

The Role of Social Stratification in the Aztec Empire: A View from the Provinces

This paper explores the role of social stratification in the regional organization of the Triple Alliance, or Aztec empire. Unlike previous interpretations that see military coercion as the main force integrating the empire, I argue that the primary integrative factor was collusion between rulers of the core states and the nobility of the provinces, who gained economic rewards for their participation in the tribute empire. The common interest of the Mesoamerican nobility transcended political boundaries. The fundamental social and economic cleavage in Postclassic Mesoamerica was not between the Triple Alliance states and the provinces, as many have argued, but rather between the nobles and the commoners. The proposed model is supported through examination of the provincial polity of Cuauhnahuac in western Morelos, Mexico.

An Empire with No Provincial Infrastructure?

THE RAISON D'ETRE OF ANY EMPIRE IS THE ENRICHMENT OF ITS RULERS and their supporters (Eisenstadt 1969:13 ff.). This was certainly true of the Aztec, or Triple Alliance, empire, which served as a device for generating tribute in provincial areas to support the peoples and governments of its three allied ruling states in the Basin of Mexico. In contrast to other known ancient empires, such as the Roman, Athenian, or Inca, the Triple Alliance empire had virtually no provincial infrastructure (see Wells 1984, Garnsey and Whittaker 1978, or Rowe 1946 for comparative cases). The empire, with rare exceptions, did not build towns, fortresses, roads, bridges, storehouses, or administrative centers outside of its own local core territory. Apart from a small contingent of tribute collectors (*calpixque*), administrators were not sent to the provinces, where local rule was maintained. How then was the Triple Alliance able to control and maintain a vast realm that produced considerable tribute in foodstuffs, textiles, valuables, and labor for the enrichment of three core states? (see Códice Mendoza 1980, Barlow 1949, Gibson 1971, or Berdan 1982:35–41 on imperial tribute; the three states were the Mexica, Acolhua, and Tepanec polities). It is my contention that the primary force binding the empire together was the common interest of the Postclassic Mesoamerican nobility. Provincial ruling dynasties cooperated with the rulers of the Triple Alliance states in the economic exploitation of their local commoners. Social stratification may thus be singled out as one of the most important factors in the integration of much of the empire.

Prior interpretations of the Triple Alliance empire have posited military force and coercion as the primary integrating force binding the provinces to the core states: provincial areas paid tribute out of their fear of military intervention by the nearly invincible Mexica armies (e.g., Bray 1972:169; Kurtz 1978:177; Marcus 1983b:314; Isaac 1983a:128). However, a consideration of the nature of warfare in Late Postclassic central Mexico suggests that this interpretation is inadequate. While the Mexica and Acolhua states certainly had

strong and effective armies, so did other large polities in central Mexico. As the Triple Alliance developed, its military machine became nearly invincible *within the Basin of Mexico*. Once expansion outside of the Basin began, however, basic considerations of distance and organization worked against the effectiveness of the Triple Alliance armies. First, there was no standing army and few professional soldiers, so armies had to be raised separately for each campaign (Davies 1976). Second, the provisioning of distant troops in the field presented major logistical problems, given the lack of nonhuman transport and the mountainous terrain in central Mexico (Davies 1976, 1973:111). Third, the rarity of Triple Alliance fortresses and garrisons outside of the Basin of Mexico severely hindered the efficiency of distant conquests.¹

A number of Mesoamerican states (including Tlaxcala, Metztitlan, and the Tarascans) were powerful enough to resist repeatedly the combined Triple Alliance armies (see Davies 1973; Isaac 1983b). Many of the successful battles were quite costly to the Mexica and Acolhua, and some of the polities included in the empire were powerful conquest-states in their own right (see discussion of Cuauhnahuac below). Calnek (1978:466) suggests that rebellions by subject states, although not rare occurrences, were far less common than would be expected if coercive force were the primary factor holding the empire together. In light of these considerations, it is difficult to accept the interpretation that military threat was the primary basis of imperial control and integration. While it is clear that the Triple Alliance did have an edge in military strength over the areas conquered and incorporated into the empire, its armies alone could not possibly have kept tribute flowing in the absence of social and economic forces binding these provinces to the Mexica, Acolhua, and Tepanec states.

It is the thesis of this paper that the bonds between provinces and the core area existed primarily within the elite stratum. Provincial elites were co-opted by the Triple Alliance through marriage alliances, preferred trade agreements, and other mechanisms, and the burden of tribute fell on the provincial commoners, not the elite. The major social cleavage in Late pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica was *not* between the Basin of Mexico and the provinces, as Mexica state ideology maintained (see Townsend 1979), but rather between the nobility and the commoners. While the importance of social stratification and elite solidarity in the rise of the Mexica state within the Basin of Mexico have been pointed out by others (Rounds 1979; Monjaras-Ruiz 1980; Calnek 1982), the role of these factors in the organization of the entire empire has not been investigated. Recent research in western Morelos, Mexico (the area of the pre-Hispanic polity of Cuauhnahuac), has uncovered evidence strongly supportive of this alternative view of the organization of the Triple Alliance empire outside of the Basin of Mexico. Because of the fragmentary nature of the available evidence, the model presented here should be seen as exploratory and not definitive. We will not know just how typical Cuauhnahuac is of the remaining provinces until further research is carried out in those areas. Before presenting the Cuauhnahuac data, the general patterns of central Mexican political growth and social stratification need to be considered.

Patterns of Political Expansion in Postclassic Central Mexico

Levels of Political Integration

The basic level of political organization in Late Postclassic central Mexico was the *city-state*. This was the basic building block for all larger political entities and it maintained its integrity as a sociopolitical unit well into the Colonial period, while larger polities did not (Gibson 1964). A city-state, or *altepetl*, may be defined as “a socially stratified state community that occupied a definite, bounded territory with a capital (the location of the royal palace) and subject settlements and lands” (Licate 1980:36).

Called *señoríos* or *pueblos por sí* by early Spanish observers (Gibson 1964:36), these city-states were ruled by a *tlatoani*, who usually inherited the position from his father or other close male relative and ruled for life. The *tlatoani* and his ruling lineage were supported

primarily through tax and tribute in goods and labor assessed on the population of the city-state (Carrasco 1964), although other sources of local income such as private estates and taxes on markets also existed for the nobility (Berdan 1982:50–55). Although often composed of ethnically diverse populations, city-states were corporate units strongly integrated by religious and social bonds in addition to their class-structured political and economic integration (see Licate 1980:36 f.). In 1519 there were approximately 50 city-states in the Basin of Mexico (Gibson 1964:34) with an average area of just under 150 km² and an average population of between 15,000 and 30,000 inhabitants (Sanders 1971:15).

A higher level of political organization in central Mexico was the *conquest-state*, in which one city-state managed to conquer neighboring polities and institute tributary relationships to become the top level of a new larger hierarchical unit. Conquest-states are sometimes difficult to identify in the historical sources, since they are often referred to by the same term used for city-states, “*señorío*”; one exception is Motolinia’s (1979:184) use of the term “*provincia*” to refer to the Tlaxcala conquest-state. Within the conquest-state the subordinate states maintained their own *tlatoque* (plural of *tlatoani*) and most of their political and economic organization, including local tribute systems; they merely had to pay tribute to the superior state (see Ramírez de Fuenleal [1870a:236, 1870b:253] for a description from 1532). Examples of central Mexican conquest-states at the time of the Spanish conquest include Tenochtitlan (Davies 1973), Texcoco (Hicks 1982), Tlaxcala (Motolinia 1979:184), and Cuauhnahuac (see below).

The highest level of political organization in Postclassic central Mexico was the *Triple Alliance empire*. In principle, the only difference between this entity and the conquest-state was the tripartite nature of its leadership (which led to a complex and confusing system of tribe allotments that changed through time—see Gibson 1971). In other respects, the Triple Alliance was organized like a large conquest-state—neighboring polities were conquered and forced to pay tribute, while local leaders and institutions were left intact (see Olivera 1976:193 for an exception to this general practice). In spite of such structural similarities, the mechanisms of integration of the mature Triple Alliance were very different from those of city-states or conquest-states. In order to understand the nature and origin of these differences, the trajectory of political evolution in the Postclassic Basin of Mexico needs to be considered.

Political Evolution in the Basin of Mexico

Most of the Late Postclassic city-states in the Basin of Mexico traced their origins to the 13th century. Native historical sources indicate that many new settlements were founded by immigrant Nahuatl populations at this time (Smith 1984), a situation reflected archeologically in a striking lack of continuity in settlement location between the Early and Middle Postclassic periods (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979:152). As documented by Calnek (1978, 1982:46–52), the 13th and early 14th centuries were a time of resettlement, land reclamation, town building, and formation of local states and dynasties. Although populations were growing (through both immigration and natural increase), overall population densities remained low, and there was little competition between the newly formed city-states. Brumfiel (1983:268) compares these early polities to chiefdoms in that they had a simple administrative structure and were politically unstable. Nevertheless, as she points out (1983:269), the rulers and ruled were not related through kinship ties. The concern of the rulers of these states with establishing legitimate dynasties (Calnek 1982:48 ff.) set the scene for later patterns of rigid social stratification.

As the individual city-states grew in size and complexity during the 14th century, the level of interaction among them increased; the major mechanisms were marketplace trade, elite marriage alliances, and warfare (see Davies 1980; Calnek 1982). This increased interaction was generated by both demographic and social structural processes. Between the Middle (A.D. 1150–1350) and Late (1350–1519) Postclassic periods, archeological data document a dramatic increase in population size and density in the Basin

of Mexico (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979:217–218); much of this increase was probably spread over the 14th and 15th centuries. At the same time, local elites were competing with each other for the support of groups of unattached commoners through “royal liberality and conspicuous display” (Brumfiel 1983:269). Throughout the 14th century, warfare became more common until a situation of constant battles and shifting alliances developed. As predicted by models of political evolution (e.g., Adams 1975), the net result of increased interaction among city-states in a context of increasing energy levels (population growth, agricultural intensification, and trade) was both internal political centralization (within city-states) and the emergence of a new higher sociopolitical level, the conquest-state.

The pattern of indirect rule and local autonomy of conquered areas characteristic of the Triple Alliance empire in 1519 had its origin in the mid- to late-14th-century conquest-states of the Basin of Mexico. As put by Calnek (1982:56), the organization of these polities,

involved the subordination but not absorption of conquered city-states, which normally retained a great deal of autonomy in the conduct of purely internal affairs. . . . The most important characteristic of this system was that local rulers retained control over their own manpower and material resources.

Integration of the conquest-states was strengthened by some of the same mechanisms that had linked previously independent city-states. For example, marriage alliances were common between ruling and subordinate royal dynasties, and marketplace trade enjoyed considerable growth during this period (Durán 1967, II: 49; Smith 1979) as patterns of regional market exchange helped give coherence to the conquest-state as an integrated corporate unit. Because the conquered city-states were generally either adjacent to or not far from the conquering state, there were often bonds of ethnic affiliation among them. At the base of relations between the paramount and subordinate city-states, however, was the threat of armed coercion. The former had demonstrated its military superiority over the latter during the initial wars of conquest, and inappropriate actions by subordinate states were met with armed force (Calnek 1982:57; Davies 1980).

The formation of the Triple Alliance in 1428 did not initially signal an increase in the level or scale of political organization. The Tepanec conquest-state had previously subjugated its main rival, the Acolhua state. Due to a number of circumstances, the Mexica and Acolhua polities joined forces and together with some external aid defeated the Tepanec armies in 1428 (see Davies 1973 or 1980). The Mexica, Acolhua, and a dissident Tepanec faction reached a joint agreement on military and tribute-gathering activities, and the Triple Alliance was born. At first, the only difference between the Triple Alliance and prior conquest-states was its tripartite leadership. In other respects, however, the organization and integration of the early empire was identical to that of the prior conquest-states described above (Calnek 1982:56 f.; Brumfiel 1983:271–274).

The distinctive patterns of provincial control and integration that characterized the Triple Alliance empire in 1519 first became significant when polities *outside of the Basin of Mexico* were conquered and incorporated. The initial conquests of distant lands (starting with Cuauhnahuac in 1438) may have resulted as much from the need of the Triple Alliance rulers to consolidate their local power bases as from the need for extra-Basin resources (Brumfiel 1983:274 f.; Rounds 1979). Nevertheless, distant conquests soon became profitable in terms of the large amounts of tribute generated, and imperial expansion was in some ways self-perpetuating (Davies 1973:202–204; Demarest and Conrad 1983). Because of the increasing distances and physiographic obstacles to communication between conquered peoples and the imperial capitals, the mechanisms of integration used by earlier conquest-states were not as effective for the Triple Alliance empire after 1438. Ethnic affiliation and regional market exchange simply did not work to tie provinces outside of the Basin of Mexico to the Triple Alliance. The significance of military threat, while not by any means eliminated, was greatly reduced due to logistical and organiza-

tional problems outlined in the first section of this paper and to the strength of some of the states encountered. The Triple Alliance simply had much less power over distant conquered provinces than it had over nearby Basin of Mexico provinces due to the lower level of control over relevant energetic forms and flows (see Adams [1975]). It was at this point that one form of conquest-state integration—cooperation between politically independent ruling families—was transformed from a force of moderate importance (see Monjaras-Ruiz 1980) to the principal means of organizing the Triple Alliance empire.

Social Stratification and the Triple Alliance Empire

Late Postclassic Social Stratification

Although a number of ranked social categories existed in central Mexico at the time of Spanish conquest, two groups—elite and commoners—stand out as the principal economic classes in terms of access to and control over basic resources, the standard criterion in defining social stratification (Fried 1967:185–191; Adams 1975:243–265). The elite class may be referred to as a *nobility* (Bloch 1961:283) because it possessed two necessary characteristics: (1) it was a legally recognized status group whose privileges and characteristics were defined by law (see Sahagún 1950–69), and (2) it was a hereditary class (Carrasco 1976). Tribute formed the basis of this system of stratification. The various categories of nobles—kings (*tlatoque*), lesser rulers (*teteuctin*), and other nobles by birth (*pipiltin*)—were all recipients of tribute in goods and labor from the various categories of commoners. The nobility were thus distinguished from and supported by commoners on the basis of tribute payments. Although limited social mobility did exist (primarily through warfare, trade, and the priesthood), the basic distinction between nobles and commoners was quite rigid.

The economic foundation of the nobility's power and position was control over land (only nobles could own or control private lands) and monopolization of the organizational capacities of government, including the military and tribute collections systems. Control over long-distance trade, state rituals, and other institutions also contributed to the nobles' power. The noble class and the ruling personnel of central Mexican city-states were nearly identical, and it is not possible to separate the personal resources of nobles from governmental resources. Thus the tribute system by which commoners supported the noble class was also the primary source of state revenue and economic control.

There were several levels of tribute payments in central Mexico, which correspond to the levels of political hierarchy described above. The number of levels in any given area depended on the political complexity and status of the region, which in turn related to the local history of military conquests and diplomatic maneuvering. In Late Postclassic Morelos, for example, there were four levels of tribute payments, which map onto the three levels of political organization. There were two levels of tribute within city-states: commoners supported their local nobles, and these nobles plus other commoners supported the city-state's *tlatoani* with tribute. The city-states in turn paid tribute to Cuauhnahuac or one of six other conquest-states, and after conquest by the Triple Alliance in 1438 the conquest-states made tribute payments to the Basin of Mexico. Tribute demands were thus inversely correlated with both the social and political hierarchies. Nobles were better off than commoners at each level of political organization (in terms of tribute burdens and standard of living), while both nobles and commoners in conquest-state peripheries had heavier burdens than their counterparts in cores (e.g., the capital city of Cuauhnahuac), who in turn had heavier burdens than the residents of the Triple Alliance capitals in the Basin of Mexico. The Cuauhnahuac tribute system is discussed with references in Smith (1985); more extended discussions of central Mexican social stratification can be found in Carrasco (1971), Berdan (1982:45–72), and Carrasco and Broda (1976).

Interaction between Regional Elites

In agrarian state societies, the elite class typically takes part in a geographically wider

and more intensive network of communication and exchange than is found among the lower classes (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:160; Geertz and Geertz 1975:60, 119; Wells 1984:195, 260; Lenski 1966: passim). A primary motivation for such participation is the common interest of the elite in protecting their privileged position and lifestyle. Control over movements of resources, technology, and information both contributes to and is reinforced by this interaction network. Control of information flow, in particular, is crucial not only for communication among the elite but for the maintenance of the whole system of stratification through factors like ritual and propaganda (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: passim). These elite interaction networks often transcend political boundaries. When this is the case, geographically and politically separated local elite groups typically employ a number of mechanisms to both maintain communication and to uphold the overall system of stratification. Among the most important of these mechanisms are marriage alliances (Fisher 1983; Geertz and Geertz 1975: 131–138; Yanagisako 1979), exchange of luxury goods (Schneider 1977; Blanton and Feinman 1984), the use of restricted cultural or religious codes such as writing (Bloch 1961:77–80), and participation in periodic consumption rituals (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: passim; Wells 1984: passim).

There is ample documentary evidence for all of these practices in Late Postclassic central Mexico. *Marriage alliances* served to link various royal dynasties into a complex kinship network. One particular form of such marriage—between a ruler and the daughter of a more powerful ruler—was quite widespread throughout Mesoamerica and formed a basic component of the political process (Marcus 1976:150–175; Spores 1974; Hunt 1972:205–208). Royal marriage alliances were particularly prevalent in central Mexico, as Carrasco's work (1976, 1984) shows. *Exchange of luxury goods* between separate groups took place through long-distance trade, marketplace exchange, and tribute payment (Berdan 1982), and like marriage alliances, served both social and political ends (Blanton and Feinman 1984). Among the *cultural/religious codes* restricted to the elite stratum were writing and calendrics (Berdan 1982).

The gatherings of politically separate noble groups at *periodic consumption rituals* are one of the best-documented forms of elite interaction, yet they are one of the most misunderstood institutions of Late Postclassic society. While these large scale ceremonies held on important state occasions (e.g., coronations, funerals, and temple dedications) probably took place in all of the major capital cities, documentation is most abundant for the Mexica of Tenochtitlan. Foreign rulers and nobles, both subjects and enemies, attended these ceremonies along with the Basin of Mexico nobility. Many modern scholars have been misled by the official ideology or propaganda of the Mexica, which maintained that the primary purpose of these occasions was to impress and overwhelm foreign nobles with the power and glory of the Mexica state. When one looks beyond the Mexica interpretation (which is stated as fact in accounts such as Durán 1967), it becomes clear that the ceremonies actually represent large-scale redistributive feasts promoting social solidarity within the geographically dispersed noble class. As Calnek (1978:469) notes, there are

certain features of the political system which are only implicit in the basic historical sources that quite often present official ideologies rather than the realities of social development. It is one thing to note that subject rulers were *obliged* to participate in the life of the imperial court. This assumes an entirely different meaning once we note that the rulers in question were likely to be sons, grandsons, cousins, nephews, or even brothers of the reigning emperor.

Contrary to the propagandistic statements of the Mexica on the fear and awe of foreign and subject rulers (e.g., Durán 1967, II:323, 341) the descriptions of Mexica state ceremonies (see Durán 1967, Tezozomoc 1975a, or Anunciación 1942) emphasize grandeur, sumptuous feasting, gift giving, and royal redistribution to the gathered nobility. The impression is given that the nobles were enjoying themselves, and that to them the human sacrifices were not an instrument of terror but rather a form of religious entertainment along with the dances, speeches, processions, and other theatrical ceremonies. Although

the role of these ceremonies in the integration of Basin of Mexico elites has been stressed by several authors (e.g., Brumfiel 1981, 1983; Calnek 1978), this solidarity also included subordinate provinces and to a lesser extent, unconquered states. Tlacaelel, advisor to the Mexica emperor, explicitly articulates this notion of elite solidarity, even between nobles of warring polities:

It seems to me that it would not be unreasonable to ask them [nobles and rulers of the enemy states of Tlaxcala and Metztlán] again to this solemn occasion because, even though we are enemies in the wars that we wage, in our festivities we should rejoice together. There is no reason why they should be excluded since we are all one. It is reasonable that there be truces and greetings among the nobles. [Durán 1964:191–192; compare Durán 1967, II:336–337]

The “fear and awe” interpretation of Mexica ceremonies is only one example of a state ideology that systematically obscured class divisions and elite interaction by focusing on political differences between states. This issue is discussed further in the conclusions of the paper.

In addition to the four factors discussed above, there were other channels of interaction and cooperation among separate local noble groups. These included military alliances for generating tribute (of which the Triple Alliance was only one example), gift exchange, mutual sharing of captives for sacrifice, and other types of general social, economic, and political cooperation. These probably ancient means of elite interaction were exploited for political purposes as the Mexica state and Triple Alliance consolidated their power base within the Basin of Mexico (see Rounds 1979; Brumfiel 1983:275–278; Monjaras-Ruiz 1980). Thus when the empire expanded beyond the confines of the Basin, the elite communication network, which already covered an area much larger than the Basin of Mexico, was easily put to similar political use. The specific manner in which the above processes operated is explored more fully in the following detailed case study of the Triple Alliance province of Cuauhnahuac and the nature of its interaction with the imperial core.

The Cuauhnahuac Polity and the Basin of Mexico

Cuauhnahuac was a pre-Hispanic conquest-state located in the western part of the modern Mexican state of Morelos, immediately south of the Basin of Mexico across the Ajusco mountain range (the Triple Alliance tributary province covering this area was also called Cuauhnahuac, as was the capital city of the conquest-state, which was renamed Cuernavaca after the Spanish conquest). Cuauhnahuac was somewhat lower in elevation than the Basin of Mexico, with rich agricultural lands that produced important crops that did not grow in the Basin (cotton and tropical fruits were the most significant—see Smith 1985). Because Cuauhnahuac was close to the Basin of Mexico, produced commodities needed by Basin of Mexico cultures, and was the first extra-Basin polity to be conquered by the Triple Alliance, it provides an excellent test for the above model of imperial organization. First, as the oldest exterior tributary province, the major structural features of imperial integration had more time to develop in Cuauhnahuac than in more recently conquered areas. Second, if military threat was the primary force holding the empire together, as others argue, we would expect it to be more effective in the closer provinces like Cuauhnahuac than in distant provinces. In fact, however, the following sections demonstrate that social stratification and elite solidarity were more important than military coercion in binding the Cuauhnahuac polity to the Triple Alliance empire.

Evolution of a Conquest-State: Cuauhnahuac to 1438

From the first mention of Cuauhnahuac in the Nahuatl native histories until its conquest by the Triple Alliance in 1438, two themes stand out in historical references to the Morelos polity.² First, Cuauhnahuac was expanding in both size and power, evolving from city-state status to become the center of a conquest-state by 1438. Second, the Cuauhnahuac nobility maintained a relatively high level of interaction with the nobility

of the Basin of Mexico through marriage alliances, politico-military cooperation, and trade arrangements; this early interaction provided the foundation for Cuauhnahuac's integration into the Triple Alliance empire after 1438.

The earliest dated reference to Cuauhnahuac illustrates both of the above themes. In 1319 (2 Acatl in the Culhua calendar, see Davies 1980:183), a group of polities, including Cuauhnahuac, joined together to defeat the Mexica in battle and drive them out of their temporary home in Chapultepec. Native historical descriptions of this event (Mengin 1952:434; Chimalpahin 1965:58; Anales de Tlatelolco 1948:36) suggest that Cuauhnahuac possessed military strength comparable to the other polities involved (these include Xaltocan, Azcapotzalco, and Culhuacan), and illustrate one form of cooperation among the various city-states.

There are a number of indications that during the period of the Tepanec empire (corresponding more or less to the reign of Tezozomoc, 1371–1426) Cuauhnahuac was a powerful but not spatially extensive polity. The *Relación de la Genealogía* (1941:250) reports that after the fall of Culhuacan in 1377, central Mexico was ruled by an alliance of five states: Azcapotzalco (the Tepanec capital), Coatlichan, Amecameca, Huexotzinco, and Cuauhnahuac. Although Tezozomoc is said to have been more renowned than the rulers of the other four states, the source makes it explicit that the five ruled together; there is no mention of tribute payment from the four states to Azcapotzalco. In spite of this, several authors have argued for the inclusion of Cuauhnahuac in the Tepanec empire (Carrasco 1950:268 ff.; Davies 1980: 241 ff.) because of its presence in some of the standard lists of conquests of Acamapichtli, the first Mexica *tlatoani* (e.g., Códice Mendoza 1980:2v; Anales de Cuauhtitlan 1975:66; Leyenda de los Soles 1975:128; Nazareo et al. 1940:118 f.). During Acamapichtli's reign (1372–91), the Mexica were serving as military vassals of the Tepanec ruler, and thus conquests attributed in Mexica sources to Acamapichtli are more realistically interpreted as Tepanec conquests in which the Mexica participated (Davies 1980:220). However, the following sources omit Cuauhnahuac in their discussion of Acamapichtli's victories: *Historia de los Mexicanos* (1941:229); Códice Azcatitlan (1949:Plate 14); Códice Mexicanus (1952:Plates 53–56). Since other sources state that Cuauhnahuac did not start tribute payments to the Basin of Mexico until after the fall of the Tepanec empire, we may conclude that Cuauhnahuac was *not* part of that empire.

A more reliable guide to the extent of Tepanec territory is a list of towns contained in the "Memorial de los Pueblos" (1940:119) and analyzed by Carrasco (1950:269–271). This list includes several towns in western Morelos (Cohuitepec, Miactlan, Xoxotlan, Xoxocotlan, Molotlan, Amacoztitlan) and Anenecuilco in central Morelos, but not Cuauhnahuac. These towns (with the exception of Anenecuilco) later comprised the heart of the Cuauhnahuac conquest state; their inclusion in the Tepanec empire under Tezozomoc indicates that Cuauhnahuac was still a relatively small polity at this time. A reconstruction of territorial organization in Morelos during the height of the Tepanec empire is found in Smith (1983:87–90); on the basis of available evidence, the Cuauhnahuac state covered an area of around 200 km².

The best example of elite interaction between Cuauhnahuac and the Mexica consists of a marriage alliance between the two royal dynasties around 1395, when Huitzilihuitl, the second Mexica *tlatoani*, married Miahuaxihuitl, daughter of the Cuauhnahuac *tlatoani* (*Historia de los Mexicanos* 1941:229; Chimalpahin 1965:183; Durán 1967, II: 65 f.). The two sources that describe this marriage in greatest detail (Tezozomoc 1975b:90 f. and Torquemada 1969, I:104) both make it clear that the alliance was initiated by Huitzilihuitl, who was in an economically and politically subordinate position relative to Tezcacohuatzin, the Cuauhnahuac ruler. The two motives attributed to Huitzilihuitl for desiring this marriage—to gain access to cotton and other tropical products from Cuauhnahuac (Tezozomoc 1975b:90 f.) and to increase his political standing and influence through this and other political alliance marriages (Torquemada 1969, I: 103 f.)—were certainly both important factors in the event. After prolonged negotiations, Tezcacohu-

atzin finally condescended (*"condescendió,"* Torquemada 1969, I:103 f.) to give his daughter to Huitzilihuitl; she then bore him a son a few years later, in 1398, the future Mexica *tlatoani* Moctezuma Ilhuicamina (Chimalpahin 1965:183).

This was not the only marriage alliance between the Cuauhnahuac dynasty and the nobility of the Basin of Mexico. Miahuaxihuitl's mother (of the same name) was the daughter of the ruler of Tenayuca, and her niece (Chichimecacioatzin, daughter of the next Cuauhnahuac *tlatoani* Cuauhtototzin) later married Moctezuma Ilhuicamina. There was thus considerable intermarriage between the Mexica and Cuauhnahuac royal families, as shown in Figure 1. That such intermarriage served not only royal political ends but also acted to link other branches of the nobility is shown by marriages between the nobility of Tlatelolco and Morelos. Two daughters of Tlacateotl, ruler of Tlatelolco (ca. 1407–26, see Davies 1980: 292 ff.), married nonroyal nobles of Cuauhnahuac, while a third daughter married a noble of the nearby Morelos polity of Huaxtepec (Anales de Tlatelolco 1948:23).

By the time of Cuauhnahuac's conquest by the Triple Alliance in 1438, it had expanded considerably in size. The former Tepanec territory in western Morelos and the previously independent polities of Mazatepec, Zacatepec, and Xochitepec were all part of the Cuauhnahuac conquest-state in 1438 (see Smith 1983:104–109). It is likely that this expansion occurred in the 1420s. As argued by Davies, the strength of the Tepanec empire declined somewhat during its final decade, 1418–28 (1973:60; 1980:288). In 1423 (2 Acatl in the Culhua count), Cuauhnahuac attacked and conquered the Cohuixca of Guerrero, southwest of Morelos (Anales de Tlatelolco 1948:57). Because the Tepanec zone in western Morelos lies between Cuauhnahuac and the Cohuixca area, it is reasonable to assume that this territory was incorporated into the Cuauhnahuac state before or during the Cohuixca campaign. This victorious military campaign is interesting in another respect: the Cuauhnahuac *tlatoani* is said to have "permitted" the weaker rulers of

CUAUHNAHUAC DYNASTY

TENOCHTITLAN DYNASTY

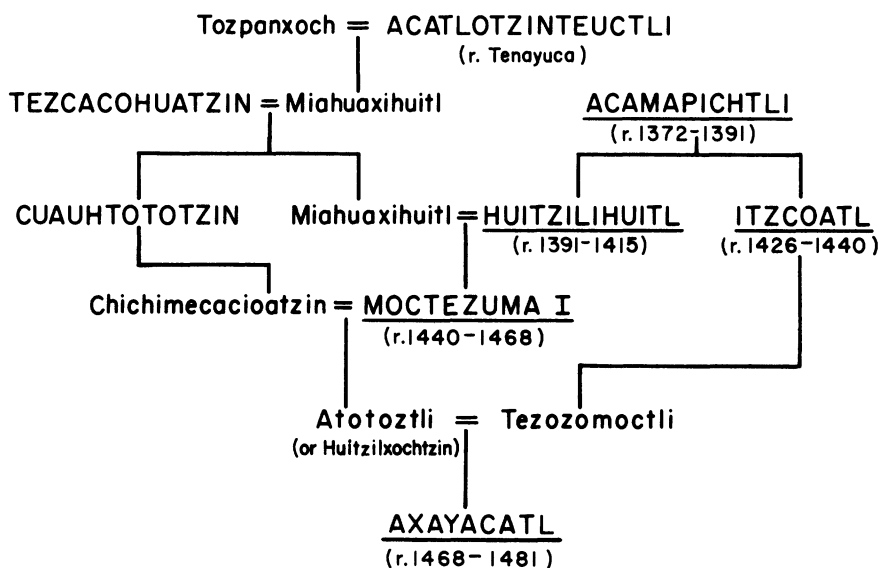


Figure 1

Intermarriage between Cuauhnahuac and Tenochtitlan ruling families. Names of *tlatoque* are capitalized; Tenochtitlan *tlatoque* are also underlined. The marriages are taken from Nazareo et al. (1941:122); dates are those of Davies (1973:305).

Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco to participate in the victory and thus provides another example of inter-elite cooperation between the two areas:

The conquest of the Cuhuisca was not accomplished by the Mexica; the rulers of Cuauhnahuac only permitted them to participate in the conquest. The spoils of victory were shared with Tlacateutzin, ruler of Tlatelolco and Chimalpopocatzin [third *tlatoani*] of Tenochtitlan. [Anales de Tlatelolco 1948:57; author's translation]

Fifteen years after this episode, in 1438, the relative positions of Cuauhnahuac and Tenochtitlan were reversed when the Triple Alliance defeated Cuauhnahuac in battle. The details of this event are discussed elsewhere (Smith 1983:98–107; 1986); for present purposes its significance lies in the following points: (1) Cuauhnahuac is portrayed in the sources as a large and powerful polity; (2) the key battle was a long and difficult one; and (3) tribute payments to the Basin of Mexico (to both the Mexica and the Acolhua) are explicitly said to have begun with this conquest (the major descriptions of the event are found in Torquemada 1969, I: 149 f., Chimalpahin 1965, and Ixtlilxochitl 1975, II: 106 f.; see Smith 1986). According to the reconstruction presented in Smith (1983:104–109), the Cuauhnahuac conquest-state had achieved a size of around 1,500 km² by 1438.

In summary, the available native historical sources present Cuauhnahuac as a state growing in both political/military strength and territorial size in the century preceding its conquest by the Triple Alliance. By the time of its incorporation into the empire in 1438, the nobility of Cuauhnahuac were linked to the nobility of the Basin of Mexico through extensive intermarriage, military alliances, and trade (see Smith 1983: 99 f. on pre-1438 trade in cotton and other goods between Cuauhnahuac and Tenochtitlan). This history of elite coordination set the scene for intensified elite interactions in the period 1438–1519. During this period, such interactions served as the primary means of integrating the Cuauhnahuac polity into the Triple Alliance empire.

Conquest-State and Triple Alliance Province, 1438–1519

Little more than a decade after the incorporation of Cuauhnahuac into the Triple Alliance empire, the town is included along with the nine other Morelos polities in the conquest lists of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina, fifth Mexica *tlatoani* (Código Mendoza 1980: 6r–8r; Anales de Cuauhtitlan 1975:66 f.; Leyenda de los Soles 1975:128; Nazareo et al. 1940:118 f.). Chimalpahin gives 12 Tecpatl (1452) as the date of this battle (1965:99). By this time, the Cuauhnahuac conquest-state had succeeded in adding several additional city-states to its realm (Smith 1983:105–110), to cover an area of around 1,700 km². Thus, in spite of being incorporated into the Triple Alliance empire as a tributary province, the Cuauhnahuac state had continued to expand its local territory within Morelos, apparently to the point where its rulers felt strong enough to cease tribute payments to the Mexica. Moctezuma's victory in 1452 shows that this perception was not accurate.

The patterns of interaction between the nobility of Cuauhnahuac and the Basin of Mexico between 1438 and 1519 may be grouped under three headings: social, economic, and political interaction. The primary means of *social interaction* between elites—marriage alliances—continued after 1438, when Moctezuma married his cousin Chichimecacioatzin, daughter of the Cuauhnahuac *tlatoani* Cuauhtototzin (Nazareo et al. 1940:122; see Figure 1). The Cuauhnahuac nobility was not alone in its marriage alliances with the Mexica dynasty. The fact that the latter lineage undertook similar marriages with other local ruling families within the empire (e.g., Marcus 1983a; Hunt 1972; Parsons et al. 1982:90) but not with those of undefeated enemies like Tlaxcala (Muñoz Camargo 1892:123–124) underscores the link between political marriages and the organization of the empire.

A second important means of social interaction was common participation in state ceremonies. An examination of the “guest lists” of Mexica state rituals and other activities provides an indication of the degree of this interaction. Durán (1967, II) describes 27 Mexica ceremonies and other state activities at which the attendance of specific groups

of foreign nobles is mentioned. As shown in Table 1, representatives from Morelos³ attended all of these events, while nobles from other provincial areas attended some of them. Table 1 is not a complete listing of Mexica state activities with invited foreign guests; Tezozomoc (1975a) discusses many that Durán omits or skims over, and other sources could be consulted to extend the list. Nevertheless, Durán’s chronicle does provide a sense of the nature of this mechanism of elite interaction and the extent of participation of the nobles of Cuauhnahuac and other areas in such events.

This participation in foreign state ceremonies was not one-sided, as Durán and other Basin of Mexico-centered sources might imply, however. For example, the Mexica *tlatoani* Ahuitzotl sent 40 captives to sacrifice at the dedication of a new temple in Cuauhnahuac in 11 Tochtli (1490; *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* 1975:58). This dedication ceremony probably coincided with the accession of the *tlatoani* Tehuehuiltzin, reported in another source as occurring in 12 Acatl (1491) accompanied by “propitiatory victims in the house of the devil in Cuauhnahuac” (Chimalpahin 1965:224; author’s translation). Further evidence of Ahuitzotl’s participation in ceremonial activities in Morelos may be provided by a stone plaque carved with his glyph accompanied by the date 10 Tochtli (1502, the year of Ahuitzotl’s death) found in the Temple of Tepozteco in the independent city-state of Tepoztlan (Seler 1904:347).

Evidence of *economic interaction* between Cuauhnahuac and the Basin of Mexico elites, aside from the former’s Triple Alliance tribute (Código Mendoza 1980: 23r, v), is found in the common participation of their agents in long-distance trade expeditions to Tehuantepec (Durán 1967, II:357) and in the use of Morelos marketplaces by Basin of Mexico nobles (or their agents) to purchase cotton textiles (Durán 1967, II:23). In addition, the archeological record provides evidence for trade in ceramics, obsidian, and salt between the Basin of Mexico and peoples of western Morelos (Smith 1983).

Table 1
Participation of Non-Basin of Mexico Nobles in Mexica State Activities, ca. 1460–1519
(from Durán 1967).

Category of activity	No. of activities participated in by groups from:			
	Morelos	Matlatzinco	Mazahuacan	Cuauhtlalpan
A. Coronations	3	2	1	2
B. Funerals	3	1	1	1
C. Other state rituals	4	2	2	1
D. Military campaigns	7	3	1	5
E. Tenochtitlan construction projects	3	1	1	1
F. Other activities	7	2	3	2
Total	27	10	9	12

- Listing of Activities and Citations* (page numbers refer to Durán 1967, II)
- A. *Coronations*: Tizoc, initial ceremony (301); Tizoc, second ceremony (306); Moctezuma Xocoyotzin (415).
- B. *Funerals*: Ahuitzotl (393); Nezahualpilli (474); Axayacatl (295–298).
- C. *Other state rituals*: Tlacaxipehualiztli (gladiator sacrifice) inauguration (172); Cuauhxicalli inauguration (192); Templo Mayor dedication (333–341); Coatecalli temple dedication (442).
- D. *Military campaigns*: Oaxaca (231); Tlaxcala (237); Michoacan (281–285); Metztitlan (303); Chiapas (319); Xoconochco (384–387); Cholula (448).
- E. *Tenochtitlan construction projects*: Templo Mayor (227); Coyoacan-Tenochtitlan aqueduct (373); reconstruction after flood (380).
- F. *Other activities*: Colonization of Oaxaca (238); colonization of Oztoman (352); trade with Tehuantepec (357); received news of conquest of Tehuantepec (361); participation in victory celebration (362); participation in council to elect Moctezuma Xocoyotzin (397); received request for information on Huexotzinca spies (464).

Political interaction between Cuauhnahuac and Triple Alliance nobility took several forms. Whereas Mexica nobles and armies had helped those of Cuauhnahuac in wars of expansion before the formation of the Triple Alliance, Cuauhnahuac now contributed soldiers and presumably military leaders to some of the Mexica campaigns (see Table 1). Durán (1967, II:397) states that rulers from Morelos (including Cuauhnahuac) participated in the council following Ahuizotl's death that chose the next Mexica *tlatoani*. Other examples of political interaction between the rulers of Cuauhnahuac and Tenochtitlan are scattered among the historical sources. For example, when Axayacatl was arbitrating a boundary dispute between the states of Tepeaca and Cuauhtinchan (in modern Puebla), he called upon the Cuauhnahuac *tlatoani* Tehuehueltzin to help survey the border between the two polities (Cuauhtinchan Contra Tepeaca 1977:68).

Given this high level of inter-elite coordination between Cuauhnahuac and the Basin of Mexico and the Triple Alliance policy of local autonomy in tribute arrangements, it is not surprising that the major states of Morelos continued to expand under the empire. In the final decades before the Spanish conquest, there is documentation of warfare between Cuauhnahuac and the adjacent polities of Malinalco (Ixtilxochitl 1975, I:473), Coahuixco (Ixtilxochitl 1975, I:473), Taxco (Relación de Taxco 1905:277) and Tepoztlan (Relación de Tepoztlan 1905:242). By 1519, Cuauhnahuac had evidently conquered the remaining city-states in western Morelos (but not those listed above), reaching a total extent of around 2,000 km² (Smith 1983:120–134; Gerhard 1970). This post-1452 growth also occurred among the other conquest-states of Morelos. By 1519, seven polities—Cuauhnahuac, Yauhtepec, Tepoztlan, Huaxtepec, Yacapichtlan, Totolapan, and Ocuituco—had expanded their territory through conquest to cover the area of the modern state of Morelos (Smith 1983:120–134; Gerhard 1970). One line of evidence for the importance of these seven polities is the fact that with the exception of Ocuituco, these states are consistently included whenever Durán (1967, II: passim) and Tezozomoc (1975a: passim) list the specific foreign polities sending nobles to Mexica state ceremonies. Thus, at the same time that the nobility of these Morelos conquest states were interacting socially, economically, and politically with the nobility of the Triple Alliance polities, the provincial states were expanding their territory at the expense of nearby city-states. Although surviving documentary sources are silent on the attitude of the Triple Alliance toward limited military activity by conquered states, it is likely that such activities were tolerated if not encouraged by the Basin of Mexico states.

Benefits of Participation in the Empire

While marriage alliances, redistributive ceremonies, and long-distance trade connections were advantages of participation in the Triple Alliance empire, the most important incentive that the Cuauhnahuac nobility gained from the empire was Mexica support for their rule and legitimacy. Common participation in state ceremonies, in both Tenochtitlan and the city of Cuauhnahuac, was a visible signal of implicit support for the Cuauhnahuac ruling dynasty by the Mexica rulers. Although the scanty documentary record for pre-Hispanic Morelos furnishes no clear-cut examples, it is very likely that Triple Alliance forces would have helped put down local rebellions or trouble within the Cuauhnahuac conquest-state. However, the most significant aspect of the Triple Alliance policy of local autonomy was not that local rulers were left in power but that local tribute systems continued to operate in the traditional manner. As put by Zorita (1963:190–191), “the rulers of conquered provinces continued to receive tribute as before” (see Gibson 1971:390 for discussion). This policy ensured the material support of the provincial nobility, who had only to raise local tribute requirements and pass on the surplus to the Triple Alliance in accordance with an area's assigned quota. Therefore, when the Cuauhnahuac state had to initiate tribute payments to the Basin of Mexico after 1438, the logical response of its rulers would have been to increase the tribute quotas of subject city-states.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that provincial rulers, counting on Triple Alliance

support, would have increased tribute quotas even beyond the level required by the empire. Broda (n.d.) suggests that the Triple Alliance policy of local autonomy in tribute arrangements coupled with economic and political benefits led to a basic structural contradiction. The increased power, property, and wealth of the provincial nobility that resulted from their incorporation into the empire improved their political and economic situation to the point that they were stimulated to withdraw from or rebel against the Triple Alliance. The "rebellions" of provincial polities against the empire are often remarked upon (e.g., Gibson 1971; Davies 1980:245). Many towns had to be conquered several times by the Triple Alliance, and thus reappear in the conquest lists of successive Mexica *tlatoque*. These "rebellions" were not military uprisings, however; they consisted simply of the cessation of tribute payments to the Basin of Mexico. Rather than a patriotic response to foreign imperial domination, such revolts are best seen as an attempt by provincial elites to keep a larger share of the total tribute for themselves. Thus by strengthening these local elites, the Triple Alliance produced an unstable situation that encouraged the provincial nobility to withdraw their economic support from the empire.

Several authors have observed that the Triple Alliance tribute burden fell mainly on provincial commoners (Licate 1980:41; Berdan 1982:36; Parsons et al. 1982:90). However, the effects of incorporation into the empire on rural hinterland areas were probably more drastic than has been suggested previously. These areas formed the economic periphery of both provincial states and the overall Triple Alliance empire and thus had a double tribute burden once they were part of the empire: they had to contribute to the new Triple Alliance tribute and probably had to provide increased tribute to their local polity as well. Therefore, Triple Alliance conquest would have benefitted only the core nobility of conquered provinces, while peripheral or rural nobles at a lower level of the tribute hierarchy had to help come up with the extra tribute goods and services. Although native historical documentation in areas like Cuauhnahuac is not complete enough to evaluate this model of the differential effect of imperial incorporation, the archeological record may be able to contribute toward such a task.⁴

Discussion and Conclusions

The Evolutionary Significance of the Triple Alliance Empire in Mesoamerica

Although Mesoamerica had a long history of states and empires before the founding of the Triple Alliance (over a millenium), the organization of that empire (with indirect control through elite interaction more important than direct military control) appears to be unique in central Mexico. Our information about such large Postclassic states as the Toltec, Tepanec, and Tarascan polities is still scanty, but two Classic period empires—Teotihuacan and Monte Alban—left archeological traces characteristic of the more traditional pattern of imperial conquest followed by strong administrative and military presence in conquered areas. Settlement pattern studies of these empires show a clear reorganization of provincial settlement as a result of foreign administration (e.g., Hirth and Angulo 1981; Spencer 1982). Why then did the unusual Triple Alliance pattern develop at all, and why did it arise in central Mexico in the 15th century? I suggest that its evolutionary development resulted from the conjunction of three factors: (1) the evolution of state-level polities over large parts of Postclassic Mesoamerica, (2) the development of a powerful and interconnected group of local elites, and (3) the existence of a slight but significant demographic and politicoeconomic advantage in one geographical area, the Basin of Mexico.

Postclassic Political Evolution. The archeological and ethnohistoric records show that state-level polities developed over much of Mesoamerica during the Middle and Late Postclassic periods, A.D. 1150–1519 (e.g., Blanton et al. 1981; Bray 1972; Hunt 1972; Olivera 1976; Smith 1983; Spores 1974). While state-level society was nothing new in Mesoamerica, the geographical extent of Late Postclassic city-states surpassed that of

any previous period. Never before had there been so many states, and never had so large an area been covered by these polities. This was particularly true of central Mexico, the heart of the Triple Alliance empire. Without well-established state-level organization in the provinces, imperial control (i.e., collection and shipment of imperial tribute) could never have been left to local authorities. The existence of socially stratified states in the provinces ensured that local populations were already accustomed to the key institution—the tribute system. This situation contrasts with that of the earlier Classic period empires, much of whose expansion came at the expense of tribes or chiefdoms rather than states.

Elite Interaction. An Early Postclassic origin (A.D. 950–1150) may be postulated for the intensive interaction network among the elite of Late Postclassic central Mexico described above. An explosion of long-distance trade followed the collapse of the Classic period Mayan, Teotihuacan, and Monte Alban states (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980). Archeologically, much of this trade can be traced through the exchange of polychrome ceramic vessels bearing a set of standardized religious symbols (e.g., feathered serpent, step-fret, sun burst) that have been called the “Postclassic religious style” (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980). Rice (1983:876) links this proliferation of polychrome ceramics to the growing size, power, and interdependence of local elite groups:

I suggest that much of the need of elite groups to express their status vis-à-vis lower status groups, as well as to identify themselves to other elites, developed with the growth of competitive and socioeconomically pivotal long-distance economic exchanges that were characteristic of the Postclassic period throughout Mesoamerica.

Other scholars agree that these ceramics were particularly associated with the elite, who controlled their production and distribution (Blanton and Feinman 1984; Blanton et al. 1981:246–250; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980), although during the Late Postclassic period, use of polychrome ceramics was not limited to the nobility (Smith 1983). Thus, by Late Postclassic times, expanding populations and increasing numbers of states led to a large and geographically extensive elite class with a history of social and commercial exchange going back at least several centuries.

Preeminence of the Basin of Mexico. Attempts to explain the rise of the Triple Alliance empire by focusing on unique characteristics of the dominant Mexica state have not been satisfactory. Since the Mexica did not differ greatly from their neighbors of the Basin of Mexico in terms of demography, ecology, social, political, or economic organization, most of these studies resort to explanations based on intangible factors like destiny and personality (Davies 1973) or ideology (Padden 1967; Demarest and Conrad 1983) to account for the dramatic political and military growth of the Mexica state. On the other hand, more sophisticated analyses reveal that the Mexica success was due not to intrinsic characteristics of the Mexica populace (such as religious fanaticism [Demarest and Conrad 1983]) but rather to social, political, and military strategies that linked the small state to other polities in the Basin of Mexico, providing its rulers with a wider base of support (Rounds 1979; Monjaras-Ruiz 1980; Calnek 1982; Brumfiel 1983). Because similar political developments were under way throughout central Mexico, one should ask not what was unique about the Mexica but rather what gave the polities of the Basin of Mexico an advantage over those of Morelos, Puebla, Hidalgo, and other areas? While this question is beyond the scope of this paper, I suggest that a combination of two primary factors gave the Basin of Mexico a military and political edge over these other areas in the Late Postclassic Period. First, the Basin of Mexico had a larger and denser population than surrounding areas (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979; Smith 1985); second, processes of political interaction and competition were more intense in the Basin of Mexico than in nearby areas. Thus, territorial expansion attained a greater impetus or momentum within Basin of Mexico polities, and these states could field larger armies, a considerable advantage given the primitive level of military technology (Isaac 1983a).

In summary, social structural and ecological factors were generating processes of po-

litical/military expansion throughout central Mexico during the Late Postclassic Period. By the mid-15th century, the core states of the Triple Alliance had achieved a demographic and political advantage over polities outside of the Basin of Mexico. This advantage was not sufficiently great to permit definitive military takeover and establishment of a pattern of firm imperial rule. However, the rulers of the Triple Alliance were able to exploit a situation that was relatively new in Mesoamerica: nearly all of the foreign peoples encountered were organized in state-level polities, and the rulers of many of these states were already linked to the Basin of Mexico nobility through social, political, and economic bonds. Through a combination of military, economic, and social incentives, provincial rulers saw that it was to their benefit to identify and cooperate more closely with foreign nobles than with local commoners. Social stratification and class interests were thus at the heart of the organization of the Triple Alliance empire.

Mexica Propaganda and the Empire

One reason scholars have been slow to recognize the crucial importance of social stratification and class interests in the organization of the Triple Alliance empire is that they have been misled by the political ideology or propaganda of the Mexica state. This ideology, which permeates the accounts of the postconquest nobility recorded and synthesized by such Spanish chroniclers as Durán (1967) and Sahagún (1950–69), celebrated the greatness and invincibility of the Mexica state. There was a strong geographical component and to the Mexica the most important sociopolitical division was between center and periphery, which in practical terms meant a division between the peoples of the Basin of Mexico and those of the provinces beyond the Basin (Townsend 1979; Broda 1978:126–133). The ancient Mesoamerican geocosmological conception of the five cardinal directions (east, south, west, north, and center; see Soustelle 1959) was used by the Mexica to support this differentiation between center and periphery, and the resulting geopolitical ideology was expressed publicly in monumental stone sculptures carved for the Mexica state and nobility (see Townsend 1979). While the center/periphery dichotomy certainly had social significance, its emphasis by the Mexica state can be seen as propaganda that diverted attention away from the more significant noble/commoner distinction.

Another example of Mexica propaganda that served to divert attention away from social stratification by focusing on political oppositions is the official interpretation of the elaborate state ceremonies as given in Durán (1967). In place of their role as consumption rituals promoting interaction and solidarity among central Mexican ruling lineages as discussed above, Durán interprets these affairs as occasions for the Mexica to show off their power and glory in front of the foreign and subject rulers:

People attended with their tribute of gold, jewels, finery, feathers and precious stones, all of the highest value and in great quantities . . . so many riches that they could not be counted or valued. All of this was done to show off the magnificence and lordship [of the Mexica] in front of their enemies, guests and strangers, and to instill fear and dread. . . . [The Mexica] had come to rule the entire world and had subjected all nations to their power. The guests were stupefied and astonished to see such riches and abundance, and they were filled with great apprehension and dread. [Durán 1967, II:341, author's translation; see also Durán 1967, II:323]

Although this interpretation may be partially correct insofar as the Mexica wanted to impress rulers of unconquered foreign states like Tlaxcala (Muñoz Camargo 1892:112), such rulers were not filled with sufficient "fear and dread" to surrender to the Triple Alliance. In spite of the obvious overstatement and propagandistic tenor of this kind of rhetoric (e.g., the Mexica had not by any means "subjected all nations to their power"), many modern authors have apparently accepted Durán's version at face value (e.g., Padden 1967; Kurtz 1978:184; Berdan 1982:101; Blanton and Feinman 1984:677). I suggest on the other hand that we must look beyond the viewpoint of the Mexica nobility for an adequate understanding of the dynamics of Late Postclassic imperialism in central Mexico.⁵

Conclusions

The Triple Alliance or Aztec empire has often been portrayed as somewhat anomalous in comparison with other preindustrial empires. In the most extreme modern views, it has been pictured as a "kingdom" of frenzied bloodthirsty protein-deficient cannibals (Harris 1977), or else a predatory chiefdom without true state-level institutions (e.g., Lenski 1966:148 ff.; Adams 1975:260). Even accepting the constituent Mexica, Acolhua, and Tepanec polities as states, not chiefdoms, the lack of provincial infrastructure leads some modern scholars to question the status of the Triple Alliance organization as a "true empire" (e.g., Davies 1973:110). Its structure was certainly quite different from those of many other preindustrial empires (Eisenstadt 1969; Garnsey and Whittaker 1978; Rowe 1946), but on the bottom line, the Triple Alliance *functioned* like an empire: its armies conquered nearby areas and instituted tribute payments. Modern views of the integration of this decentralized institution have been misled by the propaganda of the Mexica, who stressed their own power and greatness, thus diverting attention from the system of stratification and its ramifications. It is only by looking beyond the views of the Mexica and focusing on social stratification that the actual mechanisms of provincial integration and control can be elucidated. This may represent an unusual form of imperial organization, but it fulfilled the basic goal of all empires: enrichment of the rulers and their supporters in the center at the expense of the peoples of the periphery.

Notes

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, Frederic Hicks, and particularly Cynthia M. Heath-Smith for helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article. C. Melvin Aikens and two anonymous reviewers also made useful comments. Some of the interpretations discussed here were presented first at a February 1983 talk in the Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University.

¹The issue of Triple Alliance garrisons and other military installations outside of the Basin of Mexico is confused and in need of scholarly attention. While some sources appear to indicate the presence of Mexica troops stationed in the provinces (van Zantwijk 1967; Marcus 1983b), Davies denies their existence on the basis of an analysis of the meaning of the term "*guarnición*" in 16th-century Spanish. He goes so far as to conclude that "there is no concrete evidence of the presence of military garrisons of the central power stationed in the provinces (Davies 1973:111; see also 1976). Current work by Ross Hassig should help clarify this issue.

²Because of the near absence of native historical documentation from Morelos (as opposed to Spanish administrative documentation), the political evolution of Cuauhnahuac and other Morelos polities must be reconstructed largely on the basis of sources from the Basin of Mexico. These obviously present a highly biased view of political developments in the provinces, but there is sufficient information to trace the political history of the Cuauhnahuac conquest-state. This information is discussed in greater detail in Smith (1983:chap. 3), which also presents the methods used to reconstruct Cuauhnahuac's areal extent at different times.

³In most cases, Durán simply notes the presence of nobles from the Morelos area. He uses the terms "Tierra Caliente," "Marquesado," and "Tlahuica" almost interchangeably for what was regarded as a single cultural region corresponding almost exactly to the territory of the modern state of Morelos (e.g., "*la tlahuica, que es la del Marquesado y Tierra Caliente*," Durán 1967, II: 559; see also Tezozomoc 1975a:539; Torquemada 1969, I: 261). In other cases, Durán lists the specific Morelos polities represented (see text for discussion).

⁴Although the archeological record has heretofore contributed little to our knowledge of the expansion and provincial impact of the Triple Alliance empire (see Smith 1986 for comment), there are several reasons for thinking that its potential in this area may exceed that of ethnohistory. First, while native historical documentation is quite scanty outside of the Basin of Mexico and a few parts of Puebla and Tlaxcala, there are numerous Late Postclassic archeological sites throughout the hinterlands of the Triple Alliance empire, very few of which have been investigated. Second, while local administrative documentation from the provinces has permitted increasingly detailed reconstructions of social and economic organization under the empire (e.g., Carrasco 1964; Olivera 1976; Carrasco and Broda 1976; Smith 1985), these data do not deal with conditions before an area's incorporation into the empire. Careful utilization of the archeological record, with its diachronic

emphasis, can allow comparisons of provincial social and economic organization both *before and after* Triple Alliance conquest. This potential contribution of archeology to the study of the empire has yet to be realized, however. The primary reason is that local archeological chronologies have not been refined to the point that intervals before and after Triple Alliance conquest can be separated. Recent archeological work in the Cuauhnahuac hinterland has shown that the chronological problem can be overcome (Smith 1983, 1986), and my continuing investigations address the issue of measuring the impact of Triple Alliance conquest using archeological data.

⁵Additional examples of the problems that arise when modern scholars accept official Mexica state accounts as historically accurate are discussed by Davies (1973), Price (1978), Rounds (1979), Berdan (1982), and Isaac (1983b).

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