
Documents

Considering the Evidence: The Aztecs and the Incas through Spanish Eyes



During the fifteenth century, the Western Hemisphere hosted human communities of many kinds—gathering and hunting peoples, agricultural village societies, chiefdoms, and two major state-based agrarian civilizations. Most of the population of the Americas was concentrated in those two societies—the Aztec and Inca empires (see Map 13.5, p. 589). Since neither had an extensive literary tradition, historians seeking to understand their history and culture have depended heavily on the records and observations of the Spanish who conquered them in the sixteenth century. This raises obvious questions about the credibility of such accounts. Can writers from a conquering power and a completely different culture accurately describe the life and history of those they have recently defeated? At least some of those Spanish observers were able to draw on the local knowledge and experience of native peoples. What follows are accounts of the Aztec and Inca empires as seen through the eyes of two remarkable Spanish observers, both of whom at least tried to understand the people of these American civilizations.

Document 13.1

Diego Duran on the Aztecs

Coming to Mexico with his family as a young boy, Diego Duran (1537–1588) subsequently became a Dominican friar, learned to speak fluently the native Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, and began a lifelong enterprise of studying their history and culture. His research often involved extensive interviewing of local people in the rural areas where he worked and resulted in three books published between 1574 and 1581. The first excerpt records a series of laws or decrees, which Duran attributes to the Aztec ruler Moctezuma I, who governed the empire between 1440 and 1469. They reveal something of the court practices and social hierarchy of the Aztec realm as the empire was establishing itself in the middle decades of the fifteenth century. The second excerpt touches on

various aspects of Aztec culture—religion, human sacrifice, social mobility, commercial markets, and slavery.

- What do Moctezuma's laws tell us about the social and moral values of the Aztecs?
- Based on these two excerpts, how would you describe Aztec society? What distinct social groups or classes can you identify? How were they distinguished from one another? What opportunities for social mobility were available? How might people fall into slavery?
- What impressed Duran about the markets operating within the Aztec Empire?
- How was human sacrifice related to war, to market activity, to slavery, and to religious belief and practice?
- Duran's accounts of Aztec life and history were written more than fifty years after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. To what extent do you think this compromises his efforts to describe pre-conquest Aztec society?

KING MOCTEZUMA I

Laws, Ordinances, and Regulations

ca. 1450

The following laws were decreed:

1. The king must never appear in public except when the occasion is extremely important and unavoidable.

2. Only the king may wear a golden diadem in the city, though in war all the great lords and brave captains may wear this (but on no other occasion)....

3. Only the king and the prime minister Tlacaelel may wear sandals within the palace.... [N]oblemen are the only ones to be allowed to wear sandals in the city and no one else, also under pain of death, with the exception of men who have performed some great feat in war....

4. Only the king is to wear the finest mantles of cotton brocaded with designs and threads of different colors and adorned with featherwork....

5. The great lords, who are twelve, may wear special mantles of certain make and design, and the minor lords, according to their valor and accomplishments, may wear others.

6. The common soldiers are permitted to wear only the simplest type of mantle. They are prohibited from using any special designs that might set them off from the rest....

7. The commoners will not be allowed to wear cotton clothing, under pain of death, but can use only garments of maguey fiber....

8. Only the great noblemen and valiant warriors are given license to build a house with a second story; for disobeying this law a person receives the death penalty....

9. Only the great lords are to wear labrets, ear plugs, and nose plugs of gold and precious stones, except for commoners who are strong men, brave captains, and soldiers, but their labrets, ear plugs, and nose plugs must be of bone, wood, or other inferior material of little value....

Source: Fray Diego Duran, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, translated by Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 208–10.

11. In the royal palace there are to be diverse rooms where different classes of people are to be received, and under pain of death no one is to enter that of the great lords or to mix with those men [unless of that class himself]....

12. An order of judges is to be established, beginning with the judges of the supreme council. After these would come regular court judges, municipal judges, district officials, constables, and councilmen, although none of them may give the death sentence without notifying the king. Only the sovereign can sentence someone to death or pardon him....

13. All the barrios will possess schools or monasteries for young men where they will learn religion and correct comportment. They are to do penance, lead hard lives, live with strict morality, practice for warfare, do physical work, fast, endure disciplinary

measures, draw blood from different parts of the body, and keep watch at night. There are to be teachers and old men to correct them and chastise them and lead them in their exercises and take care that they are not idle, do not lose their time. All of these youth must observe chastity in the strictest way, under pain of death.

14. There is to be a rigorous law regarding adulterers. They are to be stoned and thrown into the rivers or to the buzzards.

15. Thieves will be sold for the price of their theft, unless the theft be grave, having been committed many times. Such thieves will be punished by death.

16. Great privileges and exemptions are to be given those who dedicate themselves to religion, to the temples and the gods. Priests will be awarded great distinction, reverence, and authority.

DIEGO DURAN

Book of the Gods and Rites

1574-1576

I wish to tell of the way in which the natives sacrificed....

So ended the ceremony of the blessing of the pieces of dough in the form of the bones and the flesh of the god. They were revered and honored in the name of Huitzilopochtli with all the respectful veneration that we ourselves hold for the Divine Sacrament of the Altar. To exalt the occasion further, the sacrificers of men were also present....

Smearred with black, the six sacrificers appeared.... Seeing them come out with their ghastly aspect filled all the people with dread and terrible fear! The high priest carried in one hand a large stone knife, sharp and wide. Another carried a wooden yoke carved in the form of a snake. They humbled themselves before the idol and then stood

in order next to a pointed stone, which stood in front of the door of the idol's chamber....

All the prisoners of war who were to be sacrificed upon this feast were then brought forth.... They seized the victims one by one, one by one foot, another by the other, one priest by one hand, another by the other hand. The victim was thrown on his back, upon the pointed stone, where the wretch was grabbed by the fifth priest, who placed the yoke upon his throat. The high priest then opened the chest and with amazing swiftness tore out the heart, ripping it out with his own hands. Thus steaming, the heart was lifted toward the sun, and the fumes were offered up to the sun. The priest then turned toward the idol and cast the heart in its face. After the heart had been extracted, the body was allowed to roll down the steps of the pyramid....

All the prisoners and captives of war brought from the towns we have mentioned were sacrificed in this manner, until none were left. After they had been slain and cast down, their owners—those who

Source: Fray Diego Duran, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, translated by Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 90-92, 137-38, 273-76, 279, 281-82.

had captured them—retrieved the bodies. They were carried away, distributed, and eaten, in order to celebrate the feast. There were at least forty or fifty captives, depending upon the skill which the men had shown in seizing and capturing men in war....

[M]any strove, in every possible way, to lift their names on high, to obtain glory, to procure greater honors, to found lineages and titles, and [to gain] good fame for their persons. There were three established and honored ways in all the nations [for obtaining these rewards]. The first and principal path which the kings designated was soldiery—to make oneself known in war through valiant feats, to be outstanding in killing, taking prisoners, to destroy armies and squadrons, to have directed these things. These [warriors] were given great honors, rewards, weapons, and insignia which were proof of their splendid deeds and valor....

The second way in which men rose was through religion, entering the priesthood. After having served in the temples in a virtuous, penitential, and cloistered way of life, in their old age they were sent out to high and honorable posts.... They were present when the government councils were held, their opinions and advice were listened to, and they were part of the ruling boards and juntas. Without their council and opinion kings did not dare act....

The third and least glorious manner of [rising in the world] was that of becoming a merchant or trader, that of buying and selling, going forth to all the markets of the land, bartering cloth for jewels, jewels for feathers, feathers for stones, and stones for slaves, always dealing in things of importance, of renown, and of high value. These [men] strengthened their social position with their wealth.... They acquired wealth and obtained slaves to sacrifice to this their god [Quetzalcoatl]. And so they were considered among the magnates of the land, just as the valorious soldier brought sacrificial captives from war, gaining fame as a brave....

[I]n olden times there was a god of markets and fairs....

The gods of these market places threatened terrible ills and made evil omens and auguries to the neighboring villages which did not attend their market places....

The markets were so inviting, pleasurable, appealing, and gratifying to these people that great crowds attended, and still attend, them, especially during the big fairs, as is well known to all....

The markets in this land were all enclosed by walls and stood either in front of the temples of the gods or to one side. Market day in each town was considered a main feast in that town or city. And thus in that small shrine where the idol of the market stood were offered ears of corn, chili, tomatoes, fruit, and other vegetables, seeds, and breads—in sum, everything sold in the *tianguiz*....

Furthermore, a law was established by the republic prohibiting the selling of goods outside the market place. Not only were there laws and penalties connected with this, but there was a fear of the supernatural, of misfortune, and of the ire and wrath of the god of the market. No one ventured, therefore, to trade outside [the market limits]....

There were many ways of becoming a slave within the law of the Indian nations....

First, he who stole the number of pieces of cloth or ears of corn, jewels, or turkeys which the laws of the republic had determined and set a penalty for was himself sold for the same amount in order to satisfy the owner of the purloined goods....

Second, another way in which a native could become a slave was that of the gambler who risked all his possessions on the dice or in any other game which the natives played....

Third, if the father of a family had many sons and daughters and among them was one [who was] incorrigible, disobedient, shameless, dissolute, incapable of receiving counsel or advice, the law... permitted [the father] to sell him in the public market place as an example and lesson to bad sons and daughters....

Fourth, one became a slave if he borrowed valuable things, such as cloth, jewels, featherwork, and did not return them on the appointed date....

In times of famine a man and wife could agree to a way of satisfying their needs and rise from their wretched state. They could sell one another, and thus husband sold wife and wife sold husband, or they sold one of their children.