

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

Chapter 4

Cosmovision and human sacrifice

No topic has caused more controversy and confusion about Aztec life than human sacrifice. Chroniclers, priests, anthropologists, journalists, filmmakers, and creative writers have repeatedly focused on it, some to condemn it, some to refute it ever took place, and some to understand the indigenous purposes and cultural meanings of ritual killing and the ritual ingestion of human flesh. That the Aztecs practiced ritual human sacrifice is beyond doubt, but it is also clear that Spanish chroniclers exaggerated the numbers and purposes of these sacrifices as a strategy to justify their own conquests and prodigious violence against Mesoamerican men, women, and children. Scholarship also reveals that many ancient cultures including the Romans, Greeks, Japanese, Chinese, Africans, Andeans, and Egyptians practiced human sacrifice, often in very large numbers. Even though the Aztec image in Western thought ranks them as the biggest sacrificers in the world, there is no substantial archaeological or documentary proof that they ritually killed more people than other civilizations.

Evidence of human sacrifice

During the height of the battle between Spaniards and Aztecs for control of Tenochtitlan, Bernal Díaz del Castillo described seeing his comrades being forcibly dragged up the steps of the

Great Temple by Aztec warriors and priests. As the “dismal drum” of the war god droned above the scene, mixed with the ominous sounds of shell and horn trumpets, the Aztecs decorated their captives with ritual costumes and “with fans in their hands they forced them to dance before” Huitzilopochtli. The Aztecs pushed them onto their backs on an altar and with sacrificial knives cut open their chests and drew out their palpitating hearts, then “offered them to the idols that were there.” To his fear and horror, Díaz del Castillo saw them roll the bodies down the steep steps of the Great Temple to land, broken, at the bottom. He tells us that they “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 *chilmole*.”

This kind of eyewitness observation can be combined with Aztec pictorial and alphabetic sources, the detailed accounts of elders interviewed by Spanish friars, as well as archaeological evidence, to show that ritual violence was a basic part of Aztec life. We now know that ritual killing long predates the Aztecs with the earliest Mesoamerican evidence coming from hunter-gatherers in the Tehuacán Valley at around 5000 BCE. It is also likely that many city-states before the Aztecs practiced some form of human sacrifice. But there is a huge discrepancy between the numbers that the Spanish “eyewitnesses” tell us and what careful archaeological work in this area has revealed. For instance, here is what the record shows at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, the most thoroughly excavated Aztec site in Mesoamerica, where the largest numbers of sacrifices most likely took place:

- Two sacrificial stones (*techcatl*) stood at the entrance to the two shrines at the top of the Great Temple. Each rose from the floor about 50 centimeters and served as altars for ritual killings, just as Díaz del Castillo described them.

- More than a thousand ritual knives, mainly of flint, were uncovered in the excavation of different stages and offering caches. They are carefully decorated and often transformed into the face of a deity awaiting the sacrificial moment. Evidence shows that these knives were not used in the ritual killings but rather were symbolic offerings.
- Traces on the surfaces of statues, altars, and floors of certain ritual chambers reveal that sacrificial blood was smeared on divine images and spilled in significant quantities.
- The human remains of 126 people were buried throughout the site. Forty-two are children who, suffering from various diseases, had their throats slit so the blood could be used as an offering to the gods. Forty-seven adult heads with the top vertebrae connected were found in various offerings. Only three complete human skulls have been uncovered. They were perforated at the temples probably indicating that they had previously hung on a nearby skull rack. Thirty-three facial skull masks decorated with shell-and-pyrite eyes and representing the Lord of the Underworld, Mictlantecuhtli, were deposited in the floors of the Great Temple.

This is the sum total of all sacrificial human remains found in over thirty seasons of intensive excavations in the main ritual precinct of Tenochtitlan. It is remarkable that more human remains have been found at the site of Teotihuacan (1–550 CE) than at this central ritual landscape and capital of the Aztec empire. A Spanish account claims that more than 80,000 enemy warriors were sacrificed in a four-day ceremony, and yet no evidence approaching one-hundredth of that number has been found in the excavations of Tenochtitlan.

Sacrifice and cosmivision

The reliable documentary evidence found in the writings of Bernardino de Sahagún based on extensive interviews with Aztec elders in the decades after the fall of Tenochtitlan nevertheless tells us that sacrifices took place every month at various temples and altars in the ceremonial centers. The Aztecs carried out human sacrifice

within a larger, more complex ceremonial system in which a tremendous amount of energy, wealth, and time was spent in a variety of festivals dedicated to a crowded and hungry pantheon of divine entities. This ritual dedication is reflected in the many metaphors and symbols related to war and sacrifice. Human hearts were likened to fine burnished turquoise, and war was referred to as *teotlatchinolli* (divine liquid and burnt things), "where the jaguars roar," where "feathered war bonnets heave about like foam in the waves." Death on the battlefield was called *xochimiquiztli* (flowery death), reminiscent of the modern claim that it is "good and noble to die for one's country."

The greatest ceremonial precinct where the majority of sacrifices took place formed the architectural axis of Tenochtitlan and each of its four sides measured 440 meters. It contained more than eighty temples, skull racks, schools, and other structures. Book 2 of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* provides a valuable list of most of these buildings, including the Great Temple, which stood "in the middle of the square, . . . very large, very tall, . . . and . . . faced toward the setting of the sun." We also read of a temple where "Motecuhzoma did penances, . . . there was dying there; captives died there." There was Mexico Calmecac, the main high school of the city, where "dwelt the penitents who offered incense at the summit of the pyramid Temple of Tlaloc. This they did quite daily." There was a temple from which men were thrown into fires and burned to death. Nearby stood the Great Skull Rack, where the heads of sacrificial victims were hung for display. Another temple was dedicated to the corn goddess, where a young woman impersonating the goddess 7 Snake was sacrificed at night. "And when she died, then they flayed her, . . . the fire priest put on the skin." Another temple related to cooking and eating human flesh was described where "they gathered together the sacrificial victims called Tlalocs, . . . 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."

Although important variations of ritual activity were carried out at these temples, schools, skull racks, and elsewhere, the general pattern began with *nezahualiztli*, a preparatory period of fasting, usually lasting four (or a multiple of four) days. An important exception was the year-long partial fast by a group of priests and priestesses known as "god-eaters" or the greatly feared "elder brothers of Huitzilopochtli who fasted for a year." This preparatory period also involved nocturnal vigils and offerings of flowers, food, cloth, rubber, paper, and poles with streamers, as well as incensing, the pouring of libations, and the embowering of temples, statues, and ritual participants. Dramatic processions of elaborately costumed individuals, moving to music ensembles and playing sacred songs, passed through the ceremonial precinct before arriving at the specific temple of sacrifice. The people who were to be sacrificed were called *teteo ixiptla* (deity impersonators).

It may come as a surprise that the most common form of sacrifice was autosacrifice. This involved the use of maguey thorns or other sharp instruments to pierce one's earlobes, thighs, arms, tongue, or, in the case of sinners and priests, genitals, in order to offer blood to the gods. The most common type of killing was the beheading of animals like the quail. But the most dramatic and valued sacrifices were those of captured warriors, women, children, and slaves. These victims were ritually bathed, carefully costumed, often taught special dances, and sometimes either fattened or slimmed down during the preparation period. In one of the most fascinating examples, during the feast of Toxcatl, great care was taken to choose a male with the most perfect body who would ritually become the prodigious god Tezcatlipoca before he was sacrificed. This perfect body had to be

like something smoothed, like a tomato, like a pebble, as if sculpted in wood; he was not curly haired, . . . not rough of forehead, . . . not long-headed, . . . not of swollen eyelids, . . . not of downcast face; he was not flat-nosed; . . . he was not concave nosed, . . . he was not

thick-lipped, he was not gross-lipped, he was not a stutterer, ... not buck-toothed ... His teeth were like seashells, ... he was not tomato-eyed ... He was not long-handed, he was not fat-gingered, ... he was not of protruding navel; he was not of hatchet shaped buttocks ... For him who had no flaw, who had no defects, who had no blemish, who had no mark, ... there was taken the greatest care that he be taught to blow the flute, that he be able to play his whistle. And that at the same time he holds all his flowers and his smoking tube.

Moreover, this person lived in luxury for an entire year as he promenaded, with guards, throughout the city, playing his flute, greeting people in gracious prose, for he was the living image of one of the most powerful of Aztec gods.

About thirty years ago, a heated debate broke out in academic and popular journals about the extent and purpose of Aztec cannibalism. Some argued that the Aztecs ate large numbers of people as a necessary source of protein. The Aztec state was called the "Cannibal Kingdom" by an anthropologist who unfortunately did a very limited study of the evidence. The opponents of the protein argument stated that cannibalism in Aztec Mexico was primarily a ritual need to feed the gods and renew their energy, not a gastronomic need of humans to feed themselves. This meant that in the Aztec understanding of sacrifice and cannibalism, it was the gods who were nurtured through the ritual offerings of blood and human flesh. The Aztecs had abundant protein sources in their environment, thus only small amounts of human flesh were consumed, primarily by nobles, on relatively rare occasions.

Worldview and sacrifice

The ritual practice of human sacrifice is closely connected to the shape and rhythms of Aztec worldview or cosmivision, which posited two distinguishable parts of the universe: the space-time of the gods and the space-time of the creatures of this world that

the gods created. Human beings, animals, plants, celestial objects, minerals, and rain occupied this visible space-time world that divine beings penetrated through *malinalli*, or double-helix-shaped portals located in trees, creeks, caves, and elsewhere. In Aztec mythology, divine beings temporarily departed their space-time and infiltrated everything on earth giving them their identities, energies, and powers to live and procreate. All creatures and forces on earth and in the air were made up of subtle, eternal divine substances and hard, heavy, destructible worldly substances that served as shells to the divine substance. All life forms on earth were hard shells covering the divine substance within.

During various stages of the creation of the world some gods violated divine laws and were expelled from their cosmic region, and then came to the surface of the earth in primordial times. In one version of this creation story, a group of divinities gathered in the darkness in Teotihuacan and created a fire to help them determine the cycles of life on earth and in the heavens. One of these earthbound divinities, Nanahuatzin, threw himself in an act of self-sacrifice into the bonfire at the center of the group and descended into the underworld. As the other deities waited apprehensively around the fire in the darkness, Nanahuatzin was transformed into the first creature of the new cosmos in the form of the sun that slowly appeared above the horizon in the east. But once it appeared above the horizon, the sun stopped its upward movement and wobbled from side to side. The other gods, realizing they too had to "sacrifice" themselves in order for the first solar cycle to commence, sacrificed each other and descended into the underworld for a period of incubation. Like the sun, they acquired the heavy and destructible coverings associated with life in this space-time and appeared above the surface of the earth shrouded in these material coverings.

All the beings on the surface of the earth, such as fish and amphibians, deer and other animals of the forest, insects and birds, thus became manifestations of deities whose sacrifices and descents

into the otherworld had turned them into creative beings. When these multiple sacrifices had taken place, the sun started to move on its celestial path as human, plant, and animal life began to exist. In this worldview the *self-sacrifice* of the divinities led to the creation of life in the earthly space-time. In addition, the multiple sacrifices of the gods were required to bring about the creation of the world.

Within this cyclical system of creation, destruction, and rebirth, a regular system of communication between the world of the deities and the world of creatures was established. Gods could enter and withdraw from the world through *malinalli* portals located throughout the world. The cycles of life and death, wet and dry seasons, calendars, and celestial passages were created in these ways. When a human or animal died and was buried or burned, its divine substances were released from the hard covering and returned to the underworld where it awaited the next cycle of rebirth to re-enter the world of creatures as a new, fresh being of the same type.

In the Aztec worldview, however, the gods needed nourishment, refreshment, payback, and renewal. They normally became fatigued, and in some myths they created humans who were required to worship them and make sacrificial debt-payments to them as a form of nourishment. Humans realized they were indebted to the gods for having sacrificed themselves so that life on earth could exist and be renewed, a debt that could best be paid by imitating the gods through sacrifice. Human labor and the usual offerings of fruit, meats, and ceremonial objects were important to the gods but insufficient to renew their lives. Only human blood was the truly sufficient offering to ensure the continued lives of the gods and their creative powers in the world. This resulted in an elaborate system of offerings and sacrifices designed to please, appease, and win the support of the gods with all their powers. The sun, moon, stars, and all the divine beings in the universe depended on this type of faithfulness and

ritual gift-giving. The Aztecs, not having a word like “sacrifice,” called the animals and humans who were ritually killed *nextlahualtin*, meaning payments or restitutions. These sacrificial entities were basically the “payback”—the prized gifts that would bring balance and renewal to the gods.

The people, plants, and animals who were sacrificed as payments were not just symbols but actually the living gods themselves. The warrior captured on the battlefield and brought into Tenochtitlan to be sacrificed was ritually transformed into a receptacle containing the divine being. When one of these image-receptacles was killed, the Aztecs repeated the creative sacrificial death the gods had undergone in the mythic times when the two space-times of the universe were first linked through sacrifice. Let us look at two examples where this sacrificial cosmovision was carried out: (1) the Great Aztec Temple itself and (2) the Feast of the Flaying of Men.

The Great Aztec Temple in splendor and blood

The various accounts of Tenochtitlan show us that the meaning and power of sacrifice is strongly linked to the *vision of place* that organized Aztec daily life. The ways they conceived of and ritually constructed the main ceremonial center of their city is the key to grasping what they believed they were up to in their monthly sacrifices of animals and humans. The Aztecs built their capital as a microcosm of the supernatural order—the material exemplar of their cosmovision, their universe on a smaller scale. This focused sense of heaven on earth was manifest in the pivot of the city and empire which was the Great Aztec Temple that each *tlatoani* took pains to enlarge or at least redecorate and renew through lavish rituals. This central temple towered above the eighty or so other ceremonial structures and became the political and ritual stage for major state spectacles that expressed a profound “cosmic security” and sense of balance that we see carved in minute detail on the massive Aztec Sun Stone.



7. Close-up of the center of the Aztec Calendar Stone depicting the four previous ages of creation and destruction around the central image of Tonatiuh, the sun deity.

However, this image of aggressive grandeur and balance also reveals that the Aztecs suffered a “cosmic paranoia,” a haunting sense of insecurity, instability, and profound threats from the gods, nature, and the social landscape. The central area of the Sun Stone depicts the four previous ages of the universe in four tight boxes, each with the glyph Rain, Water, Jaguar, or Wind inside, which surround the Age of the Fifth Sun. The apparent sense of

order, balance, and symmetry is challenged by the fact that each of these ages—Sun 4 Jaguar, Sun 4 Wind, Sun 4 Rain, and Sun 4 Water—is named after the force that *destroyed* the universe, and not after the force that created each cosmic period. And the Aztec age is named Sun 4 Movement in anticipation of the earthquakes prophesied to one day destroy the Aztec world, empire, and city. The myths of these repeated creations and destructions tell of periods of darkness in between the collapse of one age and the creation of a new age. This pattern of birth, fulfillment, destruction, darkness, and rebirth is the overall worldview inside which the Aztecs dwelled, constructed their capital, and lived their daily lives.

The moon goddess discovered in Mexico City

In February 1978, electrical workers excavating a pit beneath the street behind the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City uncovered a massive oval stone, in mint condition, more than ten feet (3.25 m) in diameter, with the image of a contorted Aztec goddess carved on it. An anonymous phone caller informed the National Institute of Anthropology and History that a major piece of sculpture had been discovered. Archaeologists subsequently unearthed the largest monolith found anywhere in the Americas since the Sun Stone in 1790. The sensational surface image depicts a decapitated and dismembered female goddess whose precious blood is symbolized with jewels. Her striated head-cloth, stomach, arms, and legs are circled by serpents, and a skull serves as her belt buckle. She has earth-monster faces on her knees, elbows, and ankles. Her sandals indicate that she was a royal figure, and symbols on her cheek identify her as Coyolxauhqui, the sister of Huitzilopochtli.

The realization that this huge sculpture depicted the long-known myth recorded by Sahagún in the sixteenth century generated tremendous excitement among scholars of the Aztec world. This discovery caused a national thrill in Mexico and was reported



8. Coyolxauhqui Stone depicting the dismembered Goddess of the Moon.

across the globe by major news organizations. The Proyecto Templo Mayor was initiated to uncover the foundation of the entire structure of the Great Temple, which has resulted in the most expensive and most intensely excavated single structure in the Americas. One of our most important aids in understanding how the Coyolxauhqui Stone and the Great Temple represent key elements of the Aztec vision of place is a surviving *teocuicatl* (divine song), written down in the capital soon after the conquest.

The song of Huitzilopochtli

This song makes it clear that the place of Huitzilopochtli's birth and victory, called Coatepec (Serpent Mountain), is the center, axis,

and symbolic "navel" of the earth. The narrative begins, "The Aztecs greatly revered Huitzilopochtli, they knew his origin, his beginning, was in this manner." The action took place on the great mountain near Tula, the ancient city associated with Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent man-god. Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt), mother of Coyolxauhqui and "the four hundred gods of the south," was sweeping out a temple when "there fell on her some plumage." She picked up the feathers, which symbolized divine semen, placed them in her blouse, and miraculously became pregnant. When her four hundred children learned of their mother's impregnation while she was working in the temple, they "were very angry, they were very agitated, as if the heart had gone out of them." The warrior daughter "Coyolxauhqui incited them, she inflamed the anger of her brothers, so that they should kill her mother." The troop of siblings prepared for war and marched a great distance to Coatepec to attack their mother. When word of the approaching attack reached the pregnant Coatlicue at Coatepec she became frightened and saddened by this threat from her children. Then her unborn son Huitzilopochtli, calmed her with the promise, "Do not be afraid, I know what I must do." Coyolxauhqui continued to inflame her siblings into a bellicose warrior troop marching toward the mountain.

At the climactic moment when Coyolxauhqui and her siblings arrived at the top of the mountain, Coatlicue gave birth to Huitzilopochtli, who miraculously appeared fully grown and dressed as a great warrior. Armed with the "serpent of fire," the most potent of Aztec swords, the patron god dismembered his sister and annihilated the other warriors, chasing them around and off the sacred hill. The text is quite specific about Coyolxauhqui's dismemberment: not only was her head cut off but her body broke into pieces as it rolled down the hill.

The excavations at the Great Temple in Mexico City reveal that this sacred myth-song was the model or vision of place used to build and rebuild Tenochtitlan's imperial shrine during the reigns

of the Aztec kings. The Great Temple itself was called Coatepec and consisted of a huge pyramid supporting two temples, one dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the other to the rain god Tlaloc. Two steep stairways led up to the shrines. The Coyolxauhqui Stone was found directly at the base of the stairway leading up to Huitzilopochtli's temple where the statue of the deity sat triumphantly at the top. On both sides of the stairway's base were two large grinning serpent heads, and numerous others juttled out elsewhere from the pyramid. The symbolic meaning of the structure is clear. The Great Temple is the architectural microcosm of Serpent Mountain. Just as Huitzilopochtli triumphed at the top of the mountain while his sister fell into pieces below, so Huitzilopochtli's shrine and icon sat triumphantly at the top of the Great Temple with the carving of the dismembered goddess found at the base of the steps. On another level, however, this sacred architecture represented the daily drama of the sun (Huitzilopochtli) rising out of the earth (Coatepec-Coatlícue) and then battling with its light the stars (the four hundred siblings) and the moon (Coyolxauhqui), which it dismembered and absorbed into its own brilliance.

This mythical drama of dismemberment was vividly repeated in numerous sacrificial rituals: for example, when enemy warriors were brought from distant battlefields (like the four hundred warriors in the myth), they were forced to climb the steps of the pyramid and undergo ritual death. In fact, we can surmise that the sacrifice of comrades witnessed by Díaz del Castillo at the Great Temple replicated this myth in which enemies who chose to attack the Hill of Coatepec met the fate of Coyolxauhqui and her siblings. The myth is emphatic about the relentless aggression of the Aztec warrior Huitzilopochtli against enemies. He drove his four hundred siblings off the mountain of the snake but did not stop there: "He pursued them, he chased them, all around the mountain... four times—with nothing could they defend themselves. Huitzilopochtli chased them, he drove them away, he humbled them, he destroyed them, he annihilated them." In other

words, the myth is a model, not for a single sacrifice but for the *escalation* of sacrifice or ritual debt payments of many individuals.

The Feast of the Flaying of Men: the city as ideal battlefield

In one of the most spectacular Aztec sacrifices, the priests and ritual choreographers turned the city into an ideal battlefield, the battlefield where nothing can go wrong for Aztec warriors. The purpose of Tlacaxipehualiztli (Feast of the Flaying of Men) was, in part, to show the youth and other citizens of the city that while the battlefield out there might be a place of victory or defeat for their armies, the ritual battlefield in here was a place of splendid, bloody victory for the Aztecs.

This transformation of the city into an ideal battlefield was accomplished over a forty-day period when captured warriors who underwent the spiritual and social change from human enemy to divine being were publicly displayed, given new names, forced to dance with their captors, and eventually sacrificed at Xipe Totec's temple or on a circular, gladiatorial stone. Their bodies were painted with long red stripes; they underwent an all-night vigil during which hair was taken from the crown of their heads, the site where their *tonalli* soul resided. This hair was guarded by the captor as a potent piece of an "eagle man" whose destiny after the sacrifice was to dwell "in the presence of the sun." Eventually, the captives, now believed to be "god-images," were seized by the hair and forced to climb the steps to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli. Some captives resisted or fainted, but some "did not act like a woman; he became strong like a man, he bore himself like a man, he went speaking like a man, he went exerting himself, he went strong of heart, he went shouting, ... he went exalting his city... 'Already here I go: You will speak of me there in my home land.'" The captive was stretched out on the sacrificial stone by six priests who extracted his heart, or "precious eagle-cactus fruit,"

and offered its nourishing power to the sun before it was placed in the "eagle vessel." The slain captive was now called "eagle man," and like Coyolxauhqui his body was rolled "breaking to pieces, they came head over heels, . . . they reached the terrace at the base of the pyramid."

This fragmented body was carried by elders to the local temple where it was skinned, cut to pieces, and distributed with small pieces of flesh to be eaten by the blood relatives of the captor in a bowl of dried maize (corn) stew. The heroic captor—now decorated with bird down and chalk, and given gifts—and his cohorts wearing the sacrificial skins traveled door to door in an ancient "trick-or-treat" ritual to collect food as the new "owners of skins." According to Diego Durán, who interviewed Aztec eyewitnesses several decades later, women would bring children out to these roving "owners of skins" who took them into their arms, spoke special words, circled the courtyard of the house four times, and returned the children to their mothers, who then gave gifts to these living images of the god Xipe Totec. These movements through the neighborhoods were considered provocative displays to local males, and they often resulted in boisterous, unruly mock battles between rival groups of young Aztec warriors. These groups were watched and followed by veteran warriors dressed as Xipe Totec and Yohuallahuan (Night Drinker), who menaced and occasionally captured and ransomed them at a temple for turkey hens or mantles. These ritual movements eventually ended up at Motecuhzoma's palace with even more lavish displays as he and the rulers from Tezcoco and Tepaneca wore the skins of the most important victims and danced into the ceremonial center. There, Motecuhzoma gave an eloquent speech and distributed presents of cloaks and food to the warriors for their accomplishments.

The spectacle of Tlacaxipehualiztli culminated in a gladiatorial sacrifice, which took place in public view near the heart of the main ceremonial center. The drama of the sacrificial ritual began

as great crowds entered the city. They saw the captives and their captors march in elaborate costumes, accompanied by musical outbursts, to the elevated, circular gladiatorial stone, following eagle and ocelot warriors who danced, pranced, and displayed shields and obsidian-bladed clubs raised in dedication to the sun. With sounds of conch shells, singing, and whistling, the sacrifice began when the captor seized the captive by the hair and led him to the sacrificial stone, where the captor raised a cup of the fermented beverage *pulque* four times and drank it through a long, hollow cane. The captive was made to drink *pulque* and forced onto the round stone where the "Old Bear," a priest dressed in bear skin, tied him by the ankle or waist to the center of the stone with the "sustenance rope." Given a war club decked with feathers, the captive was attacked by a dancing jaguar warrior armed with an obsidian-studded war club. If a captive somehow managed to defeat the first Aztec warrior, three others were sent in succession to destroy him. Eventually overwhelmed with slices to the calves, thighs, and chest, the captive was finished off and eventually flayed and dismembered.

The message of these ritual debt payments—"in our city, we win all battles"—was transmitted throughout Tenochtitlan. But strangers to Tenochtitlan were also present at the rituals. Foreign rulers and nobles "from cities which were his enemies from beyond the mountains, . . . those with which there was war, Motecuhzoma secretly summoned" to the ceremony. These princes from rival and tributary polities were guided, incognito, into a strategic, shrouded location to view the sacrifices. Placed behind arbors of flowers and branches so that they would not be seen by the citizens of Tenochtitlan, they were forced to watch as some of their finest warriors were destroyed amid cries, conch shells, trumpets, and dancing. Cosmic warfare indeed.