

An empire of trade

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

The Aztec merchants were empire builders, too. They built an empire of trade. Historians have shown that the Aztec world was

more fully integrated economically than it was politically. By the time the second Motecuhzoma came to power in 1502, the empire was divided into thirty districts. Different kinds of tribute were collected on a careful schedule and brought into the Basin of Mexico to the central markets and especially the royal palaces. A traveler in the Aztec world in 1500 would have witnessed eight provinces that paid huge amounts of tribute to the Triple Alliance as food and luxury goods poured into numerous open-air markets where potters, basket makers, lapidaries, and other craft specialists exchanged their products every five days among neighbors and people passing through. Larger settlements had daily markets, and Tlatelolco was so filled with people that it was said the din of their conversation, storytelling, and bickering before the judges could be heard a mile away.

The merchant classes of the Aztec empire had their own hierarchy based on their experience, regions where they worked, and success of their accomplishments. Itinerant regional merchants known as *tlanecuilo* managed a market circuit through the exchange of maize, chili, baskets, gourd bowls, turkeys, salt, cotton, and the all-important cacao. Crucial to the importation and exchange culture of the Aztecs, as well as to its political expansion toward ever moving peripheries, were the *pochteca*, the merchants who traveled long distances to trade on their own but also to spy, make war, and bring goods home to the rulers. They had groups of porters at their command and managed the transportation of obsidian knives and jewelry, beautifully decorated cloths, dyes, jade, turquoise, tropical bird feathers, warrior costumes, and sometimes slaves. In one case, the town of Tochtepec on the eastern Gulf Coast provided 16,000 rubber balls to be used in the ritual ballgames played in the core area of the empire.

Merchants were part of a frontier communication system and crucial in the collection of war booty. When wars were successful, the mopping-up operation was led by the *pochteca*, who went in and assessed the goods, supplies, and production capabilities of

the conquered town so that the appropriate level of tribute could be registered. In fact, the *tlatoani* Ahuizotl had taken great pains to set up an effective communication system with returning merchants to ensure that the war booty was quickly brought into his royal market. The ruler's prestige increased from his timely ability to redistribute the goods, some of which went to the returning merchants as payment for their extremely hard work.

The dangers and hardships of these carriers of goods cannot be exaggerated. They left home, went out into hostile terrain, and skirted enemy communities. They journeyed through perilous gorges, scaled steep hills and mountains, crossed treacherous rivers, and risked exposure to ritual pollution. They operated in the fear that they would hear the cry of the *huactli* or "laughing falcon," which could signify their doom. If the falcon laughed for a short time during their journey, it was considered a good omen, and success was ensured. But when "they heard that it laughed too long, in a high pitch, as if its bosom and side tightened; or as if it screamed swollen with joy... they felt that perhaps something woeful would now betide them; they would come upon something perilous." Their labors were considered heroic, and when successful they brought riches and honor to their ruler, the city, and themselves.

As with all parts of Aztec society, the work of the merchants was intertwined with ritual activities, specific deities, and even human sacrifices, which they called "debt-payments." When merchants departed their home community, their journeys were dictated by favorable day signs in the calendar. These especially included 1 Serpent, ironically called "the straight way," but also the days 2 Crocodile, 1 Monkey, and 7 Serpent. To launch the expedition, a ceremonial feast was organized by the vanguard merchant and attended by family and friends. Elder merchants and parents delivered speeches filled with the lore and lessons of the trading life. This was followed by the decoration of their merchant's staff with the symbol and image of their god, using cut papers and

liquid rubber. "They gave it lips, nose, eyes. It resembled a man. Thus did they make a representation of the fire god." Some transformed their walking staffs into god images of Tlaltecuhli (the earth deity) or Yacatecuhtli (the patron god of merchants), as these staffs were the magical guides and protectors of the merchants.

Often, returning merchants brought the painful news of attacks, sickness, and death on the road. The elders put the returning merchants through a harsh interrogation about the facts of the expedition, ambushes, meetings, exchanges, and the intensity of their work. Drinking and feasting followed, and the goods were taken to the *tlatoani*, whose assistants recorded them and arranged for their distribution according to the desires of the ruler.