

# I

## Introduction

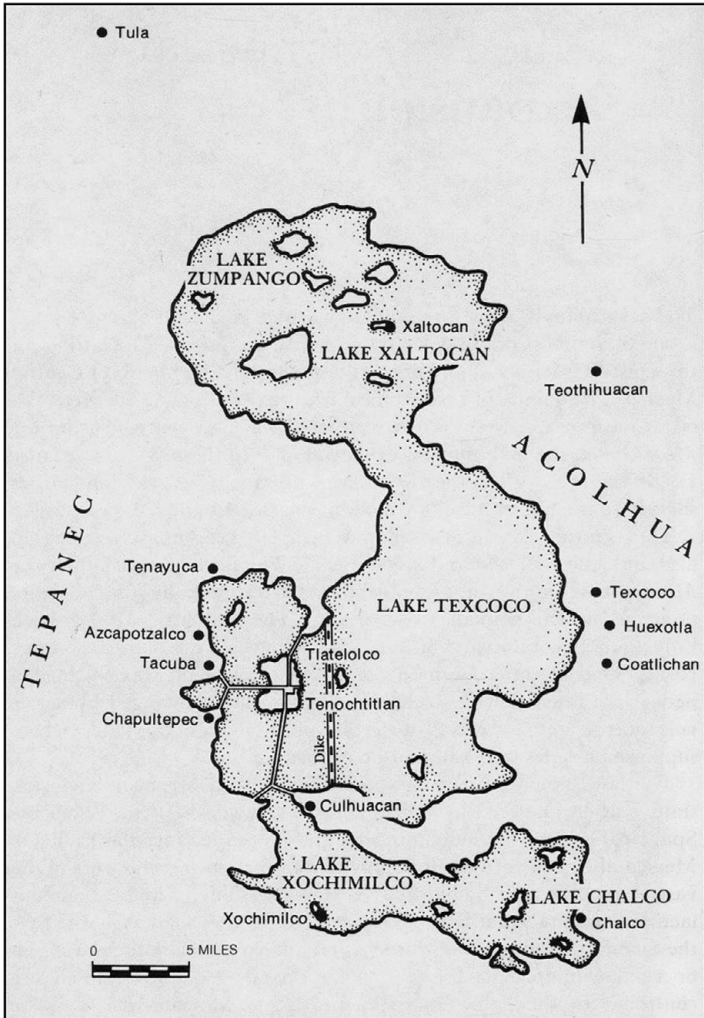


We never think of the great city of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, which five centuries ago was bigger than London at that time. We never imagine sullen teenagers in some pre-Columbian Zona Rosa dive in that fabled Aztec metropolis, bad-mouthing the wretched war economy and the ridiculous human sacrifices that drove their empire.

Aztec culture provides a gateway to Mesoamerican studies because it represents the connecting point between the prehispanic past and the globalized present.

This book presents a concise overview of Aztec *civilization*. The use of the term “civilization” is not without controversy given its connection to outmoded ideas of cultural evolution and unwarranted implications of cultural superiority. It appears here not to imply that superiority or that a single pathway toward civilization has ever existed. Instead, the term acknowledges the complex, class-based, and culturally diverse practices encompassed by the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the Basin of Mexico region and its surrounding areas (see Map 1.1). Before explaining more about the Basin of Mexico, Aztec ethnicities, and the Nahuatl language, there is a question to answer: Why write such a book when a number of overviews exist?

How I wish I could find out what those sullen Aztec teenagers mentioned above thought about their world. While I cannot approach that granular, micro-level of information, there is still a lot to be learned about how



MAP 1.1 Basin of Mexico with important Postclassic altepeme  
From Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism*, 1984, p.12, Cambridge University Press; by permission of Cambridge University Press. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSClear

they lived, thought, and represented their world to themselves and others. Beyond the micro-level of analysis, their macro-level importance to world history as the “connecting point” between the prehispanic Americas and an early modern Europe that would birth our “globalized present” should be more widely recognized. We know a great deal about the Aztecs. Nonetheless, conveying who they were, how they lived their everyday lives, and how their ideas and ways of being lived on in people and images in Mexico through their own creativity is still challenging because so many misperceptions, even misinformation, circulate about them.

To further undermine all the misinformation, this book has three goals:

- To provide a concise overview of Aztec history and civilization. It represents my attempt to make sense of their ways of being in a holistic way using the insights of a broad array of primary sources and scholarship (older and recent) – some of which emphasizes the economy, some of which highlights language, thought, and intellectual and artistic trends – to understand Aztec societies and its people, men, women, and children, commoner, and noble.
- To explain in some detail the great number and range of sources about these people but also to describe the limitations of this source base, especially when either the material or the cultural and linguistic is emphasized at the expense of the other.
- To reemphasize the way material life and the economy functioned relative to politics, philosophy, religion, and

intellectual and artistic developments. Aztecs created *value*, material and symbolic worth, every day. That value allowed them to survive and thrive. Value was created through *transformations* of bodies, things, and ideas. The overall goal of value creation and transformation was to keep the Aztec world – the cosmos, the earth, its inhabitants – in *balance*. These three concepts, value, transformation, and balance, are key to describing their civilization.

In this book, I discuss both material and symbolic value. Aztecs created material value (*patiubtli* referring to something that has a price or specific value) for use and exchange and clearly intended to do so.

#### Molina's Dictionary

How do we know what words of the Aztec language, Nahuatl, mean? Our best source goes back to the sixteenth century and was written by Fray Alonso de Molina. He produced the first dictionary of the Nahuatl language, the *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana y mexicana y castellana*. This dictionary represents the essential foundation for the translation of Nahuatl, the language spoken by Aztecs. Born in 1513, Molina came to New Spain as a child where he learned Nahuatl. He died in 1579. One of the great early linguists among the Franciscans missionaries, he wrote a Spanish–Nahuatl dictionary published in 1555 and republished as an enlarged, more detailed edition in 1571, that included a Nahuatl–Spanish section. Other dictionaries exist and are discussed in the Bibliographic Essay.

They bartered, used money, and sought profits. Not to be mistaken for a nascent capitalist society, the Aztec economy nonetheless was partly market based, with the

creation and exchange of material value an important activity for men and women. For Aztecs, symbolic value involved accruing and using sacred power. It was also useful for demonstrating, maintaining, or improving social status. Aztecs paid a great deal of attention to the transformations that unfolded in human, plant, and animal life. Cosmic time, history, and sacred forces were rooted in transformations of energy, humans, food, and weather. People could change into spirits, animals, or deity forms, and deities manifested themselves in many different ways. Raw materials could be transformed into everyday and luxury items. Value creation, transformation, and never-ending cycles of cosmic creation and destruction fueled the Aztec search for order, harmony, and balance. The Aztec world sought to find a balance between order and chaos. Falling (to fall, *buetzî*) and slipping (to slip or slide, *alabua*) conveyed disorder and loss of balance and were to be avoided physically, socially, and morally. Balance and reciprocity could also be maintained by debt payment or *nextlabualiztli* through offerings and sacrifice. Exchange, transformation, and reciprocity helped to maintain or restore order. Aztecs put vast effort into keeping their physical and spiritual world in balance, a balance that could only fleetingly be achieved.

The chapters of this book feature these ideas. Before discussing its contents, I explain why they are important and what sources exist to document Aztec history. Then the introduction discusses who the Aztecs were and describes the terminology for referring to the peoples of the central region of what is today Mexico, especially the area known as the Basin of Mexico. It also reviews the earlier history of the Aztecs.

## Why Are These Ideas Important?

First, two approaches have dominated Aztec studies over the past four decades. One approach, carried out mainly by archaeologists, examines the Aztec economy, how its market, trade, and tribute systems worked, and how these funded and empowered the political system of kingdoms, confederations, empire building, and war that characterized the late prehispanic-era central area of Mesoamerica. The other approach highlights language, writing, intellectual and artistic developments, religion, as well as sociocultural patterns, especially emphasizing gender and sexuality, done primarily by ethnohistorians working with texts rather than material remains. In actuality, value creation depended upon both economic activities and the ideas and beliefs about transformation and balance that gave the material realm meaning for Aztecs. A shorthand term for those patterned ideas and beliefs is *culture*.

Why try to examine the interplay of economy and culture? Material approaches help us understand how people *survive* in the world; cultural studies help us understand how people *perceive* their world. Material approaches do not always consider how people think, strategize, or create. Cultural studies often deemphasize the material and social and therefore give a misleading impression about everyday life and the critical role of the mass of population, non-elites or commoners, and how they lived. Cultural approaches need to recognize the importance of the material realm that provided the means through which Aztec religion, intellectual life, social statuses, and governance and war functioned. Recently, both more materially centered and culturally focused scholarship have begun to

problematize the relationships among people, things, and thought through the materiality studies approach mentioned in the Preface and to which I refer in places in this book. It is important to acknowledge the interplay among objects, environments, language, and culture in shaping how Aztecs thought about, organized, and carried out the work necessary for familial, community, and state survival.

Second, a great deal of literature about the Aztecs, specifically about the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, the largest Aztec city-state in the Basin of Mexico, focuses on religion, especially their most spectacular practice, that of “human sacrifice.” As a result, in both scholarly and popular literature, Aztecs are quite often seen as freakish and exotic, a perspective this book challenges. If native peoples are thought of as the “other,” Aztecs are the *other* of the other. They are regularly trotted out as some humorous or horrifying human oddity. Here is just one example in the “humorous” mode: In his much lauded book, *The Secret History of Emotion*, which examines how seventeenth-century European philosophical rhetoric about feelings became part of common ideas about emotion, Daniel Gross says in the very first line, “If you are tickled to learn that Aztecs located passions in the liver ...” to make a point about something else entirely. The ridicule embedded in this throwaway line dismisses Aztecs as people and, at a minimum, treats their beliefs as ludicrous, placing them somehow outside the range of intelligent ideas about how emotions work. Hundreds, if not thousands, of horrifying examples exist, virtually all written to highlight the Aztecs’ supposed propensity for human sacrifice. This term and the killing rituals connected to war and fertility Aztecs practiced will be discussed in later chapters.

Because so many colonial written sources describe Aztec religion, this has led to an outpouring of scholarship on that topic. A great deal of interest in human sacrifice as mentioned above – important though the topic is – has the unfortunate and unintended consequence of reinforcing a tendency to see the Aztecs as almost beyond the pale of human cultures. A religious practice that has taken on an almost unquestioned and definitional status, it became intertwined with the political and military goals of empire building of some Aztec groups and intensified as a result. While it appears bizarre and cruel to modern western eyes, Aztecs were far from the only Mesoamerican people to carry out ritual killings, and the world history of religion provides many examples of terrible violence performed either in ceremonial contexts or motivated by religious beliefs. Rather than engage in rationalization or the distancing scholars often do when describing Aztec religious beliefs and practices, I heed religious scholar David Carrasco's call to examine such violence carefully and deeply to argue that these killings and Aztec religion more broadly must be placed in their historical, cultural, and everyday contexts. Only in that way can we achieve a fuller picture of a people who are often depicted as so odd, so appalling. Yet these same people played a critical role in world history, not only for their agricultural, architectural, and artistic achievements, but because of the way they encountered and responded to Europeans upon their arrival.

With some exceptions, surprisingly few scholars really focus on this issue of finding the humanity of the Aztecs. Inga Clendinnen, relying primarily on a source discussed in detail in this chapter, the *Florentine Codex*, highlights the alien and the bleak in her well-known, oft-quoted



book, *The Aztecs*. This type of exoticizing description is unfortunately too common. A scholar who does better is Caroline Dodds Pennock. She writes in her book *Bonds of Blood* that her goal is “to reinvest the Aztecs with a humanity and individuality which has frequently been denied to them” because of the mortal violence in which they engaged. Theirs was a “culture of contradictions,” bloody *and* beautiful. “Pity, sorrow, love, grief and joy were all deeply felt” and expressed in Aztec ways.

Whether drawing on material or cultural frames of reference to interpret Aztec history and culture, the immense source base they generated through their own writings, architectural presence, and art as well as through the ways they stimulated, even aided, Spanish writing about them has generated much attention. The Aztecs, in conjunction with their colonizers, created what is perhaps the largest written source base about any Native American people at the point of contact with Europeans and thereafter. However complex the task of interpreting the many different written texts that exist and which are complemented by a valuable but more fragmentary material base of archaeological remains, the fact is that written and archaeological sources offer an unparalleled amount of evidence about them.

### Sources

The Aztecs are therefore intriguing not only because their civilization is complex and fascinating but also because the corpus of written materials directly concerned with their culture, history, and “conquest” is so remarkably deep. The clash between Aztec peoples and Spaniards,

provoked by the Spanish invasion, gave rise to an immense number of written sources. If the archaeological material is not as rich as that which exists for the Maya, there is nevertheless an abundance of material remains, especially from outside of Tenochtitlan. But even for that *altepetl* (*altepeme*, pl., water-mountain, a city-state or kingdom, and the basin's largest) lying under today's Mexico City as it does, there is ancient material evidence that has been recovered. It is to the vast and intriguing written source base that I turn first.

While many written primary sources fall into two basic categories, Indigenous, native-language texts and Spanish-authored texts in that language, some represent what might be considered hybrids between the two. Consider Indigenous-authored texts: One important category of these consists of the pictorial codices, few of which actually date from the prehispanic period.

### Codices

There are many codices relating to Aztec groups. In this book, I rely primarily on four that provide a great deal of information about prehispanic life and give an idea of the range of information available. The earliest is the *Codex Borgia*, believed by most investigators to be prehispanic. Its exact place of origin is unknown, but the eastern basin or areas to the southeast are possibilities. It consists of a deer-skin screenfold, meaning the panels have an accordion-like form whereby they fold out and in, with seventy-six leaves that represent a 260-day ritual calendar count (the *tonalpohualli*, discussed in Chapter 2) as well as sections covering prognostication for birth, marriage, climate, and ceremonies for a variety of deities ([www.famsi.org/research/graz/borgia/thumbs\\_o.html](http://www.famsi.org/research/graz/borgia/thumbs_o.html)).

The *Codex Borbonicus*, with its thirty-six folded leaves, was likely produced just prior to or shortly after the Spanish victory over the Mexica, on Indigenous paper (*amatl*). It includes both a 260-day ritual calendar as well as a 365-day solar calendar and was done in the traditional screenfold form. Very beautifully drawn and painted, with quite limited annotations added in Spanish, it likely was created in an important basin altepetl, but which one is not currently identifiable ([www.famsi.org/research/graz/borbonicus/index.html](http://www.famsi.org/research/graz/borbonicus/index.html)).

The *Codex Mendoza* is something quite different from the *Borgia* or *Borbonicus* that reveal little Spanish or Christian influence. This codex, seventy-one folios long, was created in 1540s Tenochtitlan for a Spanish audience to provide detailed information on Mexica rulers, their wars, and the tribute paid to the Mexica from the tribute-paying regions. It also includes an ethnographic section showing the life cycle of Mexica men and women, likely intended to defend the Tenochca Mexica political system and moral code. The first two sections draw on prehispanic histories and tribute records (especially the *Matrícula de Tributos*, a possibly prehispanic text, of which the *Mendoza* could have been a copy). The third is a more colonial creation, though it, too, may draw on prehispanic forerunners, books of prognostication in which morality and proper behavior are depicted. The *Mendoza's* content shows the strong influence of its Mexica artists, at least two, operating within Mexica artistic and intellectual traditions but created in conjunction with one or more Spanish scribes who did the annotations. Done in European book form, it is an early example of what I will call hybrid sources, discussed below (<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2fea788e-2aa2-4fo8-b6d9-648coo48622o/>).

The *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, also a colonial production, is a lengthy, complex text painted in Aztec style in book form on European paper. With its fifty folios (a small number are missing), it has multiple sections that include a calendar of the eighteen solar festivals of the solar year, a *tonalamatl* or

divining handbook (like the *Borgia*) based on the 260-day calendar, and an historical section detailing migration histories, dynastic histories of several basin altepeme, along with colonial events up until 1562 in annals, or year count, form, recounting major events year by year. Multiple annotators commented upon the drawings and supplied information and misinformation. The paintings likely were done in the mid-1550s, the commentaries added up to the year 1562. Like the *Mendoza*, the *Telleriano-Remensis* combines both prehispanic and colonial elements and tries to render Aztec time-keeping and the recording of history in a way that would be comprehensible to Europeans. It nonetheless retains artistic elements rooted in the Aztec visual vocabulary as it existed prior to the arrival of Spaniards (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8458267s>).

Most consist of often-modified copies of now-lost prehispanic codices. Codices cover a wide array of topics about the economy and tribute, rulers and their kingdoms, religion and calendars, family relations and naming patterns, even health and medicine. Scribes, usually native (*tlacuiloque*, *tlacuilo*, sing., the word for painters and writers), included handwritten explanations in Nahuatl and/or Spanish as well as sections treating the period when Spaniards violently encountered the Aztecs and its aftermath, adding a strong element of polyvocality to these writings. Tlacuiloque drew the pictorial images according to Aztec artistic and historical traditions, though Aztec imagery would come to be influenced by European imagery over time.

Written texts and documents in Nahuatl exist as well. Some are annals histories such as the chronicles of don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin.

### Chimalpahin

The man who became known as don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, having styled himself as such, was born in May of 1579, a descendant of the founding ruler of Tzaqualtitlan Tenanco, a subdivision (*tlayacatl*, explained in Chapter 3) of the Chalco region. Not a noble himself, he was nonetheless literate and had access to his maternal grandfather's collection of pictorial histories of the subdivision of his birth. Domingo Francisco moved to Mexico City as a young adolescent where he lived at the church of San Antonio Abad and began to write histories in annals form, of Chalco and several other altepeme. Truly learned and deeply read in Indigenous sources, he also drew on Spanish authors and history and was familiar with the ideas of classical writers like Sophocles and St. Thomas Aquinas. He made observations about far flung places such as China, Egypt, and Haiti, knowledgeable as he was about ancient and world history. Chimalpahin even copied and annotated an important Spanish-language text, Francisco López de Gómara's *Conquista de México*. But his most important writings were in Nahuatl. In them, he chronicled the histories of his beloved Chalco and other altepeme, covering almost a thousand years of Aztec history from 670 CE into the first third of the seventeenth century. A devout Christian, he took enormous pride in Indigenous history and drew attention to the early migrations and founding of altepeme, the great rulers of the past, as well as how the loss of Indigenous sovereignty led to a less orderly world in which a racial hierarchy was beginning to emerge. Chimalpahin's greatest emphasis was on the Chalcan world of his ancestors. He also had a special interest in the role of women in the founding of altepeme, their dynasties, and the role royal women played in maintaining rulerships when a male heir could not succeed as the ruler or *tlatoani* (pl., *tlatoque*) The author of rich political and social histories, Chimalpahin stands virtually alone among colonial Indigenous authors writing under his own name in his own language.

Others consist of narrative histories such as the *Crónica mexicana* by Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, likely drawing on the same Indigenous source that the friar Diego Durán used as a basis for his much-read history (described below). Alvarado Tezozomoc's chronicle provides a historical perspective reflecting that of the former ruling dynasty of Tenochtitlan to which he was related as a grandson of the second Moteuczoma as well as those of a number of Aztec altepeme. Another Nahuatl-language source consists of the speeches, *buebuetlatolli* – old words or words of the elders – preserved in a variety of texts, especially Book Six of the *Florentine Codex* (see below). Poem-like songs by Aztec authors, many translated into Spanish by the esteemed Mexican anthropologist-historian-linguist Miguel León-Portilla as well as into English by the North American folklorist John Bierhorst, have also survived. Finally, there is a wide array of civil judicial records written in Nahuatl – wills, censuses, town council minutes, petitions, and contracts. These records were often part of the documentation for lawsuits over land or other property, governance, or labor exploitation.

There is also an abundance of Spanish-language material. The eyewitness accounts of the Spanish war against the Mexica, the best known by Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, as well as lesser known but revealing texts by participants such as Andres de Tapia and Fray Francisco Aguilar and early colonial chronicles and histories, many by Spanish friars such as Toribio de Benavente, known also by the Nahuatl word for poor, Motolinia, Gerónimo de Mendieta, and Juan de Torquemada. These writings offer vital information

about Aztec civilization as well as Spanish reactions to what they saw and experienced. Civil officials also wrote narratives about Aztec history and government. One of the most read of these is Alonso de Zorita's *Breve y sumaria relación de los señores de la Nueva España*. The *Relaciones geográficas*, another Spanish-language source, consists of answers to a royal questionnaire collected between 1578 and 1585 to collate information on population, economy, and governing structures as well as geography. Many of the reports for individual communities contain maps. These texts, although in Spanish, are polyvocal too. Spanish chroniclers relied heavily on Indigenous scholars and writings for information they incorporated, thus Indigenous intellectuals contributed to these texts with their knowledge as well as writing and artistic skills. And legal cases heard in early colonial Spanish-organized courts encompass complaints, pleadings, and testimony of Indigenous litigants. They may include maps and drawings, genealogies, wills, and testimony of hundreds, if not thousands, of colonial Indigenous individuals; much of this evidence is in Spanish (though some, described above, was rendered in Nahuatl).

Native-language documents provide an immense amount of information about Indigenous languages – in this case Nahuatl – and prehispanic ways of living. But they do not offer an unaltered pathway into prehispanic Aztec life. As Nahuatl came into contact with the Spanish language and began to be written in the Roman alphabet, its vocabulary and, eventually, even grammatical structure changed somewhat. Furthermore, the Christian influence of the Catholic Church on the education of Aztecs literate

in Nahuatl, Spanish, and sometimes Latin rendered their writings a product of an on-going contact between languages, forms of intellectual and creative expression, and ways of organizing societies. The turn toward emphasizing Nahuatl-language documentation has immeasurably deepened our understanding of Aztecs both before and after Spaniards arrived. These invaluable and numerous texts are polyvocal. They capture the multiple voices of their creators as well as those depicted, and they allow for a much richer, more nuanced investigation into how Aztecs and Spaniards influenced each other.

Finally, several kinds of sources fall into the category of hybrid sources. Some are by authors who were *mestizos*, individuals of Indigenous and Hispanic heritage, so were themselves hybrid in their origins and, more important, in their social and linguistic identities. Men such as Juan Bautista Pomar and Fernando Alva de Ixtlilxochitl, both fluent in Nahuatl, wrote chronicles in Spanish in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that dealt with the Indigenous history of the kingdom of their ruler ancestors, Tetzaco. Another such chronicler was Diego Muñoz Camargo from Tlaxcallan who strongly identified with his conqueror father and his Spanish heritage. Yet these particular texts were written to provide the history of the city-state from which each came and to promote the rights of that place and its ruling dynasty in the new colonial political system. Other hybrid sources were constructed by both Indigenous writers, informants, and/or artists in conjunction with Spaniards. One example would be the famous, most often used source for this period, the text that goes by the name *Florentine Codex*.



Sahagún and the *Florentine Codex*

Still the single most important source for studying the Indigenous societies of the Basin of Mexico area, the *Florentine Codex* was compiled by the prolific Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún. Remarkably adept in the Nahuatl language, he came to Mexico Tenochtitlan in 1529 and ministered in at least two altepeme before becoming a Latin teacher in the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco. By the late 1540s, he had already collected forty of the huehuetlatolli which would later make up Book Six of what has become known as the *Florentine Codex*. He also set down on paper a Tlatelolca-based account of the events of the Spanish-Mexica war in the 1550s. Originally called the *Historia universal de las cosas de la Nueva España*, in 1558 Sahagún was commissioned to write a general description in Nahuatl about Indigenous religion and ways of life. Researched with Aztec elders and intellectuals and composed in three altepeme – Tepepolco, Tlatelolco, and Tenochtitlan – between the commissioning of the project and 1569, the writing of what became the *Florentine Codex* went through several stages, the first of which resulted in the *Primeros memoriales*, researched in Tepepolco and based on interviews with the ruler and leading elders. Both this text and the *Florentine Codex* depended on collaborative investigation and writing by four trilingual co-authors – Antonio Valeriano of Azcapotzalco, Alonso Vegerano of Cuauhtitlan, Pedro de San Buenaventura of Cuauhtitlan, and Martín Jacobita of Tlatelolco – who were fluent in Spanish and Latin as well as, of course, Nahuatl. Both works included not only copious text but also drawings illustrating much of the written information. Whereas the *Primeros memoriales* has four sections (Gods; Heaven and Underworld; Rulership; Human Things), the *Florentine Codex* has twelve (Gods; Ceremonies; Origin of the Gods; Soothsayers; Omens; Rhetoric; Sun, Moon, Stars, Binding of the Years;

Kings and Lords; Merchants; The People; Earthly Things; Conquest of Mexico). Almost certainly influenced by medieval encyclopedias, the *Florentine Codex* is a linguistic treasure trove reflecting Sahagún's goal of providing information to help fellow friars in the conversion project. However, that project also included suppressing what he viewed as pagan beliefs, revealed by examining some of the editing which can be detected in the choices of wording and corrections, cutting, and pasting that took place as the volumes were prepared. By considering this text as a material object, close study of the physical properties of its folios provides an example of the materiality approach mentioned in the Preface. Sahagún's co-writers were themselves Christians, whose beliefs shaped the way they viewed Aztec religion so these works must be evaluated carefully despite the rich reporting they contain about many aspects of Aztec life. Before and during the compilation of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún compiled or wrote additional texts including sermons, songs, a guide for missionizing, even a re-written version of the invasion account that emphasizes Spanish, rather than Aztec, perspectives. A Spanish version, published as the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, part translation, part paraphrase, part commentary based on the Nahuatl, has been separately published in multiple editions.

Another such text, mentioned above, would be the *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme* by the Dominican friar Diego Durán.

### Durán and His Hybrid History

Born in Spain, Durán came to New Spain at the age of seven, learned Nahuatl as a child in Tetzco, and then moved to Mexico City. He joined the Dominican order in 1556 and served in several monasteries near the Basin of

Mexico, like Sahagún becoming steeped in Aztec culture. Again like Sahagún, he came to believe that learning about that culture was necessary to evangelize and stamp out the idolatrous practices he thought continued to exist. The product of years of observation, reading, and writing, his *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme* represents his deep knowledge gained through extensive interaction with Aztec elders and scholars who could help him interpret the pictorial codices upon which he also relied. His history was composed between about 1574 and 1581 and comprised three sections: a history from the migration period through the first years after the defeat of the Mexica, a book about the gods and rites, and one covering the ancient calendar, each with illustrations. In the historical section, while drawing on an Indigenous source, Durán frequently interjects his own observations about Aztec history, religious practices, and daily life. He refers at times to his belief that the Aztecs could be compared to Hebrews, conjecturing that perhaps they were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. While reflecting his use of annals histories, Durán produced a fully narrative history, one with vivid characters – mainly rulers as well as Tlacaelel, a personage of great importance to the political development of the Mexica (described in Chapter 3) – and an epic, ultimately tragic scope as he described the arrival of the Spanish and the war that followed.

The *Historia* is a hybrid text because, while written in Spanish, Durán makes clear throughout that he used as his most important source an Indigenous-authored annals history which up until now has not come to light (the Mexica-centered, so-called *Crónica X*, also used by Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc as his main source). Both Durán and Tezozomoc provide clues to the annals history and Nahuatl terminology upon which they were drawing.

Other Spanish friars worked with native scribes to produce Catholic catechisms, sermons, plays and other conversion-related documents, written in Nahuatl, for teaching and preaching purposes. Yet the re-casting of Christian ideas in Nahuatl vocabulary, sometimes had the effect – as anthropologist Louise Burkhart has so eloquently argued – of “missionizing the missionary” and reinforcing many Aztec religious ideas, even producing what another scholar, Ben Leeming, calls “counter-narratives.”

This abundance of textual sources is a gift for scholars and students, but like all historical documentation, these materials must be used with analytical rigor. All written records are created for specific reasons for particular audiences and reflect the culturally-rooted assumptions of their authors. Readers must always consider what the intended purposes were and who the intended audience was. Meticulous historian though he was, Chimalpahin’s *relaciones* for instance, offer a defense of the culture of his Chalcan ancestors, especially their rulers and polities. This defense is embedded in his histories, designed consciously or unconsciously to bolster the status of those ancestors’ descendants. Cortés’ letters quite obviously were no objective account. He represents specific points of view intended to justify and glorify himself and misrepresents or leaves out other points of view. Durán and Sahagún lived among Aztecs in order to missionize. The question of how much can we generalize from information that is specific to a particular time and place arises, as well as the fact that this documentary record is fragmentary and can sometimes be unclear and difficult to interpret.

Why? Ancient documents sometimes simply are hard to read, either because of their handwriting or their

condition of preservation, but also due to the language used. This is true for both the archaic Spanish and colonial Nahuatl. Such texts present challenges for translation and interpretation for English- and Spanish-speakers alike. Another difficulty of these sources for contemporary readers is a fundamental characteristic of Aztec history in which conscious rewritings and multiple versions of the histories of dynastic families and their *altepeme* abounded. These versions then became subject to colonial revisions due to native political interests increasingly expressed in ways intended to appease Spanish officials. Aztecs reshaped their histories in a context of colonial power relations. Their texts embody both ancient sociocultural patterns and emergent political interests. Achieving a neat, linear, chronologically accurate historical reconstruction therefore may simply not be wholly possible.

Material remains also exist and provide richly detailed evidence for understanding the Aztecs of a pre-European time. These remains consisted of architecture and artifacts, monumental public buildings and their decorations – temples, palaces, ball courts, shrines, and altars – in both Tenochtitlan and elsewhere in the Basin of Mexico and beyond, along with housing, including the homes of both ordinary people and the palaces of elites. Urban layouts suggest the grand scale of ceremonial centers and the care with which Aztecs designed them. Cities and towns always had a central area, especially huge in Tenochtitlan, which contained rulers' palaces, and ceremonial, political, and economic structures. Surrounding that central area would be residential areas, often divided into discrete neighborhoods and outlying small areas, called *calpolli* (big house, ward, local community) or *tlaxilacalli* (ward, local

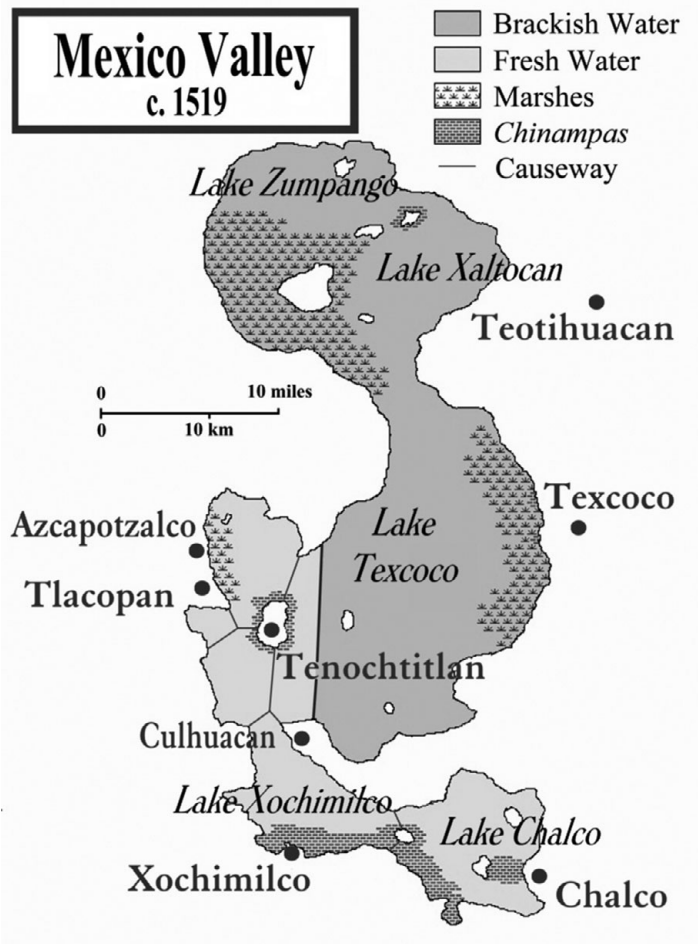
community) in Nahuatl. Encompassing the housing of commoners and minor elites, some of these peripheral communities lay at some distance from an altepetl's urban core. The remains of public and household structures from both urban areas and outlying neighborhoods offer evidence about building periods, materials and techniques, layout within buildings and room function, and astronomical orientations, which for public buildings carried spiritual and political meanings.

A question archaeologists have tried to answer through material remains and historians through early colonial documents is just how many Aztecs were there just prior to the arrival of Europeans. The first answers about population were relatively low because early twentieth-century scholars believed Aztecs represented a simpler kind of society that could not generate large, dense populations. As scholars began to look carefully at more data and understand better how complex Aztec societies were, their answers to that question became higher both for the Basin of Mexico and its most populous altepetl, Tenochtitlan. The low count estimates for the basin are less than a million inhabitants versus higher counts as high as 30 million. For Tenochtitlan, estimates ranged from 60,000 to 300,000. Contemporary estimates based on synthesizing textual and archaeological evidence suggest that the basin had a population of about 1.5 million people, and if surrounding areas are added in, the total Aztec population in 1519 would have been between 3 and 4 million. For Tenochtitlan, estimates still range widely, from as low as 72,000 all the way up to 300,000. Given that early descriptions and sixteenth-century census-like documents do not provide consistent, reliable counts,

careful scrutiny of the evidence that does exist suggests that an estimate of roughly 120,000–150,000 is reasonable. This estimate assumes a density of about 12,000 people per sq. km. or about 30,000 per sq. mile applied to the residential areas of the city, allowing for palaces of wealthy nobles and rulers as well as the homes of well-to-do merchants and skilled craftspeople to house larger numbers of people. Additionally, the city's temples and markets attracted large numbers of visitors for shorter or longer stays. The next largest altepeme housed populations of about 24,000 (Tetzaco), 17,000 (Huexotla), and 11,000 (Otumba [Otompan]).

For Tenochtitlan and many other Aztec cities within the Basin of Mexico, another important kind of architecture had to do with water control, which was essential for supplying water for farming. Controlling water flows from the huge lake system, with its five lakes, in which sat Tenochtitlan and that so many mainland cities bordered, was critical. Inhabitants of this densely populated area needed access to drinkable water, and this lake water also supplied agricultural areas with the water needed to produce edible and usable plant life (see Map 1.2). But keeping cities and towns in and around the lake system from flooding also proved essential. Aztecs built and managed sophisticated hydraulic systems that included aqueducts, dams, canals, and hillside terracing for all these purposes.

As for artifacts, portable remains, archaeologists have recovered many different kinds. One category would be largescale sculpture – deities, sacrificial stones, and skull racks (*tzompantli*) were common across Aztec sites of much size. But for Tenochtitlan, its Templo Mayor site,



MAP 1.2 The five lakes in the Basin of Mexico, major altepeme near them, and chinampa areas  
Public Domain. Map made by Madman2001, GNU Free Documentation License  
File: Lake Texcoco c 1519.png - Wikimedia Commons



the central area for state-sponsored religious activities, was especially large and dramatic and featured thousands of pieces of large- and small-scale sculptures in addition to its impressive architecture. Small sculptural pieces, especially deity figures made from stone, wood, or clay were common and found their way into the archaeological record. Stone blades, food-processing tools such as *manos* (grinding tools), *metates* (flat stone surfaces for grinding), and *molcajetes* (stone bowls), plates, and vessels for drinking and cooking have been excavated as well as smaller scale art works such as turquoise mosaics, feather work, and clothing and jewelry. Such remains provide insights into the lives of Aztecs of lower and higher strata. Rulers, and high-ranking nobles, many of whom were governing figures, had vast arrays of clothing and jewelry, some made with the gold and silver that Spaniards would find so alluring. Archaeological remains, especially spindle whorls, say a lot about kinds and amounts of textiles produced for commoners.

Archaeological remains are important. They are of pre-hispanic origin and less obviously biased in the way that historical documents are because they are the remains of daily life, providing information about people's everyday activities, where they lived, what they ate, how they worked, worshipped, and fought. Documents are more selective in what they say. But archaeological evidence presents its own problems of interpretation, especially that arising from urban archaeological projects, because material remains may occur in more or less accessible places and in greater or lesser quantities. For Mexico City, lying over the former Mexica altepetl of Tenochtitlan, that material which can be excavated relates mainly to elite political and

religious activities, some of which is propagandistic, given the imperial goals of the Mexica ruling dynasty. Also, variable patterns of perishability influence what survives and what does not. And without words, the archaeological record can only tell us so much about ideas, beliefs, social patterns, and cultural production.

A third kind of evidence consists of studies of the cultures of living peoples who are descended from the Aztecs, known as *ethnography*. While living peoples have experienced 500 years of history that deeply influenced their languages, beliefs, and cultural practices, decades of ethnographic research has demonstrated that continuities with ancient ways of life exist. Even with all the changes colonialism, the development of nationhood for Mexico, and the technological changes the modern, industrial world brought, family and kinship organization, tool use, curing practices, and important conceptions about the cosmos, spiritual beings, and conceptions of identities have survived. However, before we can explore who the Aztecs are in today's world, we should examine who they were and how such peoples came to be.

### Who Were the Aztecs?

The name “Aztec” gets used in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to the Mexica who called themselves “Azteca” early in their history but then were commanded by their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, to change that name, as Chimalpahin recounts, explaining that when the people first known as Aztec left Aztlan, they were not yet called Mexica. “They all called themselves

Azteca. And we say that later they took their name, they called themselves Mexitin.” The ethnonym “Mexica” is the most accurate name for the peoples of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, but late colonial and nineteenth-century writers like Francisco Javier Clavijero and William Prescott popularized the use of “Aztec.” “Aztec” has also been used to refer to the peoples encompassed by the city-states that would include the Triple Alliance confederation, the Tepaneca, the Acolhua, and the Mexica, or even more broadly to all the linguistically related peoples who spoke Nahuatl dialects in and around the Basin of Mexico, a usage I follow. From here on, for colonial and contemporary Nahuatl-speaking peoples, I use the term “Nahua.” For contemporary Nahuatl-speaking peoples, this is a term they occasionally use for themselves. More often, however, today’s Nahuatl speakers use “Mexicano” or “Mexicanero” as their ethnonym. They may also use “*masebuali*” (pl., *masebualmej*), which comes from the prehispanic Nahuatl term for commoner (*macebualli*) and refers to Nahuas or Indigenous people generally.

Aztec peoples created the material remains and historical records that still exist. They bequeathed language, ideas, and customs to contemporary Nahuatl-speaking peoples as well as ideas about those ancient societies that shape today’s discourses in Mexico and beyond about those peoples and their descendants. To trace the origins of Aztec peoples and the Mexica, one must rely on ancient material evidence and colonial era pictorial and alphabetic sources that combine elements of history and myth. Many written and material sources enshrine, however, a Mexica rewriting of history that occurred in the mid-fifteenth century that obscures the earlier histories of the peoples

of the Basin of Mexico, complicating and fragmenting what we can understand from colonial-period versions of codices. Nonetheless, the Aztecs developed out of early Mesoamerican peoples whose histories help explain the cultural traditions Aztecs drew upon as they created their societies and ways of living.

Spanning from northern Mexico to much of Central America, ancient Mesoamericans, who included the Olmecs, Mayas, Teotihuacanos, Toltecs, Mixtecs (Ñudzahui, the ethnonym they use for themselves), Zapotecs (Benìzàa), and Otomis (Hñahñu) spoke many different languages but shared similar, though not identical, features. These included ways of keeping time, uses of writing, obsidian tools and ceramic pottery, ideas about deities and ceremonies, reliance upon trade and markets, intensive agricultural techniques, and house building patterns. Aztec groups built upon older templates that gave rise to the societies and ways of living Europeans came upon in the Basin of Mexico region at the end of the Postclassic period that spanned the centuries from 900 CE to 1521 CE.

The Olmecs of the Gulf Coast region pioneered an early template for Mesoamerican civilizations during the Middle and Later Formative periods (about 1200 BCE to 150 CE) that included urbanism, a widespread art style, and a commanding ruling group influencing the Mesoamerican civilizations that followed. Classic-period (about 150 CE–650 CE; hereafter I dispense with CE, Common Era, as all dates refer to this expanse of time) Mayas of southern Mesoamerica and Teotihuacanos of the Basin of Mexico built large cities, immense pyramids, and developed highly productive agricultural and

craft-based economies, with powerful ruling classes. Teotihuacan, in particular, housed a large population and created trade networks that operated across a broad swath of Mesoamerica. The site lay in ruins by the time of the Aztecs, having fallen around the mid-seventh century. It loomed large in their story of the sun's and moon's origins and led to a brief period called the Epiclassic (650–900) during which a variety of regional centers emerged in central Mexico and Maya kingdoms began to suffer from environmental and political stresses. The sun and moon narrative told of the rise of the Aztec epoch, what was called by the Mexica the age of the Fifth Sun, which came after the early Postclassic (about 900–1200). During those centuries, the next Basin of Mexico center, Tollan (located within today's Tula), grew into a large, powerful center, not the equal of Teotihuacan, but one that Aztecs imagined as the center of the creation of a later Mesoamerican template where writing, calendrics, and luxury crafts, in particular, began. In reality, much of that template had older Olmec roots.

Aztec histories then describe the migration of Chichimeca nomadic hunting peoples of the north coming into central Mexico and intermingling with settled, agricultural urban, Tolteca peoples of the center. These migrations likely took place in two waves, an earlier wave of non-Nahuatl speaking Chichimeca just before and as the city of Tollan, the Tolteca capital, was falling late in the twelfth century, and a second wave during the thirteenth century, after Tollan's fall, by Nahuatl speakers, also labeled Chichimeca. These later migrating peoples settled in the Basin of Mexico and nearby areas between 1200 and 1300 and in Tenochtitlan – the Mexica capital – around

1325. Better thought of as stereotypes, the terms “Chichimeca” (some of whom actually were agriculturalists) and “Tolteca” do not themselves represent Mesoamerican ethnicities. Rather, multiethnic and multilingual in origin, these were kinds of peoples with distinctive lifeways, some migratory and some settled – neither linguistically nor culturally unified – who came together to form the ethnicities of the Basin of Mexico region as these existed in 1519.

The women and men who were part of the second-wave migrations mainly spoke Nahuatl, most of Chichimeca *and* Tolteca origins. Their movements have been referred to as the “Aztlán” migrations, and codices and historical narratives say that those migrant groups began their journeys from Aztlán or Chicomoztoc. Combining with peoples of other linguistic and cultural heritages, including the Nonoalca, Olmeca Xicallanca, Otomi, and Matlatzinca, some indigenous to the central Mesoamerican region, others also migrants, they would go on to form the ethnic groups, about fifteen, that existed just before the arrival of Spaniards. Some of these were coterminous with an altepetl, such as the Xochimilca; others spread over a wider area, such as the Matlatzinca of the Toluca Valley or the Acolhua of the eastern Basin of Mexico, encompassing multiple altepeme. Pictorial and alphabetic texts explain how Basin of Mexico peoples migrated to their places of settlement where they then built their city-states and their ruling families. Most such accounts feature a place of origin, a place with both historical and sacred meanings, where a people emerge from caves called Chicomoztoc (Seven Caves).

Such sources describe multiple peoples emerging from Chicomoztoc and going on lengthy journeys, filled with

challenges. The numbers and names of peoples and stages in the journeys differ across accounts. The Mexica accounts mostly emphasize their place of origin as Aztlan (Place of Whiteness or Place of Herons). What the migration narratives do agree on is that the Mexica were the last group to set out on a journey of migration and that they followed the guidance of their patron deity, Huitzilpochtli, on their journey to the place where they would build their capital city, Tenochtitlan. Because so many written sources describe the Mexica and their history, this book centers them, but the chapters that follow include information on other Aztec peoples as well.

The major elements of migration tales – whether rendered in pictures or words – feature several key points in the Mexica journey:

- Guided by their patron deity, Huitzilpochtli, these “Azteca,” as they were then known, began a journey, organized into seven calpolli sub-groups and migrated southeast for a period during which they experienced many hardships. Departing Aztlan early in the twelfth century, the Azteca then stopped at Chicomoztoc and Mount Colhuacan. But Huitzilpochtli – usually referred to as a deity but sometimes appearing in sources about these early migrations as a human being, an early leader who over time became transformed into a deity – promised them an eventual better, wealthier, settled, more powerful existence and ordered them to change their name to Mexica.
- Conflicts developed and several splits occurred within the original migrating group. A particularly bitter split occurred when the Mexica abandoned followers of

Huitzilopochtli's sister, Malinalxoch, and both groups struggled to find places to settle. This conflict led into the next stage of the journey whereupon the Mexica arrived at Coatepec (Snake Mountain) where their deity Huitzilopochtli was reborn from a ball of feathers that had inserted itself into the stomach of his mother, Coatlicue. He then fought with another sister, Coyolxauhqui, who ordered their 400 brothers to attack Coatlicue before the birth could take place. Born with tools of war in his hands, Huitzilopochtli killed and dismembered Coyolxauhqui. The Mexica then recreated the watery environs of Aztlan at Coatepec, where they lived peacefully until another sister provoked another split within the group, and the main body continued on.

- The Mexica stopped at a number of places in the Basin of Mexico which by then they had entered. One of these settings was Chapultepec, now a beautiful park in Mexico City, but then the site of the remnants of a Tolteca community, where the Mexica tried to establish themselves around 1300. Attacked and driven from that place twice, the Mexica began to transform their political system, moving it away from the early pattern of collective leadership organized around four religious and fifteen to twenty calpolli leaders toward a single ruler, the first known as Huitzilihuitl. However, he was killed by enemy forces, the Tepaneca of the western side of the lake system, the dominant confederation at that time. The Mexica moved on, next begging the Tolteca-descended leaders of Colhuacan to settle in their altepetl. Sent by Colhuacan's rulers to the site of Tizaapan, a nearby rocky and snake-infested area, instead of disbanding or moving on as Colhuacan's leaders surely



intended, the Mexica thrived. They farmed, hunted, and fished for food, and the Colhua began to interact with them more through trade and intermarriage. These intermarriages were important because through them the Mexica began to style themselves the “Colhua Mexica,” claiming Toltec heritage. But the Colhua became worried by the increasing military skill of the Mexica. Because he believed Colhuacan was not to be their final settlement, their god Huitzilopochtli then commanded them to ask for a daughter of one of the rulers of Colhuacan, which the ruler Achitometl provided. Arriving at what he thought would be a wedding ceremony, whereby the beautiful young woman would become the wife of Huitzilopochtli, Achitometl discovered instead that his daughter had been ritually killed, her skin removed, then donned by a priest. As the priest appeared before Achitometl in a temple, the ruler cried out in abject horror. The Mexica time in the Colhuacan region had come to an end.

- They escaped and came to rest at the place that would become their final settlement on an island amid the basin’s lake system. There they saw the sign Huitzilopochtli had told them to look for – a cactus growing from a stone with an eagle perched upon it – which the deity said to call Tenochtitlan, Place of the Stone Cactus. Most Aztec histories say this happened in 1325. While the island was scarcely developed, though it may have already had a small, probably Tolteca-remnant population, it held rich resources of swampy soil that could be developed into so-called floating gardens. They do not really float. Surrounded by water, these garden plots would be used to grow food and give access to the

lake's resources, especially fish and birds that provided needed protein. Tenochtitlan's builders divided the island into four districts called *campan* or *tlayacatl*. These districts included subdivisions called *calpolli* early in the city's history and at first numbered seven, then fifteen to twenty by the late fourteenth century. The subdivisions later became known as *tlaxilacalli* that eventually numbered about 100 as the city grew dramatically in population over time. While beginning to flourish economically, the Mexica remained tributaries to the Tepaneca, whose capital at this time was the *altepetl* of Azcapotzalco.

- One last event would mark this foundational period and that is the settlement of Tenochtitlan's sister-island, Tlatelolco, around thirty years after the settlement of Tenochtitlan. The Mexica of each settlement experienced both conflict and cooperation with each other. Tlatelolco would prove central to the rise of Mexica commerce, eventually leading to the dramatic downfall of its ruler Moquihuix, vanquished by the Tenochca ruler Axayacatl in 1473. Tlatelolco would play an important defensive role in the Spanish-Mexica War.

Aztec communities memorialized the history of their migrations and how their kingdoms came to be located where they were as well as the histories of their ruling families in oral, pictorial, and written form. A characteristic of those histories, belief systems, and ways of living and acting in their world is that they often reflected and conveyed the idea that political activities, economic undertakings, and spirituality and worship were tightly linked together in the organization of community *and* household

life as well as in the mentalities that underlay, shaped, and interpreted those experiences. The monumental architecture and sculpture of the ceremonial centers of Aztec altepeme – especially, but not only, the Mexica Templo Mayor – communicated the economic, political, and religious powers they asserted over both their own and other peoples and places. The texts and material remains of many Aztec cities and towns show how value creation in daily life allowed for political, economic, and religious transformation within altepeme and beyond as alliances formed and an imperial political organization grew. These transformations reinforced the Aztec desire to search for order, stability, and balance in a frequently chaotic world.

Keeping the Aztec integrated and holistic way of thinking in mind helps us to comprehend the Aztec world, to the extent we can, in a more Indigenous way. My goal is to bring together the two lines of thought and evidence mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the economic and material, as focused on mainly by archaeologists, the other highlighting language and cultural traditions undertaken mainly by historians, art historians, and linguists working with written and pictorial texts. The synthesis of these approaches that this book aims for will show how in all areas of life the Aztecs relied on both material and symbolic elements to think about, organize, and carry out the tasks of governance, production, spiritual activities, and intellectual and family life. Through these activities, Aztecs created value, engaged in transformations, and sought balance between order and chaos, reciprocity and hierarchy, center and periphery, and male and female – paired ideas that expressed the balance they sought.

Both women and men created value, value that had uses politically, economically, socially, and symbolically. Throughout this book, I assess the integrated nature of Aztec ways of seeing the world, living in it, and the value that women and men produced. In Chapter 2 on religion, I argue that not only did religion have material significance, as a variety of scholars have shown, but that mythical transformations, deity beliefs, and ceremonial practices underlay both the hierarchical and egalitarian relationships around which Aztec political, economic, and social life was organized. In Chapter 3, I argue that *altepeme*, the kingdoms or city-states, were key to the organization of political and economic relationships across the Aztec region. These were also structured around local communities whose relationships of reciprocity and hierarchy between central places and outlying communities, peripheries, defined the internal structures of the localities and *altepeme*. In Chapter 4, I look at Aztec economic ideas and patterns of production, exchange, and consumption in more detail. These ideas of reciprocity and hierarchy were critical to the workings of Aztec economic activities. Labor, tribute, and commerce fed into a political and social organization that was becoming organized in more hierarchical ways. Nonetheless, throughout their history, Aztecs prized reciprocity because of the need to keep their world in balance. The household as an arena for economic, political and religious activities is explored in Chapter 5 as are marriage, family life, education, gender roles, and sexuality. Again, the concepts of value, transformation, and balance help us understand how Aztec women, men, and children shaped their daily lives. In Chapter 6, Aztec creativity and intellectual life come to

the fore. Aztecs represented their ways of thinking and living to themselves and others through science, writing and literature, and art. Ultimately, these areas would play pivotal roles in their survival and resilience after Spaniards arrived. Chapter 7, the final chapter, considers how the Aztecs experienced what most commonly is referred to as the “Spanish conquest.” The chapter describes how a civilization that most think of as extinct actually lives on in both its direct, Nahuatl-speaking descendants as well as through contemporary Mexican and even global ideas about Aztecs. While using a thematic organization for the chapters, I stress the historical relationship between hierarchy and reciprocity, how it changed over time in relation to the creation and use of value, the transformations involved in such changes, and the way the search for cosmic and worldly balance persisted.