

C H A P T E R 35

AZTECS

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1 INTRODUCTION

BEGINNING with the first steps of Hernando Cortés on the Mexican mainland in AD 1519, outsiders have been both fascinated and repelled by the religious practices of the Aztecs. Elaborate monthly pageants brought thousands of people to the streets chanting and dancing to throbbing drums amidst the dense aromatic smoke of incense. Many of these ceremonies culminated in dramatic theatrical re-enactments of myths in which human victims had their hearts cut out at the top of pyramids. Early European writers about Aztec culture, especially the Spanish mendicant friars, were obsessed with native religion, and the number of pages they devoted to the topic in their books dwarfed their sections on economic or political topics. Fascination and revulsion with Aztec human sacrifice and other rituals continues today in both the scholarly literature and popular media.

Despite an extensive and rich body of historical documentation, key questions about Aztec religion and ritual have proven difficult or impossible for historians to answer. Perhaps the most publicly prominent of these is the extent of human sacrifice. Recently some ‘experts’ have proclaimed on television that they have proof that literally tens of thousands of victims were sacrificed at a single Aztec ceremony, while other ‘experts’ claim that human sacrifice was a myth invented by the conquering Spaniards and that the Aztecs were instead peaceful crystal-gazers.

The results of archaeological excavations and the analysis of museum collections of ritual objects are only now starting to contribute to knowledge about Aztec ritual. There has been a dominant tradition of scholarship on Aztec religion that largely ignored archaeology and ancient objects. That tradition began in the eighteenth century and was extended and codified in the seminal works of Eduard Seler (1990–8) in the late nineteenth century. Although Seler himself was interested in the material remains of Aztec ceremonies (see Figures 35.3 and 35.4 below), his followers generally limited themselves to historical sources. The dominant approach to Aztec religion is an example of what Lars Fogelin (2007) calls a ‘structural approach’ in that it focuses on symbolism and structure, relying primarily on written sources. The material culture that abounds in the ritual and mythological scenes in the codices was interpreted in isolation from the objects known from excavations and museum collections.

The two types of documents with the greatest information on Aztec religion are the writings of the Spanish friars after the conquest of the Aztecs (e.g., Sahagún 1950–82) and native painted ritual books called codices (e.g., Anders et al. 1993). These documents contain colourful enigmatic images of gods, myths, and ceremonies, with ample use of the 260-day ritual calendar.

The biggest archaeological blow to the structural approach to Aztec religion came from the discovery and excavation of the central temple of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan starting in 1978. Scholars had known for centuries just where this temple (the ‘Templo Mayor’) lay buried under the centre of Mexico City. The 1978 discovery of a large stone relief led to exploratory excavations revealing that the preservation of the temple was much greater than had been thought. The Mexican government invested enormous resources in clearing the remains of the temple and its surrounding area. These excavations, directed by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, uncovered hundreds of rich offerings under and around the Templo Mayor (López Luján 2005) and revealed much new architectural information.

The richness of the archaeological finds at the Templo Mayor had numerous beneficial affects on scholarship on Aztec ritual and religion. First, non-archaeologists started to take archaeological finds seriously. Ethnohistorians and historians of religion began to incorporate the results of the project into their accounts of Aztec religion. Second, members of the Templo Mayor project pursued detailed studies of documentary sources to aid in their interpretations of the material remains. Third, the excitement and energy associated with the Templo Mayor project strongly affected the larger context of central Mexican archaeology and stimulated new fieldwork. Although much of the new research followed the traditional, structural approach, the new primacy of archaeology led to a move toward what Fogelin calls a ‘practice approach’—a ‘focus on the ways that material remains can inform on the actions and experiences of past ritual participants’ (Fogelin 2007: 56).

One unfortunate effect of the Templo Mayor project was that many writers interpreted the results as if they formed the totality of material evidence for Aztec ritual and religion. This tendency was particularly prevalent among historians of religion working within a structural approach. It was assumed that the social and religious patterns identified for the imperial capital applied equally well to other Aztec cities. A re-examination of archaeological data from Aztec city-state capitals, however, shows that in fact Tenochtitlan was quite different and that religion and ritual at other Aztec cities need to be examined in their own light (Smith 2008). In the remainder of this chapter I review the material culture of Aztec ritual and religion under four headings: temples and offerings, key deities, cult objects, and ceremonies. Because there is a massive literature of primary and secondary historical sources on Aztec religion (e.g. Graulich 1997; López Austin 1997), I concentrate primarily on archaeological materials; apart from the Templo Mayor, these remain poorly known today. Unless specifically noted, discussion focuses on Aztec state religion. Rather than limit the term ‘Aztec’ to the inhabitants of the imperial capital, as many authors do, I use the term to refer to the several million people living in highland central Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest (Smith 2003).

## 2 TEMPLES, SHRINES, AND OFFERINGS

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Compared to other Mesoamerican cultures such as the Maya, Aztec temples were relatively standardized in type and form (Smith 2008). Most Mesoamerican temples consisted of tall



FIGURE 35.1 Pyramid-temple with human sacrifice, from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún.

platforms or pyramids topped by one or more cult rooms reached by a stairway running up one side of the pyramid. The most powerful Aztec capitals had distinctive twin-temple pyramids in which the two cult rooms were reached by separate parallel stairways; the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan was of this form. The standard Aztec temple was the single-temple pyramid. Aztec pyramids were the settings for rituals of human sacrifice (Figure 35.1). The use of stone altars placed at the top of the stairs (in front of the cult rooms) made the sacrifices visible to anyone watching from the plaza below.

Each Aztec city had one or more patron deities whose cults were centred on the city's main temple. The two shrines on the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, for example, were dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. Other cities had different patron deities, but in most cases we lack information on their identities. A third Aztec temple type was the circular pyramid. In contrast to the variable patron deities of central temples, nearly all circular temples were dedicated to Ehecatl, god of the wind. Stone sculptures of Ehecatl



FIGURE 35.2 Row of small platforms at Teopanzolco.

have been recovered as offerings in several excavated circular temples. The ball court, where a version of the Mesoamerican ball game was played, was another important type of religious building in most cities.

One of the most distinctive features of the built environment in Aztec cities was the small stone platform or shrine (Figure 35.2). Although nearly all Mesoamerican cities had such platforms, in Aztec times these features proliferated and became important elements of urban design for the first time. The uses of some of these structures can be reconstructed, but most remain enigmatic. A few were bases for skull racks that displayed the crania of sacrificial victims, and others contained offerings of severed skulls and other goods. One prominent type was decorated with reliefs of skulls and crossed bones (no relationship to the Jolly Roger of pirate flags!), and these were probably settings where female curers propitiated a class of deity known as the *tzitzimime* (see below). Although many authors have employed Western interpretations of the skull motif as a symbol of death and doom, contextual analysis shows that to the Aztecs these elements symbolized life, fertility, and regeneration.

Aztec burials are very poorly known because so few have been excavated. Commoner burials in residential settings show a variety of body positions and are sometimes accompanied by ceramic vessels and other goods. The remains of children probably sacrificed to the deity Tlaloc have been recovered near large temples in Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Written sources describe cremation as one type of body treatment, but very few cremated remains have been excavated. It seems likely that the Aztecs used cemeteries that have yet to be located. Other forms of buried offerings are best known from the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, where a wide variety of very rich offerings were placed in stone chambers below floors and stairways (López Luján 2005). These include coral, fish and crocodile skeletons, stone sculptures, precious jewellery, censers, textiles, and many other goods.

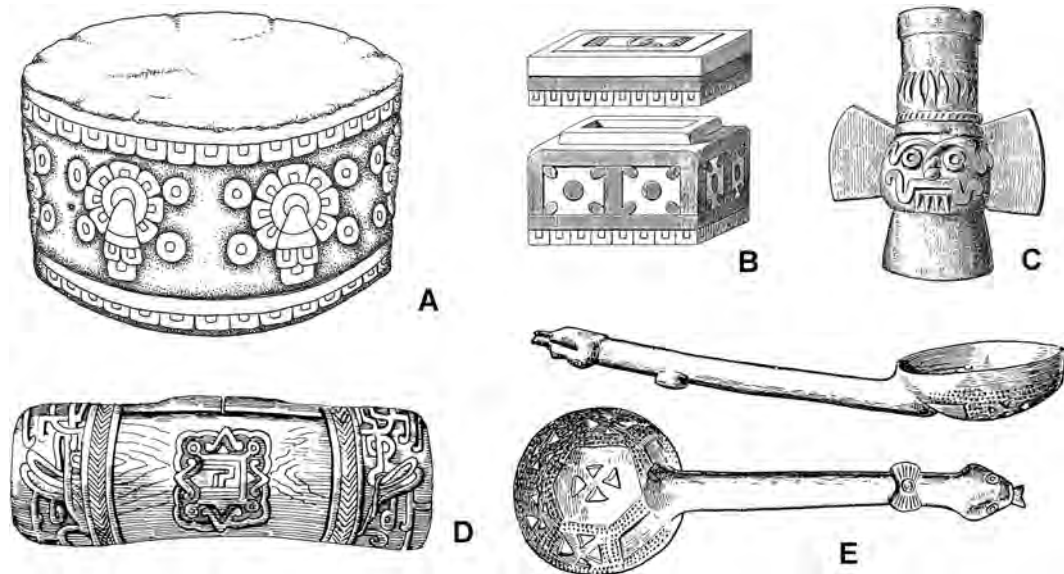


FIGURE 35.3 Large cult objects. A: sacrificial altar; B: stone box; C: ceramic brazier with Tlaloc effigy; D: wood slit-drum; E: ceramic censer. Object A is 71 cm across; the other objects are depicted with estimated relative sizes.

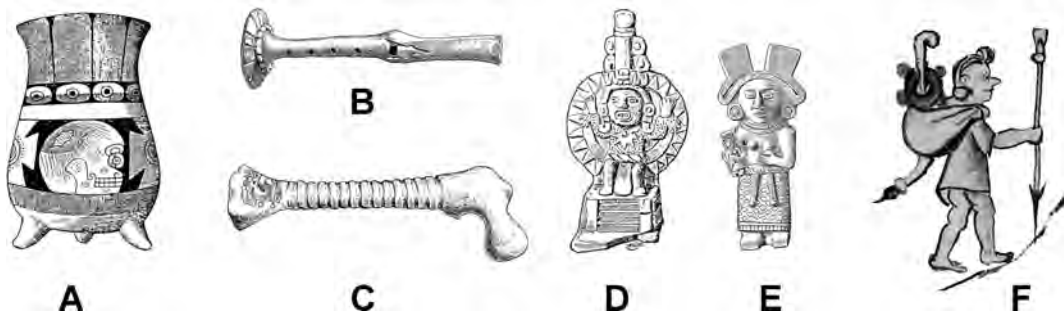


FIGURE 35.4 Small cult objects. A: ceramic drinking vessel; B: ceramic flute; C: bone rasp; D: ceramic figurine of Quetzalcoatl sitting on a temple; E: ceramic figurine of a woman with child; F: sacred bundle with smoking obsidian mirror from the Codex Azcatitlan. The height of object A is c.25 cm; the other objects are depicted with estimated relative sizes.

In the traditional, structural approach to Aztec religion, temples and shrines are interpreted almost exclusively for their symbolism and high-level meanings. This perspective was adopted by many scholars working on the Templo Mayor, for whom 'cosmovision' (religious cosmology) is a central concept (Carrasco 1999). Archaeologists, on the other hand, have tended to pursue a practice-based approach (Fogelin 2007) by emphasizing what Amos Rapoport (1990) calls the middle-level meanings of buildings and spaces. Aztec buildings and cities were carefully designed and built to communicate political messages about power, identity, memory, and status (Smith 2008), and the rituals that took place in and around these buildings were examples of what Kertzer (1988) calls political rituals (Brumfiel 2001). The static cosmovision

concept of the structural approach ignores the social class divisions that were prominent in Aztec society and religion.

### 3 CULT OBJECTS

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Aztec religious ceremonies and activities employed a wide variety of cult objects. Within the traditional approach to Aztec religion, the cult objects depicted in the codices were analysed with little concern for their materiality; that is, they were rarely compared to actual objects from excavations or in museum collections. Instead, research focused on their indigenous names and symbolic associations. Recent work that has begun to address the materiality of these objects includes Berdan (2007) and Durand-Forest and Eisinger (1998). Figures 35.3 and 35.4 depict some of the major cult items. To emphasize the importance of museum collections, I use many of Seler's illustrations of artefacts in major European museums; most of these were initially published over 100 years ago.

#### 3.1 Sculptures and Stone Objects

Stone sculpture, perhaps the major genre of Aztec art, has been studied from numerous perspectives. Although many or most anthropomorphic images probably represented deities or priests impersonating deities, the ways in which these objects were used in ceremonies remains poorly understood, in part because so few have been encountered in context. The uses of sacrificial altars, on the other hand, are much clearer. The example shown in Figure 35.3A was excavated at the base of a large circular temple at Calixtlahuaca and shows the potential of archaeological finds to provide information not present in the standard historical sources. Such sources are silent on the practice of human sacrifice at the circular temples of Ehecatl, whereas this altar points strongly to its occurrence. Smaller stone objects such as bowls and boxes with lids (Figure 35.3B) were used to hold the blood and hearts of sacrificial victims.

#### 3.2 Braziers and Censers

Fire was an important part of Aztec ritual at many levels, from large state temples to the domestic hearth. Fires were kept burning in large ornate ceramic braziers at the major temples, and these iconographically complex and aesthetically pleasing objects have received considerable attention in exhibits of Aztec art. Smaller ceramic braziers, often with deity images (Figure 35.3C) are less well known but were probably more widespread in Aztec times. Various substances were added to the fire to produce smoke and aroma; these included rubber and the aromatic gum of the copal tree. Smaller censers were used in ceremonies in a variety of settings, from temples to homes. The most common form had a bowl with cut-out triangles at the end of a long, hollow handle with a modelled serpent head at the opposite end (Figure 35.3E).

#### 3.3 Complex Painted Ceramic Vessels

The finest Aztec ceramic ware consisted of serving vessels and deity effigy forms painted with bright colours on a white background (Figure 35.4A). These were made in a number of cities, of

which Cholula was the best known. One Spanish conqueror wrote that the Mexica emperor Motecuhzoma insisted that his meals be served in Cholula polychrome vessels. By comparing the design fields and motifs on these vessels with the ritual codices scholars have identified some of the social and ceremonial contexts in which the vessels were used (Hernández Sánchez 2005; Pohl 2007). Although it is sometimes assumed that such vessels were used only by elites or in ceremonies, excavations of Aztec commoner houses typically uncover sherds from these objects. They were probably used in feasts to celebrate special occasions.

### 3.4 Musical Instruments

Music was an important part of Aztec ritual (Both 2002, 2005). The most common musical instrument was the ceramic flute (Figure 35.4B). Experimental analysis shows that these could play a number of scales and were not limited to a pentatonic scale as some authors have suggested. Many ceremonies involved flute music. In a major sacrifice to the god Tezcatlipoca, flutes were broken on the temple steps after they had been played (Figure 35.1). Numerous whole flutes have been recovered in offerings in Tenochtitlan, and broken fragments are not uncommon in domestic contexts. Two types of Aztec wood drum survive. Large upright hollow drums with skin heads provided loud music at public ceremonies, and smaller horizontal slit drums (Figure 35.3D) were probably used in a variety of contexts. Bone rasps were made by cutting shallow parallel grooves in human long bones (Figure 35.4C); these were used in various death-related ceremonies (Pereira 2005). Other musical instruments included conch shell trumpets, whistles, and various types of rattles.

### 3.5 Small Ceramic Figurines

Small fired clay models of people, gods, animals, plants, and temples were used in domestic ceremonies. Many whole figurines without context survive in museum collections, and excavations in residential contexts always recover numerous fragments. Most figurines were anthropomorphic in form. Costume elements show that some clearly depict deities (Figure 35.4D), whereas others show women and men without any obvious religious symbolism (Figure 35.4E). Some authors assume that all figurines must represent deities, leading to fruitless arguments about the correct classification of figurines that have no deity symbolism. A more likely explanation is that these were simply representations of people (Smith 2002) used in rites of curing and divination.

### 3.6 Special Items

Many other kinds of ceremonial objects are depicted in the ritual codices, but only a few have been identified in museum or fieldwork collections. Sacred bundles were of great importance, but little is known about their contents (Olivier 2006). Some apparently included obsidian mirrors (Figure 35.4F), a major item in the cult of the deity Tezcatlipoca. Mirrors were associated with smoke, and priests and diviners were thought to foresee the future by looking into the mirrors. Two forms of obsidian mirrors are found in museum collections today. Circular mirrors are common in the codices and probably served as Aztec cult items, whereas rectangular mirrors were not depicted before the Spanish conquest and may have been a Spanish colonial innovation.

## 4 THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEITIES

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The Aztec conception of deity was complex and remains poorly understood. Although the Spanish friars wrote thousands of pages about Aztec gods, myths, and ceremonies, they obtained this information from laymen after the Spanish conquest; no Aztec priest ever explained religious concepts to a Western observer. Although the sources refer to literally hundreds of deities with individual names and attributes, scholars agree that most of these were avatars or transformations of one another. Deities were not anthropomorphic. They were viewed as supernatural spirits or forces that took material form when adorned with key elements of their costume. In this section I summarize information about the material culture associations of some of the key deities, particularly their temples and cult objects. Traditional structuralist scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on the symbolism and mythological roles of Aztec deities, and there is still much to learn about their cults and ceremonies from surviving material objects and depictions in codices.

### 4.1 Tezcatlipoca

Tezcatlipoca, patron of kings, was a powerful creator god. Dark and mysterious, he represents the closest thing to a 'high god' in Aztec religion. Tezcatlipoca has been studied more intensively than most Aztec deities, and as a result we have a much better understanding of his cult and its manifestations (Olivier 2003; Smith in preparation). The smoking mirror is the most important emblem and cult object of Tezcatlipoca; indeed his name means 'smoking mirror'. Unfortunately none of the obsidian mirrors in museum collections has a secure provenience. Ceramic flutes were another component of this cult. During the major annual Tezcatlipoca festival (called *Toxcatl*) priests and god impersonators paraded around the streets of the city playing the flute, and these were then broken on the pyramid steps during the sacrifice that concluded the festival (Figure 35.1). Archaeologists have yet to identify a temple dedicated to Tezcatlipoca, although many of the small platforms that filled the plazas of Aztec cities (Figure 35.2) were probably dedicated to this god.

### 4.2 Quetzalcoatl and Ehecatl

Quetzalcoatl, the 'feathered serpent', had a long history before Aztec times. His cult spread throughout Mesoamerica after the fall of Teotihuacan and this god's support became an important component of the legitimacy of kings. Quetzalcoatl helped create the world and people, and as the patron god of priests and learning he appears often in the ritual codices. One of Quetzalcoatl's avatars, Ehecatl, attained importance as the god of wind. This god preferred circular temples, reportedly because the lack of corners helped the flow of the wind. Quetzalcoatl and Ehecatl are among the major themes of Aztec stone sculpture, and small cult paraphernalia of the feathered serpent have been recovered in offerings at the Templo Mayor. These deities are also well represented in small ceramic figurines (Figure 35.4D).



### 4.3 Tlaloc

Tlaloc was an ancient central Mexican god of rain and fertility whose ancestral forms were prominent long before the Aztec period. Of the two gods worshipped at the Templo Mayor, the vast majority of the offerings were dedicated to Tlaloc and fertility. A wide variety of ceramic effigies of Tlaloc are known, including braziers both large and small (Figure 35.3C), crude offering vessels, and—in Templo Mayor offerings—some of the most finely made Aztec ceramic objects. In spite of Tlaloc's role in agricultural fertility, however, he is poorly represented among figurines and other objects of domestic ritual.

### 4.4 Huitzilopochtli

As the patron god of the Mexica people, Huitzilopochtli's image and bundle were carried on their migration to central Mexico. As the Mexica gained ascendancy in the Triple Alliance Empire, their scribes and priests burned the books of past peoples and promoted their patron god as an important and ancient creator god. One aspect of this process was the dedication of one of the two shrines on the Templo Mayor to Huitzilopochtli. Nevertheless, this deity is remarkable for his small number of images, offerings, and identifiable cult items.

### 4.5 Tzitzimime

The tzitzimime were female fertility deities invoked by curers, midwives, and other female religious practitioners. The skull and bones emblem was associated with the tzitzimime, and small altars decorated with this motif (see above) probably played a role in ceremonies that invoked these deities. The biases of the written record hamper our understanding of the tzitzimime more than other deities. The Spanish friars did not understand Aztec women and feared their ritual activities and powers. In their written accounts of Aztec religion, the friars transformed the tzitzimime deities from benevolent fertility deities to threatening and malevolent demons and causers of harm (Klein 2000). The proliferation of small platforms in public settings at Aztec cities (Figure 35.2) could represent an expansion of the public ceremonial role for midwives and curers during Aztec times (Smith 2008).

## 5 THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF KEY CEREMONIES

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Public ceremonies are one of the best-known aspects of Aztec religion. Some of these elaborate celebrations were witnessed by Spanish conquerors, and they were strongly inscribed in the memories of the colonial Aztecs interviewed by the Spanish friars. One reason for the emphasis on ceremonies in both popular and scholarly writings is that many of them involved human sacrifice. These ceremonies have been extensively studied by scholars (e.g., Couch 1985; Graulich 1999), but their materiality remains understudied. In this section I first discuss the material manifestations of human sacrifice and then review some of the key Aztec ceremonies.

## 5.1 Human Sacrifice

Spanish descriptions of Aztec society contain extensive discussions of human sacrifice, and the practice is well represented in the codices. The Spanish sources, however, are heavily biased. The need to put an end to this custom was one of the prime rationalizations for the conquest of the Aztecs, and for this reason the Spanish writers almost certainly overstated the extent of sacrifice. This has led some modern authors to claim that the Spaniards invented the notion to make the Aztecs look bad, and that the Aztecs did not in fact practise sacrifice. Archaeological finds, however, demonstrate beyond a doubt that the Aztecs, like most ancient Mesoamerican cultures, did indeed sacrifice people. This practice was ancient and widespread in central Mexico. Unfortunately the archaeological evidence cannot yet reveal the frequency or intensity of Aztec human sacrifice. The notion that thousands of victims were dispatched at individual ceremonies, popularized by television documentaries and films like *Apocalypto*, is probably incorrect.

Rites of human sacrifice were part of a complex tapestry of myths and beliefs that have been extensively analysed and debated by specialists (Carrasco 1999; Graulich 1999). Key concepts include the sacredness of human blood, the idea that people owe a debt to the gods that must be repaid with blood and human lives, and the notion of a close relationship between life and death. In the process of creating the world and the first humans, some gods had been sacrificed and others undertook auto-sacrifice, the ceremonial letting of their blood (Klein 1987). If humans did not repay this debt with blood, the consequences would be dire.

Archaeological excavations have documented human sacrifice in central Mexico at least as early as the great Classic period (AD 100–600) metropolis Teotihuacan (Sugiyama 2004). In the Aztec period sacrificial offerings have been excavated at the Templo Mayor and other sites in the Basin of Mexico as well as in the nearby imperial provinces to the south and east of the Basin. The most direct evidence is osteological: offerings of decapitated crania with associated cervical vertebrae, crania with lateral perforations for hanging on skull racks, and cut marks on bones (Chávez Balderas 2007; Hernández Pons and Navarrete 1997; Pijoan and Mansilla Lory 1997; Pijoan et al. 1989). Some of the paraphernalia of sacrifice, including flint sacrificial knives and stone bowls and boxes for guarding blood and hearts (Figure 35.3B), have been excavated in offerings at the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan; these items are also found among the unprovenanced objects in many museum collections of Aztec materials. A number of sacrificial altars (Figure 35.3A) are known (Graulich 1998). These archaeological remains provide unambiguous evidence for Aztec human sacrifice, although we cannot yet judge the intensity of the practice from its material remains.

## 5.2 The Monthly ('Veintena') Ceremonies

The Aztec year was divided into 18 months of 20 days, and each month saw the performance of an elaborate ceremony; scholars call these the *veintena* ceremonies. The ceremonies lasted for several days and involved a series of actions: public rites in the centres of cities, processions through cities and the countryside, and offerings within people's houses. All sectors of society participated, usually in groups organized by residence, gender, occupation, or social class. Activities during the ceremony included music, dance, oration, feasting, offerings, and human sacrifice. Two lengthy descriptions of the *veintena* ceremonies survive (Durán 1971; Sahagún 1950–82), and these include paintings of the major events. A brief consideration of the activities carried out in the central plaza of a city

during the ceremony of Tlacaxipeualiztli gives an idea of the material manifestations of the *veintena* ceremonies.

The central event of the Tlacaxipeualiztli festival, the culmination of several days of festivities, was the sacrifice of a victim to the god Xipe Totec ('Our lord with the flayed skin') on top of the main temple of the city. Afterwards the victim's body was flayed. At another point in the festival a gladiator sacrifice was carried out. In this rite the victim (a captured enemy warrior) was tied to a large circular stone altar and given mock weapons to battle experienced warriors with real weapons. Eventually the victim was overcome and killed, thereby ending the sacrifice. Upcoming victims lined up next to the skull rack. Priests paraded around the city centre playing conch-shell trumpets and ceramic flutes, while groups of nobles and commoners danced together with rattles. Most research on these ceremonies has emphasized their symbolism and meaning, but more recently scholars have expanded their perspectives to consider how the participants interacted with the built environment of the city centre (Smith 2008) and how the various ritual objects were used (Berdan 2007; Both 2002).

### 5.3 The New Fire Ceremony

The New Fire ceremony was celebrated every 52 years upon the completion of a major calendrical cycle. Aztec mythology predicted the destruction of the world at the end of a 52-year cycle, but left it unclear just which cycle was implicated. At the end of a cycle all fires were put out and people discarded their household goods. When it was clear that a new day was dawning (with a reprieve of 52 more years) a victim was sacrificed in the New Fire temple, a new fire was started, and from it fire was carried to all corners of the empire to celebrate the occasion. The New Fire temple (called Huixachtatl), located at the top of a mountain near Tenochtitlan, has been excavated (Montero García 2002), but it has proven difficult to relate the findings to specific actions described in the documentary sources. On the other hand, ritual dumps at several sites can be associated with accounts of the discard of domestic objects every 52 years (Elson and Smith 2001).

Other important public ceremonies included the ball game and a series of state ceremonies focusing on the rites of life history and political history of rulers (Brumfiel 2001; Matos Moctezuma 1995).

### 5.4 Domestic Ritual

Spanish written sources have almost no information about Aztec domestic ritual. Most domestic ceremonies were performed by women, but the Spanish friars avoided speaking to native women and did not enter their houses (Burkhart 1997). All excavations of Aztec houses have uncovered broken fragments of ceramic figurines (Figures 35.4D and 35.4E) and censers of one form or another (e.g. Figure 35.3E). These two types of artefact point to distinct but overlapping domains of domestic religious practice (Smith 2002). The first domain includes objects and practices that replicate those of Aztec state religion. For example, the fragments of long-handled censers found in houses match precisely the whole censers recovered from offerings (Figure 35.3E) and depicted in the hands of priests in the codices. This correspondence suggests continuities between state and domestic rites.

The second domain of domestic ritual, focused on the use of ceramic figurines, was a women's world that only overlapped slightly with the state religion. Archaeological context and scattered historical references indicate that figurines were used by women for curing and divination. Figurines are rarely found in burials or offerings at temples, yet they are ubiquitous in domestic middens. Other cult objects recovered in household excavations include fragments of musical instruments and quartz crystals.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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It is unlikely that Aztec archaeology will ever see another project as rich and influential as the Templo Mayor project. Nevertheless, archaeology has a key role to play as research on Aztec ritual and religion moves beyond the symbolic or structural interpretations (Fogelin 2007) of the dominant tradition of scholarship. In line with the more practice-oriented research of most archaeologists today, the next major advance will probably come from a more complete recognition of the materiality of Aztec ritual practice, and the analysis of that materiality in social terms. At the most basic level scholars need to match up four types of data: descriptions of ritual by the Spanish friars and others; depictions of gods and rituals in the codices; excavated finds from many different sites (not just the Templo Mayor); and the vast collections of unprovenanced Aztec objects that lie gathering dust in museums. Scholars have already made important starts in this area. Jacqueline de Durand-Forest and colleagues have begun a programme of systematic analysis of the material culture of the codices (Durand-Forest and Eisinger 1998; Durand-Forest et al. 2000), and other scholars have begun to bring together the textual data, codices, and archaeological finds (e.g. Berdan 2007; Klein 2000; López Luján 2005; Marcus 2007; Olivier 2003; Smith in preparation). Within this interdisciplinary approach to Aztec ritual and religion, archaeologists are increasingly playing the lead role, because of both their focus on material culture and materialization, and their role in uncovering new objects and contexts that extend knowledge beyond the relatively fixed corpus of written sources.

There are hundreds of thousands of Aztec objects curated in museum storerooms in Mexico, Europe, and the United States. Published catalogues exist for only a handful of these collections, and many museums simply have no idea of the content or extent of their Aztec collections. Yet this material can play several crucial roles in advancing scholarship on Aztec ritual and religion. These objects can be matched up with the written and pictorial sources as discussed above, and they help archaeologists interpret their fragmentary finds from excavations (Smith 2004).

A related theme in research on materiality is the spatial expression of Aztec rituals. An important volume edited by David Carrasco (1991) initiated this line of analysis, and it continues with scholarship on the relationship between urban ceremonies and the built environment (Smith 2008) and studies of native maps (Boone 2000). As scholars begin to comprehend the places where rituals and processions took place, what buildings and open spaces were nearby, and what material objects were used, they will achieve a much richer understanding of Aztec ritual and religion.

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## SUGGESTED READING

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The best overall descriptions of Aztec religion are the accounts of the Spanish friars, particularly the *Florentine Codex* of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1950–82) and Fray Diego de Durán's (1971) very readable account. Historians who have contributed most heavily to the secondary literature include David Carrasco (1991, 1999), Michel Graulich (1997, 1999), and Alfredo López Austin (1997). Most publications on the Templo Mayor are either technical reports or art books; the most useful scholarly synthesis are those of Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1995) and Leonardo López Luján (2005, 2006).

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