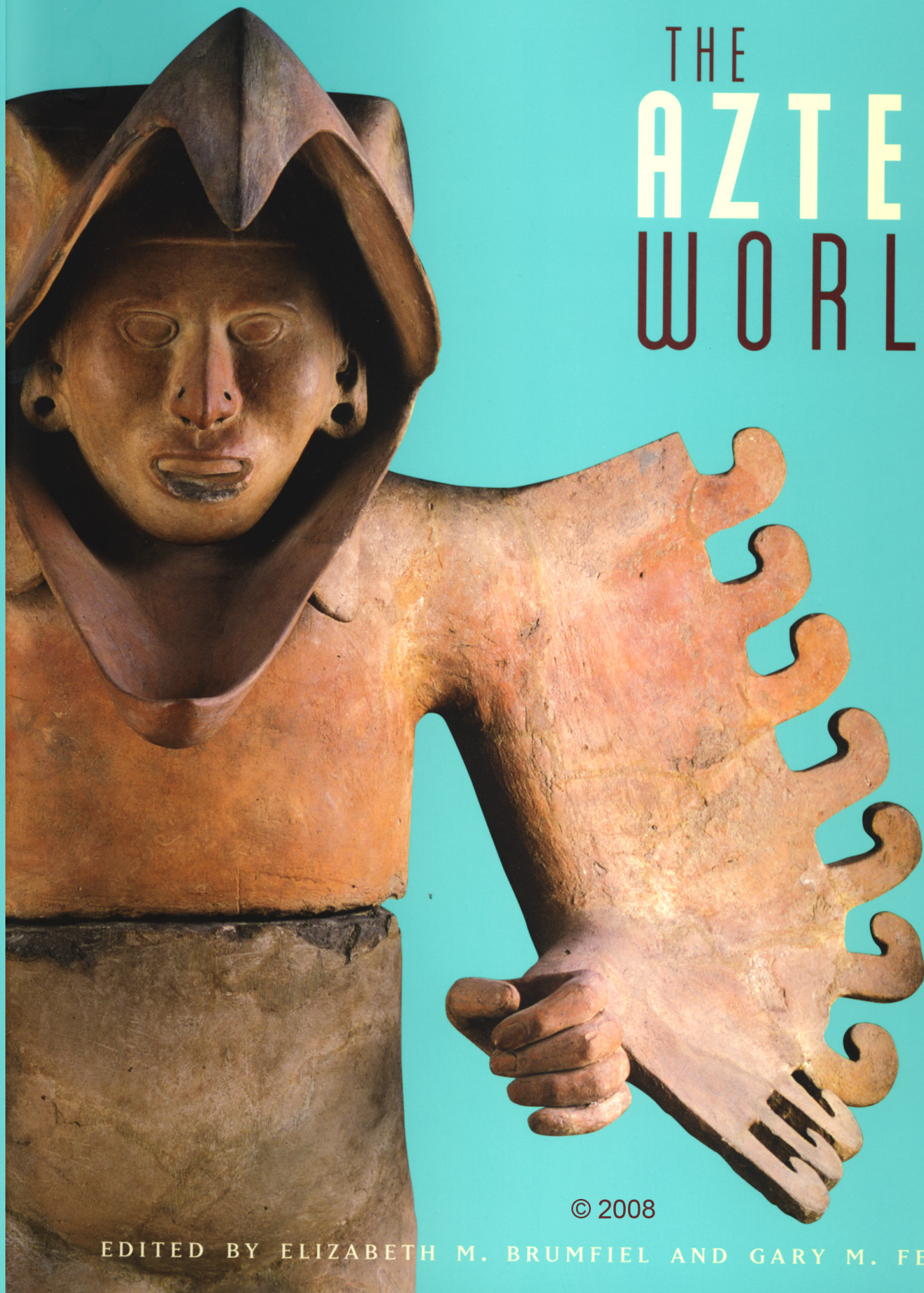


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AZTEC WORLD

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ABRAMS

# SEVEN

# THE AZTEC EMPIRE

MICHAEL E. SMITH,  
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

The Empire of the Triple Alliance—often called the Aztec empire—occupied a somewhat paradoxical place in Aztec history and society. On the one hand the empire was the dominant political and economic force in central Mexico at the time of Spanish conquest (1521). Many or most of the best-known art objects from Aztec culture were produced for imperial rulers and elites, and they only make sense within the context of the empire. On the other hand, the effects of Aztec imperialism on people were sometimes quite modest. Unlike the Roman or Inkan emperors, whose armies and bureaucrats interfered greatly in provincial society, Aztec emperors were content to leave things alone in the provinces so long as people paid their taxes. In this essay I explore this paradox, emphasizing two aspects of Aztec imperialism: its effects on people and its manifestation in art and archaeology.

The rise to power of Tenochtitlan, the dominant imperial capital, is a dramatic story that is preserved in numerous official historical accounts written down after the Spanish conquest. The chronicle includes dramatic battles, courtly intrigue, and a story of religious predestination in which the gods guided and protected the Mexica rulers and people on their imperial journey. But in order to understand the empire, we need to begin with its background of city-states (*altepetl* in Nahuatl).

## BACKGROUND TO EMPIRE: AZTEC CITY-STATES (ALTEPETL)

The ancestors of the Aztec peoples migrated to central Mexico from a semi-mythical northern homeland they called Aztlan. When groups of immigrants settled in the valleys of highland central Mexico—most likely during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D.—they established dozens of small, independent kingdoms, the *altepetl* (see Chapter 2). Each king (*tlatoani*) claimed his right to rule on the basis of descent from the ancient and holy Toltec kings of Tula. Kings

were aided by various councils of nobles, warriors, and priests, and a small but growing bureaucracy of judges, tax collectors, and other officials. The altepetl consisted of this government apparatus, the commoners who were subject to the king, and the land they farmed. These were small polities defined not by territories with boundaries, but rather by the relationships of the constituent commoners and nobles with their king. In some areas, villages and farms subject to different kings were interspersed across the landscape.

Each altepetl had a small central urban settlement in which the polity's political, economic, religious, and social institutions were concentrated. The royal palace housed the king and his family as well as the institutions of rule. It was typically located adjacent to a spacious public plaza where large gatherings—from markets to religious ceremonies—took place. Temple-pyramids dedicated to the patron gods of the altepetl loomed over the plaza; the central pyramid of Ixtapaluca has been cleared off but not restored (Figure 1). The main plazas of altepetl capitals were also flanked by a series of smaller and more specialized temples and shrines (Figure 2). Outside of the central plaza area lived neighborhoods of commoners, including many farmers who walked out to their fields each day. These capital towns were not large—most had only 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants—but they were the only urban settlements within their altepetl (Smith 2008).

Kings of nearby altepetl both competed and cooperated with one another. They continually built larger and better temples and cities to show off their power and magnificence, and in many cases kings warred with one another. These wars were true antagonistic events, not ceremonial raids, but the goal was not to conquer territory. Instead, the goal of warfare among altepetl was to conquer other kings and force them to pay tribute to the victor. At the same time, nearby altepetl engaged in more friendly forms of interaction. Merchants traded among otherwise antagonistic altepetl, and nobles married across political lines for diplomatic purposes. The joint result of these simultaneously friendly and antagonistic interactions among numerous petty kings was a volatile and dynamic political situation which generated the formation and expansion of several successive empires (Hodge 1984). In many respects, Aztec city-states and their dynamic interactions were similar to other city-state systems of the ancient world (Hansen 2000).

## IMPERIAL EXPANSION AND CONTROL

The interval from ca. 1100 to 1300 A.D.—known to archaeologists as the Early Aztec period—was a time of urban expansion and cultural development among the Aztec altepetl. By the end of this period, several cities were starting to expand at the expense of their neighbors. The kings of cities such as Texcoco and Azcapotzalco in the Basin of Mexico, and Cuauhnahuac and Calixtlahuaca in surrounding valleys, conquered numerous altepetl to forge small tributary empires. These empires employed strategies of expansion and control that had been developed by earlier altepetl. Conquered kings and governments were left in power so long as they acknowledged the supremacy of the conquering king and paid an annual tribute in goods and services. Unfortunately little is known about these earliest Aztec empires. The largest and most powerful of these—the Azcapotzalco Empire ruled by king Tezozomoc from 1374 to 1427—was defeated by the Tenochtitlan and its Triple Alliance in 1428. The rulers of Tenochtitlan then engaged in





Figure 1. The unreconstructed central temple-pyramid at the city-state capital of Ixtapaluca, also known as Acozac.



Figure 2. The main plaza of Ixtapaluca, looking north from the central temple-pyramid.



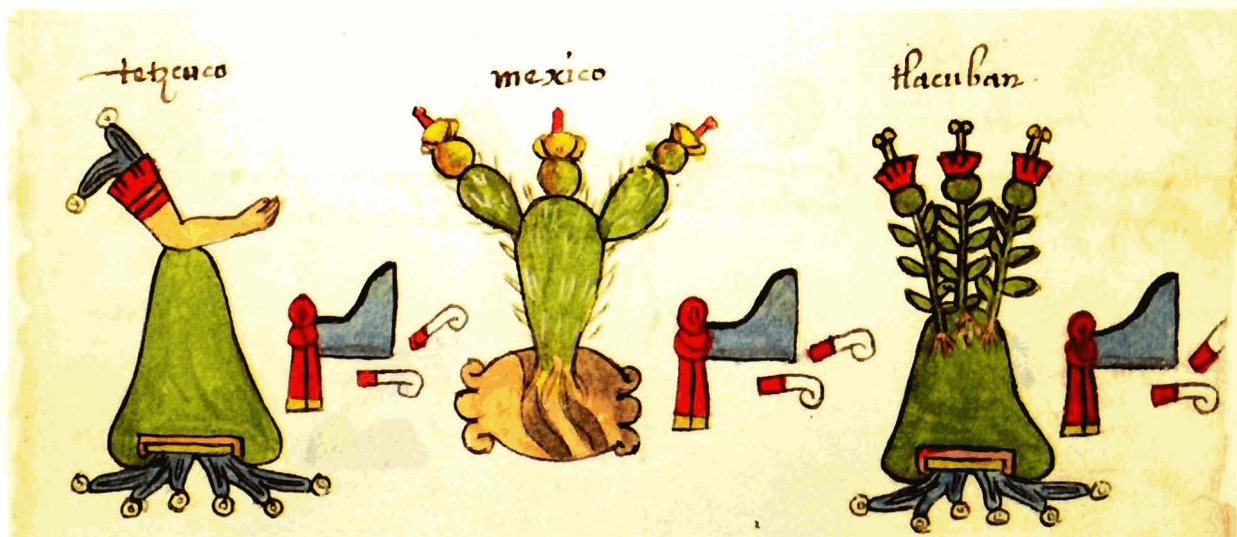


Figure 3. Glyphs representing the Triple Alliance from the *Codex Osuna*.

a systematic program of burning the history books to erase references to the glory and might of Azcapotzalco (Santamarina 2006).

The Empire of the Triple Alliance was formed in the aftermath of the war that defeated Azcapotzalco in 1428. Figure 3, an image from the *Codex Osuna* (1947) shows the toponyms (place names) of the three capitals of the empire: Texcoco, head city of the Acolhua confederacy; Tenochtitlan (labeled “Mexico”), the central city of the Mexica peoples; and Tlacopan, a former rival of Azcapotzalco within the Tepanec domain. Each place name in the codex is accompanied by two emblems, or symbols, of legitimate kingship: a turquoise diadem or crown, and a pair of speech scrolls. These three capitals agreed to jointly conquer other altepetl and split the tribute, with two-fifths going to Texcoco, two-fifths to Tenochtitlan, and one-fifth to Tlacopan. Their program of imperial expansion began right away and proved to be quite successful; within ninety years the Triple Alliance had conquered most of northern Mesoamerica to become the largest and wealthiest empire north of Peru. By the time Hernán Cortés arrived in 1519, Tenochtitlan had emerged as the dominant power in the empire, with the other capitals clearly subservient to the Mexica kings (Carrasco 1999).

The primary goal of imperial expansion was to subjugate distant city-states and force them to pay tribute to the empire (Berdan et al. 1996). The tribute goods demanded of each province were recorded in pictorial codices such as the *Codex Mendoza* (Berdan and Anawalt 1992) (Figure 4). These goods were paid four times a year. When the totals are added up, we see an enormous amount of material—food, textiles, luxury items, warriors’ costumes—that entered and enriched Tenochtitlan each year (Rojas 1986).

Aztec imperial expansion was carried out by military action. Armies were led into battle by the most experienced warriors, spurred on by drums and trumpets. Three primary weapons were used: swords whose edges were composed of rows of razor-sharp obsidian blades (Figure 5); thrusting spears; and bows and arrows (Hassig 1988). Aztec warfare was considered a sacred duty in several respects. First, all men were subject to military service, a basic duty to one’s king and





Figure 4. List of tribute from the imperial province of Huexpuchtla as recorded in the Codex Mendoza.



Figure 5. Obsidian-edged sword.



altepetl. Second, warfare was considered a cosmic struggle that paralleled battles between light and darkness and between gods such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca.

The twin elements of warfare as political expansion and warfare as cosmic duty had a strong effect on battlefield actions. On the one hand, armies sought to kill opposing soldiers and gain battlefield victory. On the other hand, soldiers tried to injure or cripple enemy fighters in order to capture them alive (Isaac 1983). Battlefield captives were the primary source of victims for human sacrifice (see Chapter 8), and taking such captives was one part of the sacred mission of war. Soldiers gained prestige and moved up the military hierarchy based upon the number of enemies they captured. The various warrior ranks were signaled publicly by dress and jewelry, and the most successful warriors joined elite military orders such as the Eagle Warriors and the Jaguar Warriors. The advancement of a young man up the military hierarchy was a source of pride for his family and neighborhood.

Warriors were a major theme of Aztec art; they are depicted in the codices, in murals, and in stone sculpture (Figure 6). The privileges of accomplished warriors, as described by the chroniclers, went beyond their special clothing and jewelry. Warriors participated in special ritual dances and other ceremonies, and they often gathered together in special halls, such as the House of the Eagles. Military activities were celebrated in the gladiator sacrifice, in which the victim (an accomplished enemy soldier) was given false weapons, tied to a sacrificial stone, and fought Mexico warriors armed with real weapons.

A major reason for the rapid success of the Triple Alliance Empire was the size and skill of its armies. The Empire could field more soldiers than most of the altepetl it faced, and soon there were few armies that could withstand sustained battle with imperial forces. By 1519 it had conquered much of northern Mesoamerica (Figure 7). Most areas were tributary provinces; they paid regular tribute as recorded in the Codex Mendoza (see Figure 4). More distant conquered ar-

Figure 6. Relief showing Aztec warriors, from a bench in the House of the Eagles.



east, called strategic provinces, were exempt from regular tribute requirements of the sort paid by the tributary provinces. The strategic provinces provided soldiers for imperial armies, they helped guard imperial borders, and they gave “gifts” to the Mexica emperor.

One reason for the existence of the strategic provinces was the presence of two major unconquered enemy states (Figure 7). To the west of central Mexico, the Tarascan Empire based in Tzintzuntzan engaged in a parallel process of imperial expansion.

When Tarascan conquests reached the Toluca Valley of central Mexico (immediately west of the Basin of Mexico) in the 1470s, Tenochtitlan sent a large force to do battle. The Tarascans won the battle, but not definitively, and in the aftermath the two empires established a fortified border zone that remained until the arrival of the Spaniards (Pollard 1993).

Whereas the Tarascans were ethnically and linguistically distinct from the Aztec peoples of central Mexico, the second unconquered enemy area—Tlaxcala—was inhabited by Nahuatl-speaking Aztec peoples. The Triple Alliance surrounded Tlaxcala with conquered provinces (Figure 7) and warfare was constant in the final decades of the Aztec period, but the Triple Alliance could not succeed in conquering Tlaxcala. Embarrassed by this failure, which contradicted official Mexica propaganda of an all-powerful empire, Aztec nobles after 1519 invented stories to explain it away. They told the Spaniards that the Mexica could have conquered Tlaxcala any time they wanted, but they preferred to engage in limited practice battles rather than a war of all-out conquest. They made up the concept of the “flowery war” to describe ritualized practice battles. But it is easy to see through such rationalizations today; the Triple Alliance badly wanted to conquer Tlaxcala and they probably would have succeeded if Hernán Cortés had not arrived in 1519 (Smith 2003).

The failure of Tlaxcala to succumb to Aztec imperial armies suggests that many or most provincial city-states were not anxious to participate in the Triple Alliance Empire. Imperial control was indirect—the empire relied on provincial kings to collect and forward tribute rather than sending governors and armies or building cities in the provinces. On many occasions subject kings rebelled against the empire; such “rebellions” were not armed insurrections, however. Rather, they usually meant that a subject king merely elected to stop sending tribute to Tenochtitlan. To keep such events to a minimum, provincial elites were “bought off” with privileges (see discussion that follows) so that they would have greater allegiance to the Triple Alliance than to their own subjects (Berdan et al. 1996).

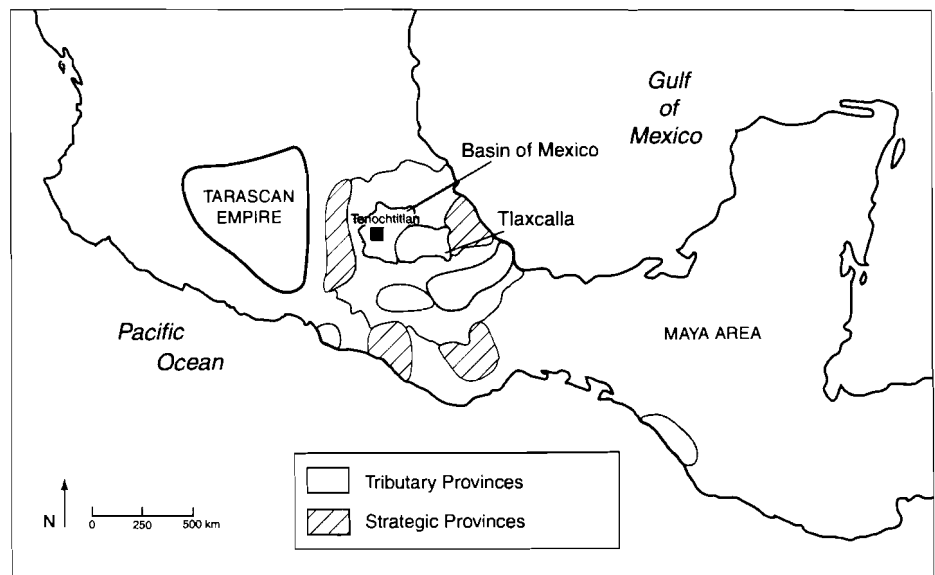


Figure 7. Map of the Aztec Empire.



## PEOPLE AND THEIR LIVES UNDER THE EMPIRE

The Aztec empire had a profound effect on the several million people in its orbit. But the nature of its effects varied greatly with location, social class, and other social categories. For the nobles of Tenochtitlan, for example, the expansion of the empire generated wealth, power, prosperity, and the good life. For provincial peasants, on the other hand, the empire brought increased taxes and lowered standards of living. For many people's lives, the empire had effects both positive and negative. The numerous material objects produced throughout the empire provide a window on these varied social effects.

## WEALTH, POWER AND IDEOLOGY IN TENOCHTITLAN

The island capital Tenochtitlan was one of the last Aztec cities to be founded, but once the Triple Alliance was formed in 1428 the city rapidly outgrew its contemporaries in size and magnificence. By 1519 Tenochtitlan was the largest city ever seen in the pre-Hispanic New World

Figure 8. The Tizoc stone, an imperial style stone sculpture.



(see Chapter 4). The major reason for the city's phenomenal growth was the successful military expansion of the Aztec empire. Increasing amounts of booty and tribute flowed from the provinces into the city, enriching not only the nobility but most of the urban commoners as well. All kinds of economic activity—from the production of everyday tools and objects to the fashioning of elite art to commerce—was stimulated by the new imperial wealth, and people from all over moved to the capital.

The most spectacular imperial effects in the capital were in religious art and architecture. As in all ancient states and empires, religion was closely entwined with politics. The gods sanctioned and encouraged imperial expansion, and the rulers, nobles and priests of Tenochtitlan invested considerable resources in thanking the gods for their help. The Templo Mayor was continually rebuilt and expanded to become one of the largest pyramids in Aztec central Mexico (Matos Moctezuma 1988). The sacrificial rites carried out at the Templo Mayor were increasingly elaborate ceremonies involving numerous participants and theatrical spectacles (Brumfiel 1998). Fine stone sculptures (Figure 8) and elaborate ceramic offering vessels (Figure 9) were crafted for use at ceremonies in this and other temples. These imperial objects had significance in two related realms: religion (direct worship of the gods) and ideology (political legitimacy for the ruler).

Much of the wealth generated by the empire went to the king and other nobles of Tenochtitlan. Noble lifestyles grew increasingly luxurious and elaborate, much more so than in other Aztec city-state capitals. But the economic activity of the capital must also have benefited the lives of artisans, merchants, and other commoner residents of the city. Unfortunately there is little direct information on such changes; written sources have little to say about changes in commoner lifestyles of Tenochtitlan, and archaeologists have excavated few commoner houses in the capital.

## ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN THE BASIN OF MEXICO

Outside of Tenochtitlan, the expansion of the Aztec Empire had varied effects on the peoples of the Basin of Mexico. Many altepetl capitals continued to flourish, as evidenced by continued architectural rebuilding (Figures 1 and 2) and increased economic activity. Many subject kings and nobles cooperated with the Triple Alliance rulers and secured favors and imperial support for their local rule. But for most commoners, imperial expansion entailed a double economic burden that must have made life difficult. First, imperial taxes were added to the local altepetl tax burden of goods and services. Second, the explosive growth of Tenochtitlan led to problems in urban food supply, and farmers had to step up their efforts to grow food for the use of urbanites. Previously, many peasant families had engaged in the production of pottery and other goods as supplementary economic activities. Although we are not sure of the role of coercion in the turn to intensive grain production, its effects on domestic life were significant. Although clear evidence is scarce, it is likely that many imperial subjects in the Basin of Mexico resented the impositions and burdens posed by the empire.

Archaeological fieldwork at two towns shows the varied effects of the empire on commoners in the Basin of Mexico. At Huexotla, an altepetl capital close to Texcoco, Elizabeth Brumfiel's research has documented the turn to heavy grain production for urban food supply. The only





Figure 9. Effigy vessel in the form of the deity Tlaloc, from an offering at the Templo Mayor.



other economic activity that people engaged in was textile production. As discussed in Chapter 5, all Aztec women spun and wove, and ceramic spindle whorls used for spinning thread of cotton and maguey were abundant in Huexotla. Under imperial control, however, the numbers of whorls declined, suggesting that people may have been devoting so much effort to growing grain that they had to reduce their cloth production activities (Brumfiel 1980). Economic activities at Otumba, a more distant altepetl capital, were quite different. Fieldwork by Thomas Charlton, Deborah Nichols, and Cynthia Otis Charlton (1991) revealed a large number of craft workshops that produced tools and other objects for exchange in the markets (see Chapter 6).

## DAILY LIFE IN THE PROVINCES

As in the Basin of Mexico, the effects of the Aztec Empire on people varied greatly in the outer imperial provinces. In some areas, commoner life continued with little change. People had to pay higher taxes (like the Basin of Mexico, imperial tribute or taxes were merely added to pre-existing altepetl taxes), but the indirect nature of imperial control left many aspects of provincial life alone. This is what I found in excavations of commoner houses at several sites in the Mexican state of Morelos (Smith 1997). Both before and after imperial conquest of this area, people lived in small houses built of adobe bricks laid on stone foundation walls (Figure 10). Their basic nonperishable domestic goods—pottery, obsidian, stone grinding tools, and rare luxuries such as stone jewelry and bronze tools—remained the same after their conquest by the Triple Alliance in the 1430s. One subtle change, however, was a reduction in the numbers of local decorated ceramic serving vessels and imported serving vessels, suggesting a somewhat lowered standard of living under the empire.

Figure 10. Wall foundations and floor of a commoner house excavated at the village of Capilco in Morelos.







Figure 11. Ceramic vessels from distinctive Aztec-period regional styles. A: Malinalco; B: Southeastern Morelos; C: Western Morelos; D and E: Toluca Valley; F: Chalco. A, B, C, and F are from excavations in Morelos; D and E are from excavations at Teotenango in the State of Mexico.

Figure 12. Long-handled incense burners excavated from an offering in the ballcourt at the provincial Aztec city of Coatetelco. Excavations of Aztec houses turn up numerous fragments of censers like these, indicating that they were used in domestic rituals as well as in the temples.



Throughout central Mexico, most commoner households had access to decorated serving ware. Potters in each region produced distinctive styles of vessels (Figure 11). This kind of aesthetically pleasing and well-made serving ware was not limited to nobles or to ceremonies, as is sometimes claimed. Archaeologists have excavated numerous broken fragments of such vessels at both commoner and elite houses. Provincial peoples also had access to a number of imported goods, including obsidian tools and ceramic vessels. The most widely traded ceramic ware was the type called Aztec III Black-on-Orange. These vessels were the everyday serving ware in the Basin of Mexico, where they were produced in several centers, but they are also found as rare additions to most household inventories of provincial peoples (again, both commoners and elites).

Domestic life in the provinces also included a sacred dimension (Smith 2002). Two types of ritual objects made of pottery are commonly found in archaeological collections from provincial houses—figurines and incense burners (Figure 12). Figurines (Kaplan 2006) in the distinctive Aztec style are abundant in domestic contexts throughout central Mexico. In my excavations in Morelos, I found that some of these were made of clay from the Basin of Mexico (and thus clearly imported), while others in the same style were made of local clays. The presence of figurines of the first category can be accounted for by commerce, whereas the second category shows that styles and religious concepts had a broad distribution throughout central Mexico. Although there is much that we do not know about Aztec figurines, it seems clear that they were used in some kind of domestic rites, most likely involving curing, fertility, and divination. Incense burners are another common find in excavations of domestic contexts throughout central Mexico. Each region had its distinctive type of censer to burn copal incense in domestic rites.

The presence at provincial sites of Aztec-style figurines made of local clays points to the existence of a network of shared styles and concepts throughout central Mexico, including Tenochtitlan, the Basin of Mexico, and the exterior imperial provinces. This is but one example among many cases of widespread similarities in material culture within this area. Several reasons for these stylistic similarities can be identified. First, the Aztec peoples of central Mexico shared a common history and heritage. According to local historical accounts, their ancestors had all come from the semi-mythical homeland of Aztlan, presumably located somewhere to the north of central Mexico. The Aztlan migrants shared the Nahuatl language and many cultural traits, and it is only logical that their descendants throughout central Mexico would have numerous similarities in styles and practices.

A second reason for widespread similarities in material culture was the importance of commercial networks that tied different regions together. In their local weekly market, people could not only purchase imported goods, but they also had the chance to see foreign styles and goods and to get news from different areas. A third explanation for the distribution of Aztec styles is found in the practices and concepts that made up Aztec elite culture.

## AZTEC ELITE CULTURE

The Aztec nobility constituted a single integrated social class that extended throughout the entire empire and beyond. Just as nobles from nearby altepetl visited one another and formed marriage alliances and other diplomatic ties (see above), so too did nobles in a much larger arena interact



intensively. One result was the forging of a distinctive elite culture that transcended political boundaries. This elite culture was responsible for much of the art shown in *The Aztec World*.

Monumental public architecture was the most dramatic material expression of Aztec elite culture. The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan is both the best-documented Aztec building and the building with the most extravagant offerings. The Mexica kings who built and enlarged this structure did not invent its form or style overnight. Rather, they drew on an ancient tradition of double-stairway pyramids begun by the earliest Aztec kings in the Early Aztec period. The temple of Teopanzolco, located in downtown Cuernavaca, was one of the earliest double-stairway pyramids (Figure 13); the first was probably that of Tenayuca. The kings of Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, and Texcoco built and rebuilt huge pyramids to demonstrate their power and glory. For the forms of their pyramids they avoided the standard Aztec single-stairway pyramid (Figure 1) and copied the ancient double-stairway temples of Tenayuca and Teopanzolco (Smith 2008).

This historical tradition of temple architecture was but one component of Aztec elite culture. Although each Aztec city had its own layout and its own public monuments, the forms of buildings were remarkably uniform throughout central Mexico. For example, circular temples, dedicated to the wind god Ehecatl (who did not like corners), were similar—but not identical—at many Aztec cities (Figure 14).

Elaborately carved stone sculpture was another material manifestation of Aztec elite culture. The imperial sculptural style shown on many objects in *The Aztec World* was developed in the workshops of Tenochtitlan, but examples have been recovered at other Aztec cities in central Mexico (Figure 15). These provincial examples could have been transported from the imperial capital, or perhaps Mexica artists traveled to distant cities, or provincial sculptors could have received train-

Figure 13. Early Aztec period double-stairway pyramid Teopanzolco, a site located in modern Cuernavaca.

Figure 14. Plans of circular temples at several Aztec capital cities.

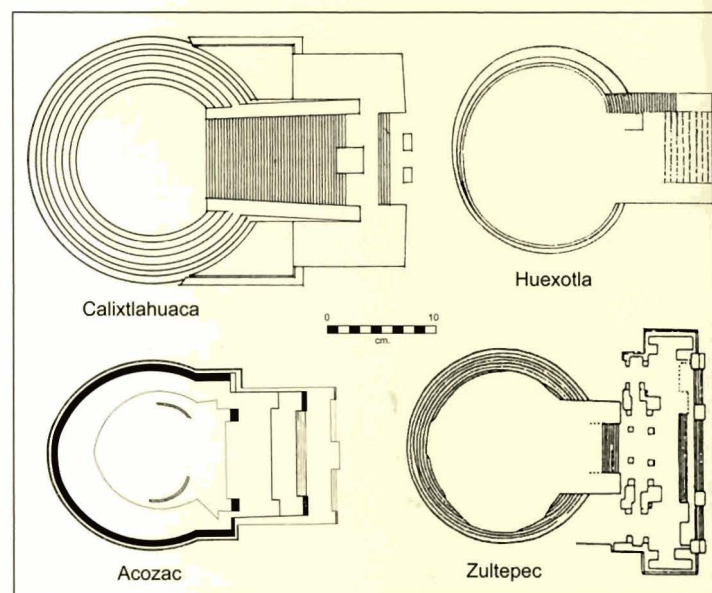






Figure 15. Imperial Aztec-style sculpture from Calixtlahuaca.

ing in the capital. Regardless of the mechanisms, however, the presence of such fine, imperial-style sculptures at other cities shows that distant rulers shared both aesthetic tastes and religious-political concepts with the nobles of Tenochtitlan (Umberger 2007). Many other fine objects present similar patterns of distribution with similar implications of shared elite culture: elaborate ceramic censers and effigy vessels; feather art; jewelry of precious stones and gold; and clothing.

## ART AND EMPIRE IN THE AZTEC WORLD

The Triple Alliance Empire influenced many aspects of life and society in Aztec-period Mesoamerica. For rulers and nobles in the imperial capitals, imperial expansion was a source of wealth and power. Imperial tribute fed much of the elite conspicuous consumption that involved the sculptures and other luxury items shown in *The Aztec World*. Regular injections of tribute wealth stimulated economic activity that also benefited the commoners in the capitals. In the provinces, the benefits of empire accrued mainly to the ruling elites, who were rewarded for participation in the imperial system. The burden of tribute, on the other hand, fell squarely on the backs of provincial commoners. The fact that many art styles and objects were very widely distributed throughout



the empire (and beyond) was due largely to the fact that art was used as a tool of imperial policy. Gifts and exchanges of goods among nobles cemented the bonds of Aztec elite culture, and the use of imperial styles in provincial areas also signaled the participation of distant elites in these networks. In this way, Aztec art was an important part of the glue that held the empire together.

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