

1491

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able. The Mexica were subordinated by a nearby city-state on the shore, and the *tlatoani* was forced to send Mexica men as conscripts for its wars. Only in 1428 did Itzacoatl, a newly selected *tlatoani*, ally with two other small vassal states to overthrow their mutual overlords. In victory, the three groups officially formed the Triple Alliance, with the Mexica the most powerful leg of the tripod. Like Tawantinsuyu, the empire grew rapidly. Its presiding genius was not Itzacoatl, though, but his nephew Tlacaelel (1398–1480).

During his long life Tlacaelel was twice offered the position of *tlatoani* but turned it down both times. Preferring the less glorious and supposedly less influential position of *cihuacoatl*, head of internal affairs, he ruled from behind the scenes, dominating the Alliance for more than fifty years and utterly reengineering Mexica society. Born to an elite family, Tlacaelel first became known at the age of thirty, when he inspired the Mexica to revolt against their masters, supervised the gestation of the Alliance, and served as Itzacoatl's general during the assault. After the victory he met with Itzacoatl and the Mexica clan leaders. In addition to taking slaves and booty, wartime victors in central Mexico often burned their enemies' codices, the hand-painted picture-texts in which priests recorded their people's histories. Tlacaelel insisted that in addition to destroying the codices of their former oppressors the Mexica should set fire to their *own* codices. His explanation for this idea can only be described as Orwellian: "It is not fitting that our people / Should know these pictures. / Our people, our subjects, will be lost / And our land destroyed, / For these pictures are full of lies." The "lies" were the inconvenient fact that the Mexica past was one of poverty and humiliation. To motivate the people properly, Tlacaelel said, the priesthood should rewrite Mexica history by creating new codices, adding in the great deeds whose lack now seemed embarrassing and adorning their ancestry with ties to the Toltecs and Teotihuacan.

A visionary and patriot, Tlacaelel believed that the Mexica were destined to rule a vast empire. But because ambition succeeds best when disguised by virtue, he wanted to furnish the Alliance with an animating ideology—a manifest destiny, as it were, or *mission civilisatrice*. He came up with a corker: a theogony that transformed the Mexica into keepers of the cosmic order.

At its center was Huitzilopochtli, a martial god who wore a helmet

Among the Mexica, a council of clan elders chose the overall ruler. Or, rather, chose the overall *rulers*—the Mexica divided authority between a *tlatoani* (literally, "speaker"), a diplomatic and military commander who controlled relations with other groups, and a *cihuacoatl* (literally, "female serpent"), who supervised internal affairs. For a century after Tenochtitlan's birth, the *tlatoani*'s position was unenvi-

shaped like a hummingbird's head and carried a fire-breathing serpent as a weapon. Huitzilopochtli had long been the Mexica's patron deity. It was he who had entered the Mexica priest's dream to explain where to found Tenochtitlan. After the formation of the Triple Alliance, Tlacaelel "went about persuading the people," as one Mexica historian wrote, that Huitzilopochtli was not a mere tutelary deity, but a divinity essential to the fate of humankind.

At the apex of the celestial hierarchy stood Ometeotl, the omnipresent sustainer of the cosmos, "the Lord of the Close Vicinity" in Nahuatl. In Tlacaelel's vision, Ometeotl had four sons, one of whom was Huitzilopochtli. These four sons had been vying for supremacy since the beginning of time; the history of the universe was mainly a record of their endless struggle. At intervals the brothers would wrestle themselves into a precarious equilibrium, like sumo giants straining motionlessly against each other in the ring, with one brother on top and the other three in a temporary, isometric balance below. In these interregnums of order, Tlacaelel explained, the topmost brother linked himself to the sun, on which all living creatures depend.

In some versions of the story, the brother became the sun; in others, he merely supervised its workings. Either way, life could exist only when one brother held sway and the cosmic battle quieted and the sun was able to shine. But when the balance came apart, as it always did, the brothers would resume their strife. The sun would go dark, sinking the cosmos into an endless, lethal night. Eventually the sons would arrive at a new transitory order and reignite the sun, letting existence begin anew. This apocalyptic cycle had occurred four times before. The Mexica lived during the Fifth Sun, when the sun was identified with Huitzilopochtli.

The sun's role was hellishly difficult, Tlacaelel said. Even when the strife among Ometeotl's sons quieted enough to allow the sun to shine, it still had to battle the stars and moon every day as it rose in the sky—a literal struggle of light against darkness. Each day of sunlight was a victory that must be fought and won again the next day. Because the sun could not hold out forever against its foes, one sixteenth-century Nahuatl account explained, it would one day inevitably lose—there was no getting around it. "In this Sun it shall come to pass / That the earth shall move, / That there shall be famine, / And that we all shall perish." But the calamity could be postponed, at least for a while, if the

sun was fortified for its battles with the stars. To gain strength, the sun needed *chalchihuatl*—the mysterious, ineffable fluid of life-energy. The sacred mission of the Triple Alliance, Tlacaelel proclaimed, was to furnish this vital substance to Huitzilopochtli, who would then use it for the sun, postponing the death of everyone on the planet.

There was but one method for obtaining this life-energy: ritual human sacrifice. To obtain the victims, Tlacaelel said (according to one of Sahagún's contemporaries), the sun needed a "marketplace" where he could "go with his army [that is, the army of the Triple Alliance] to buy victims, men for him to eat. . . . And this will be a good thing, for it will be as if he had his maize cakes hot from the griddle—tortillas from a nearby place, hot and ready to eat whenever he wishes them." Occasionally the victims were slaves and criminals, but mainly they were prisoners of war. In this way the sacred mission of the Triple Alliance became translated into a secular mission: to obtain prisoners to sacrifice for the sun, the Alliance had to take over the world. In Tlacaelel's scheme, imperial conquests were key to "the moral combat against evil," explained Miguel León-Portilla, a Mexican historian who has devoted much of his career to analyzing Mexica thought. "The survival of the universe depended on them."

Human sacrifice is such a charged subject that its practice by the Triple Alliance has inevitably become shrouded in myths. Two are important here. The first is that human sacrifice was never practiced—the many post-conquest accounts of public death-spectacles are all racist lies. It was indeed in the Spanish interest to exaggerate the extent of human sacrifice, because ending what Cortés called this "most horrid and abominable custom" became a post hoc rationale for conquest. But the many vividly depicted ceremonies in Mexica art and writing leave little doubt that it occurred—and on a large scale. (Cortés may well have been correct when he estimated that sacrifice claimed "three or four thousand souls" a year.)

The second myth is that in its appetite for death as spectacle the Triple Alliance was fundamentally different from Europe. Criminals beheaded in Palermo, heretics burned alive in Toledo, assassins drawn and quartered in Paris—Europeans flocked to every form of painful death imaginable, free entertainment that drew huge crowds. London, the historian Fernand Braudel tells us, held public executions eight times a year at Tyburn, just north of Hyde Park. (The diplomat

Samuel Pepys paid a shilling for a good view of a Tyburn hanging in 1664; watching the victim beg for mercy, he wrote, was a crowd of "at least 12 or 14,000 people.") In most if not all European nations, the bodies were impaled on city walls and strung along highways as warnings. "The corpses dangling from trees whose distant silhouettes stand out against the sky, in so many old paintings, are merely a realistic detail," Braudel observed. "They were part of the landscape." Between 1530 and 1630, according to Cambridge historian V. A. C. Gatrell, England executed seventy-five thousand people. At the time, its population was about three million, perhaps a tenth that of the Mexica empire. Arithmetic suggests that if England had been the size of the Triple Alliance, it would have executed, on average, about 7,500 people per year, roughly twice the number Cortés estimated for the empire. France and Spain were still more bloodthirsty than England, according to Braudel.

In their penchant for ceremonial public slaughter, the Alliance and Europe were more alike than either side grasped. In both places the public death was accompanied by the reading of ritual scripts. And in both the goal was to create a cathartic paroxysm of loyalty to the government—in the Mexica case, by recalling the spiritual justification for the empire; in the European case, to reassert the sovereign's divine power after it had been injured by a criminal act. Most important, neither society should be judged—or in the event judged each other—entirely by its brutality. Who today would want to live in the Greece of Plato and Socrates, with its slavery, constant warfare, institutionalized pederasty, and relentless culling of surplus population? Yet Athens had a coruscating tradition of rhetoric, lyric drama, and philosophy. So did Tenochtitlan and the other cities in the Triple Alliance. In fact, the corpus of writings in classical Nahuatl, the language of the Alliance, is even larger than the corpus of texts in classical Greek. **STOP**