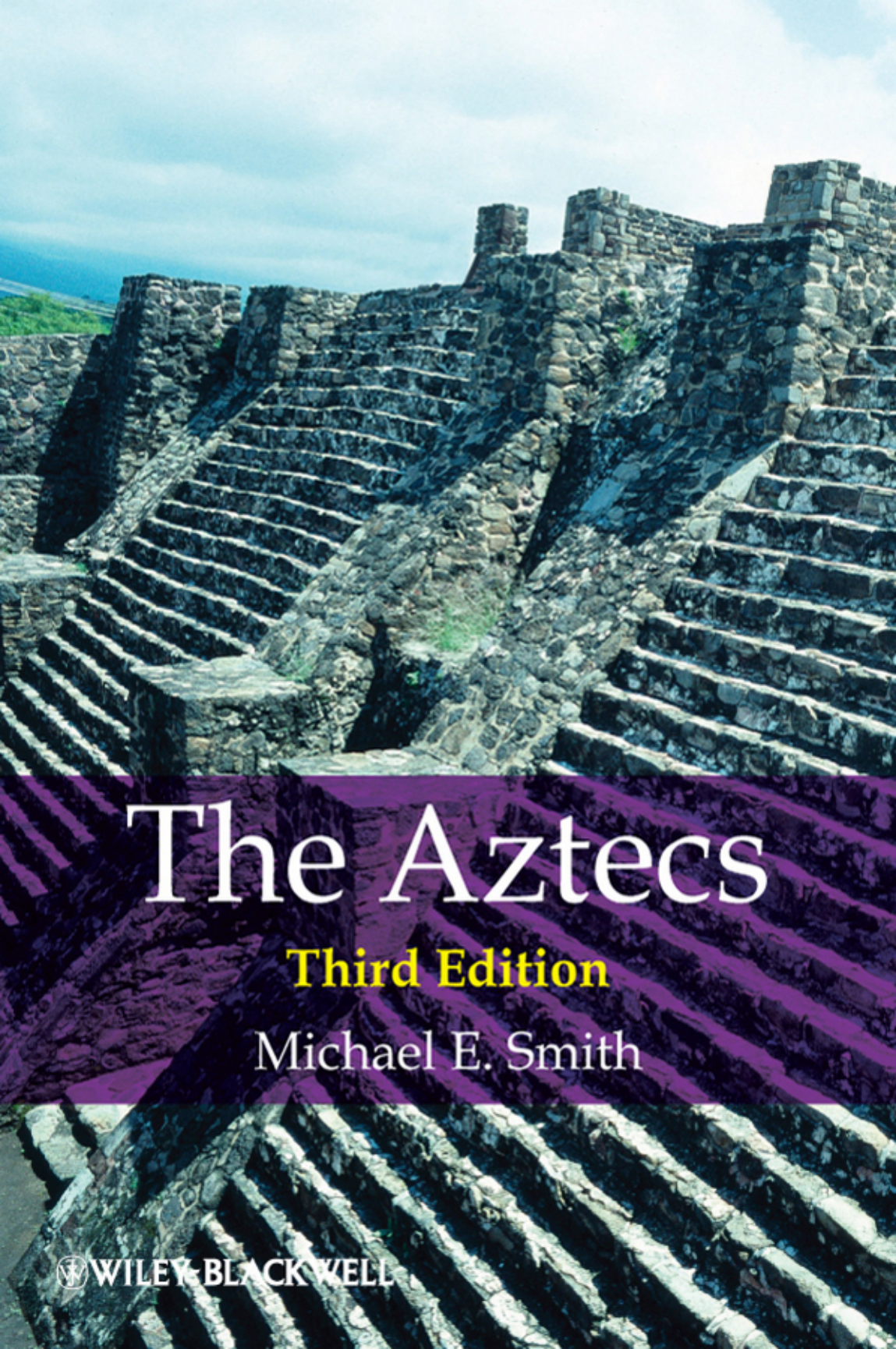
The Aztecs
Third Edition
Michael E. Smith
WILEY-BLACKWELL

The Aztecs

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The Aztecs

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In memory of William T. Sanders and Thomas H. Charlton: mentors, colleagues, friends

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Preface

Is there perchance any truth to our words here?
All seems so like a dream, only do we rise from sleep, only on earth do our words remain.

Cantares Mexicanos

Words were important to the Aztecs, and we are fortunate today that many of their own words were preserved after the Spanish Conquest. Also preserved were examples of the Aztecs' picture-writing as well as descriptions by Spanish conquerors and observers. These written sources have been available for four centuries, and many works on the Aztecs make use of them. But they are not the only window into the Aztec past; words are not all that remain on earth.

Paradoxically, the oldest information on the Aztecs is also the most recent to be discovered. I refer to the ruins of houses, temples, and towns that make up the archaeological record of Aztec civilization. Aztec archaeology is a relatively new field of study. Many exciting new discoveries over the past two decades have revolutionized our understanding of Aztec civilization, but until now most of this information has appeared only in technical reports and professional journals. A major goal of this book is to make these discoveries known to a wider audience. As a participant in this work, I try to communicate something of the excitement and significance of our research. In preparing the third edition, I have updated the text and notes in all chapters and reorganized and expanded my discussion of many topics.

In the pages that follow I draw heavily upon the results of fieldwork that I have directed at Aztec sites in the Mexican states of Morelos and Mexico. I would like to acknowledge the following institutions and agencies for providing funding for that fieldwork: the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Geographic Society, the Heinz

Charitable Trust, Loyola University of Chicago, the University at Albany (State University of New York), the Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, and Arizona State University. My research in Mexico has been greatly facilitated by Mexican officials and colleagues, particularly José Antonio Álvarez Lobato, Hortensia de Vega Nova, Joaquim García-Bárcenas, Teresa García García, Roberto García Moll, Agustín Gasca Pliego, Lorena Mirambell, Mari Carmen Serra Puche, and Norberto González C. I thank the following students who participated in the fieldwork for their contributions to its overall success: Patricia Aguirre, Martín Antonio, Robert Austin, Courtney Brown, Timothy Brown, Elizabeth DiPippo, Ruth Fauman-Fichman, Caitlin Guthrie, Timothy Hare, Kathleen Haynie, Casandra Hernández, Miriam Heun, Kathryn Hirst, Angela Huster, Marieke Joel, Amy Karabowicz, Kori Kaufman, Ronald Kohler, Annette McLeod, Samantha Miller, Raúl Miranda Gómez, Lisa Montiel, Susan Norris, Juliana Novic, Joan Odess, Rikke Marie Olsen, Jan Marie Olson, Scott O'Mack, Jennifer Pinson, T. Jeffrey Price, Colleen Rhodes, Mellissa Ruiz, Jeffrey Sahagun, Maëlle Sergheraert, David Shafer, Margaret Shiels, Andrew Somerville, Jerrell Sorensen, Sharon Spanogle, Charles Stapleton, María Stapleton, Osvaldo Sterpone, Timothy Sullivan, Cheryl Sutherland, Deborah Szymborski, and Brian Tomaslewski. I also must thank my excellent field crews from the towns of TetlamaYautepec, and San Francisco Calixtlahuaca. My later father, Dudley B. Smith, deserves acknowledgment for providing pickup trucks for our fieldwork in Morelos.

My understanding of Aztec civilization has benefited greatly from interaction with my colleagues. Although these are too numerous to list, I do want to acknowledge an intellectual debt to the following scholars: Bradford Andrews, Jorge Angulo, Anthony Aveni, Carlos Barreto M., Juan José Batalla Rosado, Francis F. Berdan, Richard E. Blanton, Elizabeth H. Boone, Aleksander Borejsza, Arnd Adje Both, Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, Adrian Burke, Louise M. Burkhart, Robert M. Carmack, René García Castro, Thomas H. Charlton, George L. Cowgill, Ann Cyphers, Hortensia de Vega Nova, Susan T. Evans, Charles Frederick, Silvia Garza de González, Susan D. Gillespie, Norberto González C., Gary H. Gossen, Michel Graulich, David C. Grove, Rafael Gutierrez, Cynthia Health-Smith, Frederic Hicks, Kenneth G. Hirth, Mary G. Hodge, Dorothy Hosler, John S. Justeson, Susan Kepecs, Leonardo LópezLuján, Druzo Maldonado J., Raymundo Martínez García, Marilyn A. Masson, Jennifer Meanwell, Ben Nelson, Deborah L. Nichols, Xavier Noguez, Jerome Offner, Cynthia Otis Charlton, Jeffrey R. Parsons, Ana Maria Pelz, John Pohl, Helen Pollard, José Luis de Rojas, Robert Rosenswig, William T. Sanders, Juan Antonio Siller, Barbara Stark, Wanda Tommasi de Magrelli, Emily Umberger, and James Wessman.

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Last but not least, I owe the greatest debt to my wife, Cynthia Heath-Smith, and our daughters April Nicole and Heather Colleen. Cindy is a superb archaeologist who has contributed greatly to our fieldwork, and is the best editor I know. She has also helped create a happy and stable home during our many moves between the US and Mexico. April and Heather have assisted during some of the fieldwork described here, but more than that they help make the life of an archaeologist worthwhile and fulfilling.

Guide to Pronunciation and Spelling

In Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, most consonants are pronounced as in English, and vowels are pronounced as in Spanish. The major exceptions are:

h	pronounced 'hw' (Huitzilopochtli; *macehualli*)
qua, quo	pronounced 'kw' (*quachtli*)
que, qui	pronounced 'k' (Quetzalcoatl; *pulque*)
tl	pronounced like the English 'atlas' (Tlaloc), even at the end of a word, where it is unvoiced (Nahuatl; *coatl*)
x	pronounced 'sh' (Xipe Totec; Mexica)

one

The Aztecs of Mesoamerica

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

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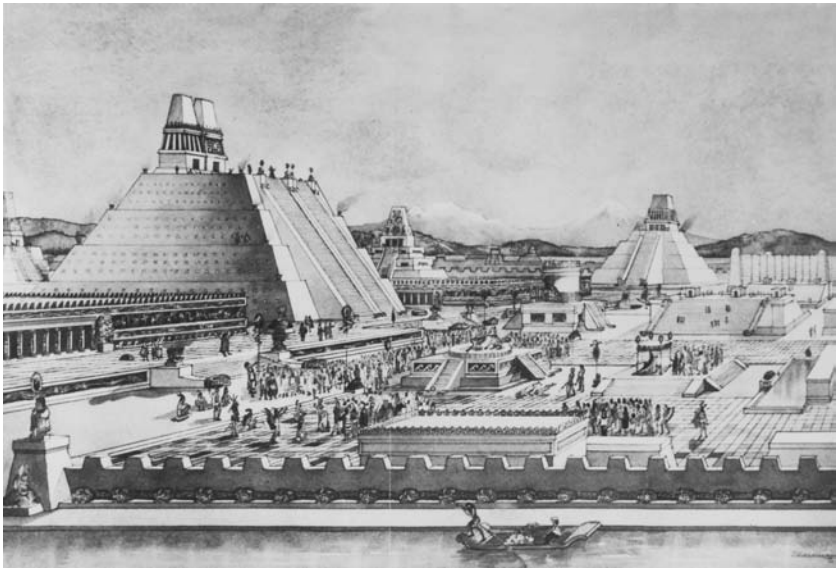

Figure 1.1 Artist's reconstruction of the Templo Mayor and the sacred precinct in the heart of Tenochtitlan (modified after Marquina 1951:lamina 55)

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*[1]

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 Aztlan (Aztlan is the origin of the term "Aztec," a modern label that was not used by the people themselves).[2]

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. Ethnohistorian 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.[3]

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.[4] 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

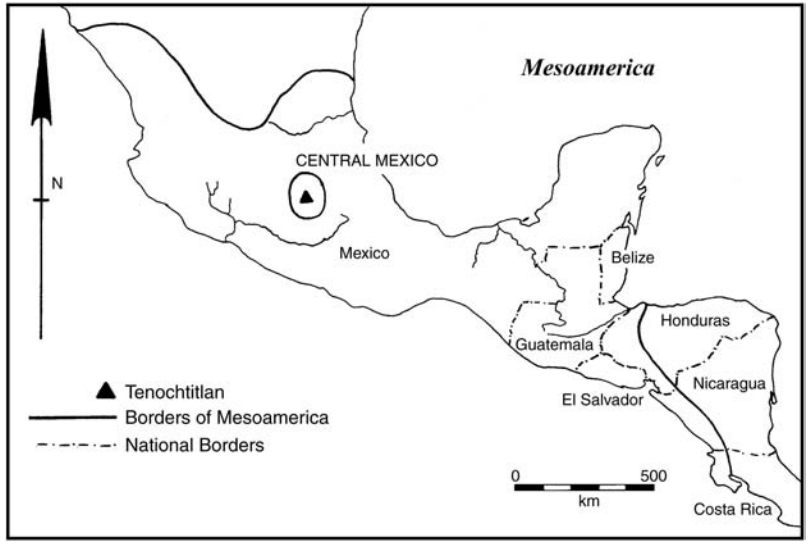

Figure 1.2 Map of Mesoamerica showing the location of central Mexico, the Aztec heartland (drawing by Ellen Cesarski and Kori Kaufman)

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.[5]

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.[6]

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.[7]

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).[8]

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).

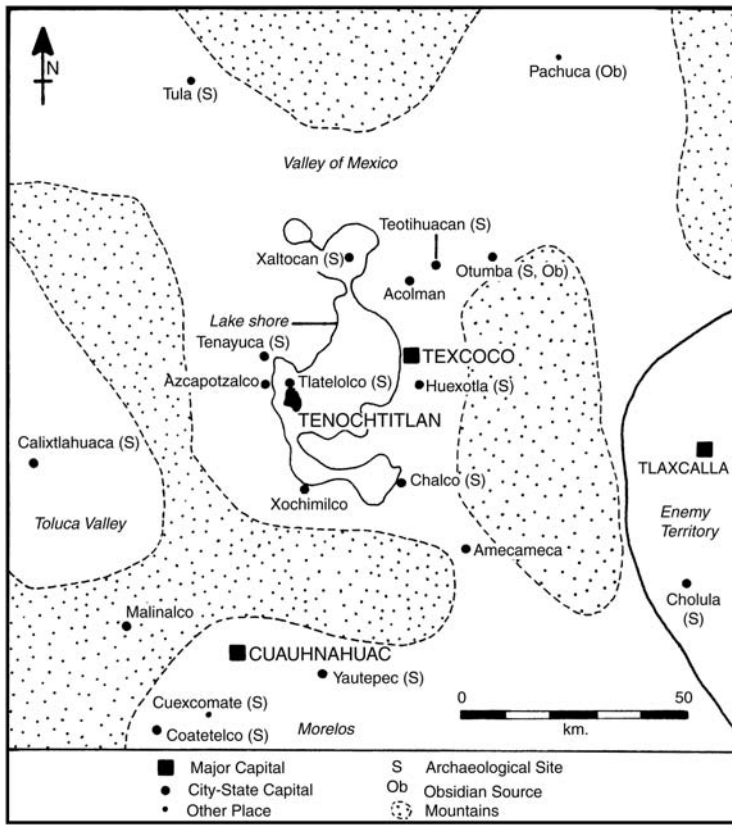

Figure 1.5 Map of Aztec sites in central Mexico (drawing by Ellen Cesarski)

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