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David Carrasco  
**THE AZTECS**  
A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

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## The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction

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David Carrasco

# THE AZTECS

A Very Short Introduction

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

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# 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

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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.

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## 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 Tezco. 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.

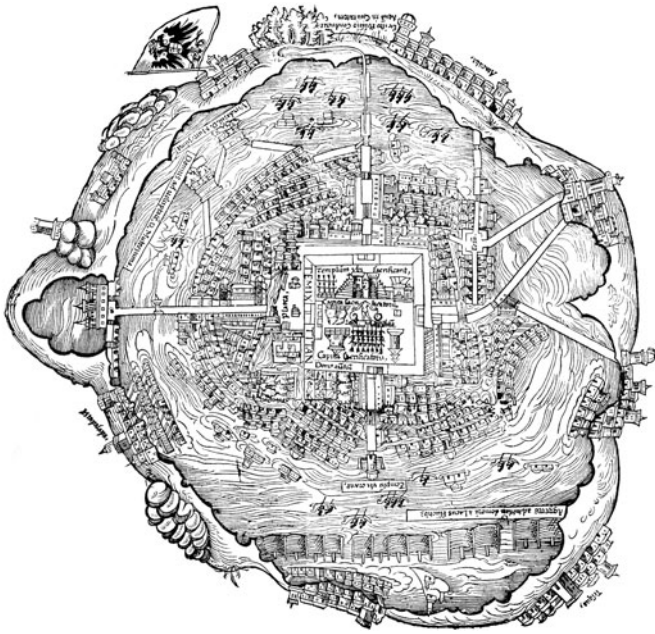
The size of the buildings and the great crowds who welcomed these strange-looking visitors left the Spaniards astonished. They saw huge palaces “coated with shiny cement and swept and garlanded... adjacent to great oratories for idols,” some of which were covered with blood. The Aztec island capital,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

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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 *tlatoani*, 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

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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

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“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

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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

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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

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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

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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



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