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*Landmark Battles in
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AZTEC WAR

Misconceptions and stereotypes abound concerning the Aztecs at war. Too often Mesoamericans are seen as little more than bizarre savages who fought in hordes solely to facilitate human sacrifice on a vast scale, captive-takers whose queer rules of engagement preempted real killing on the battlefield. More recently, apologists have reinvented them as New World Greeks whose impressive architecture symbolized an enlightened and progressive civilization that did not really sacrifice or eat fellow humans, and saw no reason to craft military technology they did not need. In fact, the Aztecs were neither Greeks nor savages, but shrewd theocratic imperialists who had ruthlessly created a loosely knit political empire based on the perception of terror, backed up by a deadly army, and fueled by a vast system of tribute.

What differentiated Aztec from European warfare were its far greater cultural and geographical constraints. Without horses or oxen, or even the wheel, the operational range of Aztec armies was limited by the amount of food and supplies their human porters could carry along. As Tenochtitlán expanded its influence in Mesoamerica, as the size of the city grew, and as war became even more predictable, the political organization of the entire Mexican subcontinent grew more vulnerable to attack: Europeans might topple the entire imperial structure by decapitating a tiny elite on an island city, which needed thousands of tons of food shipped in daily for its very survival.

Wars ceased for brief periods between October and April—precisely the time Cortés entered Tenochtitlán in November 1519—to allow agricultural laborers to work the harvests. Fighting was rare altogether in the rainy period between May and September, while battle at night was also discouraged. In contrast, the Spaniards, as a maritime people in a temperate climate, and as veterans of the murderous wars in Europe and on the Mediterranean, were willing and able to fight year round, day or night, at home and abroad, on land and sea, with few natural or human restrictions.

Many confrontations between the Aztecs and their neighbors began as “flower wars” (*xochiyaoyotl*). These staged contests, without much killing between elite warriors of either side, revealed Aztec superiority—through the greater training, zeal, and battle experience of its warriors—hence the futility of real armed insurrection. Should the enemy persist in resistance, flower wars might escalate into full-fledged battles of conquest designed to defeat an enemy outright and annex its territory. In that regard, we should assume that the creation of the Aztec empire had resulted in hundreds of thousands of Mesoamericans killed in wars during the fifteenth century alone.

Whereas Mesoamerican warriors were adept at handling weapons, there were two further factors that inhibited their ability to slay enemy soldiers in vast numbers outright. In all wars the taking of captives for human sacrifices was important proof of individual battle excellence and social status and was deemed critical to the religious health of the community at large. More often still, sacrifices were shrewd occasions for nightmarish intimidation, spectacles of bloodletting to warn potential adversaries of the consequences of resistance. For example, the Aztec king Ahuizotl purportedly organized the butchery of 80,400 prisoners during a four-day blood sacrifice at the 1487 inauguration of the Great Temple to Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlán—an enormous challenge in industrial-

ized murder in its own right. Ahuizotl's killing rate of fourteen victims a minute over the ninety-six-hour bloodbath far exceeded the daily murder record at either Auschwitz or Dachau. The presence of four convex killing tables—so arranged that the victims could be easily kicked down the pyramid—turned human sacrifice into an assembly-line process. Companies of fresh executioners periodically replaced those exhausted from the repeated obsidian-blade strokes, to ensure that the entire train of victims could be dispatched during the festival. We do not know the number of victims otherwise sacrificed under normal conditions, but surely it was in the thousands. Ixtlilxochitl believed that one of every five children of Mexica tributaries was killed each year, though Bishop Don Carlos Zumárraga's lower estimate of 20,000 a year is more plausible. Oddly, few scholars have ever likened the Aztec propensity to wipe out thousands of their neighbors through carefully organized killing to the Nazi extermination of Jews, Gypsies, and other eastern Europeans.

Although under dire circumstances Aztecs could fight to the death, the warrior's training in the methods of stunning, binding, and passing back captives through the ranks would prove an impediment against the Spanish. Scholars who argue that the Aztecs quickly dropped their notions of ritual fighting against Cortés are correct, but they must concede that years of such military training were hard for many warriors to discard in a few months—especially when pitted against Spanish swordsmen and pikemen who had drilled since adolescence in the art of killing with a single stroke.

To what degree such rituals were predicated on technological constraints we cannot be sure, but the tools of Aztec warfare—oak, stone, flint, obsidian, hide, and cotton—were incapable in themselves of killing warriors in any great numbers. Broadswords (*machuahuitl*) and spears (*tepoztopilli*) were wooden, with flakes of obsidian embedded along their double cutting edges. Both could match the sharpness of metal, but only for a few strokes before chipping or losing their edge. Aztec swords were without points, while the stone heads of lances likewise made them poor thrusting weapons.

Since the aristocratic infantry arm of the Aztec military was singularly inefficient against Spanish foot soldiers and cavalry, native commanders depended upon an array of missile weapons that might penetrate the unprotected arms, legs, necks, and faces of Cortés's men. A peculiar type of spear-thrower (*atlatl*) was made from a wooden stick about two feet in length, with grooves and hook at one end in which to place the projectile. Fire-hardened darts (*tlacoctli*) were occasionally flint-tipped; when used

with the *atlatl* these missiles could achieve accurate ranges of 150 feet. But they were essentially useless against metal armor and at great distances incapable of tearing even through layered cotton. The Aztecs used simple, rather than composite, bows (*tlahuitolli*). While they could achieve a rapid rate of fire with more than twenty arrows (*yaomiltl*) per quiver, such weapons lacked the penetrating power and distance of European models that since classical antiquity had been fabricated from glued horn, hide, and wood.

Many accounts testify to the danger of Aztec stone missiles; and while native slingers were without metal bullets and sophisticated slings, nevertheless they were able to wound unprotected flesh at ranges approaching a hundred yards. The Aztecs' wood, hide, and feathered shields, like cotton war suits, might ward off Mesoamerican stone blades but were of no value against Toledo steel, metal crossbow bolts, or harquebus shot. It is an accurate generalization that Montezuma's arms were of an inferior caliber to the artillery, missile weapons, body armor, and offensive armament of Alexander the Great's army some eighteen centuries prior.

Mexico had all the natural resources necessary for a sophisticated arms industry. There was no shortage of plentiful iron ores at Taxco. Copper was in abundance in Michoacán. The volcano Popocatepetl furnished supplies of sulfur. Indeed, within a year of the conquest Cortés himself, against the edicts of the crown, was producing gunpowder and casting muskets and even large cannon in the former domains of the Aztecs. Why amid such a cornucopia of ingredients for munitions did the Mexicas produce only clubs, blades of obsidian chips, and javelins and bows and arrows? The most popular explanations suggest need. Because Aztec warfare was designed largely to capture rather than kill, stone blades were sufficient against similarly armed Mesoamericans. The implication is that the Aztecs *could* have fabricated weapons comparable to the Europeans', but saw no need for such additional expense in their brand of ritually crafted warfare whose aim was to stun rather than cause death. Yet such claims of latent technological know-how are preposterous for a culture without a sophisticated rational tradition of natural inquiry. The opposite is more likely to be true: the Aztecs had no ability to craft metals or firearms and so were forced to fight ritual wars with weapons that would largely wound and not easily kill. Against a large and fierce army such as the Tlaxcalans, it is hard to envision how the Aztecs, despite vast numerical superiority, might have waged a war of annihilation with nonmetallic weapons—explaining why Tlaxcala was largely autonomous, and settled its disputes with the Aztecs through quasi-ceremonial flower wars.

Aztec battle, like Zulu fighting or the attacks of Germanic tribes, was one of envelopment. Swarms of warriors systematically attempted to surround the enemy, the front lines mobbing and stunning their adversaries, before passing them through the rear ranks to be bound and led off. The ensuing need to march prisoners back with the army also contributed to the Aztecs' inability to campaign at large distances, since the combined throng of victors and defeated only increased logistical requirements. While there was a national Aztec army, in fact local contingents thronged around their own captains and might exit the field altogether should their leaders or standards go down. Francisco de Aguilar relates the desperate fighting at Otumba, after the *Noche Triste*:

As Cortés battled his way among the Indians, performing marvels in singling out and killing their captains who were distinguishable by their gold shields, and disregarding the common warriors, he was able to reach their captain general and kill him with a thrust of a lance. . . . While this was going on, we foot soldiers under Diego de Ordaz were completely surrounded by Indians, who almost had their hands on us, but when Captain Hernándo Cortés killed their captain general they began to retreat and give way to us, so that few of them pursued us. (P. de Fuentes, *Conquistadors*, 156)

Relays of soldiers might enter the fray every fifteen minutes or so, as there was no concept of decisive shock battle in which heavily armed foot soldiers sought to collide head-on with the enemy at the first encounter. Ranks and files were nonexistent; warriors failed to charge and retreat in step or on command; missiles and arrows were not launched in volleys. Nor were missile troops used in concert with infantry charges. Without horses, Aztec battle doctrine was largely a one-dimensional affair, in which the greater training and numbers of the emperor's warriors, together with the pomp and circumstance of feathered warriors and standards, were enough to collapse or scare off resistance.

Finally, Aztec society was far more ranked than even aristocratic sixteenth-century Spain. The weapons, training, armor, and position in battle of most Mexica warriors were predicated on birth and status. In a cyclical pattern of cause and effect, such greater innate advantages gave aristocrats predominance on the battlefield in taking captives, which in turn provided proof of their martial excellence—and then led again to even more privilege. The Spanish were a class-bound society as well, but during the invasion, a variety of lowly conquistadors mounted horses as

the military situation demanded. Harquebuses, crossbows, and steel blades were distributed freely throughout the army. The fuel that drove Cortés's army was not so much aristocratic privilege as a desperate desire by both *hidalgos* and the impoverished to acquire enough money and fame to advance upward in Castilian society. On the battlefield itself, the result was that in matters of weapons, tactics, recruitment, and leadership the Spanish army operated on meritocratic principles of sheer killing: men and tools were trained and designed to dismember people first and provide social advancement, prestige, and religious rewards second. Killing was more likely to result in status than status was in killing.

