Chinese Political Culture,” History of Religions 17 (February–May 1978): 211–225. A comprehensive discussion of martyrdom and its sacrificial theology in the early Christian church can be found in the classic work by W. H. C. Frend’s Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church (Oxford, 1965). A more recent treatment can be found in A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christian and Jews in Antiquity (San Francisco, 1992) by Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor. H. Paul Varley’s Warriors of Japan (Honolulu, 1995) explores the evolving Samurai culture from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries as reflected in tales of war. Valerio Valeri’s Kingship and Sacrifice: Ritual and Society in Ancient Hawaii (Chicago, 1985) is an extensive study of the structure and function of Hawaiian sacrificial rituals, with particular attention to the role of the king. Valeri includes a fine discussion of Hawaiian theology as well.

A lengthy treatment of a contemporary performance of the ancient Vedic fire ritual can be found in Frits Staal’s two-volume Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar (Berkeley, Calif., 1983). This book also includes source material for the historical background of the possibility of human sacrifice in early India. It also includes an article by Asko Parpola, “The Pre-Vedic Indian Background of the Srauta Rituals” (vol. 2, pp. 41–75), which discusses the relationship between the horse sacrifice and human sacrifice.

An extraordinarily rich source of information on the Aztecs was compiled by a sixteenth-century Franciscan father, Bernardino de Sahagún, in his Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España, translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble as Florentine Codex: A General History of the Things of New Spain, 13 vols. (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 1950–1982). Volumes 2, 3, and 7 are particularly good for ritualistic and mythic sources on human sacrifice. A general discussion of Aztec sacrifice can be found in Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos by Kay Read (Bloomington, Ind., 1998), and an excellent synthesis and application of a number of classic and contemporary theories on Aztec sacrifice appears in Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis by Eric Wolf (Berkeley, Calif., 1999, pp. 134–195).

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HUMAN SACRIFICE: AZTEC RITES

One of the most vivid examples of the Aztec ritual of sacrificing human beings (tlamichitlipilli) appears in Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s book The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico (1632; Eng. ed., 1953). Díaz del Castillo, a foot soldier in Hernando Cortés’s army, describes seeing his comrades, who had been captured in a recent battle, being dragged by force up the steps of the temple of Coatepec by Aztec warriors and priests. As the “dismal drum” of the war god, Huitzilopochtli, mixed with the ominous sounds of shell and horn trumpets, the Aztecs decorated their captives with Aztec costumes and “with fans in their hands they forced them to dance before Huichilobos [Huitzilopochtli]” (p. 191). After this ceremonial preparation, we are told that the Aztecs lay the Spaniards “on their backs on some rather narrow stones which had been prepared as places for sacrifice, and with some knives they sawed open their chests and drew out their palpitating hearts and offered them to the idols that were there” (p. 191). Following this offering to the gods at the temple, the victims were rolled back down to the bottom of the steps where ritual experts “cut off their arms and feet and flayed the skin off the faces, and prepared it afterwards like glove leather with the beards on, and kept those for the festivals when they celebrated drunken orgies and the flesh they ate in chillimole” (p. 191).

This shocking description of an apparent massacre represents what Burr C. Brundage in his book The Fifth Sun (1979) calls “the central fact of Aztec life . . . the nuclear cult of war, sacrifice and cannibalism.” In this no doubt biased selection, major ritual elements of Aztec human sacrifice can be identified that help illuminate some aspects of Aztec religion. Among the outstanding elements in the text are the centrality of the sacred temple of Tenochtitlan, the ascent and descent of the temple stairs, ritual dressing, dancing and music, the heart sacrifice of enemy warriors, the disembemterment and flaying of the victim, cannibalism, and an atmosphere of political and military crisis. While it is significant that even in the report of an enemy soldier like Díaz del Castillo a number of indigenous facts of Aztec ritual sacrifice are communicated, it is important to acknowledge that many crucial dimensions are missed. First, the Nahua word that is closest to “sacrifice” was nectlacalli (paying of the debt). In many parts of the Mesoamerican world, the ritual killing of plants, animals, and humans was carried out within a deep-seated belief that the deities had created the universe out of their own self-immolations or the giving of some part of their essences. Secondly, this gift of life put a debt on human beings whose responsibility it was to pay back the gods through ritual sacrifice and the production of blood that would result in the rejuvenation of the divine forces that sustain the world. Thirdly, this commitment to paying the debt had many ritual and theological dimensions that the Spaniards could not understand including the Mesoamerican belief that the reliability of many crucial transitions between months, years and larger cycles of time depended on the ritual giving of blood. These are just some of the key meanings of human sacrifice that is often overlooked by public and scholars alike.

As a means of understanding these elements within a comprehensive setting, this essay will focus on the following: (1) the social-political world of the Aztec Empire, characterized as a pulsating polity marked by ferocious rivalries between the capital city of Tenochtitlan (the center) and the allied and enemy territories of the state (the periphery); (2) the cosmological setting of Aztec religion and human sacrifice; and (3) the practice and paraphernalia of human sacrifice. This approach will show Aztec ritual sacrifice as both text and context, ritual order and ritual destruction aimed at cosmic and social revitalization. The Aztec warrior and worshiper powerfully experienced the gods not only in the poetry, art, and architecture of the ceremonial centers of the
empire but also in the elaborate preparations of ritual places, plants, animals and people for sacrifice through the deadly thrust of the sacrificial knife, the eruption of blood on the temple, and sometimes the transformation of human flesh into ritual food.

The Social World of Center and Periphery. The social world in which Aztec ritual sacrifice developed was a rapidly expanding empire, organized around the capital city of Tenochtitlan between 1426 and 1521. This state organization was created and maintained, in part, by military force and a religious cosmology pervaded by themes of competition, conflict, agricultural regeneration, warfare, and the ritual killing of gods and men. In the ninety-plus years of the rise of Aztec power, the elites of Tenochtitlan—who conceived of their world as cemanahuac, a “land surrounded by water” that was divided by the gods into four quadrants emanating from the capital—constructed the largest and most powerful political state in Mesoamerican history. This achievement of centralization was accomplished through the military conquest of scores of communities that lay in all directions from the capital. This center-oriented cosmological and social world was hampered by a pulsating political process marked by constant rebellions, secessions, and realignments by allies. One of the major political and religious instruments in stabilizing peripheral territories, and in the acquisition of massive tribute payments such as maize, beans, cloth, war service, and labor, was the periodic, sometimes large-scale sacrifice of enemy warriors at the major temples of Tenochtitlan. Some of these sacrifices constituted theatrical ritual displays of the ideology, wealth, and symbolism of the exemplary center for the purpose of establishing and expanding Aztec authority within and beyond the Valley of Mexico.

This pattern of conquest, tributary control, and human sacrifice was already a traditional practice in Mesoamerica when the Aztec ancestors, the Chichimec (sons of the dogs), migrated into the valley in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. At that time, the Valley of Mexico was politically fragmented into a myriad of small, warring city-states (each with a population of between ten and fifty thousand) in constant competition and conflict for political, ritual, and economic control. While human sacrifice as an instrument of political intimidation and religious devotion was widely practiced and regulated by several calendars, the Aztec expanded its uses during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

The most powerful city-state encountered by the Aztec during their rise to dominance was the Tepenac empire, which consolidated some areas of the central valley in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Around 1424, the Aztec of Tenochtitlan and the city-states of Texcoco and Tlacopan successfully rebelled against the Tepenac and formed a state organization called the Triple Alliance, which took over the Tepenac patterns of conquest, territorial control, and tribute payments. However, during the next ninety years, Aztec tlatoani (chief speakers/rulers) directed aggressive military campaigns to the north, south, east, and west of the city and central valley in order to expand their territorial and tributary empire. In some cases, large-scale military campaigns were carried out at great distances from the capital. These expansions into peripheral territories resulted in both new acquisitions of land and tribute but also terrible defeats of the Aztecs at the hands of the Tlaxcala-Puebla Valley kingdom in the east and the Tarascan state in the west.

The Flowery Wars. One of the most important ritual and political institutions of the Aztec Empire was the Xochipoyotl (Flowery Wars), which lasted from 1450 to 1519 and consisted of a series of scheduled battlefield confrontations between warriors of the Triple Alliance and warriors of the Tlaxcala-Puebla Valley kingdoms. In recent years controversy has arisen over the causes and significance of the Flowery Wars. According to indigenous accounts that reflect the ideology of Aztec elites, the “wars” were staged primarily to provide sacrificial victims for ritual festivals and to keep the warriors in training. One argument is that the devastating famines of 1450 to 1454, during the reign of Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (Moctezuma I) (1466–1520) were interpreted by the priestly elites as a sign of angry gods who needed a greater supply of warrior sacrifices. A sixteenth-century chronicler, Fray Diego Durán, states that the Flowery Wars were instituted for the specific purpose of supplying victims for the Templo Mayor (Great Temple) of Tenochtitlan, where the shrines of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc stood. Whereas the actual social causes were almost certainly more complex, the argument put forth by Tlacaellel, the chief advisor of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (Moctezuma II) (1502–1520) represents the Aztec vision well. He compared a warrior going to the Flowery Wars with a merchant going to distant markets to purchase luxuries. The god and his army went to the battlefield to purchase blood and hearts, the luxuries of the temples.

Recent research has expanded our understanding of the Flowery Wars by revealing that they began almost as demonstration wars or tournaments, with limited numbers of elite combatants, no intentional killing, and the release of prisoners. A convincing display of superiority could lead to capitulation, but if that failed, the war escalated over a period of years: ever larger numbers of combatants were involved; the types of weapons allowed expanded to include those, such as bows and arrows, that inflicted indiscriminate death; captives were sacrificed and battles became lethal confrontations. (Hassig, 2001, p. 320).

Thus, these military confrontations resulted not just in the capture of warriors for temple sacrifice but eventually in large-scale battlefield killing that left the competing armies depleted and in disarray. In these cases, the Flowery Wars reflect true warfare conditions between states, not simply the acquisition of warriors for sacrifice in the capital. Further, it is certain that during periods of truce between these ritually warring kingdoms, rulers of enemy territories were invited
to witness the theatrical sacrifice of warriors in the ceremonial center of Tenochtitlan. Hidden behind special canopies, these visiting lords witnessed the ritual devastation of allied and enemy warriors. According to Johanna Broda, the Aztec rulers organized the ceremonies so that their enemies could see “the greatness of Mexico” and in order to “bewilder them, fill them with fear, . . . in order to show that the Aztecs were the masters of all the riches of the earth” (Broda, 1970, p. 234). In this case, the rulers from the peripheries of the Aztec state were brought to the center to witness the ceremonial authority of the capital, Tenochtitlan, which assisted the Aztec in their purpose of achieving political superiority.

Whereas the Aztecs were able by the middle of the reign of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin to consolidate scores of city-states into their empire and to intimidate many others into uneasy alliances, their world was repeatedly shocked by rebellions and defeats at the peripheries of their empire. These tensions put the Aztec state in an atmosphere of periodic crisis and regeneration and likely contributed to the escalation of ritual human sacrifices in the ceremonial center of the capital.

It must be noted, however, that human sacrifice was practiced prior to the Aztec Empire and in many parts of Mesoamerica. There is evidence of human sacrifice among the Olmecs who date back to 1200 BCE and the Classic Maya inscriptions have a special glyph for the notion of sacrifice that sometimes referred to the ritual killing of a defeated, rival king. The ritual torture of prisoners at ceremonial temples as well as the ritual dismemberment and beheading of prisoners is shown on murals and painted vessels from numerous Maya archaeological sites. As González Torres writes, sacrifice is now known to have taken place at the great city of Teotihuacan in central Mexico.

Recent excavations in Teotihuacan have proved that human sacrifice was practiced there on a large scale. So far, 126 skeletons have been found in or around the temple of Quetzalcoatl, and archaeologists think there were at least 272 individuals represented in remains associated just with this building. One hypothesis is that they constituted a foundation sacrifice that may have been part of a great ceremony dedicated to the deities of water, just before the completion of the temple. (González Torres, 2001, p. 103)

Whereas this essay focuses intensely on the Aztec patterns and practices, other Mesoamerican cultures devised elaborate sacrificial practices that deserve further attention.

**Cosmology of Human Sacrifice.** In the various creation myths and sacred histories found in such representative works as the Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas, the Leyenda de los soles, and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España (1569–1582), the Aztec cosmos is shown to have several distinctive qualities, including a dynamic, unstable, and destructive cosmic setting that is marked by sharp alternations between order and disorder, cosmic life and cosmic death. This oscillation reflects historical developments in which the collapse of specific city-states or kingdoms resulted in the initial fragmentation but later proliferation of new communities.

At least three major cosmogonic episodes contain paradigms for the Aztec practices of warfare and human sacrifice. A review of these episodes reveals three important patterns: first, a widening of the pattern of sacrifice from sacrifice to a single deity to sacrifice to masses of deities, and, second, the conquest and sacrifice of gods from the periphery of the cosmos by the gods and warriors at the center of the world. In some cases a third pattern appears—the victory of a weaker god or brother over the dominant sibling or deity.

A major cosmogonic episode related to human sacrifice is reported in Sahagún’s Florentine Codex as occurring after the universe has passed through the first four cosmogonic ages. We are told that during the night the gods gathered around a divine fire at Teotihuacan (abode of the gods) to discuss who take it upon himself to “be the sun, to bring the dawn” (vol. 7, p. 6). Following four days of penance and ritual, the god Nanahuatzin (the pimply one), dressed in ceremonial garb, hurled himself into the fire, followed by a second deity, Tecuciztecatl (lord of snails). Immediately, an eagle and a jaguar rose from the flames. “From this event it is said, they took the custom whereby one was called valiant, a warrior” (vol. 7, p. 6). Then the dawn appeared in all directions. Uncertain as to where the sun would rise, the gods fell upon their knees. Quetzalcoatl looked eastward and “when the sun came to rise, when he burst forth, he appeared to be red, he kept swaying from side to side” (vol. 7, p. 7). The gods were faced with an unstable, threatening cosmic orb born out of the self-sacrifice of two of their number. Because of the motionless sun, the gods decide to sacrifice themselves, saying, “Let this be, that through us the sun may be revived. Let all of us die” (vol. 7, p. 7). The wind god, Ecatl (Ehécatl), “deals death” to the mass of deities, but the sun still fails to “follow his path.” In desperation, Ecatl “exerted himself fiercely, and violently as he blew” and the sun “went on his way” (vol. 7, p. 7). Thus began the fifth and present age—the Aztec age—created when one courageous warrior god sacrificed himself, followed by the sacrifice of almost all of the gods. It may be that this cosmogonic sacrifice served as the religious justification for the increase in sacrifices at later ceremonial cities such as Tenochtitlan.

**Cosmic Sacrifice of Huitzilopochtli.** The cosmic pattern of mass sacrifice to energize the sun is repeated in a subsequent episode in which terrestrial warfare and human sacrifice are created by the gods to provide for their nourishment. In one version, the god Mixcoatl (cloud serpent) creates five women and four hundred Chichimec warriors to stir up discord and warfare. While the warriors pass their time hunting and drinking, the god sends the five human beings to slay them. In this account, war is created specifically to provide sacrificial victims for the gods but again we see a large number of sacrifices taking place.
However, the specific paradigm for massive sacrifices of enemy warriors at Tenochtitlan appears in the *teotuicatl* (divine song) of the birth of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec war god. This narrative illustrates the pattern of the conquest and ritual killing of warriors from the periphery of the state at the major temple in the heart of the capital. The story begins when the mother of the gods, Coatlicue (serpent skirt), becomes pregnant while sweeping out the temple at Coatepec (serpent mountain). When her daughter Coyolxauhqui hears of the pregnancy, she incites her 399 siblings to dress for war. The text in book 3 of Sahagún’s *Historia* reads, “They were very angry, they were very agitated, as if the hearts had gone out of them. Coyolxauhqui incited them, she inflamed the anger of her brothers, so that they should kill her mother” (p. 6). Next, Coyolxauhqui directs them to dress for war: “They distributed among themselves their paper garb, the anecuyotl, the netted, the streamers of colored paper, . . . their arrows had barbed points, . . . then they began to move” (p. 6). Following a journey through many towns, the army, led by Coyolxauhqui, charges up Serpent Mountain to kill Coatlicue. As they reach the top, Huitzilopochtli is born fully dressed and attired for war. Attacking Coyolxauhqui, he cuts off her head and dismembers her. The text notes, “The body of Coyolxauhqui rolled down the slope; it fell apart in pieces; her hands, her legs, her torso fell in different places” (p. 7). Next, Huitzilopochtli attacks the other warriors: “He pursued them, he chased them like rabbits, all round the mountain . . . four times, . . . with nothing could they defend themselves. He chased them, he drove them away, he humbled them, he destroyed them, he annihilated them” (p. 7). Following the killing of the enemy warriors at the mountain, he takes off their costumes and “introduces them into his destiny” (p. 7).

As the significant excavations (1978–2003) of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan have revealed, this mythic episode was replicated in the architectural and ritual action of the temple, which was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. It has been learned that the temple was called “Coatepec” by the Aztec. Its arrangement of parts, with Huitzilopochtli’s shrine at the top of one of the great stairways and the eleven-foot-diameter round stone depicting the dismembered Coyolxauhqui located at the bottom, is an architectural repetition of this mythic episode. Ethnographic research has shown that the largest number of ceremonial sacrifices of enemy warriors from surrounding communities took place at this temple. As the divine song of Huitzilopochtli’s birth states at the end,

The Méxica venerated him, made sacrifices to him, honored and served him. And Huitzilopochtli paid back those who behaved that way. And his cult was taken from there, from Coatepec, the Mountain of the Serpent, as it was practiced in ancient times. (Sahagún, vol. 3, p. 8)

As remarked earlier, many mythic episodes related to sacrifice constitute an “overthrow” episode in which the younger, weaker or more vulnerable sibling or god overcomes the older or more powerful sibling resulting in the death of the latter and the creation of a new age, place or era. In the three cases above, we see this pattern acted out when Nanahuatzin becomes the hero god of the Fifth Sun, when the five women take on the role of sacrificing the lazy male deities and when the miracle child Huitzilopochtli defeats his fully grown, experienced warrior sister. In these and many cases, the universe is renewed as a result of an “overthrow” of the younger sibling against the older and more powerful god.

**Practice and Paraphernalia of Human Sacrifice.** It must be understood that the “debt payments” by humans to the gods who created them and the universe—what we are calling human sacrifice—were carried out within a larger, more complex ceremonial system in which a tremendous amount of energy, wealth, and time was spent in a variety of ritual festivals dedicated to a crowded and active pantheon of divinities who needed to be nurtured. This dedication is reflected in the many metaphors and symbols related to agricultural renewal, war and sacrifice. Blood was called *chalchitlub-atl*, meaning “precious water.” Human hearts were likened to fine burnished turquoise, and war was *teoatlachinolli*, meaning “divine liquid” and “burnt things.” War was the place “where the jaguars roar,” where “feathered war bonnets heavy like foam in the waves.” And death on the battlefield was called *xochimiquiztli*, meaning “the flowery death.”

The crowded ceremonial schedule was acted out in the many ceremonial centers of the city and empire. The greatest single ceremonial precinct, that surrounding the Templo Mayor, formed the axis of Tenochtitlan and measured 440 meters on each of its four sides. It contained, according to some accounts, more than eighty ritual temples, skull racks, schools, and other ceremonial structures. Book 2 of Sahagún’s *Historia* contains a valuable list with descriptions of most of these buildings, including “the Temple of Uitzilopochtli [Huitzilopochtli] . . . of Tlaloc . . . in the middle of the square; . . . it was higher; it was taller; . . . [it] faced toward the setting of the sun.” Sahagún’s work also contains descriptions of the kinds of sacrifices performed at various sacred places. At Teccizcalli, the Florentine Codex reports, “Moctezuma did penances; . . . there was dying there; captives died there.” At Mexico Calmecac “dwelt the penitents who offered incense at the summit of the Temple of Tlaloc, quite daily.” At Teccalco “there was casting of men into the fire.” At the Great Skull Rack “there also . . . used to be slaying.” At the Temple of Cinteotl, “the impersonator of Chichomecotl died, at night only. And when she died, then they flayed her . . . the fire priest put on the skin.” At Coapan “the fire priest of Coatlan bathed himself.” At Tilpan, amaranth-seed dough was “cooked . . . [for] the image of Uitzilopochtli.” And, finally, at Acatl Yaicapan Uey Calpulli, “they gathered together the sacrificial victims called Tlalo . . . when they had slain them, they cut them to pieces there and cooked them. They put squash blossoms with their flesh . . . then the noblemen ate them, all the high judges: but not the common folk—only the rulers.” (All

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quotations in the preceding passage are from Sahagún, vol. 2, pp. 179–193.)

Though important variations of ritual activity were carried out at these temples, schools, skull racks, and bathhouses, the general pattern of debt payment/human sacrifice was as follows. Most Aztec ritual began with a preparatory period of priestly fasting (nezahualiztli) that lasted four (or a multiple of four) days. An important exception was the yearlong fast by a group of priests and priestesses known as the teocuauque (god eaters) and the greatly feared in iachhuan Huiztilopochtli in mocesiuhxauhque (the elder brothers of Huitzilopochtli who fasted for a year). This preparatory period also involved nocturnal vigils (tozohualiztli) and offerings of flowers, food, cloth, rubber, paper, and poles with streamers, as well as incensing (copaltemaliztli), the pouring of libations, and the embowering of temples, statues, and ritual participants. Dramatic processions of elaborately costumed participants moving to sacred songs played by musical ensembles passed through the ceremonial precinct before arriving at the specific temple of sacrifice. The major ritual participants were called in ixiptla in teto (deity impersonators). All important rituals involved a death sacrifice of either animals or human beings.

Autosacrifice and bloodletting. It is often overlooked that autosacrifice or the willful piercing and bleeding was the most common form of sacrificial action carried out by the Aztecs on their own bodies. A simple way to understand the meaning of autosacrifice is to state that Mesoamerican peoples shed their own blood at the completion of major temporal cycles and periods. This reflects their understanding that the continuation of life on the cosmic and local scales depended on the ritual offerings of one’s own internal divine substance—namely blood. As Cecelia Klein writes in her superb summary of this ritual practice “Maya rulers let their blood during what we now call ‘period endings,’ which could mark the successful completion of a katun (twenty-year period), baktun (four-hundred-year period), or even longer time cycle. On those occasions, autosacrifice was intended to encourage the safe transition between the old cycle and the new, and thus the continuation of life” (Klein, 2001, pp. 64–66).

Klein shows that as early as the ninth century BCE, Mesoamerican peoples were using stingray spines and other sharp instruments to ritually bloodlet themselves. This practice, as shown in the archaeological (obsidian, flint blades, animal bones—sometimes found in the foundation of buildings), iconographic (lintels, pictorial manuscripts sometimes showing the ritual instruments as elaborately decorated) and documentary (sixteenth-century accounts) evidence was carried out throughout Mesoamerican history. These practices were carried out by elites and commoners alike with the former sometimes using sharpened jaguar bones and the latter using stingray spines. The Aztecs had elaborate rules determining when and what parts of the body were to be bled. In colonial manuscripts it describes Aztec priests piercing their tongues, thighs, calves, and there are written reports that the most committed priests pierced their tongues and penises, sometimes splitting them in two. All people—men, women, and children—were apparently expected to carry out ritual bloodletting and several Maya carvings depict royal women involved in highly important scenes of autosacrifice. As Klein writes,

These women are invariably wives or mothers of a male ruler, who typically accompanies them in the image. The most famous example is Lintel 24 from Yaxchilan. In his sixteenth-century Relacion de las cosas de Yucatan, the Franciscan bishop Diego de Landa reports that bloodspattered paper strips used in autosacrificial rites by the Conquest-period Yucatec Maya were eventually burned. The smoke from the burning bloodletters and bloodied papers was thought to transmit nourishment to the gods, since blood was perceived as an analogue of both fertilizing water and semen. (2001, p. 64)

The most dramatic and valued sacrifices were the human sacrifices of captured warriors and slaves. These victims were ritually bathed, carefully costumed, taught to dance special dances, and some were fattened or slimmed down during the preparation period. They were elaborately dressed to impersonate the specific deities to whom they were sacrificed. What must be emphasized—if one is to gain a deeper understanding of the indigenous practices, is that these rituals utterly transformed the identity of the human beings to be sacrificed into teotl ixiptlas (living images of the gods) as they had lived in the mythic times before the establishment of the daily life of the present age. This point has been made most clearly by Alfredo Lopez Austin who writes that these deity impersonators or

... men possessed by the gods, who, as such, died in a rite of renewal. The idea of a calendric cycle, or a periodic returning, in which the power of a god was born, grew, decreased, and concluded made it necessary in a rite linking the time of man to mythical time that a god would die so his force might be reborn with new power. It was not men who died, but gods—gods within a corporeal covering that made their possible ritual death on earth. If the gods did not die, their force would diminish in a progressively aging process. Men destined for sacrifice were temporarily converted into receptacles of divine fire, they were treated as gods, and they were made to live as the deity lived in legend. Their existence in the role of ixiptlatl, or “images” could last from a few days up to four years. (Lopez Austin, 1988, p. 377)

Various sacrificial techniques. The different primary sources reveal a wide range of sacrificial techniques, including decapitation (usually for women), shooting with darts or arrows, drowning, burning, hurling from heights, strangulation, entombment and starvation, and gladiatorial combat. Usually, the ceremony peaked when splendidly attired captors and captives sang and danced in procession to the temple, where they were escorted (sometimes unwillingly) up the stairways to the sacrificial stone. The victim was quickly
thrust on the sacrificial stone (techcatl), and the temple priest cut through the chest wall with the ritual flint knife (techpatl). The priest grasped the still-beating heart, called “precious eagle cactus fruit,” tore it from the chest, offered it to the Sun for vitality and nourishment, and placed it in a carved circular vessel called the cuauhxicalli (eagle vessel). In some cases, the body, now called “eagle man,” was rolled down the temple steps to the bottom, where it was dismembered. The head was cut off and the brains taken out. In some ceremonies the victim was beheaded and the head was placed on the tzompantli, a skull rack consisting of long poles laid horizontally and loaded with skulls. In many cases, the captor was decorated (for instance with chalk and bird down) and given gifts. Then, in some cases, together with his relatives, he consumed a ritual meal consisting of a bowl of stew of dried maize called tlacatlaolli.

Although this pattern of ritual preparation, ascent, and descent of the temple, as well as heart sacrifice of enemy warriors, dismemberment, and the offering to the gods in order to nurture them was typical, it is also important to emphasize the diversity of sacrificial festivals, which involved variations and combinations of these elements. For instance, during the feast of Tlacaxipeualiztli (the feast of the slaying of men), a prisoner of war “who came here from lands about us” was taken by a priest called the “bear man” and tied to a huge, flat on the ground. The captive was provided with a pine club and a feathered staff to protect himself against the attacks of four warriors armed with clubs of wood and obsidian blades. When he was defeated he was taken off the stone, his heart was taken out, and he was flayed. His skin was then prepared to be worn by relatives of the captor and then paraded around the city going from house to house asking for gifts.

Another distinctive festival, called Toxcatl, was dedicated to the protean god Tezcatlipoca. Elaborate efforts were made to find the perfect deity-impersonator for this festival. The captive warrior had to have a flawless body and musical and rhetorical skills. For a full year prior to his sacrifice, he lived a privileged existence in the capital. He had eight servants to ensure that he was splendidly arrayed and bejeweled. Four wives were given to him during the last twenty days of his life. Just before the end of the sacrificial festival, he arrived at a small temple called Tlacochalco. “He ascended by himself, he went up of his own free will, to where he was to die. As he was taken up a step, as he passed one step, there he broke, he shattered his flute, his whistle.” He was then swiftly sacrificed (see Sahagún, vol. 2, p. 71).

Still another remarkable ceremony was the New Fire Ceremony, also called the Binding of the Years, held only once every fifty-two years on the summit of the Hill of the Star outside Tenochoitlan. At midnight, when the star cluster called Tlanquiztli (marketplace; the Pleiades) passed through the zenith, marking the end of the fifty-two-year calendrical cycle, a captive warrior was sacrificed. In his chest cavity a new fire was started, marking the regeneration of the cosmos. The fire was then taken to the Templo Mayor and thence to all the cities and towns in the empire.

A remarkable festival, celebrated on the first day of the month of Atlcaualo, involved the paying of debts to Tlaloc, the rain god. On this day, children (called “human paper streamers”) with two cowlicks in their hair and favorable day signs were dressed in costumes—some set with pearls—of dark green, black-striped with chili red, and light blue were sacrificed in seven different locations. The flowing and falling of tears of the children insured the coming of rain. It should be noted that some sources indicate the difficulty that priests had in carrying out these particular “debt payments.” The meaning of the rain-blood exchange in this ritual has been interpreted by the historian of religions Phil Arnold as follows. These child sacrifices physically constituted the central theme of correspondence between human life and the landscape; blood and water. The former is a bodily water and the basis of human life, the latter is an earthly or heavenly blood and logically the basis of Tlalocan or the landscape’s life. The reciprocal nature of life and death was a central element in most Aztec religious life. The ritual acquisition of water required paying a high price in children’s blood, which offset the costs of the sacrifice given by Tlaloc. The exchange was a liquid one. (Arnold, 1999, p. 227)

CONCLUSION. In recent years a controversy has broken out in academic and popular literature as to whether there is any reliable evidence that the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples actually carried out human sacrifice. It has been argued in polemical tones that all the evidence is the result of either distorted archaeology or terribly biased Spanish sources. One motive for these denials is to protect contemporary indigenous peoples from being labeled as descending from uncivilized even monstrous cultures. For years, the word Aztec has been equated—like no other world culture—with the worst and most violent forms of human violence. In books, films, and art, the Aztecs are degraded in ways that sometimes makes a fulsome understanding and appreciation of their culture impossible. The solution is not to deny what is so clearly in the record pre-conquest and post-conquest—namely that ritual violence against humans was one of the many ways the Aztecs and their precursors carried out their religious commitments, military expansions, and political dominations. The more useful approach is to study the Aztecs in the full range of their expressions in daily life and political glory—including their extraordinary linguistic achievements, their astonishing aesthetic expressions, their architectural and political practices, and their bellicose traditions of imagining and treating the human body as a receptacle of divine fire that needed to be magically transformed into a divinity, cultivated in spirit, and cut open so the plants and political forces of the world could be rejuvenated. This duality with its apparent contradictions is what makes the study of the Aztecs and all Mesoamerican peoples so interesting, challenging, and necessary. It also demonstrates in dis-
comforting ways that their contradictions—however distant from modern practices—are similar to people in modern times.

With all this cosmology, social history, and ritual practice in mind, it can be seen that Bernal Díaz del Castillo witnessed more than a massacre. He glimpsed and was later able to record with some accuracy fragments of an elaborate ritual tradition struggling to maintain the dominance of the Aztec city and its temple against threats from enemy warriors, who, like the siblings of Huitzilopochtli (and like the Spaniards), had come from the edge of the world to conquer and kill.

**SEE ALSO** Aztec Religion.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Isaac, Barry L. “The Aztec ‘Flowery War’: A Geopolitical Explanation.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39 (1983): 415–432. Isaac’s scrutiny of primary sources challenges our understanding that the Flowery Wars were fought for the primary purpose of obtaining sacrificial victims for the temples. A geopolitical model is presented that provides insight into the escalation of human sacrifice.


**HUME, DAVID** (1711–1776), was a Scottish philosopher and historian. Hume was born in Edinburgh on April 26, 1711, to Joseph and Katherine Home. Most of his childhood was spent on the family estate at Ninewells, in Berwickshire, forty miles south of Edinburgh near the border of England. At age eleven Hume entered the University of Edinburgh, and upon leaving the university three years later, began to prepare for a career in law. Hume’s interest in law began to be eclipsed by his passion for literature, history, and philosophy; over the following decade most of his time was spent studying what he called “polite authors” such as Shaftesbury, Butler, Locke, and Cicero. In 1734, at age twenty-three, Hume left Scotland to take a position as clerk with a Bristol merchant. It was here that he changed the spelling of his surname from *Home* to *Hume*, because in Scotland *Home* is pronounced as *Hume’s* in England; Hume preferred that his name be pronounced correctly, even if it meant changing the spelling. After four months in Bristol, Hume left for the south of France, determined to pursue a life of letters.

In 1737 Hume returned from France with the two volumes of *A Treatise of Human Nature* in manuscript form. Being sure that the work would bring him instant fame and fortune, he was eager to publish without delay. In his own words, however, the *Treatise* “fell dead-born from the press.” This is not to say that it was not widely read both in Britain and on the continent. Hume undoubtedly meant that the ideas put forth in the *Treatise* fell dead-born on the minds of those who read it. Reviews of the *Treatise* were universally negative.

Hume’s disappointment was profound. During the six-year period from 1739 to 1745 he lived in virtual seclusion at Ninewells, writing the third volume of the *Treatise* (published in 1740) and experimenting with the essay form as a medium of expression. Hume’s first efforts as an essayist resulted in a two-volume work published in 1742 under the title *Essays Moral and Political*. This was Hume’s first successful publication. Only a small selection of the twenty-seven essays therein contained can be counted as serious philosophical pieces, and these were not the ones that accounted for the popularity of the collection as a whole.