

**A Mat of Serpents:**  
**Aztec Strategies of Control**  
**from an Empire in Decline**

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On my honor, Professors Andrea Lepage and Elliot King mark the only aid to this thesis.



**“... the ruler sits on the serpent mat, and the crown and the skull in front of him indicate... that if he maintained his place on the mat, the reward was rulership, and if he lost control, the result was death.”**

- Aztec rulership metaphor<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 18, 1 (2007): 18.

I dedicate this thesis to

my mom, my sister, and my brother  
for teaching me what family is,

to Professor Andrea Lepage  
for helping me learn about my people,

to Professors George Bent, and Melissa Kerin  
for giving me the words necessary to find my voice,

and to everyone and anyone  
finding their identity within the *self* and the *other*.

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## **INTRODUCTION: THREADS BECOME TAPESTRY**

As an amalgamation of the *self* and the *other*, identity offers a blurred line between liberation and limitation.<sup>2</sup> In skewing too far toward the *self*, the individual risks stagnation, blinding themselves to the possibilities of experimentation, forever resigned to security and tradition. In surrendering completely to the *other*, the individual is left desperately inventing and reinventing their identity, becoming an amorphous construct of whatever aspects best suit their immediate need. This thesis considers the Aztec identity under Marxist and Postcolonial lenses, focusing on how the Aztec state codified a visual vocabulary based on the commodification of the empire's religion, history, and people in order to establish and justify ever-expanding class disparities. The Aztec Empire's visual culture will be considered holistically, including its architecture, urban design, codices, and sculpture.

In early 13<sup>th</sup> century Mesoamerica, at a time when lineage determined a people's rights to rulership and independence, the Mexica, lowly mercenaries descended from nomads, desperately sought to tie themselves to the great civilizations of the past.<sup>3</sup> When presented with an opportunity to enter a marriage alliance with the Culhua, remnants of the fabled Toltecs, master craftspeople who themselves had ties to past civilizations like Teotihuacán, the Maya, and dating as far back as the Olmecs, the Mexica were faced a choice.<sup>4</sup> They could reimagine their identity, creating a complex fusion of the nomadic oral and written histories that made up their *self*, and merge it with their new claim to Toltec status, the *other*, to make an entirely new lineage.

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<sup>2</sup> This argument of the *Self and Other* stems from the Postcolonial theories of Frantz Fanon's struggle of the liberated person's self-othering, Edward Said's ideas of a fabricated 'Orient,' Linda Nochlin's theory of art revealing more about the portrayer than the portrayed, Stuart Hall's difference between *being* and *becoming*, Homi Bhabha mimicry and hybridity, and Gayatri Spivak's discussions on the subaltern.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara E. Mundy, "Mapping the Aztec Capital: The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, Its Sources and Meanings," *Imago Mundi*, 50 (1998): 23

<sup>4</sup> Clemency Coggins, "Toltec," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 42 (Autumn, 2002): 35

However, the Mexica chose instead to literally burn away their past identity by setting fire to their written histories, relinquishing all they once were to be reborn as the Culhua-Mexica.<sup>5</sup>

With the standing that such a pedigree afforded them, in 1428, the Culhua-Mexica joined the peoples of Tlatelolco and Tlacopán to form the Aztec Triple Alliance. Together, they defeated their overlords, the Tepaneca, and declared themselves the Azteca, the region's new and rightful rulers.<sup>6</sup> The Mexica had now fully lost their identity in their quest for prestige, abandoning their original *self* and redefining themselves through a tapestry of multiple *others*. Just as they had used the Toltec line to validate their claim to rulership, the heads of the fledgling empire adopted the most beneficial aspects of former powers, like religious sacrifice, elite architecture, and a tribute system, in order to expedite the empire's growth.<sup>7</sup> Despite initial lucrative returns, by the Late Aztec Period of 1440 to 1519, these practices left the empire with a vast wealth, but also substantial power inequalities reaching a boiling point.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the Culhua-Mexica, and by proxy the Aztecs, originally defined their identity based solely on the *other*, as soon as they rose to power after developing a patchwork identity from those of previous peoples, they opted to drastically shift from their focus from the *other* to the *self*. They began zealously presenting themselves as the Valley's absolute pinnacle of power and adamantly opposing any threat to their new position at the zenith of the Basin of México. This militant stranglehold over all aspects of society, religion, and politics fomented exponential religious sacrifice, constant warring, and rampant over-taxation. This was the only frame of reference the Spanish had when first encountering the Aztecs, and in the former's effort to justify their genocide of the latter, they constructed a hyperbolic identity of the Aztecs as bloodthirsty

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<sup>5</sup> Emily Umberger, "Antiques, Revivals, and References to the past in Aztec Art." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 13 (1987): 66

<sup>6</sup> Carmen Aguilera, "Of Royal Mantles and Blue Turquoise: The Meaning of the Mexica Emperor's Mantle" *Latin American Antiquity* 8, (1997): 6

<sup>7</sup> Michael E. Smith and Frances F. Berdan. "Archaeology and the Aztec Empire," *World Archaeology*, 23, 3, (1992): 364

<sup>8</sup> Michael E. Smith, "Cities in the Aztec Empire: Commerce, Imperialism, and Urbanization." In *Rethinking the Aztec Economy*, ed by Smith Michael E., Nichols Deborah L., and Berdan Frances F. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017): 57

and sadistic heathens.<sup>9</sup> Such colonialist surface-level interpretations of the Aztecs dominated their depictions for the following centuries, and in order to truly understand pre-contact Mesoamerica, and entirely new foundation of scholarship was needed.

Much of the groundwork for this effort was paved in the 1960s by William Sanders, who forewent textual and artifactual evidence in favor of environmental information.<sup>10</sup> As one of the earliest proponents of cultural ecology, Sanders relied on site-specific characteristics to understand an area's probable settlement patterns and population densities. He revolutionized the way Mesoamerican site populations were estimated by arguing that its peoples had access to the technological advancements necessary for agricultural terracing, a hypothesis which was in stark opposition to the leading theory of the more primitive slash-and-burn techniques. His hypothesis was later corroborated by the discovery of house mounds and evidence of terracing in various Mesoamerican settlements. Using these new data projections on population, Sanders devised more representative notions of sociopolitical frameworks within a given area, and thus opened the door for investigation into the concept of control in these Mesoamerican settlements.

Whereas Sanders was focused on delineating the sizes of settlements and their populations therein, the core of Mary Hodge's work in the 1970s laid deeper in the architecture and the people that populated those settlements. Hodge traced the Aztec's imperial architecture to the great civilizations they emulated, noting that the empire's capital Twin Cities of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco had a layout of gridded avenues much like the legendary Teotihuacán, and that the Templo Mayor at the heart of Tenochtitlan, the Culhua-Mexica's hub,

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<sup>9</sup> Caroline Dodds Pennock, "Mass Murder or Religious Homicide? Rethinking Human Sacrifice and Interpersonal Violence in Aztec Society." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 37, 3 (2012): 281

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Gonlin and Kirk D. French, eds. "Human Adaptation in Ancient Mesoamerica: Empirical Approaches to Mesoamerican Archaeology," (Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2016): 3 - 4

Note: The information in the remainder of the paragraph draws from Gonlin and French's article.



was largely adopted from templates found at the Toltec's capital of Tula.<sup>11</sup> Hodge research complemented Sanders' by relying on primary Spanish documents, namely post-conquest census data, not only to compare with Sanders' population estimates, but also to discern social hierarchies by gauging the number of people in each social group in a given settlement. Beyond this, Hodge was instrumental in spearheading scholarship into many of the topics later researchers would focus on, namely the dynamics between power and property, the Aztec economy, and the living conditions of the often-overlooked peasant class.

Three scholars went on to expand on aspects of Hodge's work while also building off of each other's findings. Since the late 1970s, Michael Smith's comprehensive surveys of Aztec socioeconomic dynamics have granted insights into systems of elite communication and control. Smith noticed a pattern across the empire, wherein elites patronized the creation of religious architecture under the guise of public service, and as these structures and the city-states, the *altepetls*, around them grew, the number of people who worshipped within them increased as well.<sup>12</sup> With greater numbers of people in the area, traveling markets met the increased demand by expanding their operations, and as such, had to pay more taxes to the very elites who had sponsored the public architecture in the first place. Smith found that this overlap within the mode of operation of elites across the empire was no mere coincidence, in that there were dedicated lines of transregional communication between ruling bodies, through trade, gift-giving, tributes, and marriage alliances, there was an unofficial homogenous web of control across the empire that ensured that power remained firmly in the hands of the elites.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mary G. Hodge, "Archaeological Views of Aztec Culture." *Journal of Archaeological Research* 6, 3 (1998): 199 - 220

Note: The information in the remainder of the paragraph draws from Hodge's article

<sup>12</sup> Smith, "Cities in the Aztec Empire: Commerce, Imperialism, and Urbanization," 61

<sup>13</sup> Michael E. Smith, "Long-Distance Trade Under the Aztec Empire: The Archaeological Evidence." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 1, 2 (1990): 163

Another scholar who has furthered Hodge's research is Emily Umberger, who, since the 1980s, has poured over the Aztecs' appropriation from various past civilizations, as well as the growing social discriminations within the empire. Umberger developed Hodge's point on urban design by showing that it was not just the city plans, but also what decorated the cities' interiors, that was lifted from these historical powers. Since the Aztecs believed that history was a cyclical process and whoever possessed an artifact therefore embodied the people that created and previously possessed it, they traveled to ruins like Tula and Teotihuacán to plunder their remaining artifacts.<sup>14</sup> Tellingly, the meaning behind many of these artifacts was lost to the Aztecs, and so, possessing them did not represent a conscious and active revival of the artifacts' purpose, but rather a superficial and fetishistic survival of their historical ties. Umberger brought further attention to the social inequality rampant toward the empire's decline given the strict social guidelines that legally barred non-nobles from publicly wearing cotton fabrics, precious stones, or even owning two-story homes.<sup>15</sup> The most notable of her findings was the manner in which the ruling class distributed the taxes and tributes they demanded from their subordinates, as the majority of these went to warriors and dignitaries, people already within the ruling class, thus the elites were keeping the riches amongst themselves, and only in times of great famine or drought did the rulers see fit to share the wealth and bread with the peasants.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, in the 2000s and 2010s, Deborah Nichols analyzed the power dynamics of land ownership and elite market sponsorship in the Aztec Empire. She found that land ownership was the ultimate class differentiator, as land was inherited between generations of nobles and rarely sold outside of family dynasties. Moreover, land served as political leverage that the emperor,

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<sup>14</sup> Umberger, "Antiques, Revivals, and References to the past in Aztec Art," 63 - 67

<sup>15</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 193

<sup>16</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 198

the *hueytlatoani*, could either gift an ally or strip it from an insubordinate puppet ruler, a *tecuhlli*, and that land even came packaged with the peasant farmers that worked it.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Nichols noted that the ruling class, namely the *hueytlatoani*, had control over access to resources like water, and were known to alter the course of freshwater toward the Twin Cities, leaving the towns that settled alongside those waterways to their own devices.

Regardless of each scholars' approach, there were threads connecting all of their works which converged on one main idea: in an effort to eradicate dissent, the Aztec state codified a visual vocabulary based on the commodification of the empire's religion, history, and people in order to subdue the working class and justify ever-expanding class disparities. This visual system of control forewent tradition by increasingly focusing on the state's rulers rather than its gods, ultimately connoting the two, such that to question the ruling body would be to challenge not only the historical foundation of its authority, but more critically, the gods themselves.

When discussing Aztec visual vocabulary, few pieces offer as authoritative a view on state-sponsored religious works than the 1439 *Statue of Coatlicue* (Fig. 1). The piece represents the unknowable divinity of the gods through its abstract form, as well as the gods' connection to human sacrifice through its garb of skulls, severed hands, and extracted hearts.<sup>18</sup> The state-sponsored statue is in stark contrast to the ritual figurines of the empire's peasant class (Fig. 2), which adorned most rural homes and represented local agricultural deities.<sup>19</sup> The 1473 *Coyolxauhqui Stone* (Fig. 3) refers to the mythical birth of Coyolxauhqui's brother, the Mexica sun god and patron, Huitzilopochtli. Coyolxauhqui's dismembered body attests to him

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<sup>17</sup> Deborah Nichols, "Farm to Market in the Aztec Imperial Economy." In *Rethinking the Aztec Economy*, eds Deborah L. Nichol, Frances F. Brendan, and Michael E. Smith, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017): 25

Note: The information in the remainder of the paragraph draws from Nichols' article.

<sup>18</sup> Ann De León, "Coatlicue or How to Write the Dismembered Body," *MLN*, 125, 2, (2010): 260

<sup>19</sup> Hodge, "Archaeological Views of Aztec Culture," 213

slaughtering her and their siblings for plotting to kill their mother, Coatlicue.<sup>20</sup> The *male Coyolxauhqui* (Fig. 4), likely made around 1473, was carved on the back of a pendant cached beneath the Coyolxauhqui Stone, and, although the male figure is not dismembered, his chest wound points a shared theme of death and sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> The 1485 *Stone of Tizoc* (Fig. 5) bears the sun glyph, a representation of Huitzilopochtli, on its top side, and reliefs of Toltecs defeating Chichimeca, ancestral nomadic people, along its rim.<sup>22</sup> The state-sponsored *Tezcatlipoca Vessel* (Fig. 6) created sometime between 1464 - 1481, was placed as an offering at the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlán and shows the evolving depiction of gods from an abstracted to a figurative style.<sup>23</sup> In the 1487 *Dedication Stone* (Fig. 7), the emperor, Ahuitzotl (right), and the previous emperor Tizoc (left), are dressed as sacrificial victims and offering their royal blood to the earth in order to bless the Aztecs with gifts like the maize.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, the 1507 *Throne of Moctezuma II* (Fig. 8), is fashioned after the Templo Mayor, includes mythical imagery of an eagle eating a serpent on a cactus, a reference to the symbol that marked the location for the Culhua-Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan, and in the backrest, there is a relief of Moctezuma II offering his royal blood directly to Huitzilopochtli.<sup>25</sup>

In examining these artworks' functions, their veiled sociopolitical ties become apparent. For instance, the state disapproved of the domestic worship of deity figurines, thinking it would lead to working class autonomy, so elites sponsored expensive projects like the *Statue of Coatlicue* as well as numerous temples to compel peasants to gather in, and give offerings at, the state's lavish ritual centers, thus securing its economic and religious grasp on the people.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>20</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 11-25

<sup>21</sup> Michel Graulich, "Un relievé de Coyolxauhqui en Tetzaco," *Mexicon*, 27, 1, (2005): 8

<sup>22</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 24

<sup>23</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 211

<sup>24</sup> Richard Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, 20, (1979): 40

<sup>25</sup> Smith, "Cities in the Aztec Empire: Commerce, Imperialism, and Urbanization," 60

<sup>26</sup> Roger Atwood, "Under Mexico City," *Archaeology* 67, 4 (2014): 28

*Coyolxauhqui Stone* both presents the newly-born Huitzilopochtli, symbolizing the young empire and its elites, as having divine right to rule, and shows that any dissenters, represented by the god's siblings, would be eliminated.<sup>27</sup> The *male Coyolxauhqui* references Tlatelolco claiming independence from the Culhua-Mexica in 1473, sparking a civil war that ended with the Tlatelolco ruler, Moquihui, being assassinated and immortalized with Coyolxauhqui imagery, punctuating the futility of rebelling from the Culhua-Mexica.<sup>28</sup> The reliefs on the *Stone of Tizoc* do not truly depict Toltecs or Chichimeca, they depict the 1480s provincial Aztec subjects rebelling against high imperial taxes as Chichimeca, landless barbarians, while the state's troops sent to quash them are represented as the refined Toltecs.<sup>29</sup> Such revisionist history is also present in the *Tezcatlipoca Vessel*, as ashes found within the urn are believed to be Moquihui, who is humiliated by being represented as Tezcatlipoca, a god associated with excrement and deceit.<sup>30</sup> The *Dedication Stone* shows the Aztecs no longer harkening to the Toltecs for validity, as Ahuizotl now faces Tizoc, neither depicted as Toltecs, but rather as Aztecs.<sup>31</sup> This sentiment of Aztec independence is taken to extremes with the *Throne of Moctezuma II*, as he would sit atop the Templo Mayor, above religion and politics, propped up by imagery of the creation of Tenochtitlan, a place believed to be the center of the world, and situate himself on above it all.<sup>32</sup>

Aztec emperors from 1369 to the 1470s presented themselves as conduits for the gods to speak through, but over time, the line between god and emperor purposely began to blur in order to better control an increasingly rebellious proletariat. The *Statue of Coatlicue* offers a reference point demonstrating a clear separation between the mortal and the nigh incomprehensible divine

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<sup>27</sup> Diel, "Till Death Do Us Part: Unconventional Marriages as Aztec Political Strategy." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 18, 2 (2007): 267

<sup>28</sup> Graulich, 8

<sup>29</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 23

<sup>30</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 211.

<sup>31</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 40

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid* 49

realms through the abstract representation of this larger than life metaphysical being. The *Coyolxauhqui Stone* and the *Stone of Tizoc* are both surfaces on which human blood was spilled to feed the gods. As such, to even consider questioning the revisionist history presented on either piece was deemed in opposition to the gods' nourishment, thus threatening the continuation of the reality they personified.<sup>33</sup> Although the *Stone of Tizoc* depicts poor farmers as worthless Chichimeca, Moquihuix, who has historically been cast as a traitor to the empire, was depicted as a god on the *Tezcatlipoca Vessel* due to being a member of the ruling class, seen in the smoking mirror by his left foot, a symbol of Tezcatlipoca's treachery.<sup>34</sup> These points culminate in the *Throne of Moctezuma II*, where the *Dedication Stone's* imagery of rulers transferring power between generations is redefined by placing the mortal Moctezuma II on equal ground to the sun god Huitzilopochtli.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, by sitting atop a facsimile of the Templo Mayor, he presents himself as the sun god's head priest, though, as the relief shows, no longer simply a conduit, but as a full-fledged god-emperor.<sup>36</sup>

The coming chapters will offer a deeper look into the themes and ideas that were here briefly touched upon. Chapter 1 will establish a historical foundation to contextualize the Mexica's journey from nomads to emperors, and in order to properly do this, the various past civilizations they sought to embody, the Olmeca, Maya, Teotihuacán, and Tolteca, will be covered. Chapter 2 will then expand upon this artistic discussion, grounding these pieces as parts of a continuous imperial program of class-based control by investigating the empire's self-destructive tendency of commodification during the Late Aztec Period.

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<sup>33</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 24

<sup>34</sup> Danièle Dehouve, "The Notion of Substitution in Aztec Kingship," in *Anthropomorphic Imagery in the Mesoamerican Highlands: Gods, Ancestors, and Human Beings*, (Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2020): 363

<sup>35</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 40

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 1 – THE SUM OF ITS PARTS**

Among all the histories that have stemmed from the root of Mesoamerica, stories of waxing and waning empires, of supernatural cosmic pantheons, of impossible cities raised in unforgiving environments, and of the struggle of negotiating between adopting and creating a legacy – the history of the Mexica stands unparalleled. On the one hand, they would become the most expansive empire the Valley of México had ever seen, a dominating amalgamation of all the powers and peoples that had come before them, but on the other, they were originally foreigners to those lands, little more than impoverished farmers that were shunned and chased away by other established peoples who had claims to great historical lineages.<sup>37</sup> The Mexica's explosive rise to being the sole rulers of the entire Valley of México by the 15<sup>th</sup> century came about as a dialogue between who they were and the legendary civilizations of the past that they wished they could be. Having come from next to nothing, the Mexica could not envision a future where they could rule as they were, so they decided instead to look to the past, and forge for themselves a new identity that would not only give them the legitimacy to rule, but also present them with the blueprints on how to do so.

Whether the Mexica knew it or not, the histories they were drawing upon began with the Olmec, more than two millennia before they even set foot in the Valley of México. Largely regarded as the Mesoamerican mother culture, from 1600 - 350 BCE, the Olmec civilization pioneered the social, cultural, religious, and economic frameworks that would influence and inform all of the great Mesoamerican empires that arose thereafter.<sup>38</sup> By using slash and burn techniques, the Olmecs were able to secure an agricultural surplus that afforded them the security

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<sup>37</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 54

<sup>38</sup> John Clark and Mary Pye, "The Pacific Coast and the Olmec Question," *Studies in the History of Art*, 58, (2000): 218 - 224

to focus their energies on developing a complex system of governance and ritual ceremonies.<sup>39</sup> Although the Olmec had a writing system, epi-Olmec, it has not yet been fully deciphered, such that most of what is now known about the Olmec stems from the physical history they have behind.<sup>40</sup> From artifacts found at Olmec ruins like La Venta and San Lorenzo, researchers have regarded the Olmec as pioneers of Mesoamerican staples such as human sacrifice, cannibalism, ritual pilgrimages, precious stones and apex predator offerings, ball courts, pyramids, temple complexes, and anthropomorphic animal gods.<sup>41</sup> To the Olmec, the gods embodied the forces of the world around them, both the natural world, seen in their worship of a Maize God and Water God, and the metaphysical world, seen in their reverence of junctions where the sky, earth, and underworld meet.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, their cities had bilaterally symmetrical designs along a north-south axis in order to worship and mirror the sun's daily path across the sky.<sup>43</sup> Above all of this, the Olmec are best known for their colossal head portraiture, wherein they rendered male heads with unique features and by sculpting massive basalt boulders.<sup>44</sup>

Despite all that is known about what the Olmecs believed in, not much is known about how their society functioned. The intricacy of their cities' layouts and the sophistication of their colossal head portraiture point to a nonegalitarian society wherein a ruling class had enough control over a working class to have them bring such spaces and pieces to life.<sup>45</sup> Given the way that the lower classes' house mounds were so distant from the architectural centers, the cities are believed to have served more as ceremonial and religious gathering places to witness an upper class of priests, shamans, and rulers conduct rituals rather than actual urban centers where the

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<sup>39</sup> Clark and Pye, 244

<sup>40</sup> Pool, 247

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> David Grove, "Olmec Archaeology: A Half Century of Research and Its Accomplishments," *Journal of World Prehistory*, 11, 1 (1997): 79

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 56

<sup>45</sup> Pool, 249



Olmec could secularly gather as a community.<sup>46</sup> The basic template of the divine ruler arose from this system of control and began to permeate to other Mesoamerican civilizations.<sup>47</sup> This process of cultural dissemination was facilitated by the Olmec innovation of trade, wherein they exchanged their cultural production of celts, masks, and figurines for precious offering materials like obsidian, jade, serpentine, quetzal feathers, cacao beans, and necessities like salt.<sup>48</sup> Unlike many their successors, the Olmec civilization likely did not end in violence. From approximately 400 – 350 BCE, a combination of environmental factors including diminishing water supplies due to nearby rivers silting over,<sup>49</sup> agricultural land erosion, deforestation, and a possible volcanic eruptions forced the Olmec to abandon their cities.<sup>50</sup> The legacy of the Olmec cannot easily be understated, as their presence could be felt implicitly in their successors' cultures, with human sacrifice; belief systems, with anthropomorphic animal gods, namely Olmec Dragon, derivatives, and the use of a calendar to organize their ritual practices; and urban layouts, with the north-south axis sun worshipping bisection. The Olmec legacy could be seen explicitly in the reverence their artworks received from the great civilizations that followed them, as Maya rulers were buried with Olmec figurines, and the Aztec Templo Mayor boasted an Olmec mask in its inner sanctum.<sup>51</sup> The difference between these two people's reactions to Olmec artifacts was that the Maya, contemporaries to the Olmec, understood the meaning and context of said pieces, so their reverences acted as informed revivals of the Olmec tradition, whereas the Aztec merely valued the ostensive history attributed to the artifacts, therefore superficially surviving Olmec traditions based only on the perceived legitimacy they added to the Aztecs' claim to power.

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<sup>46</sup> Pool, 244

<sup>47</sup> Grove, 79

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 84

<sup>49</sup> Pool, 246

<sup>50</sup> Clark and Pye, 244

<sup>51</sup> Beatriz de la Fuente, "Olmec Sculpture: The First Mesoamerican Art," *Studies in the History of Art*, 58, (2000): 262

The weight and wonder the Maya placed on the Olmec artifacts serves as a microcosm of the way the Maya Empire would adopt and reimagine nearly every aspect of their Olmec neighbors' culture. Originating in 1800 BCE, the Maya arose in the Yucatán Peninsula around the same time that the Olmec did by the Gulf of Mexico. One of the most readily apparent differences between the two peoples was their writing systems, as the Maya script, developed decades after the fall of the Olmec civilization, was highly complex and logographic, being one of the three independently developed complex writings systems in history, alongside ancient Sumerian and Chinese.<sup>52</sup> Before the Maya script was deciphered, researchers believed they were peaceful stargazers that had taken the Olmec number system, culture, and calendar and expanded them into a complex mathematical frameworks, improved agricultural and artistic production, and heavily detailed codices that tracked the movements of celestial bodies.<sup>53</sup> These records proved agriculturally useful as they informed on when to plant and harvest crops, and this, along with advancements like terracing and irrigation gave the Maya the nutritional surplus that had allowed their Olmec neighbors to focus on their cultural developments.<sup>54</sup> As soon the Maya script was deciphered, the previous idea of the Maya as innocent astronomers was shattered.<sup>55</sup>

The Maya's regional topography divided them into three separate cultural groups, which were engaged in constant military struggles with each other.<sup>56</sup> When one of the three main powers would take over a rival polity, they would take the latter's aristocrats captive, torture them, and sacrifice them to the gods.<sup>57</sup> While the Maya simply adopted many of the Olmec's beliefs, the former crucially expanded on one aspect of the Olmec social system: the idea of a

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<sup>52</sup> Danny Law, et al., "Aerial Shifts in Classic Maya Phonology," *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 25, 2 (2014): 361

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 362

<sup>54</sup> Wendy Ashmore, "What Were Ancient Maya Landscapes Really Like?" *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 71, 3 (2015): 308 - 310

<sup>55</sup> Law, 362

<sup>56</sup> Marilyn Masson, "Maya collapse cycles," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 109, 45 (2012): 18237

<sup>57</sup> Law, 361

divine ruler.<sup>58</sup> Each polity had its own king with absolute control over the social, political, and religious practices of that settlement by claiming that they were directly related to the gods, and acting as mediators between the gods and their people.<sup>59</sup> The kings, along with the priest class, held ceremonies and rituals to continue the Olmec practice of human sacrifice, though now, the rituals were performed with the understanding that every living thing was imbued with a level of sacred energy, *k'uh*, and that the gods needed to feed off of this energy.<sup>60</sup> The Maya rulers were able to establish a system of control beyond reproach in that they presented an existential threat to their people in the form of their deities starving and claimed that they alone were the solution to this problem through their ritual practices. When the kings passed away, due to the Maya practice of male ancestor worship, whole pyramids were built as grave-markers to immortalize their greatness.<sup>61</sup> While Maya rulers used religion to sway the thoughts of their people, they used their armies to exert control over rival polities as well as their own people through the monopolies on various natural resources. Through their command over resources like obsidian, jade, quetzal feathers, and salt, as well as the production of elite items from these resources like polished obsidian mirrors and jade mosaics, rulers expanded their domination over ever larger portions of the Maya economy.<sup>62</sup> Often times, the rulers would trade these resources for gold, as it was scarce in the Yucatán, and thus further created a veneer of godly connection by cladding not only themselves but their palaces in the precious metal, all this while power and wealth were being relegated ever more to the ruling class.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ashmore, 312

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 311 - 312

<sup>60</sup> Law, 364

<sup>61</sup> Ashmore, 306

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 308 - 309

<sup>63</sup> C. Scott Speal, "The Evolution of Ancient Maya Exchange Systems," *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 25, 1 (2014): 97

The authority of the Maya ruling class would remain unquestionable so long as they maintained the favor of the people, but after continuous fighting within and between the three main Maya powers, the elite lost the respect of, and control over, the lower class.<sup>64</sup> Without the support of the laborers, and along with land erosion, disease, overpopulation, and drought, the once-powerful Maya cities were abandoned by 900 CE.<sup>65</sup> The Maya, then, provide a cautionary tale about the consequences that await a ruling class demanding ever more from the people on whom they ultimately rely on.

Among the civilizations and empires mentioned in this chapter, the city of Teotihuacán, established sometime between 150 BCE and 200 CE, stands out as paradoxically having so much yet so little known about it. Teotihuacán had a written language resembling a simplified Maya script, but it was mainly used to name and date artworks and architecture.<sup>66</sup> The city's placement was evidently strategic, as Teotihuacán sat atop the lucrative Pachuca obsidian reserves which allowed it to have a de facto monopoly over the obsidian trade.<sup>67</sup> By dedicating themselves to production of obsidian goods like mirrors, arrowheads, and spear tips, the people of Teotihuacán amassed generous amounts of cotton, cacao, feathers, and salt through trade, and went on to expand their own military capabilities.<sup>68</sup> The city adopted and furthered the Maya innovation of trade route infrastructure which not only facilitated commerce between neighboring settlements, but also placed Teotihuacán at the hub of this new web of trade networks, guaranteeing the expansion of its size and influence.<sup>69</sup> The city's population size demanded an orderly layout, and Teotihuacán turned to the past for guidance, employing the Olmec north-south axis bisection for

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<sup>64</sup> Speal, 85

<sup>65</sup> Masson, 18237

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 35

its commanding main road, the Avenue of the Dead, and the gridded plan of Maya cities like Uaxactún to create 2,000 single story apartment complexes among its many temples, palaces, pyramids, and plazas.<sup>70</sup> Although the identity of the city's founders is not known for certain, what is certain is that the city drew in peoples from all across Mesoamerica, so many that it had neighborhoods with ethnic majorities of Maya, Mixtec, and Zapotec individuals.<sup>71</sup>

Researchers do not have a clear picture of the political framework of Teotihuacán, with the city's architecture hinting at multiple separate social classes,<sup>72</sup> and its fresco murals focusing on both military strength<sup>73</sup> and religious imagery like processions and scenes revering gods like the only known Mesoamerican female head deity, the Spider Goddess.<sup>74</sup> Offerings found within the city's main structures, such as precious stones and metals, apex predators, and human sacrifices,<sup>75</sup> point to the existence of ruler and priest classes as seen in the two previous civilizations, but the lack of evident royal burials like the Maya pyramids and of royal figures in carvings or murals leaves even more aspects of Teotihuacán shrouded in mystery.<sup>76</sup> There was architectural social stratification, as the elites' living quarters were nearer to the city's temples and pyramids than the commoner's apartment compounds, thus granting the upper class a literally closer connection to their gods.<sup>77</sup> However, art from Teotihuacán was rather minimalist in approach, as it was mainly just focused on capturing the general appearance of a figure or deity, a far cry from both the Olmec colossal head portraiture and Maya relief carvings.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Coggins, 57

<sup>71</sup> Nichols, "Teotihuacan," 18

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>74</sup> Zoltán Paulinyi, "The 'Great Goddess' of Teotihuacan Fiction or Reality?" *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 17, 1 (2006): 9

<sup>75</sup> Nichols, "Teotihuacan," 19

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 19

The ambiguity surrounding the political system in Teotihuacán suggests that either it was not ruled by one figure and instead by a council, or that there were rising class tensions hidden beneath the veneer of the perfect city. It seems that the latter was the case, as, in 600 CE, an unknown force set only major administrative and elite buildings on fire and destroyed state-sponsored artworks.<sup>79</sup> Since the only structures that suffered damage during the attack belonged to the elites, scholars suggest that this was an internal affair, a revolution of the lower class against their overlords.<sup>80</sup> Despite the ambiguity surrounding this event, one thing remains certain, after the sacking of the elite sectors of the city, Teotihuacán lost its dominant position as an influential hub of commerce and culture in the Valley of México and, along with compounding factors like deforestation leading to massive resources scarcities along with soil erosion, the city was abandoned completely by 750 CE, leaving behind the treasures for which it had once been so renowned.<sup>81</sup> Centuries later, the Aztecs revered the once-great city, believing it to be the current sun's birthplace,<sup>82</sup> and, blinded by their perception of the city's glory, led themselves to believe that a city so grand could have only be created by the people from whom they claimed lineage, the Toltec.<sup>83</sup>

Whereas the histories of the Olmec and Teotihuacán have remained shrouded in mystery due to their lack of primary written records, Toltec history has remained muddled due to an excess of tertiary records, those authored by the Aztecs. Despite this, a few key inferences can be made from these biased accounts. First, the Toltec were likely an amalgam of the Nonoalca people, who fled from Teotihuacán during the city's final decades, and of Chichimeca farmers

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<sup>79</sup> Nichols, "Teotihuacan," 30

<sup>80</sup> Nichols, "Teotihuacan," 30

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>82</sup> Emily Umberger, "Antiques, Revivals, and References to the past in Aztec Art." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 13 (1987): 67

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 33

fleeing similar situations to the north.<sup>84</sup> These Tolteca-Chichimeca peoples then migrated to the arid deserts of the northwest Valley of México and established a capital at Culhuacán in the 9<sup>th</sup> ct. CE.<sup>85</sup> They proved to be gifted in agriculture and began showing signs of their artistic inclination by selectively breeding cotton to produce natural strains of various colors, however, due to the city's arid environment, the need for water was constant and its supply, irregular.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps due to their origins in Teotihuacán, the Toltec understood the value of trade networks, and the later abundance of obsidian in Toltec cities both as weapons and prestige items – despite its scarcity in the surrounding areas – shows that the Toltec embraced commerce.<sup>87</sup> Although the Toltec did not have a monopoly over a precious resource like Teotihuacán or the Maya once did, they created a high demand for another kind of resource altogether, their art. Toltec pottery, stone tools, textiles, elite ornaments, and metal fineries became coveted prestige items across the Valley of México<sup>88</sup> Sometime after establishing Culhuacán, the Toltec moved their capital to the city of Tula, which was seen as an architectural marvel, with twin pyramids, a large palace overlooking the main plaza, a colonnaded walkway with the columns shaped like warriors holding spear-throwers, *atlatsls*, and all of this surrounded by densely-packed apartment complexes.<sup>89</sup> The Aztecs wrote that Tula and all other Toltec cities were completely made of gold, covered with precious materials such as jade, turquoise, and quetzal feathers, and that all of these riches stemmed from the godly talent that the Toltec possessed, so much so that the Aztec attributed the invention of metallurgy, writing, and medicine to them.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Willermet et al., 448

<sup>85</sup> Ibid

<sup>86</sup> Thomas H. Charlton, "From Teotihuacan to Tenochtitlan: The Early Period Revisited," *American Antiquity*, 40, 2 (1975): 233

<sup>87</sup> Coggins, 36

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Coggins, 40

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 42

Despite being painted as a new breed of elegant, artistic, and intellectual people by the Aztecs, the Toltec did not stray far from the established systems of control that had served their predecessors so well. The Toltec Empire's expansion occurred mainly under its second ruler, Ce Acatl Topiltzin, who led conquests in the name of Quetzalcoatl, a winged serpent god that served as the Toltec's main deity, a god who had originated a millennium ago as the Olmec Dragon, was passed down to the Maya as Kukulcan, and who was later revered at Teotihuacán's Pyramid of the Sun, appearing dozens of times across its talud-tablero exterior.<sup>91</sup> The Toltec Empire did not bother to integrate the people it conquered into the Toltec culture, meaning that conquered city-states were violently crushed, forced to submit to imperial rule, and left to rebuild on their own, with their hatred and frustration festering within them.<sup>92</sup> Facing growing rebellious tension in its periphery and suffering a civil war due to a prolonged drought, the empire was finally brought to an end in the 12<sup>th</sup> ct. CE by the Chichimeca, members of the very ethnic group the Tolteca hailed from, who, along with another group, set Tula ablaze.<sup>93</sup> Though short-lived, the Toltec Empire managed to leave a cultural impact unlike that of its predecessors, becoming lost somewhere between myth and memory and thus, serving as the perfect cultural clay from which the Mexica could mold the identity of the Aztec Empire to replace its true lowly nomadic origins. However, interestingly, the very group that helped the Chichimeca destroy the Toltecs was the Mexica.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Coggins, 51

<sup>92</sup> Willermet et al., 448

<sup>93</sup> Dan Healan, "The Archaeology of Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico," *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 20, 1, (2012): 96

<sup>94</sup> Healan, 96



## CHAPTER 2 - COMMODIFICATION

The seeds of the Mexica's eventual internal struggle between the *self* and the *other* were planted long before the formation of the Aztec Triple Alliance, and long before their nuptial union to the Culhua. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as soon as they stepped foot in the Valley of México, the Mexica were uncompromisingly branded the *other*.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps initially following rumors of the prosperity to be found in Mesoamerica, the Mexica left their existence as hunter-gatherers in the fabled land of Aztlán and headed southward to an unknown future.<sup>96</sup> Their welcome was far from warm, as the Mexica were seen as alien to the peoples of the Valley of México, as the former were ethnically different from the latter, having descended from a later migratory movement to Mesoamerica than the other, more established, ethnic groups, having a different spoken and written language to those already set in stone throughout the Valley, having belief systems considered barbarous and obscene, and ultimately, having no claim to status, land, or lineage.<sup>97</sup> The Mexica arrived long after the 12<sup>th</sup> century mad scramble for power and influence in the Valley, so there was hardly any land left for them to lay down new roots, and so, they were forced to hire themselves out as mercenaries and fight for prestige they themselves could never know.<sup>98</sup> It was not long before the region's overlords, the Tepaneca, banished the Mexica from their domain, uprooting what little the latter had established as mercenaries, and forcing them to begin again with nothing more to their name than their written and spoken histories.<sup>99</sup>

During the final years of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the wandering Mexica came across the Culhua people, a seemingly forgotten remnant of the Toltecs, now a shadowy husk of their former glory,

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<sup>95</sup> Cathy Willermet et al., "Biodistances Among Mexica, Maya, Toltec, and Totonac Groups of Central and Coastal Mexico," *Chungara: Revista de Antropología Chilena*, 45, 3, (2013): 449

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>98</sup> Deborah Nichols, "Aztec Studies," 265 – 266

<sup>99</sup> Herbert Burhenn, "Understanding Aztec Cannibalism," 5

but they had a connection to the Toltecs nonetheless. These two fractured peoples, low-born yet capable mercenaries and a fading echo of a once-great civilization with no other options left, desperately needed each other to survive. For the Mexica to claim the Culhua's Toltec history as their own, they would have to erase every trace of who they once were. This would not mark the first time the Mexica had shed their identity in favor of a new one, nor rewritten their history reaching for some semblance of status. The Mexica were once the Tenochca, having changed their name at the supposed behest of their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, and their mythical home of Aztlán may have been nothing more than a fabrication meant to grant them a claim, however tenuous, to status.<sup>100</sup> Faced now with the same choice between working to make their *self* their own, or embracing the *other* and abandoning all they once were in an attempt to forge a new *self*, the Mexica set fire to their written records, disowned their past as nomads and mercenaries, and from then on, they were the Culhua-Mexica, heirs to the Toltec line.<sup>101</sup>

Although this connection to the legendary civilization was noteworthy, an empire could not be founded on a name alone, and so, the Mexica would need to claim a place upon which to set down their new roots. Guided by their patron god, the Mexica set forth after an omen which would mark the birthplace of their new empire: an eagle eating a serpent while perched atop a cactus. In 1325, they found this omen, though at the center of Lake Texcoco.<sup>102</sup> Despite there being multiple powerful altepetls in the neighboring area, none had claimed this location, as they all considered the lake's marshlands worthless and building upon to be a fool's errand, but the Mexica, now Culhua-Mexica, were no strangers to reconstruction and reinvention.<sup>103</sup> The supposedly worthless location would prove serendipitous in two crucial ways. Firstly, the

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<sup>100</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 211

<sup>101</sup> Hodge, "Archaeological Views on Aztec Culture," 198

<sup>102</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 53

<sup>103</sup> Willermet et al., 449.

Mexica demonstrated their proclivity for adaptation by innovating the use of *chinampas*, floating gardens, that resulted not only in a rich foundation upon which to grow their crops, but, with some alterations, a foundation upon to which to build their capital city, Tenochtitlán.<sup>104</sup> By looking beyond the rough appearance of the lake's marshlands, the Mexica circumvented the issue of water access that had plagued the civilizations that had come before them, and from the death of the marsh's foliage, new and bountiful harvests of beans, tomatoes, and squash, along with game like rabbits and turkeys, would grant life to the growing city.<sup>105</sup> Although the lake graced the Mexica with access to water and food, its true importance came in its placement, as it was nestled between multiple rival altepetls, meaning that, should any of them seek to conquer the miniscule Tenochtitlán, they would risk war with its monumental neighbors.<sup>106</sup> Under this indirect protection, the Mexica's capital would slowly grow and their numbers would grow with it. In 1428, with a claim to the mythical Toltecs and an impossible city as their capital, the Culhua-Mexica, led by Itzcoatl, would join the peoples of Tlacopán and Texcoco to form the Aztec Triple Alliance.<sup>107</sup> Together, along with other groups like the Tlaxcala, they defeated the Tepaneca, and together, the three took on the mantle of the Azteca, the new rulers of the Valley of México.<sup>108</sup> For the Mexica to secure the level of prosperity and wealth had they all but come to fetishize, they would need to amass a larger empire than had ever before been seen in the Valley of México. Perhaps due to the Mexica's own familiarity with the ambiguity and dynamism of a people's identity, they understood that whosoever had the power to mold the people's perception of religion and history had the power to alter the people's understanding of reality itself, thus ensuring the Mexica elite's control over the empire's lower class.

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<sup>104</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 53

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 10

<sup>106</sup> Willermet et al., 449

<sup>107</sup> Diel, "Till Death Do Us Part: Unconventional Marriages as Aztec Political Strategy," 267

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*

## 2.1 – Commodification of Religion

For propaganda to succeed, there must be grains of truth within its fabrication, and at the heart of the Mexica's manufactured reality lies a linchpin of religious validity: cosmic balance. In the vein of balance, Aztec cosmology understood the world to be comprised of inamic pairs – fire and water, life and death, male and female – each given meaning by their counterpart, thus creating a bidirectionally dependent relationship between the two.<sup>109</sup> To speak of the gods and of reality in the same breath would be redundant to the Aztecs, as the mortal realm was just humans' flawed understanding of divinity, and so reality was nothing more than a glimpse at the gods' totality – every raindrop, every kernel of corn, every birth, and every death were echoes of the divine – the gods *were* reality.<sup>110</sup> Herein lies the crux of Aztec religious control as the elite who can claim to speak for the gods can also determine the commoners who will die for them. This class stratification manifested the moment the Tepaneca fell, as Itzcoatl, the first Aztec hueytlatoani, set precedents by establishing the distribution of power within the young empire.<sup>111</sup> Given the Mexica's prior destruction of any written records and the malleability inherent to oral history, myth became variable. A new creation myth that claimed that a god self-immolated to spark the birth of the current Sun Era rose alongside the Aztec Empire. The myth's simple alteration to Mexica mythology posited two cosmic truths: the continuation of reality was not guaranteed, as Sun Eras had risen and fallen before the current age; and the mortal realm's existence was owed wholly to the sacrifice of the gods, so, for humanity to pay back that debt, and prolong the mortal age, the gods demanded blood.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Maffie, 27

<sup>110</sup> Maffie, 82

In one fell swoop, Itzcoatl had ensured the continuation and expansion of the fledgling empire by justifying its conquest of the region as the Aztecs' cosmic mission to feed the gods, had rationalized the elite status of the noble and warrior classes by claiming that they protected the preservation of reality by funding the construction of temples and taking captives for human sacrifices, and, whether intentional or not, had inextricably linked the concept of imperial growth and success to the presence and fervor of blood rituals.<sup>113</sup> Itzcoatl's cosmic justification of class distinctions also created the recursive logic of the moral community, wherein the ruling class would only remain in power so long as they maintained the favor of the gods. Under this logic, any dissent or dissatisfaction against the elite by the working class would thereby be opposing the will of the divine, effectively making the ruling class beyond question.<sup>114</sup>

Whereas the concept of the moral community implied the gods' support of the elite, the ruling class bypassed this pretense entirely, and literally spoke for the gods. Body piercings in the Aztec Empire served to telegraph social status, both in the placement of the piercing and the worth of the accessory within it.<sup>115</sup> In that vein, only *tlatōanis*, altepetl rulers, could have their ears and lower lip pierced simultaneously, a practice compared to carving out holes within a reed flute, and thus, they fashioned themselves as *ixiptlas*, conduits, literal instruments through which the gods could communicate with the empire's people.<sup>116</sup> However, the hueytlatōani alone could also have his septum pierced, as the nose was considered the foremost part of the body, and thus, only he, as the foremost ruler of the empire could claim this honor.<sup>117</sup> Beyond warriors and nobles, however, the elite class also included priests, who, alongside tlatōanis, embodied the

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<sup>113</sup> Hodge, 210

<sup>114</sup> Kay Read, "Sacred Commoners: The Motion of Cosmic Powers in Mexica Rulership," 62

<sup>115</sup> Danièle Dehouve, "The Notion of Substitution in Aztec Kingship," In *Anthropomorphic Imagery in the Mesoamerican Highlands: Gods, Ancestors, and Human Beings*, Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2020, 361,

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*

empire's religious hegemony in their ritual practices and divinations. Given the cosmic importance of the transferal of *Teyolia*, or life force, from the mortal to the divine realm, priests were considered to be of absolute import to the continuation of reality, and were therefore largely above question or reproach by anyone, rivaling even the tlatoanis' religious authority.<sup>118</sup> Not only did priests directly conduct ritual sacrifices, thus being seen as personally nourishing the gods, but their methods often served to create a liminal space within which the supernatural and metaphysical became tangible and identifiable, something best seen in the common practice of wearing the skin of a sacrificial victim to impersonate a god.<sup>119</sup> This process both fed the gods due to the bloody nature of flaying the victim, and also made the priests *ixiptlas* in their own right, as they took on the identities of these deities by wearing the victim's skin.<sup>120</sup> Therein, the priests cemented the physical connection between the ritual-going commonfolk and the gods, thereby adding a crucial weight to abstract concepts like the moral community and cosmic balance. These rituals also increased the priests' own authority, as, like the rulers, they spoke for the gods, but more than that, the priests also embodied them.<sup>121</sup>

If all other systems of control failed to assuage the masses and rebellion threatened to bloom, the ruling class could simply have the dissenters sacrificed. Although, officially, sacrificial ceremonies were justified under the pretense of divine nourishment, written codex records show that sacrifice was also knowingly used as a tool for intimidation and coercion. The *hueytlatoani* would hold the families of rebellious *tecuiltis* hostage under threat of sacrifice and members of the proletariat who expressed dissent against the ruling body were quickly used to set an example to the people that any insubordination would not be tolerated.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Burhenn, 2

<sup>119</sup> Maffie, 114

<sup>120</sup> Dehouve, 372

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>122</sup> Camilla Townsend, "Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs," Oxford Press, 2019. See Appendix 1 for details on *tecpana*, calendar organizing.

The religious dialogic power dynamic between the state and the people is best illustrated by the contrast between artworks used for state-sponsored and quotidian ceremonial practices. The *Statue of Coatlicue* (Fig. 1), sculpted in 1439, embodies the Aztec Empire's strategic use of religious imagery for the purposes of control. The goddess is depicted as having an inextricable connection to, and therefore implicit approval of, human sacrifice. Her necklace of severed hands, human hearts, and a human skull not only directly ties her to sacrificial practices, but also draws attention to her breasts, which punctuate her fertility and status as the mother of the Mexica's patron god and sun deity, Huitzilopochtli. This alludes to the way in which human sacrifice nourishes the gods, and reality therein, as the milk of a mother nourishes a child.<sup>123</sup> By commissioning her in a larger-than-life abstracted form, with a skirt of writhing rattlesnakes, serpent heads for shoulders and feet, quetzal feathers down her legs, snakes for a belt, and a face comprised of mirror-image serpents, the state emphasized the clearly defined gap between the mortal and the godly realms.<sup>124</sup> For commonfolk without access to the mythological education and context of the piece, as well as the people who could not claim to speak for such abstracted and incomprehensible figures, these intimidating state-sponsored works served to distance them from the divine, cementing the sense of their own powerlessness as well as the authority that the ruling body leveraged by using the gods' images.

Due to this class-based disconnect, rural farmers within the empire's periphery forewent abstraction in favor of domestic simplicity in the form of ritual figurines (Fig. 2) which adorned most rural homes and differed from state-sponsored art in three crucial ways. Firstly, simply out of a disparity in wealth and living space for worship between urban and rural peoples, the figurines tended to be miniscule and made of simpler and easily-moldable materials like

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<sup>123</sup> De León, 268

<sup>124</sup> Ibid

ceramics. However, due to these resource restrictions, artisans were able to make each household's figurines unique, thus creating more approachable imagery of the divine while also resulting in a more intimate relationship between the commonfolk and their deities. Lastly, and most importantly, these ritual figurines largely showed the gods as resembling humans, which meant that, culturally, when the people of the empire's periphery were left to codify their own visual language of the gods, they chose not only to imagine the divine as looking like them, a far cry from the intimidating abstraction of pieces like the Coatlicue, but also preferred to worship agricultural gods, who were often understood to be more peaceful and friendlier than gods like Huitzilopochtli or Quetzalcoatl with which the capital and urban cities identified most fervently.<sup>125</sup> The statuettes undermined the empire's religious authority both in lessening the prevalence, and therefore importance, of the capital's preferred, more grisly, gods, but also in the statuettes' figural appearances, as priests and rulers were no longer needed to humanize the abstracted gods, and so, the state believed that this domestic worship would erode its control over the working class, granting it a dangerous amount of autonomy and likely fomenting rebellion and independence therein.<sup>126</sup> To the Aztecs, there was a direct transactional relationship wherein the aid the gods would provide was proportional to the amount of offerings worshippers would sacrifice to them. Due to Itzcoatl allowing the warrior and noble classes to pillage the Tepaneca's bounty, wealth in the Aztec Empire was highly centralized in the capital Twin Cities of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco.<sup>127</sup> Urban areas, then, were often politically and religiously dominated by a few grossly affluent members of the upper class, and due to their inherited wealth, they would commission the building of temples and plazas upon which ceremonies

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<sup>125</sup> De León, 268

<sup>126</sup> Ibid

<sup>127</sup> Scott Hutson, "Carnival and Contestation in the Aztec Marketplace," 141



would be held.<sup>128</sup> These ceremonies posed far grander ritual worshipping opportunities than individual households could possibly afford and so, commonfolk all but coerced to attend these large ceremonies in order to reap from the far greater rewards inherent in larger offerings.<sup>129</sup>

Religion posed an all-encompassing net of control that the ruling body weaponized to manipulate and coerce the empire's people under threat of poor harvests, human sacrifice, and ultimately, the collapse of all reality.<sup>130</sup> In an empire where dissent was punishable by death and the continuation of reality itself was used as blackmail to ensure the docility of the working class, it is all too clear that there existed a commodification and an economy of faith. That the elite could simply change the rules of creation myths to suit their needs, play a game cosmic pretend and speak for the gods, and cry foul when the proletariat establish their own ritual visual vocabulary, all speak to religion being nothing more than toys to the elite, nothing more than a mere commodity.

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<sup>128</sup> Nichols, "Farm to Market in the Aztec Imperial Economy," 34

<sup>129</sup> Ibid

<sup>130</sup> Roger Atwood, "Under Mexico City," 28

## 2.2 – Commodification of History

In the economy of control, the price of lies and deception is nominal – histories can be rewritten by anyone. Freedom stands in stark opposition to such systems of manufactured inequality. Whether freedom of expression, of culture, of thought, it is a priceless resource and a source of rebelliousness that no system of control could ever hope to directly bribe or shatter. For would-be conquerors, then, if the state cannot control the hearts and minds of the people, the logical alternative is to manipulate everything else around them, fabricating a reality that not only justifies but also deifies the unequal distribution of wealth, of power, and ultimately, of humanity within it. In order for freedom, and the hope that blooms from it, to be subdued, the people must be completely surrounded by state-sponsored imagery such that any thought of revolt or rebellion is snuffed out in its infancy. The Aztec Empire did just that, designing its cities from the disparate echoes of fallen civilizations,<sup>131</sup> creating a proto-surveillance state by carving propaganda on every surface within its cities' walls,<sup>132</sup> and fashioning themselves a testament to the glory of the status quo – the cities were living documents, and while only the elite could read them, the people were taught just enough to fear them.<sup>133</sup>

To the Mexica, time did not progress in a linear trajectory, rather time was cyclical, with Sun Eras rising and falling only to be reignited and renewed, and as such, the Aztecs applied a similar logic to the material remains of those who came before them.<sup>134</sup> Building upon the concepts of the moral community and cosmic balance, the Aztecs contended that whosoever possessed an artifact was the present embodiment of all those who once laid claim to it, and thus inherited the history and authority of all those forerunners.<sup>135</sup> This mentality led the Aztecs on an

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<sup>131</sup> Umberger, "Antiques, Revivals, and References to the past in Aztec Art," 69

<sup>132</sup> Kay, 129

<sup>133</sup> Herbert, 5, See Appendix 2 for elaboration on *calmecacs*, the Aztec schools exclusively for the elite.

<sup>134</sup> Umberger, "Antiques, Revivals, and References to the past in Aztec Art," 64

<sup>135</sup> Ibid

almost fetishistic hunt for abandoned artifacts throughout the Valley of México, traveling to sites like Tula and Teotihuacán, hungrily seizing masks, figurines, and jewelry, anything that they believed could bolster their perceived fragile claim to authority.<sup>136</sup> However, the Aztecs' more insidious appropriation stemmed not from the theft of these civilizations' physical patrimonies, but rather in the adoption of the latter's more abstract yet unique markers such as their languages, cultures, and ultimately, their identities. To illustrate, the Aztec written language was little more than a facsimile of Toltec pictographs, their sculpture was largely based off of Toltec templates, and the drawings and paintings within their codices were taken from the Mixteca-Puebla peoples. Ironically, in appropriating such a vast and varied mosaic of artistic and cultural modes of expression, the Aztecs developed a visual language unique to them. When plundering the dead cities, along with lifting any artifacts they literally could, the Aztecs also studied and measured the layouts of these historic centers, noting the ways in which the settlements were organized, how the concept of power was made tangible by the placement of, and distance between, structures, how the cities' layouts related to the natural world around them, and above all else, how the precursors that once ruled those lands visualized their supposedly immutable power and manufactured a city-state to perpetuate their supremacy.<sup>137</sup>

These branching points are illustrated by the relationship between a plundered Tula Warrior Figure (Fig. 3) and a Late Aztec Period Culhua-Mexica derivative (Fig. 4). As the capital of the mythical Toltec empire, Tula represented a heritage the Mexica desperately clung to for substantiation of their claim to power, and as such, the original figure's Toltec cultural markers like the elite triangle loincloth, butterfly breastplate, and septum perforation are all

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<sup>136</sup> Umberger, "Antiques, Revivals, and References to the past in Aztec Art," 64

<sup>137</sup> Deborah Nichols, "Aztec Studies," 268

actively referenced not only in the imperial Aztec copy, but in the hueytlatoani's attire as well.<sup>138</sup> As such, the facsimile denotes an effort to ground the contemporaneous ruler, and by proxy, the ruling class, as a worthy and legitimate continuation of centuries of historical figures of authority.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, the Aztec derivative exaggerates nearly all the features of the relatively minimal and simple Tula original, with an enlarged symbol upon the former's crown, a more obvious and protruding breastplate, and far more elaborate designs all throughout its loincloth. These alterations insist upon the Aztecs' authority to rule, allude to their unquestionable military might, and in the end, subtly imply their artistic superiority over the Tolteca people they had once so fervently claimed lineage to. This visualization sought to modernize the artifacts the Aztecs had previously stolen in a strategic effort not only to insist that they were the rightful cyclical inheritors of the authority of all of the civilizations they had robbed, but also to present themselves as an avant-garde and intellectual people, at once a purposeful antithesis to their previous image as beggarly nomads, and also a hyperbolic pastiche of the reputation the Toltecs once held.

While punctuating their cities' streets and structures with historical artifacts and reproductions would serve to present the Aztec elite as the current and rightful stewards of the responsibility and legitimacy of rulership, such a strategy alone would not sufficiently overwhelm and intimidate the lower class with visualizations of the elite's sheer power, and so, to rectify this, the Aztecs designed their capital Twin Cities of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco to resemble the layouts of Tula and Teotihuacán.<sup>140</sup> Altogether, the Aztecs fabricated an atmosphere in the urban centers entirely inspired by the sensibilities of previous civilizations,

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<sup>138</sup> Dehoue, 61

<sup>139</sup> Umberger, "Antiques, Revivals, and References to the past in Aztec Art," 67.

<sup>140</sup> Nichols, "Aztec Studies," 268

thus seeking to employ the direct and subliminal methods of control that allowed those cities to rise to their historical greatness, and simultaneously ensuring that the concept of their imperial might was evident not only to would-be invaders, but also as a preliminary warning to its own people, disincentivizing any thoughts of dissent by surrounding them with constant reminders of the ruling class's legitimacy, power, and divine favor. While the cities' lower class was bombarded by this manufactured reality, the rural settlements' farmers fared no better, as the language of sycophantic historical posturing appropriated by the elite of the urban centers had in turn been adopted by the nobles of the rural altepetls.<sup>141</sup> The rural nobles lived within simplified versions of the urban palaces and as such, the nobles were forcing the rural peasants to experience the very same anti-rebellion perceptual manipulation that the urban lower class faced by being continuously reminded of state-sponsored architecture that treated its own people with more hostility than hospitality.<sup>142</sup>

Just as the Mexica had used the concept of the moral community to justify their rule, they would eventually forego this unnecessary intermediary step and simply bolster their deniability of abuses of power by directly projecting themselves unto their patron god. Huitzilopochtli's image was nearly omnipresent in urban cities, given his status as not only the patron god of the Aztecs, but also as the god of the sun and war. By choosing him as a proxy, the ruling essentially ensured that their presence was felt and feared wherever a carving or sculpture of Huitzilopochtli could be found – everywhere.<sup>143</sup> Much like how Huitzilopochtli's original mythology was altered in order to justify imperial expansion, his origin story was rewritten to better serve the ruling class's agenda, and thus, the 1473 *Coyolxauhqui Stone* was commissioned not only to visualize

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<sup>141</sup> Michael Smith, "Life in the Provinces of the Aztec Empire," 81

<sup>142</sup> Michael Smith and Berdan Frances, "Archaeology and the Aztec Empire," 360

<sup>143</sup> Kay, 129

Huitzilopochtli's altered creation myth, but also, to implicitly depict the gruesome fate of enemies of the state (Fig. 5). In the updated myth, Coyolxauhqui is cast as the selfish dissident, greedily demanding the title of ruler despite Huitzilopochtli being a more-qualified and humble candidate. It is telling that the *Coyolxauhqui Stone* was situated at the base of the Templo Mayor stairs, from which sacrificial victims were rolled down to presumably land on the *Stone*.<sup>144</sup> The artifact itself functioned as more than just an intimidatory propaganda piece, as it was also considered a surface upon which sacrificial blood would seep into and thereby feed the gods. As such, the *Coyolxauhqui Stone* was an unspoken reminder of the futility of dissenting against the cosmically predetermined status quo, as it was Huitzilopochtli, the proxy for the established religious and political order, that threw the dismembered traitor down the temple steps, proving himself to be the rightful, humble, and undisputed ruler(s) of the land.

Were the image and visual language of a dismembered Coyolxauhqui unique only to this sacrificial stone, then perhaps the theories of its use as an explicit and strategic forewarning against rebellion would be up for contention. However, just like her brother's mythology was reshaped to fit the needs of the elite, the symbol of Coyolxauhqui would become a malleable tool used to fit the evolving political ends of the Aztec ruling class. Looking back to the birth of the Aztec Empire, upon defeating their Tepaneca overlords, the Aztec Triple Alliance shared in the spoils of war, but they did not do so evenly. Itzcoatl divided the bounty into five pieces, relegating only one fifth to Tlacopán, who were themselves rebel Tepaneca factions that had fought against the Tepaneca proper, but giving two fifths each to Texcoco and the Culhua-Mexica. Despite having taken up arms against their own people and fighting alongside the Triple Alliance, the Tlacopán peoples were treated as lesser from the very inception of the Aztec

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<sup>144</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 204, See Appendix 3 for brief description of the Coyolxauhqui myth

Empire. Itzcoatl would once again give preferential treatment to the Culhua-Mexica and Texcoco peoples when claiming the former's altepetl of Tenochtitlán to be the true capital of the empire, and assigning the latter reign over a lucrative port altepetl along lake Texcoco, leaving Tlacopán to rule the perceived lesser of the two capital Twin Cities, Tlatelolco. Over decades, Tlatelolco would flourish and gain massive wealth by becoming what was essentially a city-sized marketplace, eclipsing Tenochtitlán's wealth and, therein, authority. After decades of mistreatment of the Tlacopán peoples, in 1473, Tlatelolco's tlatoani, Moquihuix, began the process of declaring independence from the Triple Alliance, though mainly, from Tenochtitlán.<sup>145</sup> Realizing that the secession of the Aztec Empire's most lucrative altepetl would severely wound its ability to control its many territories, Tenochtitlán declared war on Tlatelolco, and, with the former being the main source of the empire's military forces, swiftly defeated the Tlatelolco revolt.<sup>146</sup> It is said Moquihuix retreated to the top of Tlatelolco's Templo Mayor and was subsequently thrown off to his death, sharing Coyolxauhqui's fate. Herein lies the strategic revisionist history that had by this point become second nature to the Mexica. Tenochtitlán's hueytlatoani, Axayacatl, ordered that every trace of Moquihuix be erased from Aztec history, other than the depiction of him falling to his doom from the Tlatelolco Templo Mayor, and so, for the crimes of trying to establish a new history, just as the Mexica had once done, every neutral or positive mention of Moquihuix was systematically omitted from the Aztec history.<sup>147</sup>

However, this was not enough for Axayacatl, as two artifacts were found at the base of Tenochtitlán's Templo Mayor stairs, some of the only surviving state-sponsored traces of Moquihuix throughout the empire, these being a small pendant buried under the Coyolxauhqui

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<sup>145</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 12

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>147</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 16

Stone, and a vessel containing ashes now believed to be the remains of Moquihuix.<sup>148</sup> The greenstone pendant is an interesting partner piece to the *Coyolxauhqui Stone*, as it appears to show a fatally wounded *male Coyolxauhqui* figure, and, by drawing analogs from the *Coyolxauhqui* myth, this figure likely represents a traitor immortalized in his moment of defeat (Fig. 6). Given that the pendant was found beneath the massive *Coyolxauhqui Stone*, it was likely buried there upon the Stone's installation in 1473, the same year of Tlatelolco's revolt.<sup>149</sup> In uniting these pieces, there is a clear shared symbolic meaning between them – two traitorous leaders whose rebellions were put to an end as they were tossed from their respective hilltops. As such, the *male Coyolxauhqui* figure is likely meant to represent Moquihuix, and in adapting the *Coyolxauhqui* visual language, and burying his effigy at the foot of Tenochtitlán's Templo Mayor, every time that a sacrifice was rolled down its stairs, Moquihuix's defeat would be relived, the gods would be fed, and thus his eternal damnation of being shamed for daring to defy the Mexica was made into a *fact*, inextricably linked to the nourishment of the gods, and therein, the continuation of reality.

Curiously, just a couple of feet away from the *Coyolxauhqui Stone*, along the base of the Templo Mayor's stairs, was the *Vessel with Tezcatlipoca Relief* (Fig. 7). On its own, the *Vessel* does not appear out of place, as various vessels and standard-bearers once lined the stairs leading up the Templo Mayor, and its relief of Tezcatlipoca also fits thematically, as the Templo Mayor once faced a temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, the god of order to Tezcatlipoca's god of chaos. In connecting the *Vessel* to the events of the Tlatelolco revolt, and analyzing the contents within the artifact, a more sinister picture of the *Vessel's* purpose, is revealed. The presence of ashes in the vessel was noteworthy enough, as they implied the remains of a very highly-ranked

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<sup>148</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 23

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 11



individual, but, in finding other cultural markers within the vessel, including a small carved duck representative of Tlatelolco, the list of likely suspects narrowed greatly, heavily implying Moquihuix.<sup>150</sup> The placement of the *Vessel*, not under the Coyolxauhqui Stone, but proudly displayed at the base of the cultural heart of Tenochtitlán, as well as Moquihuix seemingly being honored with a relief of Tezcatlipoca, appeared oxymoronic. Only when considering the *Vessel* as a partner piece to both the *Coyolxauhqui Stone* and the pendant, along with Moquihuix being omitted from history, does it become clear that the *Vessel* was meant to humiliate him, representing him not as Huitzilopochtli, whom he so dearly fashioned himself after, and whom only the hueytlatoni could claim ixiptla status to, but as Tezcatlipoca, a god associated with excrement and treachery.<sup>151</sup>

In his time as hueytlatoni, Axayacatl was able to literally omit his political rival from history, yet, though this erasure is existentially disquieting, Moquihuix was just one person. At the end of Axayacatl's reign, his successor and younger brother, Tizoc, not only learned from his brother's reality-altering tactics, but also considered them a challenge. Where Axayacatl had sponsored the visual language of Moquihuix as a Coyolxauhqui figure, and alluded to his toppling by representing him through divine proxies, his younger brother forewent all sense of subtlety in the *Stone of Tizoc* (Fig. 8), and bluntly depicted mortal imperial soldiers crushing rebel forces.<sup>152</sup> However, if Tizoc had simply included an honest image of the rebels on his commission, he would have risked the empire's lower class people relating to, and potentially being inspired by, the dissidents, as well as risked showing the similarities between the imperial soldiers and the rebels, as, after all, they were both part of the same empire. As such, Tizoc chose

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<sup>150</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 23

<sup>151</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 211.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid

to represent this complex political struggle as a simple binary, pulling far from Aztec history to find two opposing identity extremes, the very heart of the Aztec argument between the *self* and the *other* – the imperial warriors were depicted as Toltecs, and the rebels as Chichimeca.<sup>153</sup>

Just as his older brother once had, Tizoc repurposed foundational Aztec imagery in order to deride the empire's enemies, though, interestingly, while Axayacatl relied on more subjective and fluid mythical imagery to convey his psychological warfare, Tizoc simply opted to use real historic representations as codes for concepts of class and worth, furthering the elite's strategic blurring between myth and history.<sup>154</sup> Fittingly, as this effort revolved around stripping contemporary Aztec rebels of their voice, dignity, and identities and replacing them with corrupted and exaggerated stereotypical caricatures of barbarism, the images used to elevate the Aztec soldiers were just as historically unfounded. Not only did the Aztecs base their conceptions of the Toltecs off of idealized and self-aggrandizing Toltec sculpture, but as can be seen from detail of the *Stone's* rim carvings (Fig. 8b), the Toltec image the Aztecs used to legitimize their tyrannical practices bore more resemblance to their own derivative version of Toltec sculpture than the sculpture itself, as shown by the exaggerated butterfly breastplate and sharper triangle loincloth. The Mexica were essentially several self-referential layers deep into a game of cultural telephone, and thus preferred to harken to their own fetishized idea of Toltec refinement instead of accepting the Toltec's own humbler depiction of themselves. Tizoc, once again drawing inspiration from his brother's Coyolxauhqui Stone, represented the Aztec cosmology by having the sun glyph, a representation of Huitzilopochtli, carved onto his commission's sacrificial surface (Fig. 8a).<sup>155</sup> By including this allusion to the elite's divine

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<sup>153</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 46

<sup>155</sup> Maffie, 321

proxy, the Stone of Tizoc ensured that to even consider rebelling against the Aztec Empire or to so much as question the rulers' revisionist history, any enemy of the empire, even other Aztecs, forfeited their ties to the Toltecs and were reduced to nothing more than Chichimeca by selfishly opposing the gods' nourishment.<sup>156</sup>

The Stone attempts, through its repetition of the warring figures, to insist that the imperial ruling class will always succeed over the greedy and disheveled commonfolk. However, not only was the outcome of the battle between the Toltecs and the Chichimeca reversed in reality, not only was the imagery used for both figures as much a fabrication as the reality the *Stone* sought to peddle, but more importantly, in a similar way to how the imperial forces were just as Aztec as the farmers they were sent to quash, the figures in the *Stone* were ultimately both Chichimeca, and so, the Stone of Tizoc perfectly encapsulates the tragic way that the Mexica, and by proxy the Aztec, were always ultimately fighting themselves.

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<sup>156</sup> Umberger, "The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War," 24

### **2.3 – Commodification of the People**

The riches of an empire lie not within its material or influential wealth, but in its *people*, in the cultures that have arisen from the communal experiences of hardship and hope, of success and sorrow, of the way in which a community has come together in the knowledge that there is strength in numbers, but not one of violence, rather a strength of feeling welcomed, known, and safe among one's people. Within these communities that identity is negotiated and defined, that meaning and tradition arise from the quotidian, and that the all-to-human act of story-telling springs forth into vast histories and mythologies that grant some certainty to an otherwise uncertain world. Palaces, let alone empires, are not built by one ruler, mythologies and histories not coalesced by one generation, and a people's identity not crafted in a vacuum.<sup>157</sup>

From the Mexica's past as mercenaries, the Aztec Empire's birth in the embers of war, and the implicit reliance on conquest for Itzcoatl's imperial expansion, the warrior class was inextricably embedded within the foundation of the empire from its very inception. On the battlefield, a soldier was expected to capture his opponents alive in order to bring them to their *altepetl* for the priests to sacrifice them to the gods, and a warrior's status was directly correlated to the number of people they had captured.<sup>158</sup> By claiming a large number of enemy combatants, fragments of the upper class's luxuries were opened to the warrior class, such as living in better housing closer to their city's religious center, gaining legal permission to publicly wear jewelry, certain types of restricted garb, and elite hairstyles that denoted rank, ritualistically consuming the coveted remains of captured enemies, and, having a greater choice of spouse due to the prestige that came with the role.<sup>159</sup> In weaponizing this class disparity and exploiting the young

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<sup>158</sup> Hutson, 140

<sup>159</sup> Burhenn, 2

warriors' desperate attempts at experiencing life as an elite, those in power industrialized war, having a never-ending supply of warriors and therefore, a never-ending supply of sacrifices. This conveyor belt of muscle and blood fed into the idea that the elite were favored by, and nourished, the gods, rendering them even further beyond reproach. As if the warriors' existence as cogs in the machine of imperial expansion justified by the preservation of reality did not reduce them enough to mere commodities, the ruling class priests' 'flower wars' make the dehumanization unquestionable. When neighboring altepetls, regardless of status as friend or foe, were in need of human sacrifices, the priests would order the warriors to march out and engage in these flower wars, where the sole purpose of the deadly combat was to capture soldiers for human sacrifice, and once both sides were satisfied, the battle was called off and both groups returned home.<sup>160</sup> Priests would describe battles as ritualistic dances wherein warriors spilled their blood in honor of the gods, but due the very existence of flower wars and how priests treated the lives of these lower-class men with such disdain, it is clear that the warrior class served a purpose, but not one of feeding the gods or preserving reality. Soldiers served as tools for expansion, pawns to be played and sacrificed at the whims of rulers and priests, cogs in a system meant to disincentivize dissent within the empire, and, given the existence of a military draft, a thinly-veiled scheme for population-control. Despite the fact that a city-state without sacrifices implied that the gods no longer favored the rulers, the elite only ever cared to enforce their moral community when it benefitted them. The young would-be-warriors knew the risks involved, but to them, a gruesome death on the battlefield or on a sacrificial slab were well worth even the slightest chance at living a noble's life.

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<sup>160</sup> Burhenn, 2

Given that permission to publicly wear jewelry was a reward for the accomplished warrior, it is clear that Aztec society privileged a person's image and judged them accordingly. The nobles' inherent access to jewelry, including symbolically charged pieces like turquoise which was connected to the Toltecs, and to fine fabrics, specifically cotton garb which was also believed to reflect Toltec refinement and prestige, both served as readily identifiable class differences, further cementing the class disparities that led young men into the military.<sup>161</sup>

However, the benefits of being born into the upper class extended far beyond a person's appearance, as, upon conquering an altepetl, the Aztec Empire would offer the current ruling class to keep their power, so long as they paid taxes and tribute to the Twin Cities, and by doing this, not only did the hueytlatoni extend his empire, diffuse his culture and with it, the class disparities that fueled the continuation of the military machine, but also, ensured that a loyal, like-minded ruling class remained in power, essentially allowing him to project his decrees and desires across the empire, making him a nigh omnipresent force in the Valley of México.<sup>162</sup> The one exception to the upward social mobility mentioned above, and the one other opportunity for someone from the lower-class to ever reach the heights of the ruling class, was when a tlatoni would choose a captive set to be sacrificed to be his ixiptla, and this captive would adopt the identity of the tlatoni, wearing his garb, being treated and referred to as him, living his life of luxury for months, if not years.<sup>163</sup> At the end of this contract, the captive would be sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli, and the real tlatoni was believed to absorb the vitality and power of the sun god through this *self*-less sacrifice.<sup>164</sup> It begs repeating that the sacrificial ixiptlas agreed to this relationship given that they could live as a tlatoni for an extended period of time and believed

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<sup>161</sup> Aguilera, 6

<sup>162</sup> Smith, "Life in the Provinces of the Aztec Empire," 76

<sup>163</sup> Caroline Pennock, "Mass Murder or Religious Homicide? Rethinking Human Sacrifice and Interpersonal Violence in Aztec Society," 289

<sup>164</sup> Ibid

that, upon their death, they would enter the realm of the gods as the tlatoanis were said to, thus essentially marking a microcosmic version of the warriors' desperate attempts to eke out a semblance the elite lifestyle, and doing so knowing all of the risks involved, simply due to the strategically drastic disparities in living conditions between those that had and those that did not.

It was not enough for the ruling class to weave religious systems of control based on cosmic balance that left the people powerless to oppose them, not enough that rulers could have dissenters literally erased from history if they so desired, not enough that war had become so ingrained in the empire's normalcy that it was held as if by habit, no, the elite were not satisfied by the mere commodification of the people, they wanted commendation for the people's daily struggles and backbreaking efforts as well. The 1487 *Dedication Stone* (Fig 9) marks at once a culmination of the previously seen imperial artistic vocabulary of control while also embodying a branching-off point that saw the Aztec elite turning not to the *other*, but rather to the *self*, for validation. Carved onto the stela's greenstone surface, two figures are seen nourishing the Aztec earth monster, Tlaltecuhli, here a proxy for the pantheon of gods, and thus ensuring the life-giving gift of maize.<sup>165</sup> The identity of the figures completely redefines the way the piece is understood, as their depiction wearing plain clothing and the ritual headdresses reserved only for sacrificial victims presents an image that fits neatly in line with the *Coatlicue*, *Coyolxauhqui Stone*, and *Stone of Tizoc* series in linking the concept of the sacrifice of the enemy to the nourishment of the gods, however, these figures are no enemies, rather they are both Mexica hueytlatoanis.<sup>166</sup> On the left, Tizoc, the ruler whose rebellion quashing exploits were immortalized in the piece named after him, and on the right, Ahuitzotl, his successor, both shown self-mutilating to offer sustenance to the divine. The decision to include Tizoc opposite himself

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<sup>165</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 211

<sup>166</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society," 211

betrays Ahuizotl's deeper intentions, as the former's presence alludes to the events carved onto the *Stone of Tizoc*, meaning that anyone who dared to question the legitimacy of Ahuizotl's rule would face the very same fate that the rebels who opposed his predecessor did: death, defeat, and, if even allowed to remain in the historic records, revisionist reduction to Chichimeca status. Beyond that, however, in the notable absence of Toltec identifying markers, the latter now proudly presents himself as the latest in a long line of not Toltec, but rather *Aztec* rulers, finally eroding the Mexica obsession to the external *other* and creating a now meta-referential system that no longer insisted upon, but rather declared, the Mexica's legitimacy to rule.

In spite of all this, the narrative scene portion of the *Dedication Stone*, despite depicting two hueytlatonans and the earth monster, is wholly eclipsed by the true focus of the piece, the maize glyph that serves as a foundation and support for the scene itself, and thus a justification for Ahuizotl's rule. None of the previous state-sponsored images shown so much as hint at the representation of the peasant class, focusing only on gods or warriors as they benefitted the narrative of the elite, which makes the overpowering presence of the maize glyph here, which serves as an implicit semiotic index of the people, a long overdue inclusion of the lower class in imperial art. However, now that the lower class was finally being represented, if indirectly, the ruler chose to do so only to claim complete credit for their unrecognized and unsung labor.

The lucrative income the empire gained by taxing the marketplaces made it impossible to simply ban them, but given how much freedom they offered the people, the empire decided instead to use the markets to pry the people's earnings from them.<sup>167</sup> The wealth that separated the elites from the peasants resulted largely from landownership, as only a select few families were gifted plots of land amidst the fall of the Tepaneca by the hueytlatonani.<sup>168</sup> As such,

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<sup>167</sup> See Appendix 4 for details on the experiences of laborers in the markets

<sup>168</sup> Kay, 5



dynasties began to dot the Valley of México, each ruling over their own altepetl in the name of the empire, and all the wealth, expansion, and growth that each generation gained by exploiting the lower class would be transferred down only within their family, keeping those select few dynasties in power and loyal to the empire.<sup>169</sup> Terrain seldom traded hands, as land sale was exceedingly rare, but the hueytlatoani used land either as bargaining chips or blackmail, as disloyal or agriculturally unproductive dynasties could be stripped of their land which would then be gifted to another, more loyal, elite family.<sup>170</sup> However, the truly important power dynamics occurred within the individual altepetls, as their worth was measured not by their material wealth or their size, but rather by the number of commoners that lived within them.<sup>171</sup> Given that each tecuhtli had to pay tribute to the hueytlatoani, the formers sought to grow their settlements' populations to be able to increase their own net wealth, and with those excess funds, expand their altepetls and draw in more commoners. The peasant farmers became so commodified that whenever land was passed between generations or dynasties, they were merely considered part of the transaction, as if cattle or resources to be traded and owned. The workers' severe poverty made it so that they had no hope of building a life anywhere else.<sup>172</sup> As the empire and its population grew in size and as initial waves of tribute and taxes flooded the Twin Cities, altepetl expansion projects and elite living conditions soared to new heights, but new lows were soon to follow.

The 1507 *Throne of Moctezuma II* (Fig 10) marks not the culmination, but the only possible conclusion, of the codification of the Aztec religious and historic systems of control that had been evolving in the empire up until this point. Fittingly, as the Aztec state-sponsored art

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<sup>169</sup> Kay, 5

<sup>170</sup> Deborah Nichols, "Farm to Market in the Aztec Imperial Economy," 25

<sup>171</sup> Hodge, 209

<sup>172</sup> Ibid

entered a new age of depicting the ruler as god, the Aztec Empire entered a new 52-year sun life cycle during the 1507 New Fire Ceremony. These ceremonies, wherein the Aztec solar and sacred calendars overlapped, marked the most vulnerable time in the sun's life cycle, wherein it was most possible that it would cease to rise altogether.<sup>173</sup> Due to this, the entire throne is ostensibly designed to commemorate the nourishment of the sun, ensuring its new beginning was an auspicious one, a hope likely shared by the ruling class given the increasingly grim conditions across the empire as whole.

The throne itself is modeled after Huitzilopochtli's side of the Templo Mayor, and is covered in symbols that relate not only him, but to the welcoming of his new life cycle.<sup>174</sup> The glyphs that represent the years that mark the end of the previous and the start of the new cycle adorn the throne's front, the backrest is dominated by a sun disk, reminiscent of the sacrificial surface of the *Stone of Tizoc*, and at center of its cardinal directions, the sun glyph, declaring the sun to be the universal source of life in the Aztec Empire.<sup>175</sup> To the left of the sun disk, stands Huitzilopochtli, clad in his hummingbird armor, and facing Moctezuma II on the right, who self-mutilates to feed the god.<sup>176</sup> The rest of the throne's carvings serve as a religious, historic, and political foundation for the role of the hueytlatoani, as the right and left surfaces of the throne depict the gods of rain and dawn, Tlaloc and Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, and of fire and flowers, Xiuhtecuhtli and Xochipilli, respectively. The throne's backside depicts an eagle, which alludes to the location upon which Huitzilopochtli instructed the Mexica to build Tenochtitlán, and the throne's seat shows Tlaltecuhli, the earth monster, a metonymy for the earthly realm.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Maffie, 195

<sup>174</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 49

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 52

<sup>176</sup> Townsend, "State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan," 49

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*

When considering only the throne's purpose, all of these symbols do well to describe the concepts that inform a hueytlatoani's governance, but in analyzing its literal function, the carvings take on an entirely new meaning that focuses not on Huitzilopochtli as a god born anew, but on Moctezuma II as a newly-born god. Firstly, given that the throne is designed as a temple, which were themselves meant to be anthropogenic mountains that allowed people to rise above the underworld and nearer to, if only slightly, that of the gods. That this throne was designed to have thirteen steps on its front, however, shows that whosoever sat upon it had risen above not just the underworld, and thereby death, but also above the natural world, given the thirteen layers of reality that make up the human realm.<sup>178</sup> The sun disk's inclusion on the throne's back rest may harken back to Tizoc and his domination over any would-be rebels, something that Moctezuma II would surely need given the state of the empire, but the sun glyph at its center meant that he blotted out the sun every time he sat upon his throne, placing himself before Huitzilopochtli. The earth monster carved onto the seat of throne may have been meant to ground and connect the hueytlatoani to his empire, but in truth, it serves to show how he alone sits above the whole world and above a proxy for the godly pantheon that two hueytlatoanis spilled their lifeblood for in the *Dedication Stone*. That Moctezuma II is propped up by imagery of the mythical eagle that represents Tenochtitlán's creation, and that city was understood to be center of the world, him situating himself on top of it all, encapsulated not only how he hopes to present himself, but how he was drunk with his own ostensive grandeur. The gods on the throne's sides are all topical and call for a bountiful New Fire, yet they are all depicted on the level upon which Moctezuma II sat on, meaning that not only did he sit on the earth monster that had been so dearly worshipped in the *Dedication Stone*, but he also sits above the god who commands the

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<sup>178</sup> Maffie, 506

other half of the Templo Mayor, Tlaloc, the rain-bringer, as well as above the gods of dawn, fire, and flowers. Moctezuma II blatantly depicted himself as above the gods that brought life and new beginnings, showing how he alone was the culmination of the new era the empire had just entered. Finally, the backrest wherein Moctezuma II faces Huitzilopochtli just as Ahuitzotl faces Tizoc in the *Dedication Stone*. The latter artwork sought to validate the recently-inaugurated hueytlatoani by connecting him to the Aztec rulers of the past, as a passing of the torch between figures on equal footing, and that the same visual language is used to present *the* Aztec patron god and the latest hueytlatoani removes any pretense of humility that had at one time been so important to the fabricated image of the hueytlatoani as martyr. Moreover, just as the *Dedication Stone* had presented maize so centrally, thereby allowing Ahuitzotl to claim the labor of the lower class as his own doing, the *Throne of Moctezuma II* allowed him to appropriate the works and efforts of the gods and monsters etched onto the stone – Moctezuma II had renounced simply being an *ixiptla* for the gods and harkening to them for validation, opting now to present himself as Huitzilopochtli's head priest, though, as the relief shows, no longer simply a conduit, but a full-fledged god-emperor, if not the god himself.

## CONCLUSION

Reconsidering the Mexica's story through Marxist and Postcolonial approaches was supposed to be novel, but in writing this thesis, and researching how commodification is used by the few to control the many, I see now how similar to modern-day powers the Aztec Empire was, and in turn, how similar to past civilizations the world of today is. Perhaps the Aztecs were onto something in their belief that time is cyclical.

The idea for this thesis came about at a time when blatant and outward anti-Mexican rhetoric was commonplace in the United States, granted legitimacy by White House. My hope was that, by understanding the Aztecs under a modern lens and using the findings to help educate people as to the logic by which they lived, I could help fight such prejudices. Years later, my people are in cages, rather 'temporary overflow centers,' and the nation's working class continues to be oppressed and exploited as the few in the ruling body use their own modern-day visual vocabulary and media to try to quell the masses. The number of similarities between the Aztec Empire in decline and many countries today, especially the United States, is no coincidence. The elite continue to commodify religion, history, and the people in order to control and dissolve the people's identity, leaving us trapped between the *self* and the *other*.

The key difference is that now, the proletariat, the working class, the commoners are more connected than ever before and together, we can define and hold true to our beliefs, uncover the histories that were kept from us for so long, and lift each other up along the way. Empires will always rise and fall, but together, the people, our cultures, our stories, and our struggles will endure so long as we remain true to our identities, true to *ourselves*, and true to each *other*.

Thank you for reading.

Illustrations



**Figure 1:** *Statue of Coatlicue*, Late Period, 1439 (disputed)



**Figure 2:** Peasant Ritual Figurines, Date Unknown



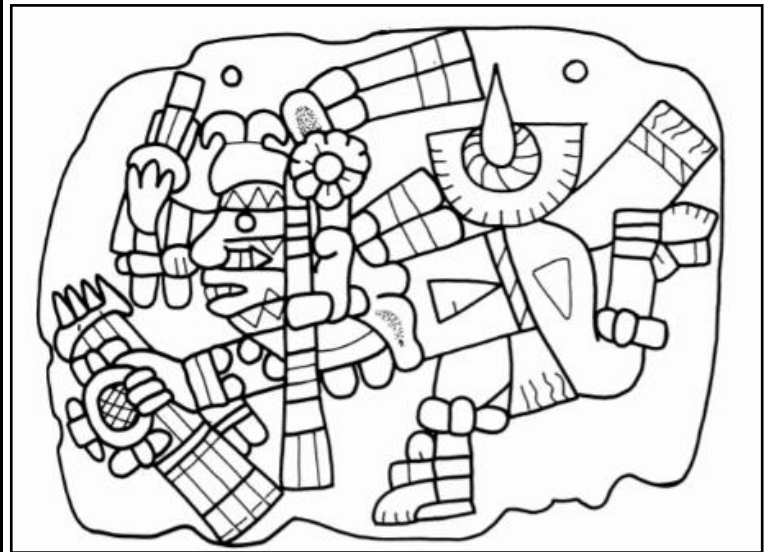
**Figure 3:** Tula Warrior Figure



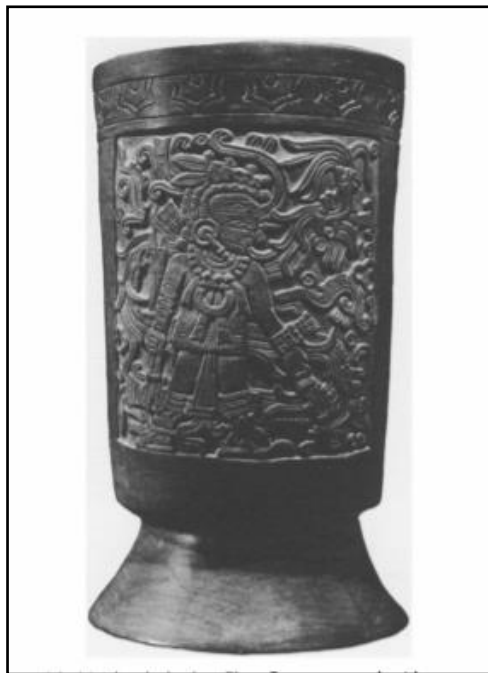
**Figure 4:** Mexica copy of Tula Warrior Figure, Late Aztec Period



**Figure 5:** *Coyolxauhqui Stone*, Late Aztec Period, 1473



**Figure 6:** *Male Coyolxauhqui*, carving on greenstone pendant, found in cache beneath the *Coyolxauhqui Stone*, Date Unknown,



**Figure 7:** *Vessel with Tezcatlipoca Relief*, Late Aztec Period, ca. 1464-1481



**Figure 7a:** *Tezcatlipoca relief detail drawing*

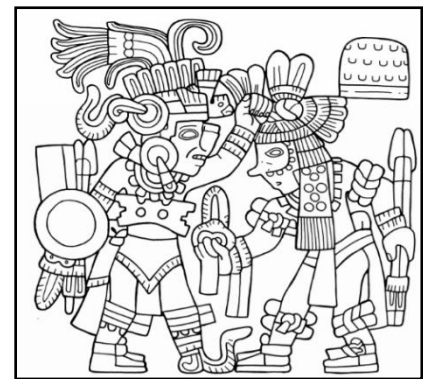




**Figure 8:** *Stone of Tizoc*, Late Aztec Period, 1485



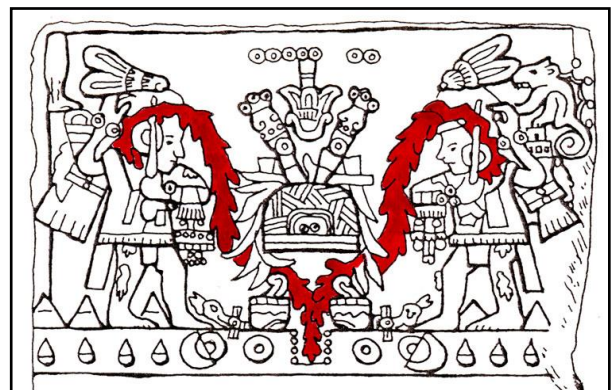
**Figure 8a:** *Stone of Tizoc*, Top



**Figure 8b:** *Stone of Tizoc*, Rim relief detail drawing



**Figure 9:** *Dedication Stone*, Late Aztec Period, 1487



**Figure 9a:** *Dedication Stone*, Relief detail drawing





**Figure 10a:** *Throne of Moctezuma II*, Backrest relief detail



**Figure 10:** *Throne of Moctezuma II*, Late Aztec Period, 1507



**Figure 10b:** *Throne of Moctezuma II*, Right side relief detail



**Figure 10c:** *Throne of Moctezuma II*, Left side relief detail

## Appendices

### APPENDIX 1 – Tecpana, Cosmic Calendar Organizing

Although the priests' religious authority at times rivaled the rulers', the priests served not as rivals, but advisors, to the rulers, seen clearly in the former's practice of *tecpana*, calendar divination.<sup>179</sup> The Aztecs used two calendar systems, a 350-day solar calendar and a 260-day sacred calendar, to determine cosmically auspicious dates for nearly every facet of imperial life, such as when to hold ritual ceremonies, wage wars, celebrate with feasts, open markets, and even when to plant and harvest crops.<sup>180</sup> By organizing and planning events, priests were seen as balancing the chaotic and eventful passage of time, which was equated to balancing the cosmos, however, more than that, through their knowledge of the context surrounding certain dates, priests were able to manipulate and alter when imperial events would be held, thus creating a fabricated sense of cosmic, godly, or ancestral favor of the current elite by strategically controlling the empire's schedule.<sup>181</sup>

### APPENDIX 2 – Calmecacs, Aztec Schools for the Elite

When discussing history, it is vital not only to consider what agendas individuals disseminate and why these narratives were chosen among a sea of others, but it is just as pivotal to question who has access to the knowledge necessary to negotiate and interact with these histories, and how this access is then realized into either social unification or, as was the case with the Aztecs, social stratification. The Aztec Empire understood that education could serve as a tool of control depending on the level of exclusivity attached to accessing that education., and as such, limited entry into the *calmecacs*, elite urban schools, to the children of the wealthy and the privileged.<sup>182</sup> As these students would go on to become the ruling class's next generation, they were mainly taught how to maintain the theatricality of decorum and refinement by using the eloquent 'ancient words,' the *huehuehtlatolli*, thus superficially elevating themselves away from the unbecoming behavior of the commoner rabble, though, since the students themselves would only be a link within the chain of command, serving under the hueytlatoani and the priest class, they were also taught to temper their expectations and accept the status quo, taught to embrace frugality, deprivation, and discipline.<sup>183</sup> While certainly noteworthy that even among the elites, there existed a strategic and systemic separation between the merely wealthy and the truly powerful, the focus should remain on the presence of education as a tool used for class separation. Being versed in the context surrounding not only social traditions and interactions, but also religion and history, would grant the elite students new frames of reference with which to understand and take advantage of the systems of control hidden just below the surface of their society. It is telling, however, that even the elites were taught to accept the amount of freedom that the true rulers allotted them, and that one of those strategies of control was the concept of "greed vs. humility."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Maffie, p 106

<sup>180</sup> Maffie, p 106

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>182</sup> Herbert, p 5

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>184</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society,." p. 202

### APPENDIX 3 – Revised Coyolxauhqui Myth

According to the revised Aztec legend, Coyolxauhqui, the moon, was jealous of her unborn brother, Huitzilopochtli, as he would inherit the sun crown and rule as sun god. In her envy, she convinced their brothers, the stars, to kill their pregnant mother, Coatlicue, and forcefully claim the sun crown as her own.<sup>185</sup> Huitzilopochtli emerged in defense of his mother, slew his brothers and sister, and threw the latter down the Coatepec, the mountain from which the left side of the Templo Mayor was based.<sup>186</sup>

### APPENDIX 4 – Experiences of Commoners in an Urban Market

History is not the product of the actions of a few ‘great men,’ and the active erasure of the voice of the subaltern only serves to further such a fallacy. Regardless of class or lineage, everyone deserves to be remembered and acknowledged, so let these long overdue words add, even if a raindrop in a desert, to this effort. The Aztec Empire would not have grown to have five to six million subjects by the 16th century if the lower-class people who made up a vast majority of the population had no value, and despite the elite’s active efforts to erase and devalue their presence, the stories and struggles fueled by their unyielding potential and labor have lived on. One of the few places that offered any semblance of freedom to the Aztec commoner was the marketplace, as it offered a rare opportunity to come together as a community in a secular space, and simply be together. These markets teemed with life, bustling and bringing curiosities from every corner of the empire, and this stimulation spurred community recreation to take place in these spaces, including simple and private occurrences like young people flirting, older folks gossiping, and people just enjoying being able to go for a long walk given that Tenochtitlán canals heavily limited the presence of contiguous walkways. These markets also allowed the community to come together and enjoy some much-deserved and cathartic entertainment, such as theatre pieces in the market’s open plazas and even what amounted to modern-day stand-up comedy routines. Economically, the markets allowed few lower-class merchants to amass modest savings and socially, the role of market proctor offered people, namely women, a power and freedom they would otherwise never experience living in the empire. Try as they might, the elite’s fabricated realities and systems of control could not erase the freedom afforded to the people by the genuine sense of community within the markets, and given the elite sought to limit even the modicum of freedom the lower-class had with their ritual figurines (fig. 2) would lead to a loss of their power or even possible sparks of rebellion, they viewed the marketplaces as a much greater threat that, in turn, called for active intimidation tactics to proactively disincentivize any thoughts of dissent. In terms of religious control, altars lined the walls of the marketplaces, with the urban empire’s patron deities like Huitzilopochtli serving as a proto-surveillance state that not only reminded the commoner of the omnipresence of the empire’s reach, but also, of the propaganda of the moral community, and that any thoughts of rebellion were in opposition to the gods themselves. Despite the prevalence and foundational nature of war for the Aztecs, the empire held a monopoly over violence, and reminded the people of this by holding public executions in the same marketplace plazas where the community entertainment was held. The state would make a show of executing these petty criminals, and the style of execution, while ranging from cutting the accused into pieces to stoning them death, was described as being dramatically gruesome, especially when compared to the surgical precision of some of their sacrificial counterparts, making it clear that these executions were meant to be mere tastes of what the state was capable of should any of the people in the audience think of opposition the status quo. In fact, the audience members were often invited to join in on the executions, permitting the people to release their pent-up frustrations and come together in a morbid show of community, though it is said the officials holding the execution were just as likely to be heckled by the audience as they were to be joined by them.

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<sup>185</sup> Umberger, "Conflicting Economic and Sacred Values in Aztec Society,," p. 201

<sup>186</sup> Hodge, p 213

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