

Introduction to the Aztec economic world

In the modern world, international commerce provides more links between the people of different nations than *all* the political, religious, and humanitarian delegations combined. Every day, millions of goods are produced, shipped, bought, and sold by over seven billion people around the world. People pay little attention to where these goods come from. Instead, they simply expect them to appear on the shelves of their local grocery stores or in the public marketplace. The ingredients for even a simple lunch can come from many different places around the world, the result of modern commercial networks and how efficiently they mobilize the products we consume. These networks, of course, are not new. The movement of resources from producers to consumers in rural and urban settings has been an indispensable part of large-scale societies throughout human history. Two important questions for the study of ancient economy, of course, are what types of goods moved through regional networks during preindustrial times, and in what volume?

The way goods are transferred from producers to consumers takes many different forms. In the modern world, goods and money move through multiple channels as wages, gifts, grants, and taxes to name a few, each representing a different sphere of distribution and exchange. The same was true for the distant past; goods and resources moved through multiple economic and social channels in large-scale ancient societies. One of the challenges of social historians is to reconstruct the economic organization of ancient societies where information is limited or of uneven quality. As societies grew in size the goods needed to provision them often had to move over further and further distances. One of the solutions to this problem in many places around the world was the

appearance of merchants and merchant groups who were the agents that bridged the gap between producers and consumers.

The merchant, whether male or female, is an exchange and transportation specialist. They procure goods or resources and move them over space to their final consumers. Whether merchants link producers directly with consumers or form part of a network through which consumables flow is simply a matter of scale. Their function remains the same: they provide a provisioning function from which they obtain a portion of their livelihood.

This book is about the indigenous merchants and commercial behavior found in prehispanic Mexico at the moment of Spanish contact. When Hernando Cortés landed his expeditionary force of 600 men on the coast of Veracruz, Mexico in 1519 he expected to find a native population organized as relatively small *cacicazgos* or chiefdom societies like those encountered on Hispaniola and elsewhere throughout the Caribbean. Instead, he encountered the densely populated and powerful Aztec empire that was organized for conquest at a continental scale. What ensued was one of the great adventure stories of all time. Cortés and his intrepid force of Spaniards conquered the Aztecs in a two-year period through a series of both planned and unplanned events. Conflict, disease, and political intrigue were the tools of the conquest and Cortés would never have defeated the Aztecs without the tens of thousands of soldiers provided by the Tlaxcalans and other indigenous native kingdoms that were longstanding enemies of the Aztecs.

The Spaniards marveled at the scale and structure of native societies. They were large, well-organized kingdoms with impressive urban centers and complex economies. Two dimensions of the Aztec economy especially impressed the Spanish conquistadors: the wealth of the Aztec tribute network and the size and richness of their indigenous marketplaces. While the tribute system maintained the Aztec state, the marketplaces supported a rich commercial society where the greater population bought and sold the staples of everyday life. These marketplaces were identical in function to the *sugs* and market bazaars that the conquistadors had seen in Spain and other parts of the Old World. What was different was their size. The Spanish were astonished by the number of people who frequented them, the variety of goods sold, and the well-ordered manner in which marketplaces operated. This amazement is captured in many of the first-hand accounts of the Tlatelolco marketplace in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (Cortés 1962; Díaz del Castillo 1956). Bernal Díaz del Castillo writes,

When we arrived at the great market place, called Tlaltelolco, we 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, for we had never seen such a thing before

(Díaz del Castillo 1956:215).

The Spanish understood commercial society. The Mediterranean world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was in the midst of a mercantile revolution. The Portuguese explorations in Africa, India, and Indonesia brought a multitude of new exotic products and riches into the marketplaces of the western Mediterranean. Many of the conquistadors were well traveled and they were not easily impressed by native institutions given their ethnocentric biases against non-Christian societies. It is within this context that their comments must be understood. While they had seen large markets at Salamanca and Cordoba, they were still impressed with the level of commercial activity found across the Mexican highlands.

This study explores the organization, scale, and complexity of indigenous commercial behavior across the Central and Southern Mexican highlands, an area I refer to as the Aztec economic world. The term Aztec is commonly used to refer to the Late Postclassic (AD 1200–1520) Nahuatl people of Central Mexico (Evans and Webster 2001:59) and I follow that convention here. The specific population that formed the core of the Aztec empire resided on the island of Tenochtitlan and referred to themselves as the Culhua-Mexica.¹ They are best known for the conquest of a large area of Mesoamerica and its integration into a tribute empire between AD 1428 and 1519 (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). This is the empire that Hernando Cortés and the Spanish conquistadors encountered in 1519 and which represents the greater part of the Aztec world. While many different ethnic groups² resided within the empire, they shared similar forms of domestic and institutional economic organization.

The Aztec empire covered an area of between 160,000 and 165,000 sq. km that extended from just south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to 150 km north of Mexico City, and from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific coast (Figure 1.2). The inception of the Aztec empire can be traced to the formation of the Triple Alliance in AD 1428 when the three city-states of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan came together to overthrow the rule of the Tepanec state. From that point on, these three city-states worked together to conquer and shape the tribute empire with the Aztecs playing an increasingly dominant role over its span of growth between AD 1428 and 1519. The empire was composed of many small independent or



FIGURE 1.1 Western Mesoamerica: Major communities and *altepeme* centers mentioned in the text

semi-independent city-states centered on a principal town or confederation of towns from which they derived their name. These small political entities were called *altepeme* (sing. *altepetl*) in the Nahuatl language and were the action entities for political and local economic interaction both before and after Aztec conquest.³ Examples of some of these *altepeme* polities include Cholula, Coixtlahuaca, Tenochtitlan, Tepeaca, and Texcoco to name a few (Figures 1.1 and 1.3).

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMERCE

The core of the Aztec empire was the central and southern Mexican highlands north and west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. I refer to the area west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as western Mesoamerica throughout this volume (Figure 1.1) to distinguish it from the greater region of Maya and related Mesoamerican cultures located further to the east. The Aztec empire extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts, incorporating environments extending from sea level to the tops of Mexico's highest

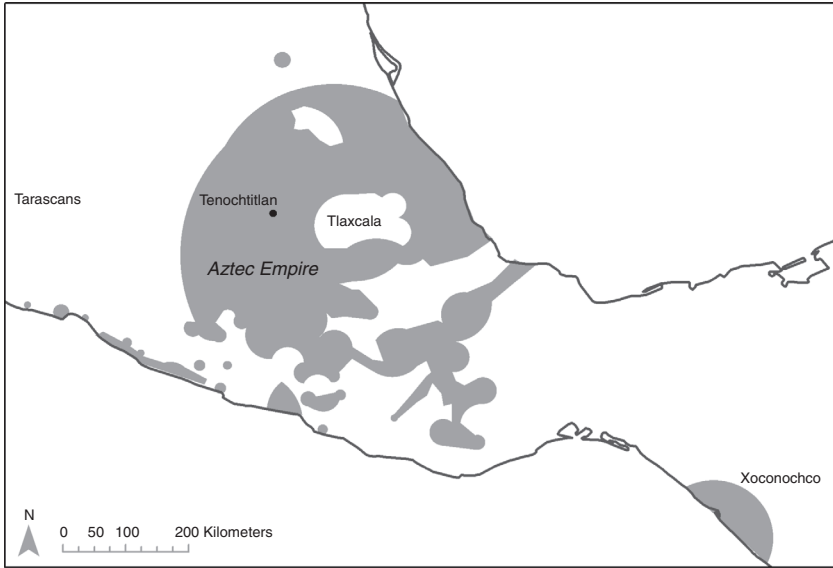


FIGURE 1.2 The Aztec world and empire

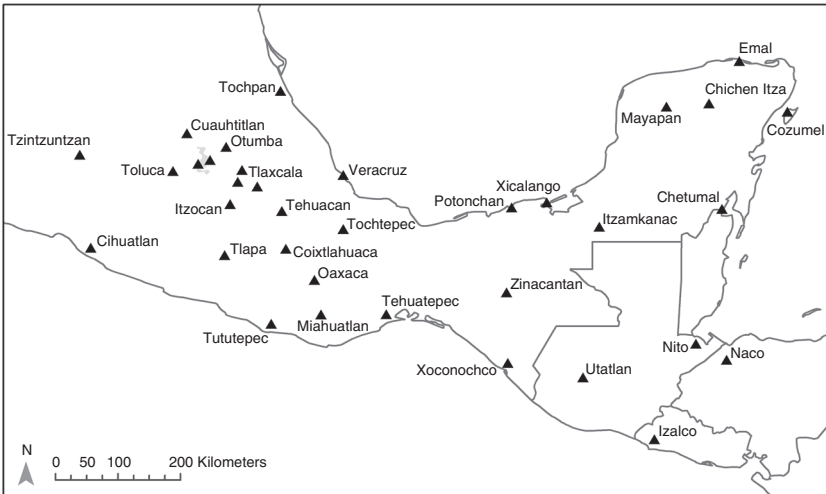


FIGURE 1.3 Major prehispanic and colonial communities in Mesoamerica

mountain peaks over 5,000 m in elevation.⁴ The highland core of the empire is a dissected environment of several large valley and basin areas (e.g. the Basin of Mexico and the Valleys of Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Toluca) separated by mountain ridges. Elevation differences within the



FIGURE 1.4 Tierra Fria and Tierra Helada environment of the Iztaccihuatl volcano in Central Mexico

highlands have produced an environment that juxtaposes differing ecological zones in close proximity to one another. These differences are most noticeable during the rainy season when perennial flora spring to life.

Differences in elevation create a mosaic of five differing climatic-vegetation zones that define Mesoamerica's complex resource ecology. These are: 1) the Atlantic and Pacific coasts where marine resources including fish and salt are available; 2) the *tierra caliente* or hot lands below 1,000 m msl where tropical commodities such as fruits, cotton, cacao, and other tropical flora and fauna are found; 3) the frost-free *tierra templada* or temperate lands between 1,000 and 2,000 m msl that maintain an average temperature of around 60 degrees F. throughout the year and are well suited for agriculture; 4) the forested *tierra fria* or cold lands from 2,000–2,800 m msl where temperatures during the coldest months can drop below freezing creating problems for agriculture; and, 5) the *tierra helada* or frozen lands above 2,800 m msl which can receive snowfall during winter months and include the snow covered peaks of Mexico's highest mountains (Figure 1.4). Figure 1.5 illustrates the distribution of these climatic-vegetation zones across western Mesoamerica which represents the area between Lake Cuitzeo and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Figures 1.6 and 1.7 show some of the ecological variation found over Mesoamerica ranging from mangrove swamps along the Pacific coast near Xoconochco to thorn forests in the Tehuacan Valley.

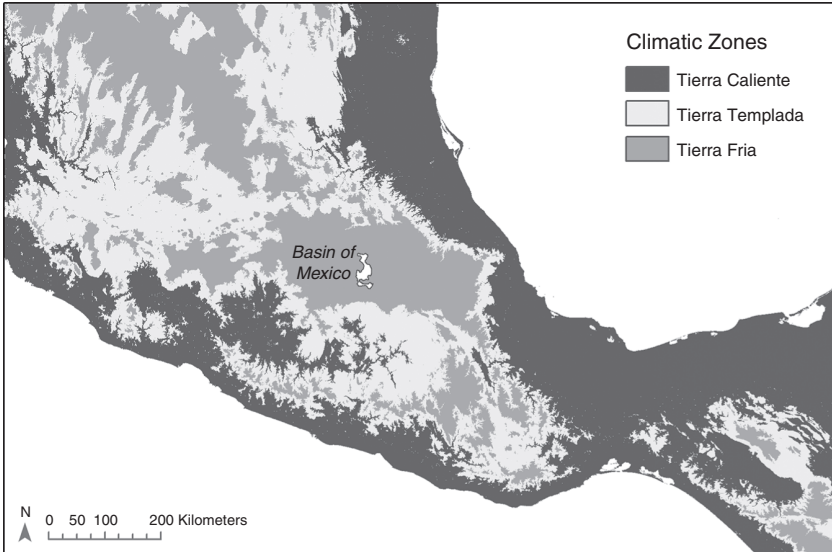


FIGURE 1.5 Climatic zones in Mesoamerica



FIGURE 1.6 Mangrove swamp along the Pacific coast of Xoconochco

What is important about western Mesoamerican cultural geography is that every area within this region is within 90 km of a different resource zone. This was significant for prehispanic trade because it meant that the vast majority of indigenous communities across this area were located



FIGURE 1.7 Thorn Forest in the Tehuacan Valley, Puebla, Mexico

within 1–3 *jornadas*, a normal day’s walking journey of 30 km, to a different ecological zone from the one they lived in.⁵ This sharp juxtaposition of environmental resources was succinctly summarized by Francisco Hernández in the middle sixteenth century where he states,

It is amazing that in a distance of as little as three miles one encounters so many variations in temperature: here you freeze and there you boil, not because of the weather, but because of the topography of the valleys . . . All of this means that these areas produce two harvests a year, nearly three, because at the time that one is extremely cold, another is predominantly hot

(Varey 2000:73).

Figure 1.8 illustrates the portion of western Mesoamerica that is within 30 km of another resource zone of at least 1 sq. km in size. This figure shows that if settlements were randomly distributed across Central Mexico, fully 86.6% of all towns and villages would be within one day’s walk or less from another major resource zone (Hirth 2013b). The percentage actually is much higher since the Basin of Mexico and the adjoining areas of the valleys of Toluca and Puebla-Tlaxcala were studded with small fresh water lakes and/or seasonal marshes that provided their own unique set of exploitable waterfowl, fish, and insect resources

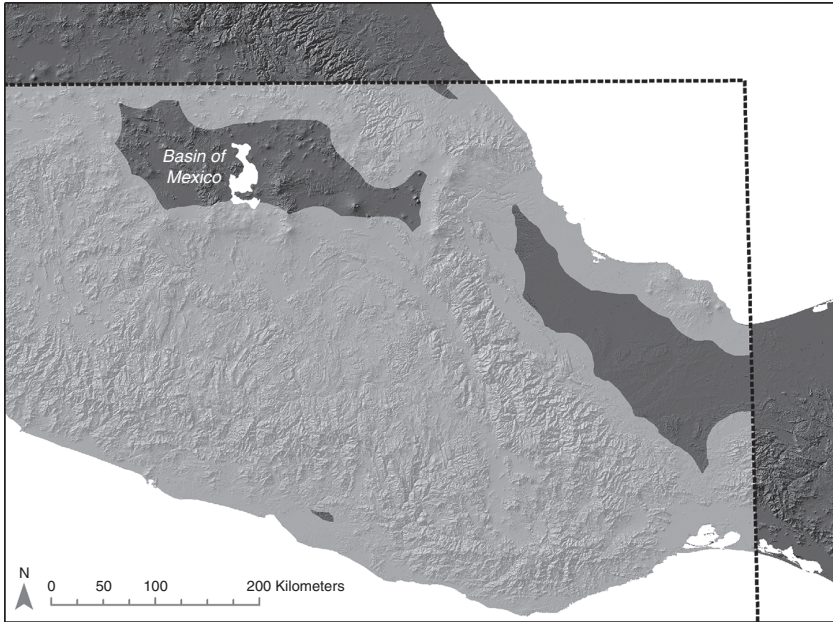


FIGURE 1.8 Areas of the Mexican highlands within 30 km of another ecological interface

(e.g. Parsons 1996, 2001, 2008) that added to regional resource diversity.⁶ When these highland lacustrine zones are taken into account virtually all of the western highlands is within a normal day's journey of a different resource zone.

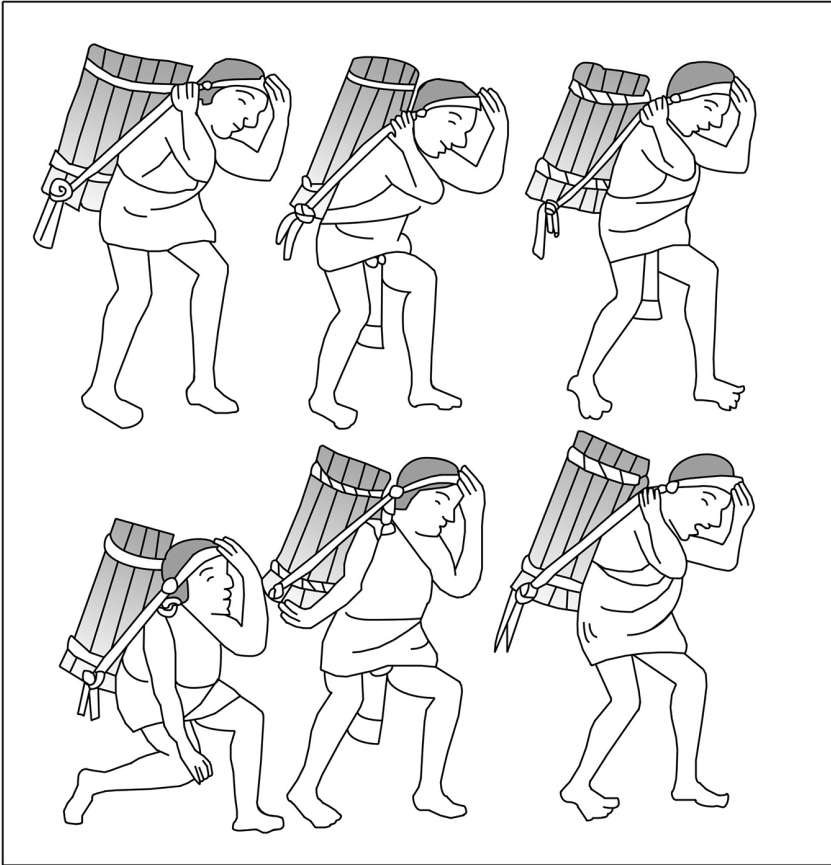
Archaeologists and historians have long recognized that resource diversity was an engine behind trade and commerce (Braudel 1986). William Sanders (1956, 1962; Sanders and Price 1968) was one of the first investigators to argue for the importance of ecological diversity in stimulating economic interaction throughout Central Mexico. While Sanders was concerned with the origin of political complexity, he recognized that economic diversity stimulated economic interaction at multiple levels.⁷ The close spacing of different resource zones, and the desire for the different resources and agricultural products available from them, led to a high degree of symbiotic interaction between communities and households located in different ecological zones.

This close juxtaposition of different resources meant that different zones could be exploited by households without much difficulty. It created multiple intersecting distribution spheres that moved different resources

over distances of 20–40 km. This is the distance range that commoner households could easily navigate to engage in trade. Differences in elevation and variable rainfall patterns created different agricultural cycles and levels of crop risk across the highlands. Exchange was one way to mediate these risks and to provision households with resources they did not produce. A review of indigenous trade during the sixteenth century reveals that the movement and trade of perishable and imperishable commodities was commonplace over distances of 50–150 km (Hirth 2013b).

The dissected highland topography created a landscape of small polities with strong local ethnic identities that fiercely sought to maintain their independence from one another. This makes discussing general economic practices across the Aztec economic world challenging because it requires generalizing about groups that saw themselves as unique and ethnically distinct. This is complicated by the fact that the largest body of historic information comes from the Basin of Mexico which was the center of the Aztec empire. The marketplace was the central economic institution in all highland societies which enabled all individuals to be involved in commerce to differing degrees. Nevertheless, many of the same economic structures were shared by Tarascan groups to the west, and Maya groups to the east. Juan de Grijalva's initial exploration of the coast of Mexico in 1517 reported bustling markets, port towns, and wealthy merchants along the entire Gulf Coast all the way to Yucatán (Bernal Díaz 1956:6). In one case the Spanish referred to the town of Ecab in northeastern Yucatán as the "Great Cairo" because of its size and apparent commercial prosperity.⁸

Ancient Mexico possessed a rich commercial economy that in the early sixteenth century was as complex as any the Spanish had seen in the Mediterranean world. Understanding the structure of this economy is important for the comparative study of ancient economic systems because it developed under a different set of conditions than those in the Old World. One of its most distinctive differences is that it lacked an effective system of transportation (Hassig 1985). The precolumbian societies of ancient Mexico did not have wheeled vehicles, beasts of burden, or a system of large-scale maritime commerce like that found in the Old World. All the goods moving across the Mexican and Guatemalan highlands were carried on the backs of human porters (*tlameme*) (Figure 1.9). Elsewhere small dugout canoes were important for moving goods across freshwater lakes and along navigable rivers (Figure 1.10). Lake transportation was very important in the economic integration of the Basin of Mexico. Canoes moved agricultural goods from different areas of the lake

FIGURE 1.9 *Tlameme* porters

system and fostered the development of marketplaces in Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, and other lakeside cities (Hassig 1985). The nature of maritime and riverine transportation is less well known. Large maritime canoes may have transported goods along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts (Thompson 1949) although it is difficult to know what the frequency and scale of this maritime commerce was.⁹

While several modes of transportation existed in Mesoamerica, the overwhelming majority of goods moved within and between regions on the backs of human porters. This level of transportation technology stands in sharp contrast to that found in the Mediterranean world where the ability to transport items cheaply and regularly by both land and sea was instrumental in enabling or limiting the level of regional and inter-regional

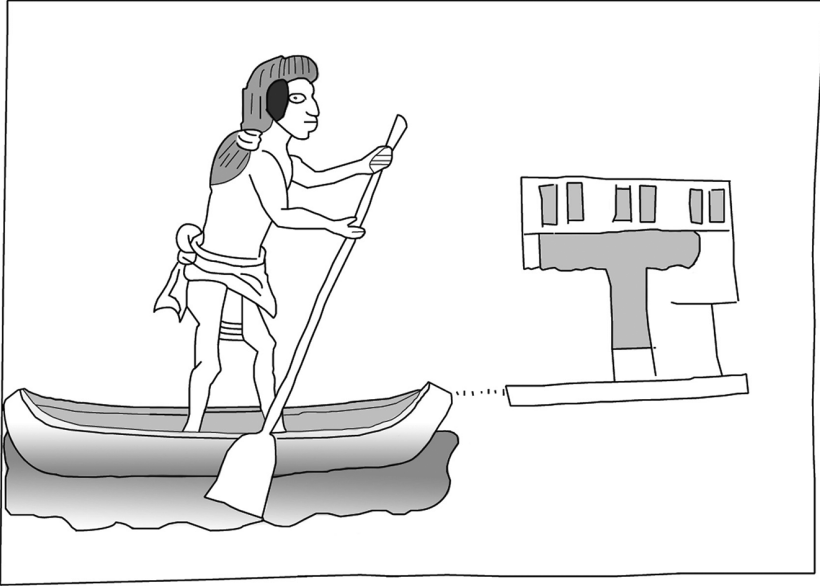


FIGURE 1.10 Canoe transportation in the Aztec world

economic interaction (Braudel 1986; Casson 1991; Landers 2003). Given these differences it would be no surprise to find that the indigenous economies of ancient Mexico were organized differently than the commercial systems found throughout the Old World.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS NEW WORLD ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

This volume has three fundamental goals. First, it develops a model of the precolumbian highland economy from the perspective of economic anthropology that is relevant for the comparative study of ancient and premodern commercial behavior across the pre-industrial world. The perspective taken here is that all premodern commercial behavior is instructive for understanding the long-term processes of modern market development. The cross-cultural perspective in anthropology assumes that while societies may differ from one another in many ways, there are commonalities in the way humans adapt to their natural and cultural environments that permit making useful inter-societal comparisons about economic organization. Research suggests that many of the commercial behaviors identified in early states (Abu-Loghod 1989; Garraty and Stark

2010; Grassby 1999; Moore and Lewis 1999; Silver 1995) were present in the earlier and simpler societies that preceded them. That similar commercial behaviors may have developed independently in the Old and New Worlds with very different transportation systems is an important topic for the comparative study of ancient economy.

Most discussions of the ancient and premodern economy have focused on Old World societies in the Mediterranean, Near East, and Europe (Braudel 1982, 1986; Finley 1985; Holleran 2012; Marx 1964; Pirenne 1939; Weber 1976; Young 2001). One reason for this is the greater availability of written sources on Mediterranean trade and the role that western merchants played in the formation of modern market systems.¹⁰ It is here that the principal building blocks of the modern economy were laid including the invention of coinage, banking and lending systems, maritime commerce and insurance, the privatization of property, the development of the joint stock company, and the industrial revolution.¹¹ Conversely Asia, Africa, and the Americas are less frequently discussed or are considered marginal to the discussion of ancient economy. I believe the reason for this is that they are considered to be outside the commercial lineage that led to the development of today's modern capitalistic system.

The emergence of World Systems Theory (Wallerstein 1976) as a way to study globalization and the effects of world capitalism also has impacted the comparative study of economic systems by giving primacy to European economic development. Areas that were embraced by European colonialism or that lay on the periphery of the European World System were viewed as underdeveloped or outside the sphere of emerging European capitalism (Frank 1976, 1981; Wolf 1982). As a result, areas of the New World, East Asia, and Africa have received less economic study despite possessing lively market economies and active commercial systems (Garraty 2010).

Non-western economic systems have been neglected as subjects of study for four reasons. First, they lie outside of the direct historical tradition of western Europe where the industrial revolution took place. While they are important in their own right, they do not provide much direct insight into the development of industrial capitalism. Second, information on the economic structure of non-western societies is often sparse. In many cases non-western economies either lacked writing, did not use it for economic purposes, or have few preserved documents available for scholarly examination. Third, these societies often operated on non-capitalistic principles with different forms of production and distribution from those found in Europe. While true, it did not make these societies

any less commercial than some of their European counterparts, an important point that is often overlooked. Fourth and finally, colonialism resulted in both the intentional and unintentional destruction of indigenous systems of trade and commerce minimizing what can be deduced from historic documents about pre-colonial economic structures (Murphy and Steward 1956; A. Smith 1991). The discussion that follows attempts to reconstruct the prehispanic economy of ancient Mexico so that it can be compared to other premodern societies around the world. As such it seeks a broad comparative, rather than a regionally particularistic, view of ancient Aztec economy.

A second goal of this volume is to explore the role and scope of individuals who bought, moved, and sold goods as part of their pre-Columbian livelihood. It addresses the question of who was involved in commercial activities for profit and/or subsistence provisioning in a system where human porters were the primary vehicle for moving goods over space. It examines the question of *who qualifies as a merchant* within this context. Was it only full-time professionals involved in medium- and long-distance trade, or should it include part-time participants who also sold goods for profit? Professional, full-time merchants were a dynamic component of the commercial landscape in all ancient complex societies where there is evidence of long-distance trade. The issue rarely addressed is the degree that commoner households also engaged in commercial dealings on a part-time basis. This question is addressed to the extent possible using the qualitative information on the economic activities available in the early colonial sources.¹²

Merchants, whether they operate on a full- or part-time basis, are economic agents. They act on their own behalf and move goods over the landscape to the individuals who ultimately purchase them. The investigation of economic strategies, motivations, and the scale of operation of merchants is a contribution to agency theory in that it deals with the outcomes of intentional commercial acts (Dobres and Robb 2000; Flannery 1999). While it is not possible to examine the activities of specific individuals in the context of this study, understanding the level of commercial behavior that they engaged in helps to establish the scope and framework of merchant behavior. More generally, it provides insight into how the collective action of numerous independent commercial decisions can shape a society's economic landscape.

Third and finally, this volume presents a structural model of pre-Columbian economic organization that describes levels of economic interaction found across the Aztec economic world. It is more concerned with

characterizing *how* the precolumbian economy operated than it is adhering to any specific theoretical view of the economy. It presents commercial interaction as the product of individually motivated economic desires designed to enhance household and individual economic well-being. In this regard the approach follows individual maximization principles and recognizes the importance of transaction costs in governing human behavior. It follows formalist and neoclassical economic principles as they are applied to understanding individual decision making, risk minimization, and the creation of wealth (Garraty 2010; Netting 1990; North 1981, 1997). At the same time it recognizes that the valuation criteria involved in individual decision making is established by the society in which individuals reside. Culture sets the parameters of economic interaction which are embedded in existing social networks rather than being a free-standing feature of the society where they are found (Granovetter 1985; Gudeman 2001).

A central objective is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the modes of organization for both production and exchange. That is, how were labor and resources brought together to produce or procure the resources necessary to support, not only the state apparatus of society, but also the domestic households that supported it. Understanding the structure of economic organization is fundamental for identifying the causes for how it changed over time. The discussion that follows develops a bottom-up view of how individuals in the precolumbian world constructed or used their social networks to improve their economic well-being through commercial interaction.

EXPLORING COMMERCIAL BEHAVIOR

The chapters that follow examine different aspects of economic behavior practiced across the Aztec economic world. I explore the structure of the Aztec economy using ethnohistoric and early colonial written sources. The reason for using a historic rather than an archaeological approach for this investigation is twofold. First, the historic sources while limited in number contain information on a broader range of economic behavior than can be obtained from archaeology. Second, while archaeology can provide useful data on prehispanic production and exchange, the problem of equifinality often makes it difficult to identify the specific economic behavior that produced the patterning of material remains recovered in the archaeological record. What I have chosen to do is push the historic sources to the limits of interpretation to extract as much information from

them as reasonably possible. While caution always needs to be maintained when “reading the sources” my goal is to construct a model of Aztec economic organization that can be examined and tested in future research using archaeological data.

The first three chapters provide information on the structure of indigenous economic systems derived from a combination of contact period accounts and archaeological information. Chapter 2 constructs a general model of the precolumbian economy that is germane to understanding both Aztec and earlier economic systems. It subdivides the economy into its two fundamental components, the *domestic economy* organized to support individual family units, and the *institutional economy* operating above the level of individual households (Hirth 2012a). The institutional economy was composed of both formal and informal economic relationships and was much broader in structure than what is often referred to simply as political economy. *Informal institutions* were the principles and customs that operated between households often on a voluntary basis to provide inter-household support and to mobilize labor or resources when needed. *Formal institutions* were the special-purpose organizations that operated at the level of the whole society to integrate multifaceted groups into a cohesive state. This framework provides the context for discussing a range of topics including Aztec land tenure, taxation, tribute, craft production, and prebendal estates. The chapter summarizes how resources were produced and mobilized in each of these different but overlapping domestic and institutional spheres.

Chapter 3 focuses on the structure and operation of the precolumbian marketplace. The marketplace was the center of economic life in highland Mesoamerica. It was the primary conduit through which households provisioned themselves with the resources that they did not produce. It also was the institution through which surpluses were mobilized, made available to the broader population, and perishable goods were converted to storable wealth. Understanding the role and structure of the marketplace is fundamental for modeling the level of commercial development found in Mesoamerica at the time of the conquest. The marketplace was the arena where strangers could meet to exchange goods, enduring business relations could be fostered, and individuals involved in commerce could make a profit to support themselves and their families. Moreover, the marketplace provided economic opportunities for farmers and craftsmen to sell the fruits of their labor for economic gain. The opportunities offered by the marketplace over the course of its development shaped the Aztec economy encountered by the Spanish in the early sixteenth century.

Commerce, as the term implies, is trade and exchange for purposes of making a profit. Anthropologists studying indigenous societies have long recognized that many exchanges are not motivated by profit or even the desire to improve economic well-being. Instead, they may be used to establish and maintain social relationships fundamental to the operation of society (Dalton 1977; Drucker and Heizer 1967; Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1990). Chapter 4, therefore, examines the question of who was engaged in commerce and whether the concept of profit was a motivating force for exchange and is appropriate for exploring the economic relationships in the precolumbian world. It identifies and discusses the three broad categories of commercial practitioners found in the Nahuatl sources: the household producer-seller (*tlachihqui*), the general merchandiser and market vender (*tlanamacac*), and the commercial retailer (*tlanecuilo*). The discussion examines what prehispanic merchants did and how their activities affected prehispanic economy.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore the different levels of commercial activity found in the Aztec world at the time of the conquest. Chapter 5 examines the part-time domestic producer-seller whose principal venue was sale in the marketplace. Like many other ancient societies, this group of small-scale producers generated most of the commercial activity in Mesoamerica. They account for the majority of transactions performed, the volume of the goods exchanged, and the number of individuals involved in commerce on a full- or part-time basis. One hundred and twenty four different producer-sellers are identified in the sources, most of who resided in commoner households that produced most of the food, fiber, and craft goods consumed in Mesoamerica. Finally it explores the role of household self-sufficiency and how domestic entrepreneurship led to diversification in household activities.

In contrast to small-scale producer-sellers, Chapters 6 and 7 examine professional merchants who engaged in commerce on a full-time basis. Professional merchants fall into two categories. Chapter 6 discusses those individuals who can be classified as merchant retailers. They worked at a regional and inter-regional scale selling both finished goods and raw materials bought from other individuals. Retail merchants are identified in the historic sources from the terminology used to describe them, the diversity of goods they sold, and, when apparent, from evidence that they sold imported goods from distant lands. The discussion examines the commercial areas where retailing occurred, the role of women in commerce, and the existence of several economic specialists including itinerant peddlers, bankers, and exchange specialists.

Chapter 7 examines the highly specialized long-distant merchants that dealt primarily in luxury goods. Referred to as the *pochteca* and/or *oztomeca*, these merchants criss-crossed Mesoamerica moving a range of high-value goods both within and between regions. These merchants were private entrepreneurs in every sense of the word. Their goal was the procurement of wealth in the form of feathers, textiles, jade, cacao, and other goods that they bought and sold in the marketplace. While economically independent, these long-distant merchants served the state as commercial agents, political envoys, and foreign spies. The size and structure of merchant communities are examined along with a discussion of the ritual life of merchants. The activities of long-distance merchants are relatively well understood because of the rich body of information compiled by Sahagún (1959; Garibay 1961) from his Tlatelolco-Tenochtitlan informants who were some of the last surviving members of prehispanic merchant groups.

The two concluding chapters move the discussion to a broader consideration of prehispanic commercial activity across Mesoamerica. Chapter 8 examines the tools employed in these commercial dealings. It explores the moral economy as well as the commercial structures used to facilitate the movement of goods over space under the constraints of a prehispanic transportation system where most goods moved on the backs of human porters. Forms of precolumbian money are discussed along with the role that barter as a traditional means of trade may have been used to facilitate exchange. Finally, it examines the extent to which commercial practices like loans, credit, and the use of agents found throughout the Old World, were parallel developments in Mesoamerica. The concluding chapter provides a discussion of the main features of the Aztec economy and how it compares to premodern societies elsewhere around the world.

The Aztec economic world was the most highly commercialized indigenous system to develop in the New World. Aztec society lacked price responsive markets in land, labor, and capital. Nevertheless, it has an interesting mix of commercial and non-commercial forms of production in a setting without wage labor, private property, formal currencies, credit and lending institutions, and efficient forms of transportation. Despite these limitations, the network of regionally integrated marketplaces that developed across the Aztec world was among the most sophisticated market systems ever to appear in the ancient world. Understanding the scale, complexity, and integration of this system is important because it provides a uniquely New World perspective on how commercial activity was organized in a different place and moment in time.