



Aztec (Mexico)
Stone Tlaloc Masked Figure with Cornucopia, 1440–1520
 Stone

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 Cornell University**

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Aztec Human Sacrifice: Primitive Fanaticism or Genius of Empire?

When the Spanish troops under Cortés first visited Tenochtitlán in 1519, they were perplexed by the seemingly contradictory extremes they found: a magnificent city larger than any in contemporaneous Western Europe, possessing an excellent public education system and astounding skills in the arts, simultaneously engaged in the barbarous practice of ritually slaughtering thousands of victims each year in the very center of the city. The Spanish subsequently emphasized the repulsiveness of these sacrifices, thereby lending ideological support to the Conquest, and thus to this day our culture regards Aztec religion as horrifying and irrational. However, when we examine the history of Tenochtitlán and the social context in which the Aztecs performed human sacrifice, it becomes apparent that mass sacrifice, and its underlying religious ideology, meshed quite well in that era with the political and economic goals of both the state and its citizens. Through skillful statecraft, the Aztec ruling elite modified pre-existing rituals of small-scale, temporally-restricted communal human sacrifice. In order to foster imperial conquest, these rituals were expanded into mass sun sacrifices of war captives. In what follows, I will examine archaeological data and especially the creation myths, historical accounts, and descriptions of mass sacrifice's social context found in colonial-era codices. By thus considering how the Aztecs invented and embraced an institution that we find so abhorrent, I hope to highlight an awareness of the ways in which our own culture structures how we think and the methods we employ to advance our cultural ambitions at the expense of the rest of the planet.

It would be misleading to suggest that the Aztecs invented mass human sacrifice from scratch—archaeological evidence indicates that human sacrifice is a very ancient element of Mesoamerican culture (Conrad and Demarest 19). While many societies selected victims primarily from within the community, excavated sculptures in Oaxaca indicate that ritualized sacrifice of war captives existed as early as 600

BC (Brown and Stanton 104). As depicted in their art and suggested in their stories, the Maya sacrificed prisoners in reenactment of their Creation myths, a pattern we will later see in the Aztecs (Brown and Stanton 130). More significantly, excavations at Teotihuacán suggest that mass graves there mostly consist of enemy soldiers sacrificed in ceremonies related to monumental construction (Sugiyama 206, 226), and archaeologists have found definitive indications of human sacrifice at Tula, such as skull racks and sculptural depictions (Conrad and Demarest 19). The Aztecs expressed great respect for the past empires of both Teotihuacán and Tula, and (probably inaccurately) claimed to be the descendants and rightful heirs of these peoples. While we cannot be sure how much the Aztecs actually knew about these cities—Tula collapsed around one hundred fifty years before the founding of Tenochtitlán and Teotihuacán—large-scale sacrifices appear to have been a recurring pattern, especially in the more imperialistic societies.

Although there certainly was a historical precedent for mass sacrifice, ethnohistorical data indicates that the Aztecs in the early years of Tenochtitlán practiced human sacrifice on a quite smaller scale than during the era of the Conquest (Conrad and Demarest 29–30). Historical accounts found in codices of the Aztecs and their neighbors do not bear any mention that mass sacrifice existed in early Aztec society. While sacrificial rituals were certainly a prominent element of religion in Tenochtitlán from the start, most only occurred on an annual basis or upon momentous dedications or commemorations organized by the state (Torres 188, 214). Even at the time of the Conquest, the only Aztec ritual of mass sacrifice was the feeding of war captives to the sun on top of the Templo Mayor; meanwhile, there were a number of rituals, linked to the calendrical cycle, that involved sacrifice of no more than a few individuals, usually Aztecs themselves, selected according to factors such as age, gender, birthday, and physical appearance.

So the question arises: when and why did the Aztecs start sacrificing multitudes of war captives? The codices are not always historically accurate and misrepresent information in a way that glorifies the state and the Aztec people. However, scholarly analysis of the historical accounts provided by the Aztecs, compared with those provided by their enemies and the available archaeological data, produces a reliable story of the institution of mass sacrifice. When the Aztecs first migrated into the Valley of Mexico and founded Tenochtitlán around 1325, there were already powerful, established city-states dominating the region.

Thus, Tenochtitlán became a tributary of Azcapotzalco, the primary city of the Tepanec empire. However, the Tepanecs apparently did not place a heavy demand for material goods on the Aztecs. Instead, they actually protected and nurtured Tenochtitlán and in turn demanded the services of its army for use in their imperial schemes, allowing the Aztecs a share of the wealth and land gained in battles they helped win. This relationship of patronage set Tenochtitlán onto a course toward becoming a highly militaristic society with an economy based on tribute and transformation of raw goods rather than on agriculture, and likely acculturated the inhabitants to the traditions of militaristic sacrifice present in many Mesoamerican empires (Conrad and Demarest 22–23).

By the early fifteenth century, the Aztecs had become so powerful that the Tepanecs apparently began to see them as a threat. In the year 1426, significant changes in both Tenochtitlán and Azcapotzalco ignited these tensions. The Tepanec king Tezozomoc, who had ruled for about fifty years and had nurtured the Aztecs to power, finally died, and internal strife broke out in Azcapotzalco. Shortly thereafter, King Chimalpopoca of Tenochtitlán died of unnatural causes. The sources disagree as to how, but it seems most likely that he was murdered under the orders of an Aztec noble named Itzcoatl, who was elected to the throne after Chimalpopoca's death. Some Aztec accounts accuse the new Tepanec king Maxtla of adopting an openly aggressive stance towards Tenochtitlán and sending assassins to kill Chimalpopoca. However, looking at the various viewpoints found in different primary sources, the more likely story is that a militaristic faction within Tenochtitlán saw the disorder of Azcapotzalco as an opportunity for rebellion, and proceeded to assassinate Chimalpopoca so that Itzcoatl could carry out their agenda (Conrad and Demarest 30–32).

Indeed, Tenochtitlán and two allies went to war with the Tepanecs in 1428, came out victorious, and gained much land and tribute as a result. This event marked the true beginning of the empire's rapid expansion and regional dominance, but it was more than the victory in itself that provided the impetus. After the victory, the ruling elite initiated a series of reforms: destruction of existing documents and rewriting of history and mythology; increased militarism accompanied by great rewards for taking captives in battle; and the institution of tearing out the hearts of up to tens of thousands of captives at a time upon the Templo Mayor. Mass sacrifice soon assumed a dominant role

in Aztec society, touching on religion, politics, economics, and social order (Wolf 140–49).

The theoretical underpinning of this new program of mass sacrifice lay in the need to feed the sun with human bodies and thus ensure the stability of the cosmos. According to the version of the creation myth that the hierarchy told during the imperial era, the world was in darkness for 52 years following the destruction of the previous (fourth) age. The gods then gathered around a fire to determine which of them would perform the necessary act of self-sacrifice in order to create the fifth sun, the beginning of our present fifth age. One god volunteered, throwing himself into the fire. However, when the sun then began to rise out of the east the other gods saw that it was “swaying from side to side,” a clear sign of instability, so they decided to offer their own lives in order to secure the sun’s vitality. Thus the wind god sacrificed all the others and then violently blew on the sun, setting it in motion along a straight path. Because the gods sacrificed themselves to give strength to the sun, humans are eternally indebted to the gods and must keep the sun-god alive by continually feeding it with human blood. It is especially significant here that all of the gods in the story sacrifice themselves, suggesting that there is no limit on how much sacrifice from which the sun can benefit (Carrasco 79–80).

A more explicitly militaristic myth explains the origin of the patron deity of the Aztecs, Huitzilopochtli. As the story goes, a small ball of fine feathers falls from the sky and impregnates the Mother Goddess, Coatlicue, at her abode on the hill Coatepec, center of the universe and future site of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán. Coatlicue’s four hundred children regard this pregnancy as a disgrace and set out from neighboring lands to kill her, led by the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. This news worries Coatlicue, but the child she is carrying as a result of this divine conception, Huitzilopochtli, comforts her with the assurance that he knows what to do. When the four hundred children of Coatlicue arrive at Coatepec, Huitzilopochtli suddenly emerges from his mother’s womb as a fully-grown adult. He dresses as a warrior and then decapitates Coyolxauhqui, sending her body rolling down the hill, and finishes the job by chasing down and destroying the other four hundred gods (Carrasco 60–62).

The myth of Huitzilopochtli’s birth sets the precedent for mass sacrifice at the Templo Mayor. Just as their patron deity defeated his multitudinous foes gathered from neighboring lands by dismembering

them upon the hill Coatepec, the Aztecs sought victory by taking captives from enemy city-states to sacrifice on top of the Templo Mayor. After priests extracted the heart of a victim and held it up in offering to the sun, they tossed the body down the pyramid’s steep steps so that it rolled to the ground, where other priests waited to decapitate and flay it. To the side of the priests at the bottom lay a stone greater than ten feet in diameter depicting the dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui, serving as a symbol of the divine play they were reenacting (Carrasco 63–64).

As Rappaport argues in his work on ritual theory, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, creation myths are not so much about the production of substance as they are about the informing of substance (158). We see this clearly in our present discussion: the Aztec creation myths ignore questions such as the origin of matter or how Huitzilopochtli happened to be born as a physically mature man, and instead generate powerful relationships between the gods and the Aztecs whom the gods created and favored. Their myths make it clear that they must imitate the actions of the gods and reciprocate in the life-giving act of human sacrifice.

Thus, by turning unlimited human sacrifice into a cosmological imperative, the Aztec elite not only legitimized but also drove their agenda of imperial expansion. In order to fuel nationalism even further, they elevated Huitzilopochtli, previously a relatively minor figure, to a central position of the Aztec pantheon and associated him primarily with war and the sun, claiming themselves as the chosen people who honored and fed their god through warfare and sacrifice (Conrad and Demarest 38). The codices even go to the point of indicating that sacrifice also nourished the king (Wolf 180). Of course, the power of the mythology and its imperialistic ideology was first of all dependent on a means of communicating them, and an excellent means did exist: all children in Tenochtitlán, excluding slaves, attended state-run schools that heavily relied on the use of written codices (Conrad and Demarest 43).

Imperialism not only directly expanded the power of the state, but also fed the economy through the increasing influx of tribute into the city. In fact, tribute was a crucial element of the Aztec economy that greatly influenced patterns of imperial expansion. Military expeditions targeted resource-heavy regions (Wolf 159), and religious leaders considered members of the ethnic groups inhabiting those regions to be

especially desirable for sacrifice, while other ethnic groups were wholly unfit (Wolf 150). Although tribute ultimately benefited all residents of Tenochtitlán, the nobility claimed a disproportionately large share for themselves, extravagantly consuming luxury items as a display of the state's power (Rounds 83).

One might object that the goals of feeding the sun and glorifying the state are too abstract to serve by themselves as sufficient motivation for individual warriors. This may largely be true; in fact, it is likely that the main reason the commoners ever accepted the nobility's project of imperial sacrifice was the heap of rewards that the state bestowed on those who successfully took captives in battle. Returning armies arrived in Tenochtitlán with great fanfare, and the government showered material riches, prestigious titles, and wardrobes indicative of high class upon warriors who had taken captives. The warriors personally handed over their captives when the day for sacrifice came, and after the captive was slain, the captor took part of the body for a ceremonial feast in which family and friends celebrated his rise in social status (Conrad and Demarest 51). Correspondingly, given such a militaristic ideology, a warrior had little incentive to restrain himself in battle. While people who died of natural causes had only the gloomy underworld to look forward to, men who died in war, as well as women who died in childbirth (producing warriors) and even sacrificial victims taken in battle, had the promise of a glorious afterlife in the entourage of the sun (Berdan 115–16).

Rappaport argues that effective ritual does not require that all of the participants share the same view of the ritual or even participate with any sincerity (158), and Bell asserts in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* that the ambiguity of ritual is actually essential to its success (184). So in the case of the Aztecs, the lack of one single motivational factor for capturing sacrificial victims in battle is not a weakness, but a strength. Some warriors might see capturing enemy soldiers as an opportunity to gain honor and serve as a useful member of society; others might see it as a way to acquire power and wealth; still others as a means of expressing their devotion to the gods. For most individuals, it was probably a combination of the above factors and possibly others I have not mentioned. Sacrifice could be fully effective regardless of whether the warriors really believed that the blood of their captives would keep the sun alive, because the power of ritual comes not in simply instilling belief, but in the performance of the ritual itself (Bell 186–87). Re-

gardless of what factors may have prompted specific warriors to accept the dangerous proposition that human sacrifice was a goal worthy of pursuit, their acceptance of the ritual furthered the cause of imperial expansion.

Girard's analysis of sacrifice in *Violence and the Sacred* asserts that sacrifice is more prevalent in societies lacking a strong judicial system because sacrifice is primarily a means of preventing unchecked violence within a community. Regarding sacrifice in societies that do develop strong judicial systems, he argues that "it may still be practiced for a while, but in diminished and debilitated form" (18). This may have been the case in the Mediterranean world, but it is obviously inconsistent with Mesoamerican history; the Aztecs had a very strict and effective judicial system (Berdan 96–97), and sacrifice only intensified as the central authority of the state increased. Human sacrifice in Aztec society was not just some vestigial element of a more "primitive" past. Rather, it was skillfully crafted political ritual in that it used ancient Mesoamerican symbols and practices but modified them in a way that created a new era and claimed a special place for the ruling elite that instituted the ritual (Bell 195). The Aztec practice of mass human sacrifice was a modern innovation that integrated individual and collective religious, political, economic, and social goals in order to take advantage of new imperial opportunities by rendering expansion as of upmost necessity.



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