrificed.” Spanish admiration returned when their tour took them to lapidary and gold workshops where they saw jewelers working with precious stones and *chalchihuites*, which reminded the Spaniards of emeralds. They saw featherworkers, sculptors, weavers, and an immense quantity of fine fabrics with attractive and complex designs.

The Spaniards, always with an eye out for native women, were not disappointed when they saw large numbers of Motecuhzoma’s beautifully dressed mistresses attending him and his nobles. They also viewed “nunneries” of young maidens being guarded and instructed by veteran “nuns.” The Spaniards relaxed in lush gardens with sweet scented trees and medicinal herbs, and marveled at the luxurious homes of Aztec nobles.

Spanish interest in Aztec wealth escalated when the group arrived at the nearby imperial marketplace of Tlatelolco that, according to Cortés, was twice as large as the great market of Salamanca and filled with 60,000 people each day. Díaz del Castillo added that they “were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise that it contained, and at the good order and control that was maintained. . . . Each kind of merchandise was kept by itself and had its fixed place marked out.” The weavers spinning many colors of cotton reminded some Spaniards of the silk market in Granada. What also greatly impressed the Spaniards were the various inspectors and magistrates who mediated disputes and kept order among the bustling crowds. At one point in their tour the Spaniards were taken to the top of one of the great pyramids for a bird’s eye view of Tenochtitlan, which prompted Díaz del Castillo to make enthusiastic comparisons with the great cities of Europe: “we turned to look at the great marketplace and the crowds of people, . . . the murmur and hum of their voices and

words that they used could be heard more than a league off. Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome, said that so large a marketplace and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before.”

Soon, the Spaniards witnessed a grand banquet presided over by Motecuhzoma, where more than thirty dishes, including rabbit, venison, wild boar, and many types of fowl, were prepared for him and his entourage of nobles, servants, and guards. The ruler sat on a soft and richly worked stool at a table with tablecloths of white cotton and was served by four beautiful women who brought him hand-washing bowls, towels, and tortilla bread. Seated behind a gold painted screen, he was joined by high government officials and family members with whom he shared the best dishes of the night, including fruit from distant regions of the empire as well as a chocolate drink made from cacao beans, which he drank in “cup-shaped vessels of pure gold.” Entertainers showed up at some of these dinners: “some very ugly humpbacks... were their jesters, and other Indians, who must have been buffoons... told him witty sayings and others... sang and danced, for Motecuhzoma was fond of pleasure and song, and to these he ordered to be given what was left of the food and the jugs of cacao.”

Then, Díaz del Castillo added a provocative and enigmatic passage about human sacrifice and cannibalism in relation to the feast: “I have heard it said that they were wont to cook for him the flesh of young boys, but as he had such a variety of dishes, made of so many things, we could not succeed in seeing if they were human flesh or of other things... so we had no insight into it.”

The Spaniards saw many more places and cultural practices in the Aztec capital in the days and months following their initial tour. But within a year and a half of the Spanish arrival, the social order, architectural beauty, and neighborhoods of the entire island city were shattered and many thousands of people were killed by

war and disease. The human price paid in this European and Mesoamerican encounter was tremendous on both sides but especially among the Aztecs, whose population would be decimated in the coming decades. While the Spaniards were, in the end, militarily and politically victorious, one of their chroniclers remembered their terrible defeat during the battle known as the Noche Triste: the Aztecs, fed up with Spanish abuses and the murders of a group of priests and dancers at a festival, attacked the intruders and drove them out of the city and into the waters. "The canal was soon choked with the bodies of men and horses. They filled the gap in the causeway with their own drowned bodies. Those who followed crossed to the other side by walking on the corpses." But the greatest laments were those of the Aztecs about their own destruction and defeat as is clear in this poet's words:

We are crushed to the ground.
We lie in ruins.
There is nothing but grief and suffering in Mexico and Tlatelolco
Where once we saw beauty and valor.

Díaz del Castillo shared this lament forty years later when he wrote: "Of all these things that I then beheld today all is overthrown and lost, nothing left standing."

The city of Tenochtitlan: center of the Aztec world

Questions about the Aztecs

Once Europeans heard the astonishing reports of the discovery and conquest of Tenochtitlan and later read Spanish accounts of the indigenous riches, settlements, and religious practices "discovered" in New Spain, three major controversies developed. One question was whether Mesoamerican peoples had actually attained a level of social complexity and symbolic sophistication characteristic of urban civilization as reflected in the writings of Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Were these accounts of cities and kings fanciful Spanish exaggerations designed to

elevate the prestige of their military campaigns in the New World or were they generally accurate accounts of Aztec social life?

Another set of questions greatly challenged the Europeans: Where did these strangers, called “Indians,” living in the new lands originally come from? Did they descend from Adam and Eve? Were they fully human and capable of understanding Christian teachings?

The third controversy, which continues to this day, was whether human sacrifice took place on the scale reported by the Spaniards and to what extent cannibalism was practiced. Did the Spaniards purposely exaggerate Aztec sacrifices to justify their military conquest of the city or to disguise the extent of their own violent practices? In this chapter we will address the first of these big questions while leaving the problem of human origins in the Americas and human sacrifice for later chapters.

The scientific rediscovery of the Aztec world

Almost immediately following the collapse of Tenochtitlan, an aggressive conversion effort was launched to wipe out Aztec religion and replace it with a brand of Roman Catholicism that would herald in the millennium prophesied at the end of the New Testament. A clear example of this impassioned campaign to overwhelm and transform the misguided and dangerous life ways of the Aztecs is seen in this passage from the Franciscan friar Martín de Valencia’s *obediencia* (exhortation and instructions) given to the “apostolic twelve” missionaries who were sent to Mexico City in 1524 to officially begin the evangelization of the natives. Using a series of martial metaphors, which defined their purposes as a kind of holy war, their *superior* implored them to attack and utterly defeat the evil madness of Aztec thought and culture: “Go . . . armed with the shield of faith and with the breastplate of justice, with the blade of the spirit of salvation, with the helmet and lance of

perseverance . . . and to the perfidious infidels a road may be opened for them and pointed out, and the madness of heretical evil may fall apart and come to nothing.” In fact, when those twelve Franciscans arrived in Mexico, Cortés arranged a ceremonial escort from Veracruz all the way to the destroyed capital of Tenochtitlan so that their arrival and purpose could be witnessed everywhere they triumphantly walked.

But the process of converting the “perfidious infidels” ran into problems when European priests and laypeople began to interact with native peoples who spoke the indigenous languages, knew native philosophical teachings, and could communicate the myths, songs, histories, and cultural practices of pre-Hispanic times. A significant number of texts began to emerge that described indigenous cultural practices, settlements, calendars, and mythologies of many city-states and rural communities.

A Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún, produced a twelve-book chronicle of the Aztec world known today as the *Florentine Codex*. His interviews with elders between the 1530s and 1570s reveal a sophisticated social, linguistic, and ceremonial world in which merchants and kings, slaves and warriors, women and men, farmers and shamans, and priests and artists interacted to produce a highly stratified, intensely ritualized, wealthy urban society. But even as Sahagún, his students, and other friars collected and recorded this kind of knowledge, there were intense cultural and religious forces in colonial society working against their dissemination. Without necessarily intending to do so, Sahagún had produced a huge amount of writing that some Spaniards believed was *preserving* Aztec knowledge, mythology, and cultural practices.

The city of Tenochtitlan: center of the Aztec world

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as missionaries and civil servants collected data on Aztec life, the majority of the native inhabitants suffered terrible diseases and were forced to provide cheap labor while being confronted with unrelenting evangelical efforts. These pressures on indigenous peoples greatly

- [read Muzzled: The Assault on Honest Debate](#)
- [Illustrated Theatre Production Guide \(3rd Edition\) for free](#)
- [read **Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time**](#)
- [Statistics for the Life Sciences \(4th Edition\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [The Management Myth: Why the Experts Keep Getting it Wrong for free](#)

- <http://berttrotman.com/library/The-Year-of-Billy-Miller.pdf>
- <http://junkrobots.com/ebooks/The-October-Revolution-in-Prospect-and-Retrospect--Interventions-in-Russian-and-Soviet-History--Historical-Mater>
- <http://www.1973vision.com/?library/CompTIA-Security--All-in-One-Exam-Guide--2nd-Edition---Exam-SY0-201-.pdf>
- <http://www.netc-bd.com/ebooks/Welten-in-Angst--Perry-Rhodan-Silberb--nde--Band-49--Die-Cappins--Band-5-.pdf>
- <http://transtrade.cz/?ebooks/Rosalind-Franklin--The-Dark-Lady-of-DNA.pdf>