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# The Aztecs of Mesoamerica

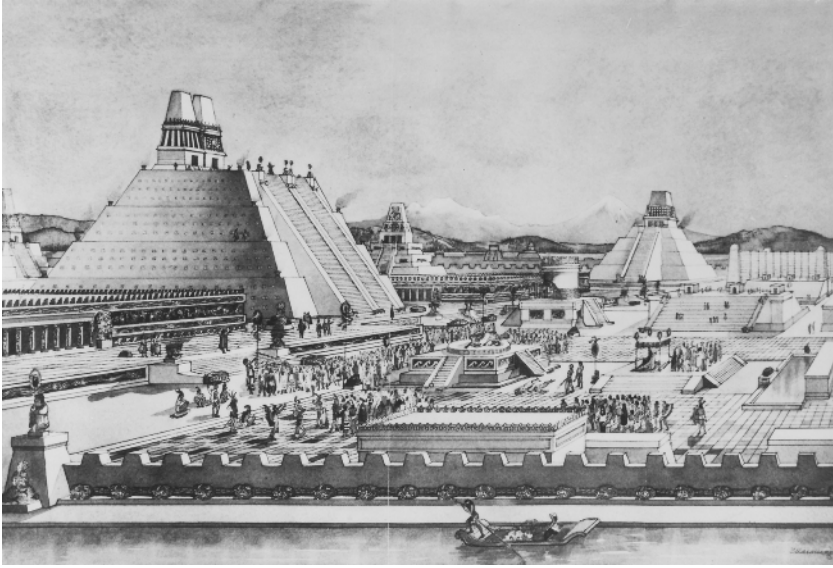
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*Next morning, we came to a broad causeway and continued our march towards Iztapalapa. And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and cues [temple-pyramids] and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream. It is not surprising therefore that I should write in this vein. It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen or dreamed of before.*

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*

With these words Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a soldier in Hernando Cortés's conquering army, expressed his amazement at the Aztec capital city. When the Spaniards approached Tenochtitlan in 1519, it was one of the most populous cities in the world, the largest ever to flourish in the pre-Hispanic New World, and far richer and more grandiose than any community the Spanish soldiers had ever beheld in their home country (figure 1.1). Expecting to find a simple, backward people, the conquerors were awed by the civilized nature of Aztec society. The kings and royal courts, the huge bustling marketplaces with their orderly layouts, the wealth of the nobility, the detailed scientific and technical knowledge of the priests and artisans, these and many other features of Aztec civilization filled the conquerors with awe.

Much about the Aztecs continues to amaze us today. When workmen in Mexico City accidentally uncovered a huge Aztec sculpture in 1978, the Mexican government quickly mounted one of the largest excavations in the



**Figure 1.1** Artist's reconstruction of the Templo Mayor and the sacred precinct in the heart of Tenochtitlan (modified after Marquina 1951:lamina 55)

country's history. What emerged from these diggings was the "Templo Mayor," a huge temple-pyramid that had served as the sacred center of the Aztec Empire. The sculpture was an offering buried in front of the pyramid. This pyramid (figure 1.1) and the thousands of rich and exotic offerings uncovered in and around it are now open to the public, and millions of visitors express their interest and appreciation every year.

Human sacrifice was a central ritual at the Templo Mayor, as it was at most Aztec temple-pyramids. Each year hundreds or perhaps thousands of victims had their chests cut open, and their still-beating hearts ripped out by knife-wielding priests, as throngs of spectators looked on. Today we find these bloody rituals horrifying but morbidly fascinating. Yet the same people who produced this sacrificial blood and gore wrote some of the most beautiful and poignant lyric poetry ever recorded. Here is a poem attributed to the philosopher-king Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco:

Is it true that on earth one lives?  
 Not forever on earth, only a little while.  
 Though jade it may be, it breaks;  
 though gold it may be, it is crushed;  
 though it be quetzal plumes, it shall not last.  
 Not forever on earth, only a little while.

*Cantares Mexicanos*<sup>1</sup>

Today we find this contrast intriguing – blood and sacrifice versus beauty and sensitivity.

As an archaeologist, I used to feel a different sort of fascination toward the Aztecs: why was there so little fieldwork at Aztec sites? Spectacular discoveries had been made for over a century at Maya sites in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, but little effort was directed at the remains of the Aztecs. Nearly all of our information about the Aztecs came from ethnohistoric documents, but these left gaping holes in our reconstructions of Aztec society. Ironically, many of these gaps in the written record were topics for which the methods of modern archaeology were uniquely suited to study. If archaeologists could now provide detailed information on the agricultural systems, craft production, cities, houses, and rituals of other ancient civilizations, why were these methods not being applied toward understanding the Aztecs? This question had two answers: first, most scholars assumed that nearly all Aztec sites had been destroyed, either by the Spanish conquerors or by modern urban expansion; and second, those sites known to have survived were small and unassuming, unlike the large and impressive jungle cities of the Maya.

Two breakthroughs – the excavations of the Templo Mayor starting in 1978 and the work of a group of Mexican and American archaeologists at smaller sites – showed that it was still possible to map and excavate Aztec sites, and the results of recent work have revolutionized our understanding of Aztec civilization. At the Templo Mayor, excavations continue in adjacent lots. A number of books and articles describe this work for specialists and nonspecialists alike. Fieldwork in Tenochtitlan and at smaller Aztec sites continues unabated, but so far most of this research has been described only in technical reports and articles. Although archaeological fieldwork outside of Tenochtitlan has yet to turn up any finds as spectacular as the Templo Mayor, recent discoveries have led to exciting new views of Aztec social, economic, and religious life. My goal in writing this book is to draw upon both the ongoing archaeological study of Aztec sites and the continuing tradition of ethnohistoric scholarship in order to arrive at a more complete and comprehensive picture of Aztec society as it existed on the eve of Spanish conquest. As a participant in Aztec archaeology, I hope to communicate something of the excitement and significance of our work and its contribution to a new understanding of Aztec life before 1519.

## **Who Were the Aztecs?**

I take a wider and more inclusive view of the Aztecs, both geographically and socially, than most authors. For many, the term “Aztec” refers strictly to the

inhabitants of Tenochtitlan (the Mexica people) or perhaps the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico, the highland basin where the Mexica and certain other Aztec groups lived. I believe it makes more sense to expand the definition of “Aztec” to include the peoples of nearby highland valleys in addition to the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico. In the final few centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards in 1519, Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs) was the dominant language throughout central Mexico, although other languages were spoken in some areas (see below). People in this area all traced their origins to a mythical place in the north called Aztlán (Aztlán is the origin of the term “Aztec,” a modern label that was not used by the people themselves).<sup>2</sup>

The several million Aztecs were divided into 20 or so ethnic groups (such as the Mexica, Tepanecs, or Tlahuica). Although people identified themselves by their ethnic group and by the city-state in which they resided, they were tied together by a common language, origin myths, and cultural patterns. Ethno-historian James Lockhart has found many cultural similarities among these peoples at the time of the Spanish Conquest, and he uses the term “Nahuas” to describe the central Mexican Nahuatl-speaking peoples. My use of the term “Aztecs” parallels Lockhart’s term for the period before 1519; after that I switch to “Nahuas” to describe these peoples following the Spanish Conquest.<sup>3</sup>

This book also takes a more inclusive social perspective than most other works on the Aztecs. Much of the available written documentation of Aztec society is flawed by two biases. First, the lives of nobles are heavily emphasized, whereas commoners are given short shrift. Second, life in Tenochtitlan is described in detail, whereas rural and provincial life is almost ignored. These biases ensure that any account of Aztec society based entirely on historical records will be incomplete. At this point, however, archaeology comes to the rescue. Recent methodological and conceptual changes in the discipline now permit archaeologists to recover rather detailed information on the lives of commoners and social conditions outside of Tenochtitlan.

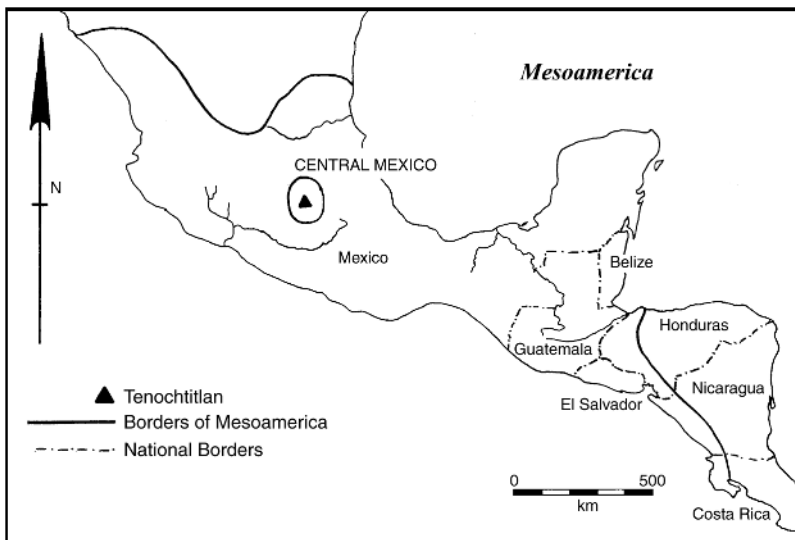
The archaeological study of the everyday lives of peasants and other commoners is a relatively new development in the history of the discipline. It is understandable that early archaeologists with an interest in the high civilizations – ancient Egypt, Sumeria, the Inca, Maya, and others – chose to devote their energy to the grand monuments of these cultures. For two centuries, archaeologists excavated pyramids, palaces, tombs, and temples, the highly visible remains of ancient power. They searched for artistic masterpieces to bring back to European or American museums. This style of fieldwork, which I call “monumental archaeology,” still goes on today, but it has been supplemented by a newer approach, “social archaeology.”

Social archaeology develops its mission from a close interaction between archaeology and other social sciences, particularly anthropology, and draws

its methods from the physical and biological sciences. This approach views archaeology as a social science whose goal is to reconstruct and explain the workings of past cultures. Pyramids and palaces were certainly important parts of ancient cultures, but so were peasant houses, foods and crops, merchants and markets, and other aspects of everyday life that the monumental archaeology approach omits. The social archaeology approach depends upon the principle that the everyday actions of ordinary people are important parts of any culture.<sup>4</sup> These things can be reconstructed for the Aztecs or any ancient civilization if the appropriate methods and theories are used to guide archaeological fieldwork and analysis. One of the main tasks of this book is to bring the Aztec people – commoners as well as lords – into the light of modern knowledge, and archaeology is the primary means for accomplishing this.

### Mesoamerican Context

The Aztecs were a Mesoamerican civilization. Mesoamerica is the term for a distinctive cultural area that extends from north-central Mexico to Pacific Costa Rica (figure 1.2). Mesoamerica first took form with the initial spread of farming villages soon after 2000 BC. By the year AD 1519, the area was



**Figure 1.2** Map of Mesoamerica showing the location of central Mexico, the Aztec heartland (drawing by Ellen Cesarski and Kori Kaufman)

composed of a large variety of peoples whose cultures resembled one another far more than they resembled other New World cultures. Even in the face of Spanish conquest and colonization, the native Mesoamerican peoples managed to maintain fundamental beliefs and practices. In Mesoamerica today many distinct native languages are still spoken; the most common are Nahuatl, Yucatec Maya (there are many Maya languages), Zapotec, Mixtec, and Otomi. Nevertheless, the different Mesoamerican cultures share many characteristics, and key traits can be traced to their origin several thousand years ago.<sup>5</sup>

Early definitions of Mesoamerica focused on the identification of cultural traits unique to the area, which included economic features such as periodic markets, obsidian tools, plaster floors, and digging sticks, and religious traits such as human sacrifice, use of 13 as a sacred number, and a 260-day ritual calendar. Today, scholars are less interested in the compilation of lists of Mesoamerican traits and more concerned with the processes and mechanisms by which the diverse Mesoamerican cultures interacted with one another to maintain their cultural similarities and differences.<sup>6</sup>

### *Mesoamerican environments*

The hallmark of Mesoamerica as a setting for cultural development is its diversity. The area includes many different environmental zones, from steamy lowland jungles to cold, windy highland plains. This environmental diversity was matched by linguistic and cultural variation. Mesoamerican environments, which set the scene for the expansion of the Aztec Empire, are best discussed in terms of elevation above sea level.<sup>7</sup>

*The tropical lowlands.* Mesoamerica lies entirely within the tropical latitudes, and areas of low elevation tend to be hot and humid. Lands under 1,000 m in elevation are referred to by Mexican geographers as *tierra caliente* or the hot country. Rainfall is heavy in most lowland areas, producing either tropical forest vegetation (figure 1.3) or else savanna grasslands. Two Mesoamerican civilizations that evolved in tropical lowland environments were the Formative-period Olmec and the Classic-period Maya. The Aztecs were a highland civilization, yet they were dependent upon the tropical lowlands for a number of critical goods, including colorful feathers from parrots and quetzal birds (important in ritual and art), jaguar skins, cacao, tobacco, and jade.

*Highland Mesoamerica.* Areas lying between 1,000 and 2,000 m above sea level are called the *tierra templada* or temperate country. Many Mesoamerican civilizations, including the Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Tarascans, and highland Maya, flourished in this zone. Temperatures are more moderate than in the lowlands, with many areas averaging in the 70s (Fahrenheit) year round.



Figure 1.3 A Mesoamerican tropical forest at the Maya ruins of Tikal in Guatemala (photograph by Michael E. Smith)

Most places have enough rain to grow crops successfully. Rainfall is highly seasonal, with a wet season from June to October and a dry season from January to May. Much of the Mesoamerican highlands consist of steep mountains; human settlement was concentrated in river valleys with expanses of flat terrain. The southern portion of the Aztec heartland in central Mexico falls into this highland temperate zone.

*The Central Mexican Plateau.* Lands above 2,000 m in elevation are called the *tierra fria*, or cold lands. This zone includes the central Valley of Mexico and adjacent valleys to the north, east, and west. Rainfall varies from levels adequate for farming to levels that will not support maize agriculture. Average temperatures are much cooler than the other zones, and frost is a problem for farmers between October and March. The shorter growing season makes agriculture more risky than at lower elevations and limits the number and variety of crops that can be grown.

## The Aztec Environment

Central Mexico, the home of the Aztecs, is a mountainous area, with much of the land surface taken up by steep wooded slopes. The highest mountain in Mexico, Pico de Orizaba (5,700 m elevation), sits at the eastern edge of the

region. Human settlement in central Mexico has always been concentrated in the large highland valleys, whose fertile volcanic soils and abundant resources made them home to a series of complex ancient cultures beginning before 1000 BC and leading up to Aztec civilization.

### *The Valley of Mexico*

The Valley of Mexico was the heartland of Aztec civilization, and in 1519 it was home to approximately one million Aztecs. It is a large internally drained basin ringed by volcanic mountains that reach over 3,000 m in elevation. Millennia of soil erosion from the mountainsides have produced deep, rich soils in the Valley and a system of shallow, swampy, saline lakes in its center (figure 1.4). These salty lakes furnished various types of food to the Aztecs,



**Figure 1.4** The island capital Tenochtitlan in Aztec times, showing the causeways and the two volcanoes in the background (copyright © 2010 National Geographic; courtesy of *National Geographic Magazine*, Nov. 2010)



including fish, turtles, insect larvae, blue-green algae, and salt. The outcast Mexica peoples chose an island in the central lake (Lake Texcoco) to found their town Tenochtitlan, which later grew into the huge imperial capital. The southern arm of the lake system, Lakes Chalco and Xochimilco, was higher in elevation than Lake Texcoco and consequently less saline. The freshwater swamps of this arm proved to be ideal for the construction of *chinampas* or raised fields, a highly productive form of agriculture used to feed the large Aztec population (see chapter 3).<sup>8</sup>

Surrounding the lakes is a band of alluvial plains with deep, rich soils. Where springs or rivers could be tapped for canal irrigation, the flat alluvium became a highly productive zone. Most of the Aztec cities in the Valley (except for Tenochtitlan) were located in this environmental zone (figure 1.5).

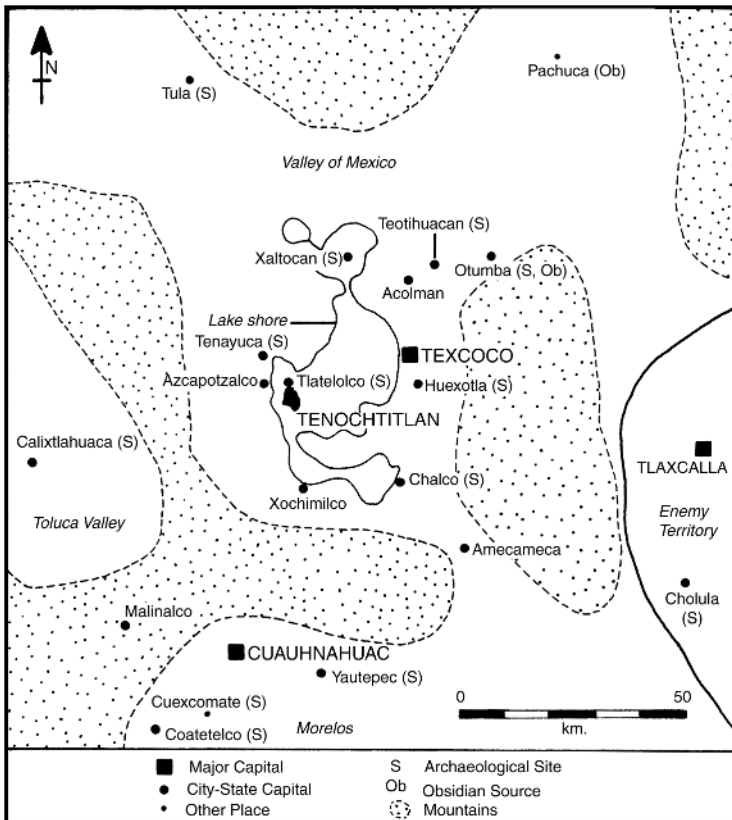


Figure 1.5 Map of Aztec sites in central Mexico (drawing by Ellen Cesarski)

Beyond the flat alluvium are piedmont foothills that lead up to the volcanic mountains ringing the Valley of Mexico. The soils on these gentle slopes are rich and easy to work using hand tools, but they are shallow and prone to erosion. The Aztecs made use of stone terrace walls to check erosion and create fields in this area. Few large settlements were located in the foothills, but this zone was crowded with dispersed rural houses of peasant farmers. A major outcrop of obsidian, the volcanic glass that was important to Aztec technology, is located in the foothills of Otumba in the Teotihuacan subvalley (see chapter 4).

The steep mountain slopes above the piedmont were not farmed and had little settlement. These areas were covered with a pine and oak forest exploited for wood for lumber, firewood, and charcoal production. Deer and various smaller mammals were hunted in these forests, although much of the game had been depleted by hunters of pre-Aztec cultures. A few shrines have been found on mountaintops above the treeline (4,000 m). In the southeast corner of the Valley the two towering volcanoes Popocatepetl (5,450 m) and Ixtacihuatl (5,290 m) are covered with snow year round. Mount Popocatepetl has been active at various points over the centuries, with a period of significant ash-fall during the 1990s.

### *Surrounding valleys*

The highland valleys and plains that surround the Valley of Mexico were home to the remaining two million Aztecs. The Toluca Valley to the west and the Puebla Valley to the east have environments similar to the Valley of Mexico. The lands north and south are considerably different.

*Northern plains.* Unlike the eastern, southern, and western borders, the northern edge of the Valley of Mexico does not have a steep mountain range to set it off from adjacent areas. The climate to the north becomes increasingly drier, and the northern border of Mesoamerica is soon reached. The agricultural potential of this area, now part of the Mexican state of Hidalgo, is poor and one of the major crops for the Aztecs of this region was the hardy maguey plant, cultivated for fiber and syrup. The Toltec capital Tula was located in this northern zone, as were several geological sources of obsidian. In Aztec times, parts of the northern plains were populated with speakers of the Otomi language.

*East and west valley.* The Toluca and Puebla valleys are at a similar elevation and have environments and climates comparable to the Valley of Mexico. Like the central Valley, the foothills were terraced and the alluvial areas irrigated during Aztec times. The Toluca Valley, to the west of the Valley of Mexico, is a large, flat plain in the modern state of Mexico. The

headwaters of the Lerma River are in this valley. During the Aztec period, Nahuatl speakers shared the valley with other groups including speakers of the Otomi, Mazahua, and Matlatzinca languages. The Puebla Valley, east of the Valley of Mexico, is located in the modern states of Tlaxcala and Puebla. Several Aztec city-states in the northern part of this area (including Tlaxcalla and Huexotzinco) successfully resisted attempts by the Triple Alliance (Aztec) Empire to conquer them. These Nahuatl-speaking peoples remained independent until the arrival of the Spaniards.

*The southern valleys.* South of the Valley of Mexico, elevation drops off more quickly and the valleys of the modern state of Morelos and the southern part of Puebla lie about 1,000 m lower than the other central Mexican valleys. A warmer climate permits cultivation of a number of tropical crops such as cotton and many fruits. Otherwise, this area has similar environmental zones to the rest of central Mexico (figure 1.6). The Nahuatl-speaking Aztec peoples built terraces on hillsides and irrigation canals in the valleys, making Morelos one of the most fertile areas of central Mexico. Beyond the agricultural productivity of Morelos is its archaeological richness; Aztec sites are abundant and well preserved here.



**Figure 1.6** Typical central Mexican countryside (in southern Puebla). The field in the foreground is planted in maize (photograph by Michael E. Smith)

*The social landscape*

The natural environment of central Mexico is unique within Mesoamerica, and its qualities go a long way toward explaining why the area was a center for advanced civilizations for over two thousand years. The close juxtaposition of many diverse environmental zones encouraged communication and exchange among groups and enabled settlements to obtain readily a wide variety of goods. Unlike most highland areas in Mesoamerica, central Mexico has large expanses of flat valleys and plains. Rainfall is adequate for maize agriculture, though not abundant. This environment easily supported small agricultural populations for many centuries, but larger numbers of people, with more complex institutions such as cities and states, required higher levels of food production. Fortunately, many central Mexican regions could be made more productive with only modest investments of labor. Barren hillsides could be transformed into fertile plots by construction of terrace walls; valley plots could be improved with canal irrigation; and swamps could be turned into high-yielding farms by adoption of the ancient Maya technique of raised field agriculture (*chinampas*).<sup>9</sup>

The Aztecs did in fact adopt all of these innovations in farming. They were carried out in response to two dramatic developments during the final centuries before Spanish conquest: an explosion of population and an expansion of city-states and empires across the region. One result of these changes in agriculture, demography, and politics was the spread of Aztec peoples across the face of the land. By the time the Spaniards arrived in 1519, central Mexico had been transformed into a social landscape filled with villages, towns, and cities set within a greatly modified agricultural countryside. Although I do not wish to invoke any sense of environmental determinism, it is clear that the unique characteristics of the central Mexican environment were crucial in order for this social and ecological transformation to occur.

**Sources of Information**

The Aztecs are long gone, yet we know quite a bit about them today. Our knowledge comes from two sources: ethnohistory, the study of written documents, and archaeology, the study of material objects or artifacts. At first glance, the use of this information seems straightforward. What could be clearer than a firsthand Spanish description of an Aztec town or ritual, or an archaeological interpretation of an Aztec temple or cookpot? Yet as we look closer at the evidence, the picture begins to blur.

The conqueror Hernando Cortés sought to glorify his accomplishments by inflating the sizes of the towns he conquered, and he justified his destruction of Aztec culture by exaggerating its more savage elements. Similarly, a 500-year old pot does not have a label telling us whether it was used to store grain, to serve wine, or to cook human flesh. The archaeologist must infer its use and significance from fragmentary evidence.

In other words, scholars cannot simply leap from primary evidence – written or material – to believable interpretations of Aztec culture. We must consider the origin and nature of the evidence, we must apply rigorous methods to its study, and we must report the evidence and our methods objectively so that others may judge our interpretations on their merit.<sup>10</sup> Let us now take a look at the sources and methods used by ethnohistorians and archaeologists to create our understanding of Aztec civilization.

## Ethnohistory

The use of documents and other written materials to study the anthropology of past cultures is known as ethnohistory. Ethnohistorians typically use the writings of explorers, soldiers, missionaries, diplomats, and others to reconstruct cultures at the time of contact with the west. Unlike many of the cultures studied by ethnohistorians, those of Mesoamerica were literate. For the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples, the scope of ethnohistory is therefore broadened to include all written texts by and about these cultures. Ethnohistoric documents on the Aztecs can be divided into four types: native pictorial documents, reports of the Spanish conquerors, compilations of early colonial chroniclers, and Colonial-period administrative documents.

### *Pictorial codices*

The Aztecs used one of the five known writing systems of ancient Mesoamerica; the others are Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Epi-Olmec. Although Aztec writing was capable of expressing a range of words and ideas, scribes chose to limit the scope of writing to a limited repertoire of names and concepts. Most Aztec texts comprised pictorial images of persons, places, and things augmented with limited glyphic elements. Texts served as mnemonic devices – the readers (typically nobles, priests, and scribes) used the images as clues or keys and filled out the interpretation with their own personal knowledge. Manuscripts or codices (singular, codex) were written on bark paper or animal skins (see chapter 11). Only a few pre-Colonial examples

have survived, but scribes continued to paint manuscripts in the Aztec style for several generations after the Spanish Conquest, and several types of these still exist.

*Pictorial histories* depicted significant events in the history of a dynasty or city-state. In the most common form, a continuous series of year-glyphs was painted across the page, and depictions of events were drawn next to the year in which they occurred or were connected to the year by a line. Aztec history was related in oral form, with the historian using these manuscripts as a framework. The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, an early colonial, Nahuatl-language narrative that describes the events illustrated in a now-lost pictorial history, gives an idea of the content of these histories:

**2 House [1481]** was when the ruler Axayacatl died. Then Tizoc was inaugurated as ruler of Tenochtitlan. Also, there was an eclipse of the sun.

**3 Rabbit [1482].** At this time the Colhuacan ruler called Tlatolcaltzin died. Then his son, called Tezozomocli, was inaugurated as ruler of Colhuacan.

**4 Reed [1483].** At this time, in Tenochtitlan, the foundation was laid for the house of the devil Huitzilopochtli [i.e., the Templo Mayor], started by the ruler Tizoc.<sup>11</sup>

An example of a pictorial history codex is provided in chapter 2 (figure 2.11 and box, pp. 54 and 55 below).

*Ritual almanacs* helped priests to manage the ritual calendar, a sacred 260-day cycle (figure 1.7; see box; see also figure 11.1). These depictions of gods and rituals were used for divination and to keep records of ceremonies and cycles of time. *Tax records* were lists of payments due by individuals to their lords and by city-states to the Aztec Empire (figure 7.5), and maps were records of land held by individual families.

For sheer quantity of information, the Codex Mendoza is probably the most important Aztec pictorial document. This three-part manuscript was commissioned in the 1540s by the Spanish viceroy (Antonio de Mendoza) to show the king of Spain something of Aztec culture. The manuscript was painted in Aztec style, and then a scribe wrote short descriptions (in Spanish) of each element. The first part of the Codex Mendoza is a pictorial history showing the conquests of the Mexica emperors. The second part is a record of the tax paid by each province of the Aztec Empire (figure 7.5). These two sections are based on pre-Hispanic manuscript formats and are similar to other pictorial histories and tax records. The third part of the Codex Mendoza is an innovation without any

known pre-Hispanic antecedents – an account of the Aztec life cycle from birth to death (figures 4.4, 4.9, 6.1, 6.2, 11.6).

The Codex Mendoza has had a colorful history. It contains a note from the scribe stating that he did not have sufficient time to complete the job to his satisfaction because the royal galleon was about to sail for Spain. French pirates hijacked the ship, and the Codex ended up in the possession of an aide to the French king. After a number of transfers, it came to rest at Oxford University, where it remains today.<sup>12</sup>

### *Reports of the conquerors*

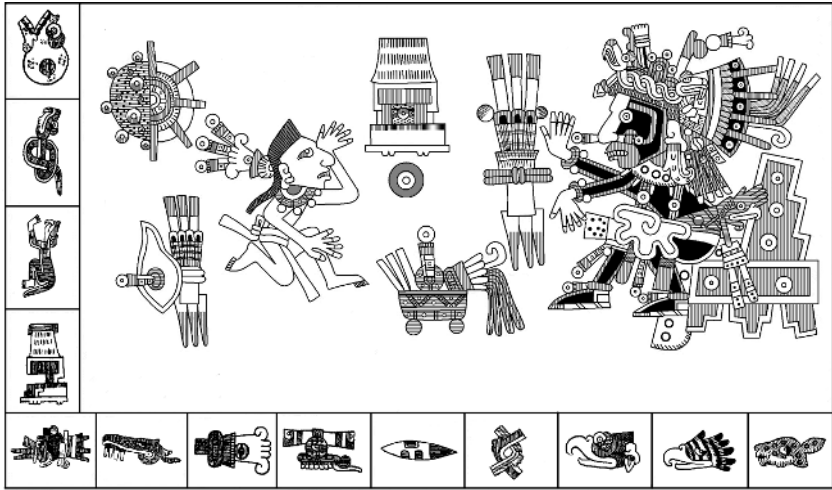
Hernando Cortés and several of his soldiers recorded accounts of the conquest of the Aztecs. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, whose description of the approach to Tenochtitlan opens this chapter, wrote a particularly vivid account of his experiences. Cortés's lengthy reports to the king of Spain, Charles V, were filled with information on the Aztecs.

As helpful as these documents are to modern scholars, they are biased in several ways and must be treated with caution. The Spaniards, Cortés in particular, were trying to justify and glorify their actions, and they slanted their accounts accordingly. Cortés gained greater glory by inflating the size of the armies he defeated, or the size of the cities he converted. Furthermore, Cortés and his army were criticized by priests and others for their wanton destruction of the Aztec people and their property, and he tried to justify his actions by portraying the Aztecs as terrible savages in great need of civilizing and conversion by the Spaniards. So long as these biases are taken into consideration, however, the lengthy reports of Cortés, Díaz del Castillo, and others are essential sources of information on the Aztecs.<sup>13</sup>

### *Accounts of the chroniclers*

The term “chronicler” refers to anyone who wrote a description of Aztec culture in the decades immediately following the Spanish Conquest. This is a broad category that includes many authors and diverse types of written accounts. A brief look at four of the more important chroniclers – Durán, Sahagún, Alva Ixtlilxochitl, and Chimalpahin – gives an idea of the nature of these sources. The chroniclers provide some of the richest and most detailed accounts of Aztec culture.

*Friar Diego Durán.* The Dominican friar Diego Durán was born in Spain around 1537. He was brought to New Spain (central Mexico) as a young boy and spent his youth in Texcoco and Mexico City before entering the



**Figure 1.7** Page from an Aztec ritual almanac, the Codex Borgia (1976:f.62). This shows a 13-day period known as a *trecena*; the 13 day names are arranged across the bottom and right, starting with the day 1 jaguar in the lower right. This *trecena* is ruled by the god Quetzalcoatl, who is seated on a throne. A supplicant and a variety of cult items and offerings are shown in front of the deity (redrawn from Seler et al. 1904–09 by Baert Georges; reproduced with permission)

priesthood in 1556. Durán traveled extensively in central Mexico, where he developed a curiosity about ancient Aztec culture. As research for his three books on the Aztecs, Durán read the earlier accounts of the conquerors, traveled widely to interview natives and Spaniards, and consulted Aztec pictorial manuscripts.

Durán was quite energetic in seeking out knowledge on Aztec culture, and his respect for and objectivity towards Aztec customs and beliefs was unusual among his contemporaries. For example, he describes the practice of human sacrifice almost dispassionately and then goes on to discuss the famous racks of human skulls that were set up outside of temples:

From pole to pole, through the holes, stretched thin rods strung with numerous human heads pierced through the temple. Each rod held twenty heads. These horizontal rows of skulls rose to the height of the poles of the palisade and filled it from end to end. One of the conquerors assured me that they were so numerous that they were impossible to count, so close together that they caused fright and wonder. These skulls were all that remained of those who had been sacrificed . . . I asked whether they were set up flesh and all, and everyone said no; after the flesh had been eaten, only the skull was brought to



the temple. Some were left with their hair on, and they remained until the hair fell off.<sup>15</sup>

Friar Durán interviewed Mexica nobles and commoners and consulted pictorial histories to write the most complete historical account of the Mexica people.

*Friar Bernardino de Sahagún.* Sahagún was born in Spain in 1499 and traveled to New Spain as a Franciscan monk in 1529. He helped found the College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, where he instructed young Mexica nobles in Spanish and Latin and in turn learned Nahuatl from them. Like Durán, Sahagún was keenly interested in the precontact culture and strived to learn as much as he could about Aztec history, customs, and especially religion. He began to collect systematic information on these topics, employing a team of

### Reading a Ritual Codex

Priests used ritual codices for divination and to keep track of lucky and unlucky days in a type of astrology. The most common theme in these codices is the *tonalpohualli*, the 260-day ritual calendar. The operation of this calendar is explained in chapter 11; here we only need to know that the calendar was divided into 20 groups of 13 days called by the Spanish term *trecenas*, and that the days of a *trecena* shared a patron god and various symbolic associations. The *trecena* in figure 1.7 is called 1 jaguar, after the first day name in the sequence of 13 days (lower right). The 13 days of this *trecena* are listed across the bottom and up the left side.

On the right of the main panel the god Quetzalcoatl sits on a throne; he is the patron of the *trecena* 1 jaguar. A supplicant offers weapons and a bowl of precious objects (such as feathers) to the god. A sun disk half obscured by the starry night sky suggests dusk or nightfall. In the center is a temple with a ball of rubber before it. The identification of these elements and their meanings are not certain; no Aztec priest ever revealed his or her secrets to a Spanish or native chronicler. The meanings of these items have been reconstructed by scholars using myths and other pictorial and written accounts. According to Eduard Seler, the foremost interpreter of the Codex Borgia, these elements all relate to myths about Quetzalcoatl, who ruled over the 13 days of the *trecena* 1 jaguar.<sup>14</sup>

Indian assistants and artists. They interviewed surviving Mexica nobles, asking the same questions of a series of different informants. Answers were cross-checked, and informants were reinterviewed to settle conflicting accounts and to amplify previous replies. All the interviews were conducted in Nahuatl, which helped to ensure that Sahagún's account preserved much of the Aztec point of view.

Friar Sahagún produced several distinct, yet overlapping, written accounts of Aztec culture. The most informative, today called the *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, is a lengthy chronicle written in Nahuatl. Although Sahagún made a hasty Spanish translation of the manuscript, the original Nahuatl version is more complete. It was written in 12 books, some of the titles of which are as follows: The Gods, The Ceremonies, Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy, Kings and Lords, The People, and Earthly Things. Each book was accompanied by numerous drawings illustrating major points. The Florentine Codex has been translated into English and published in a bilingual (Nahuatl and English) edition. The work of Bernardino de Sahagún stands as the most detailed and systematic first-hand account of Aztec culture. I make numerous references to Sahagún's writings in the pages that follow, and many of his illustrations are reproduced in this book.<sup>16</sup>

*Alva Ixtlilxochitl and Chimalpahin.* These two chroniclers, descendants of Aztec nobles and kings, recorded historical accounts of their native towns.<sup>17</sup> Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1578–1650) was a mestizo (a person of mixed native and Spanish origins) whose ancestors were kings of Texcoco (his namesake Ixtlilxochitl ruled from 1409 to 1418). He was educated at Sahagún's Colegio de Santa Cruz and wrote his first chronicle, in Spanish, in 1600. His description of the expansion of the Triple Alliance (Aztec) Empire provides a non-Mexica point of view of the empire's history to balance the better-known Mexica versions, and gives scholars insight into the nature of Aztec native historical accounts.

Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin (1579–1660) was a descendant of a minor branch of the nobility of Amecameca, a city-state in the southeast corner of the Valley of Mexico that was subject to Chalco. He was a caretaker at a Christian church and was in contact with Alva Ixtlilxochitl and other native historians of the early seventeenth century. Chimalpahin wrote several histories of Chalco and Amecameca, in Nahuatl, that cover events from the time of the Toltecs until 1612. These documents are valuable for their historical chronicle of these areas and for their portrayal of the Aztec view of histories and settlements.

Durán, Sahagún, Alva Ixtlilxochitl, and Chimalpahin were only four of the many sixteenth-century chroniclers. Other notable examples are the Spanish friars Acosta, Motolinía, and Torquemada; the Aztec noble Alvarado Tezozomoc; and the Spanish administrator Zorita. Taken as a group, the works of the chroniclers are our single most extensive source of information on the Aztecs. Recently, however, ethnohistorians have begun to recognize some serious drawbacks to these accounts. First, the chroniclers describe overwhelmingly the lives and activities of lords and nobles with scant attention to the commoners. Second, most of their descriptions are very generalized and written as if they apply to all parts of the Aztec realm, whereas we now realize that there was considerable variation between regions in customs, beliefs, and social conditions. For example, the chroniclers described Aztec cities as huge, complex urban centers, using the imperial capitals Tenochtitlan and Texcoco as their models. Yet recent research on other Aztec cities shows them to be far smaller and simpler than the imperial capitals. Just how widely can we generalize descriptions of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan to other Aztec peoples and places? Another problem is that the Colonial-period Nahuas sometimes deliberately deceived the Spanish chroniclers to achieve particular objectives, so some of the information in the chronicles is incorrect.<sup>18</sup> There is a growing recognition that the work of the chroniclers is of limited relevance for many Aztec peoples and areas, and this sentiment has led to an increased use of the fourth type of ethnohistoric document.

### *Colonial-period administrative documents*

Once the conquest of the Aztecs was completed in 1521, central Mexico became a province of the Spanish Empire called New Spain. The Spaniards ran their empire in a highly bureaucratic fashion, and countless written reports were produced on topics ranging from fruit trees to Aztec land tenure to strategies for converting the natives to Christianity. These documents were stored in archives in Mexico and Spain, where many still remain for scholars to study. Fortunately, a large number of the most informative examples have been transcribed and published, and some have been translated into English.

Documents on the civic administration of New Spain are numerous. Wills, deeds, baptismal and death records all provide information on household and family organization. Many of the most informative records are those written by Nahuas in Nahuatl, using the Spanish alphabet. The Nahuas quickly learned to use the Spanish legal system, and lawsuits with extensive written documentation proliferated. These suits often involved detailed information-gathering actions, and the results are a treasure trove

of useful information on local conditions in many areas of central Mexico soon after the Spanish Conquest.<sup>19</sup>

The most systematic attempt at gathering information on New Spain and the other Spanish provinces was a questionnaire prepared by the crown in 1577 and sent to all colonial administrators. Fifty questions were included on a variety of topics, from the ancient customs of the area to the natural environment and resources to the Spanish occupants. The often lengthy replies to this questionnaire, called *Relaciones Geográficas*, fill nine books today and furnish detailed pictures of several hundred Aztec towns in the years 1579 to 1581.<sup>20</sup>

Excerpts from the *Relación Geográfica* from Huaxtepec, a town in the modern state of Morelos, give an idea of the information to be found in these documents. The reply was submitted on September 24, 1580, by Juan Gutiérrez de Liébana, mayor of Huaxtepec and other towns.

**Question 14:** To whom were they subject when they were heathens; what power did their rulers have over them; what did they pay in tribute; what forms of worship, rites, and good or evil customs did they have?

**Reply:** They say that in this town, although they recognized Montezuma the Elder and his successors as king, they did not pay tribute beyond participation in his campaigns . . . They had another local lord whom they obeyed and recognized as king . . . called Tultecatli tecuhtli. When the king would go out of his house, no one dared look at him except those who accompanied him . . . For affairs of state, they had two officials like judges who ascertained and verified what had to happen when crimes occurred . . . And they say that they had only one idol in the town's public market, called Ichpuchtli Quilaztle . . . to this idol, every 20 days they sacrificed a child, the offspring of slaves they had captured in war.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the written replies, many of the *Relaciones* are accompanied by maps of the towns and their dependent villages (see chapter 7). Unfortunately, not all Aztec towns are covered by these reports, and some examples that were submitted have since been lost. For towns that do have a surviving report, it is one of the first places ethnohistorians turn for information on local conditions.

## Archaeology

The contributions of archaeologists to Aztec studies are quite recent. For decades archaeologists bypassed Aztec sites on their way to the spectacular

jungle ruins of Classic Maya civilization. A few surviving Aztec pyramids at sites such as Tenayuca (in Mexico City) and Teopanzolco (in Cuernavaca, Morelos) were excavated and restored (see chapter 2), but most Aztec sites had little to offer fieldworkers whose focus was on the great monuments of ancient civilizations. In the late 1970s, when the ideas of social archaeology began to bring a more scientific approach to the discipline, archaeologists took another look at the potential of Aztec sites.

Today archaeologists design their fieldwork with clear research problems in mind. Previously, many archaeologists who followed the “monumental archaeology” approach would select a site simply because it had large mounds or was conveniently located; they would then excavate it to see what turned up. Sometimes the results were spectacular; sometimes they were meager. Now, we focus on a particular problem and use that to structure the research. We select which sites to study and what methods to use in order to answer specific questions about the past. This change makes fieldwork much more efficient and productive. When this approach is coupled with the latest technical advances in dating methods, fieldwork, and artifact analysis, it allows archaeologists to reconstruct many aspects of Aztec society in great detail. A number of examples of projects that follow the problem-oriented social archaeology approach are discussed in the chapters that follow. Here I review the different fieldwork methods that have contributed to our knowledge of Aztec society.

### *Regional survey*

The goal of regional survey is to locate archaeological sites across the landscape. A team of archaeologists walks over the entire surface of an area, using maps and aerial photographs to plot the locations of sites and features. This method is particularly useful in arid and semiarid environments, such as most of central Mexico, where the surface of the ground can easily be seen. Most of rural central Mexico has been plowed for many years. Although plowing destroys the upper portion of archaeological sites, it also brings buried artifacts to the surface where the survey crew can find them. The team members spread out in a line and walk forward with their “nose to the ground.” Sites are identified by either the presence of mounds (usually the ruins of temples or residences) or more commonly by a scatter of potsherds, obsidian tools, and other artifacts (figure 1.8).

Once a site is found, the survey crew measures its size, makes a map, and takes one or more collections of artifacts from the ground surface. Any visible architecture is photographed and/or drawn (figure 1.9). Regional surveys provide information on the number and size of sites in each temporal period and the locations of sites in relation to the



**Figure 1.8** A rural Aztec site. The low mound was once an Aztec house or other structure. This site in the Teotihuacan Valley, called TA-27, was discovered in 1957 by a regional survey project directed by William T. Sanders (Evans and Sanders 2000:188)



**Figure 1.9** A small temple platform at the site TA-8 in the Teotihuacan Valley. This structure was built of small stones and covered with white lime plaster. It was discovered by a regional survey project directed by William T. Sanders (Evans and Sanders 2000:115)

natural landscape and to each other. These data are then analyzed to produce population estimates and reconstructions of settlement patterns for each period.

The use of regional survey in highland Mesoamerica was pioneered by William T. Sanders in the Teotihuacan subvalley of the Valley of Mexico in the 1960s. As part of this research, Sanders located many Aztec sites, and he used ethnohistoric sources to interpret Aztec settlement patterns. His methods of regional survey were then applied to other parts of the Valley of Mexico by Jeffrey R. Parsons, Richard E. Blanton, and in later fieldwork by Sanders himself. By 1975, several thousand square kilometers had been surveyed, resulting in the identification of nearly four thousand archaeological sites.<sup>22</sup> A major discovery of these projects was a population explosion that took place during the Late Aztec period. The implications of this growth are discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

### *Intensive site surface studies*

At many sites, artifacts are numerous on the surface of the ground, or the foundations of houses and temples may still be visible. Aztec sites are often not deeply buried. In these cases, the mapping of structures and features and the systematic collection of surface artifacts allow archaeologists to reconstruct the ancient activities and lifeways at a site. The surface collections taken during regional survey are usually inadequate for this purpose. Intensive site surface studies typically take hundreds or even thousands of separate artifact collections for thorough coverage of the site (figure 1.10).

Intensive site surface research at Aztec sites was pioneered by Elizabeth M. Brumfiel at the city-state center of Huexotla. Brumfiel took 1,243 artifact collections from the surface of the site and studied changing patterns of resource use, commerce, and craft production between the Early Aztec (AD 1150–1350) and Late Aztec periods (1350–1520). She later applied this method to the sites of Xico and Xaltocan, and I used a similar approach at Calixtlahuaca (see chapter 8). The most spectacular results from intensive site surface research come from the city-state center of Otumba. Thomas H. Charlton, Deborah L. Nichols, and Cynthia Otis Charlton took 1,150 artifact collections that documented extensive craft production activity, including the manufacture of obsidian tools, pottery figurines and incense burners, textiles, and several types of jewelry. This unexpectedly high degree of craft specialization has changed our views of Aztec urbanism and economics; the Otumba research is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 1.10** Archaeologists collecting surface artifacts from a  $2 \times 2$  m square in a cornfield at the Aztec city of Yautepec (photograph by Michael E. Smith)

### *Excavation*

Beginning with the uncovering of the Templo Mayor in 1978, excavations at Aztec sites have added tremendously to our knowledge of Aztec culture. The Mexican government project at the Templo Mayor, directed by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, has produced the most dramatic results. Beyond documenting the history of building and rebuilding of the central temple of Tenochtitlan, these excavations have yielded new information on imperial rituals, taxes from distant lands, and the cosmic symbolism of the Aztec Empire (see chapter 10).

Outside of the Templo Mayor project, three types of excavations have been done at Aztec sites: (1) excavations of monumental architecture at major urban centers, (2) large-scale exposure of houses and domestic contexts, and (3) small, problem-oriented test-pit operations. The monumental archaeology approach has been applied to Aztec urban sites since the 1920s, when major excavations were undertaken at Tenayuca in Mexico City and Teopanzolco in Morelos (see chapter 2). Urban architecture has also been studied at Tlatelolco and Santa Cecilia in Mexico and at provincial sites like Malinalco, Calixtlahuaca, Coatetelco, and Yautepec.<sup>24</sup>





**Figure 1.11** Excavation of an elite residence at the Aztec city of Yauhtepec. The flat, white surfaces are lime plaster floors. This ruin is in a schoolyard today; the modern basketball courts are visible in the background (photograph by Michael E. Smith)

House excavations are crucial for the reconstruction of Aztec economic and social patterns (figure 1.11). Except in the largest cities, houses were widely scattered and people simply threw their trash out back. By excavating these trash middens, we can learn of domestic activities and living conditions of individual Aztec households. Susan T. Evans excavated several houses at the rural village of Cihuatecpan in the Teotihuacan Valley, and I have dug houses at a village (Capilco), a town (Cuexcomate), and two cities (Yauhtepec and Calixtlahuaca) in provincial areas. Hortensia de Vega Nova excavated part of an Aztec royal palace in Yauhtepec, and more recently Elizabeth Brumfiel and her students have excavated a number of houses at Xaltocan in the northern Valley of Mexico.<sup>25</sup>

A number of projects have used test excavations to investigate specific issues at Aztec sites. For example, Jeffrey R. Parsons and colleagues tested the *chinampa* agricultural fields in the southern Valley of Mexico to learn how and when these features were constructed. At Otumba, Charlton, Nichols, and Otis Charlton followed up their intensive surface collections at craft workshops with test excavations to better document economic activities at the site. Similarly, Mary G. Hodge excavated test pits in Chalco to investigate

economic and social changes. At Yautepec, I used test excavations to look for buried houses (some were successful, some not), to see whether early Spanish churches were built on top of Aztec temples (they were not), and to look (unsuccessfully) for evidence of Aztec irrigation canals.<sup>26</sup>

### *Analysis and interpretation*

Artifacts do not speak to us directly. They must be analyzed, and the results must be interpreted. This is the tedious side of archaeology. It is fun and exciting to excavate sites, but then we are faced with the long task of classifying, studying, and describing the artifacts and architecture. The fruits of five months of excavation at Cuexcomate and Capilco (nearly half a million artifacts, mostly potsherds) required my wife and me to spend four years in the laboratory studying artifacts plus several additional years of computer analysis and write-up.

Beyond the basic classification and description of artifacts, new technological analyses have revolutionized the discipline. We routinely use methods such as radiocarbon dating or obsidian hydration dating to determine the ages of artifacts and deposits, and new techniques of chemical analysis permit artifacts to be traced to their often distant points of origin. Some of the advances made possible by these methods are discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Nearly all of our interpretations of ancient society from archaeological remains depend upon inductive logic, also called reasoning by analogy. For example, I have interpreted small bowls with tripod supports as tools used in the spinning of cotton thread based on an analogy with modern cotton handspinning techniques. When modern Maya women spin cotton, they use a small bowl to control the twirling spindle. The small Aztec bowls resemble modern spinning bowls, so I argued by analogy that the ancient artifacts functioned in a similar manner. An analogy is a hypothesis, so the next step was to test this interpretation with independent data. Several lines of evidence converge to support this hypothesis: pictorial sources from the Early Colonial period such as the Codex Mendoza show women spinning cotton using a small bowl; the artifacts show traces of abrasion where the spindle has worn away the interior surface of the bowl; and these artifacts are found in domestic contexts where we know from other evidence that spinning took place.<sup>27</sup>

This example shows the importance of modern (and historical) analogues for our interpretation of many aspects of Aztec culture. Thus our knowledge of the Aztecs comes not only from ethnohistory and archaeology but also, indirectly, from Mesoamerican ethnology, the study of modern and historic cultures. Two other branches of modern anthropology – physical anthropology and linguistics – also contribute greatly to Aztec studies. Physical

anthropologists study the skeletal remains of the Aztecs in order to determine their sex, age, health and nutrition, and sometimes cause of death. Linguists have expanded greatly our knowledge of Nahuatl and its historical development in Aztec and more recent times. Geographers have also provided new information on the physical environment, farming systems, and settlement patterns.

## Art History

After the initial work by the chroniclers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, scholarly study of the Aztecs started in the eighteenth century with a growing appreciation for Aztec art, particularly stone sculpture and painted codices. An interest in Aztec architecture and archaeological sites did not come until much later. In the nineteenth century, museums in Mexico, the United States, and Europe were busy filling their exhibit halls and back storerooms with Aztec sculptures, ceramic vessels, metal, and other objects. The richest collection was at Mexico's National Museum, where items of Aztec art filled storerooms to their limit (figure 1.12). Today, Aztec art may be



Figure 1.12 “Mexican antiquities which exist in the National Museum of Mexico, 1857.” Lithograph by Casimiro Castro, published in *México y sus alrededores* (Castro 1855–1857)

found in museums throughout Mexico and in the larger museums in the United States and Europe. The National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City has an outstanding exhibit of the finest examples of Aztec art, and the Museum of the Templo Mayor has another excellent exhibit. These and other museums also have large collections of objects in storage that are open to researchers.

Ever since the rebirth of interest in Aztec art in the eighteenth century, the rigorous study of Aztec objects by art historians has been one of the major components of Aztec studies. Art historians have made major contributions not only to the historical and aesthetic study of Aztec art, but also to the topics of Aztec religion, writing, cosmology, iconography, astronomy, and social organization.<sup>28</sup>

### **Aztec Studies Today**

Scholarly interest in the Aztecs began with the chroniclers in the aftermath of the Spanish Conquest. Research on documents and major sculptures developed gradually over the centuries, but archaeology lagged because most Aztec sites were buried under colonial and modern cities and towns. After the Mexican Revolution of 1910, several important Aztec sites were excavated by the government as part of a program to emphasize Aztec culture as a historical source for modern Mexican identity. The single most important event in the history of Aztec scholarship was the start of the Templo Mayor project in 1978. Apart from the significance of the Templo Mayor itself, the attention and energy generated by the project led to increased archaeological research at other sites and a renewed focus on codices, administrative records and other documentary sources.<sup>29</sup>

If any overarching theme can be identified within the recent boom of research on Aztec civilization, it is an explicit focus on people. Ethnohistorians, archaeologists, and art historians are reconstructing the activities of families, social groups, and villages while they explore the social conditions of the people who lived in all parts of the Aztec world. Whereas many earlier scholars restricted their studies to lords, temples, gods, and cities, the advances of social archaeology and recent trends in ethnohistory and art history now give us access to peasants, workshops, and villages. Themes that were unheard of a few decades ago, such as women's roles, farming methods, domestic crafts, and standards of living, are now topics of research.<sup>30</sup>

Modern anthropology, the study of human cultures and their variations over space and time, provides the best framework for our emerging understanding of Aztec civilization, and I use an anthropological approach to

structure the narrative that follows. Chapter 2 sets out the historical outline of Aztec culture, from its predecessors through the Spanish Conquest. Chapters 3 through 12 discuss specific aspects of Aztec culture, beginning with settlement (chapter 3), followed by economics (chapters 4 and 5), social organization (chapter 6), politics (chapter 7), urbanism (chapter 8), religion (chapters 9 and 10), and intellectual and aesthetic life (chapters 11 and 12). Chapter 13 recapitulates the glory of the final century of Aztec civilization, tells the story of the Spanish Conquest, and ends with an account of the legacy of the Aztecs today. I begin my account in central Mexico before the Aztecs arrived on the scene.