

## Chapter 3

# Aztec expansion through conquest and trade

### David Carrasco, *The Aztecs: A Very Short History*

In spite of the deliberate destruction of Aztec pictorial documents by Spaniards in the early years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, a significant number of pre- and postconquest documents survive. Among them is an unusually beautiful codex, which was created by Aztec scribes in the early 1540s. Named after the Spanish viceroy who commissioned the work for his European emperor, the *Codex Mendoza* contains extraordinary images and descriptions of Aztec political, economic, and social history. The story and symbolism of this document, today housed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, provides us with a useful guide to the bellicose career of Aztec kings and their achievements of political control over large territories and towns within and beyond the Basin of Mexico.

#### The *Codex Mendoza*

One of the leading patrons of the native artists was the first viceroy of New Spain, don Antonio de Mendoza, who was called a "Renaissance Maecenas" by one scholar in reference to the great patron of the arts in ancient Rome. Mendoza served as viceroy from 1535 to 1550, longer than any other, and when he arrived in Mexico City he found a world buffeted by indigenous uprisings, heated Spanish rivalries, and the destruction and extraction of native arts and documents ordered by the Crown to

acquaint Emperor Charles V with New Spain. Mendoza invited trained artists and scribes, who were being schooled at the Franciscan college in Tlatelolco, to gather in a workshop where they could re-create the document that became the *Codex Mendoza*. It consists of seventy-one folios on Spanish paper, largely executed in the native style, with alphabetic glosses. The document is a rare example of how Mesoamericans and Europeans worked together to tell the Aztec story as a pictorial epic for royal eyes in a distant land. The native informants interpreting the pictograms and ideograms clearly argued over the meaning of some images, because the commentator who wrote the descriptions in Spanish noted that disagreements left him only ten days to complete the manuscript prior to the ship's departure for the king's court.

But this masterpiece was never seen by Charles V. The Spanish ship that carried it, along with other precious cargo, across the Atlantic was captured by French sailors who turned the codex over to the French court. Sometime before 1553, the *Codex Mendoza* came into the possession of André Thevet, the French royal cosmographer. Thevet was so excited by the document that he wrote his name and title on it five times, as if trying to make it his companion.

The document is divided into three sections, the first two of which appear to have been copied from no longer extant pre-Columbian originals: (1) the pre-Hispanic history of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, beginning at the moment of its foundation and then recounting the explosive wars of conquest and expansion of its kings, including the two Motecuhzomas, through to the year 1523, (2) a colorful account of the various kinds of tribute paid to the capital between 1516 and 1518 by the nearly four hundred towns in five regions of the empire, and (3) a pictorial account of key aspects of the daily life, education, priestly training, crime and punishment, and social stratification of Mexica society.

## Framed by time signs

The initial pictorial folio of the *Codex Mendoza* can be used as a window into the multiple realities of the Aztec world, including its calendars, agriculture, kingship, sacred spaces, mythology, ritual renewal, and human sacrifice. This single symmetrical illustration shows the last instant in the migration from Aztlán/Chicomoztoc and the first step toward empire. In the borders, calendar signs, in a series of blue boxes, frame the city and the significant acts depicted below it. Thevet's extravagant signature and title fill the gap at the top left. The year count (*xiuhpohualli*) almost always appears in Aztec pictorials, and here it begins at the top left with the sign for 2 House immediately to the left of the signature. This calendar continues down and around in a counterclockwise fashion mixing thirteen numbers, presented as dots, with the four year signs—House, Rabbit, Reed, and Flint Knife—and ends at the top with the year sign 13 Reed. The accompanying Spanish commentary states that “each little compartment . . . figured in blue . . . means one year.” These fifty-one blocks almost make up the fifty-two-year Calendar Round, which, like our concept of century, marked a major time unit that renewed itself in the final year through a major public ritual.

A closer view reveals that there are indeed only fifty-one signs on the page and that the artists emphasized something special about the date 2 Reed, in the bottom right-hand corner. First, the date itself has a knot tied around it, signaling that a rare and powerful ritual called the “Binding of the Years” took place at that time. A fire-drill glyph with four puffs of smoke slightly to the side rises from the year sign, attached by a single thread, showing that this was the year of the New Fire Ceremony, one of the most profound ceremonies of the Mexica world. Once every fifty-two years at the culmination of the interlocking permutations of the 365-day solar calendar and the 260-day ritual calendar (an 18,980-day cycle), the spectacular New Fire Ceremony was held at the ceremonial site of the Hill of the Star, beyond the limits of the Aztec capital.



4. The founding of Tenochtitlan and the reign and early conquests of Tenuch, the first *tlatoani*, as painted on the frontispiece of the *Codex Mendoza*.

After destroying all household goods, extinguishing all home, temple, and community fires, and piercing and drawing blood from their children's ears, the populace waited in the darkness and watched for the passage of the constellation Tianquiztli (Marketplace), known to us as the Pleiades, through the celestial meridian. This moment of passage was marked by the lighting of the "new fire" on the chest of a sacrificed warrior who had marched out of Tenochtitlan earlier in the day among a huge entourage of musicians, priests, and members of the royal family. The single fire was then taken down the mountain into the center of the city and placed in the shrine of Huitzilopochtli, from which it was distributed to all parts of the empire. The artists who painted this symbol on the date 2 Reed were showing how time, with its orderly and sacred meanings, framed the early years of the capital city.

### Chinampa agriculture

Within this temporal frame, the city appears as a large square with stylized blue borders representing the waters of Lake Tezcoco. Two intersecting blue lines, apparently representing canals, divide the island into four quarters. Within these four parts, we see a number of human, plant, and cultural images (a skull rack, a government building), which tell us about the Aztec city and its symbols. Spread throughout are signs of vegetation reflecting the agricultural life of the community.

These plants and waterways point to the impressive agricultural productivity of the Basin of Mexico. Called Anahuac by the Aztecs, the basin was a great natural saucer, covering more than 7,500 square miles, parts of which came to function as a productive breadbasket for the 1.2 million people living there. Aztec engineers transformed thousands of acres of poorly drained land into highly productive gardens in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Through canal irrigation, swamp drainage, and the cultivation of maguey and nopal plants, the Aztec economy

became so productive that it was able to support a population level that, after the arrival of the Spaniards and the onslaught of diseases and violence against the native peoples, was not reached again until the end of the nineteenth century.

Central to this explosive productivity were the *chinampas* (called "floating gardens" by the Spaniards) or raised agricultural beds, which fed a significant part of the Aztec population. *Chinampas* (derived from Nahuatl, meaning "surrounded by rushes") are plots of soil raised up on lake beds or freshwater swamps and shaped into long rectangular islets reinforced by rushes, branches, logs, and other organic materials. The porosity of the soil and the continual flow of water through the narrow canals insured constant fertilization of the soils and plants, and created an environment filled with aquatic birds, fish, insects, algae, and frogs.

The enormous Basin of Mexico was an internal drainage system surrounded on all sides by hills, piedmonts, and high mountains. The result at the lowest elevations was a group of extensive shallow, swampy areas and interconnected lakes covering more than four hundred square miles. It was onto one of these swampy islands that the Aztecs were driven when they enraged the ruler of Colhuacan upon sacrificing his daughter. In a rags-to-riches scenario the Aztecs soon transformed the swamps into a world of nutritious and tasty foods. Bernal Díaz del Castillo thus reported about his visit to the great Aztec market at Tlatelolco: "Let us go on and speak of those who sold beans and sage and other vegetables and herbs in another part of the market, and let us also mention the fruiterers, and the women who sold cooked food, dough, and tripe in their own part of the market." Bernardino de Sahagún's native informants gave long lists of plants and foodstuffs including many varieties of maize, beans, amaranth, chia, chilies, tomatoes, and fruit.

Though there is no *chinampa* in the *Codex Mendoza* image, its presence is reflected there in the various healthy looking plants that dot the four parts of the city landscape. It is clear that the composers of the *Codex Mendoza* were signaling to the viewer, especially through the blooming cactus in the central space, that plants and cultivation were crucial to their existence, mythology, and economic life.

### Rulers: the *tlatoani*

Around the arresting central image of the *Codex Mendoza* frontispiece and distributed throughout the four quadrants of the city sit ten males, nine identically dressed and one more prominently attired, who represent Mexica leaders. In this distribution and difference we are introduced to one of the signal features of Mexica society: intensive social stratification and the powers of the ruler. Nine of these men appear with a white *tilmatli* (robe) snugly wrapped around their bodies; they are seated on bundles of green reeds with their hair worn in the warrior style known as *temillotl* (pillar of stone), signifying their achievements as warriors. The tenth man in the *Codex Mendoza* image is the most prominent leader. He is distinguished by a blue speech glyph in front of his mouth signifying that he is the *tlatoani* or chief speaker. His elevation above the others is further marked by his black body paint (signifying his priestly status), smears of blood on his temple and right ear, indicating his bloodletting rites, and loosely tied hair, showing that he was a priest.

His name is expressed by the thin line attached to the sign above and behind him, which is a blooming cactus growing from a stylized rock, a symbolic duality reflecting the central image that supports the giant eagle. This name glyph translates as Tenuch (Stone-Cactus-Fruit), written on the front of his white garment. This part of the painting gives us the important information that the supreme human authority in Aztec Mexico

resided in the imperial capital of Tenochtitlan and was closely identified with the eagle-cactus-water imagery in the center.

### Aztec rulers as warrior kings

Aztec rulers had to distinguish themselves in warfare as commanders in order to fulfill their religious, social, and economic duties. A great king conquered many towns, which increased rich tributary payments to the royal and capital storehouses. It is believed that one Aztec ruler, Tizoc, whose military expansions were meager, was assassinated by members of the royal household for his weak leadership. This emphasis on warfare as a tool of the expansion of imperial control by the Mexica is vividly shown in the bottom section of the *Codex Mendoza* image where giant warriors conquer two towns on the mainland. Away from the city, on the other side of the waterways but still within the time frame of the fifty-one year signs, the Mexica under the rulership of Tenuch (1325-77) carry out conquests against the communities of Colhuacan (Curved Hill) and Tenayuca (Rampart Hill), both of which were located outside the city. The standard glyph in the codex for the conquest of a community is a tipped and burning temple that signifies that the structure, symbols, gods, energy, and "essences" of a community have been defeated.

The expression of Mexica dominance is illustrated by the posture, costumes, and especially the size of the warriors. The two Mexica warriors wear the standard Aztec armor of thick quilted cotton. They wear their hair in the pillar-of-stone style and carry the *ihuiteteyo* shield, symbolizing the city. They not only dwarf the enemy warriors but symbolically subdue them by pressing their shields down onto their heads to force them to crouch. The Aztec warrior may also be gripping, behind the shield, the *temilotl* (the sacred forelock) of the enemy as an act of ritual dominance. In Aztec thought, grasping another's *temilotl* was equivalent to capturing the *tonalli*, one of the essences or souls of the enemy.