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A warlike culture? Religion and war in the Aztec world

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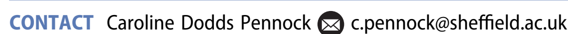
ABSTRACT
The Aztec-Mexica people of Tenochtitlan were, by their own definition, a 'warlike' culture, their collective identity closely tied to military ideals and behaviours. The values of war were dramatized and re-enacted at every level of society, and their shared warrior identity was widely understood by both men and women. This was also a culture in which religion and the supernatural were so deeply embedded in belief and behaviour that it is almost impossible to distinguish religious practice from everyday activities. Attempts to 'rationalize' Mesoamerican approaches to warfare often stem from a laudable desire to demystify Indigenous cultures, to recognize their sophistication, and to refute accusations of superstition and savagery. But any attempt to disentangle religion from practice deprives Aztec structures of the very logic scholars seek to instil. For the Indigenous peoples of Mexico, religion was rational: it provided explanations, motivations, structures and identities. One did not go to war solely for religious reasons, but the process of reasoning, of decision making, occurred within a universe in which the physical and metaphysical were interwoven. For the Aztecs, warfare was a sacred act performed in the service of the gods. They framed themselves as warriors, not only in tangible terms, but historically, mythically and metaphorically. Warfare was inextricable from belief in Tenochtitlan, and only by seeing the Aztecs within their own frame of reference, giving value and meaning to their rituals and histories, can we understand the conjunction of religion and war in their embracing and active vision of the cosmos.

KEYWORDS
Aztec; Mexico; warfare; religion; gender

Proud of itself
is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.
Here no one fears to die in war.
This is our glory.
This is Your Command,
Oh Giver of Life!
Have this in mind, oh princes,
do not forget it.
Who could conquer Tenochtitlan?
Who could shake the kingdom of heaven?
With our arrows,
with our shields,



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> the city exists.
> Mexico-Tenochtitlan remains.
> *Cantares Mexicanos*, mid-sixteenth century. (León-Portilla 1986, 86–87)

The Aztec (or, more properly, Mexica) people of Tenochtitlan were, by their own definition, a 'warlike' culture, their collective identity closely tied to military ideals and behaviours. Mythical histories emphasized their origins in conflict and all men were warriors. This was also a society in which religion and the supernatural were so deeply embedded in their belief and behaviour that it is almost impossible to distinguish religious practice from day-to-day activities. In this article, I argue that war and religion were inextricable in Aztec culture. Scholars have, at times, attempted to 'rationalize' Aztec culture and rejected 'superstitious' explanations for their violence but, as I will demonstrate, the separation of the physical and spiritual worlds would have made no sense to the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan. In the Aztec worldview, their capital was framed explicitly as the *axis mundi*: the centre of both the terrestrial and celestial worlds, which were intricately entwined. Mirroring the cosmology in miniature, the city formed what Geertz (1980, 13) called an 'exemplary centre', which embodied both the supernatural universe and the state. Tenochtitlan was the beating heart of the cosmos, but also the hub of a powerful military machine. The Aztec capital lay at the centre of an ambitious cosmovision (Matos Moctezuma 1989) which brought together supernatural and imperial imperatives to create a society focused on war.

The Aztec practice of warfare was rooted in the mythical histories – rich cyclical narratives blending fact and myth (Gillespie 1989, xi–xxvii) – which established their credentials as a 'chosen people' of Huitzilopochtli, god of war. The importance of conflict to Aztec identity is clearly articulated in a sixteenth-century account by the Dominican friar Diego Durán, whose work is believed to be based on the early, lost, *Crónica X* (Hill Boone 1988; Colston 1988; Durán 1994, introduction and appendices). In 1298, the Aztecs had paused their migration from the north and were contentedly settled at Tizaapan, in the south of the Valley of Mexico.

> But Huitzilopochtli, god of the Aztecs, was an enemy of this quiet and peace and sought unrest and strife. Seeing the few benefits he received from this tranquillity, he said to his priests and the elders: 'It is necessary that we search for a woman who shall be called 'The Woman of Discord.'[1] … This is not the land where we are to make our permanent home, this is not yet the site I have promised you, it is still to be found. The occasion for leaving this place where we are now staying must not be peaceful but must be through war, when many die. Let us begin to take up our arms, our bows and arrows, our shields and swords! Let us show the world the valour of our persons! … Seek a way to leave this place'. (Durán [c.1581] 1994, 36–37)

Following Huitzilopochtli's orders, the Aztecs asked Achitometl, the *tlatoani* (ruler, lit. speaker) of nearby Culhuacan, to give them his daughter to become the 'bride of their god' and 'a living goddess'. Unfortunately, Achitometl failed to realize that this meant his daughter would be sacrificed and flayed as an impersonator of the goddess Toci. When he discovered the truth, the horrified father declared war on the Mexica and destroyed their community, propelling them toward their final settlement at Tenochtitlan (Durán [c.1581] 1994, 37–41; *Codex Ramírez* in Tezozomoc [c.1598] 1878, 28–30). This critical foundation story highlights the centrality of warfare to Aztec identity. The tribal god, Huitzilopochtli, patron of the state, was himself the god of war. And Huitzilopochtli was an

'enemy of peace'; he could not simply order his followers to move on – the impetus for their migration had to be 'through war'. Thus, it was only through conflict that the Aztecs could claim their destiny at Tenochtitlan, a place which would eventually be recognized as 'the supreme capital':

> There our name will be praised and our Aztec nation made great. The might of our arms will be known and the courage of our brave hearts. With these we shall conquer nations, near and distant, we shall subdue towns and cities from sea to sea … We shall rule over those people, their lands, their sons and daughters … (Durán [c.1581] 1994, 36–37)

Warfare and conquest were central to the Aztecs' self-perception, as well as their view of the world.[2]

Critically, this was no accidental rationalization of power; the history and cosmology which underlay Aztec claims to a 'military identity' were quite deliberately constructed (or at least reconstructed). In 1431, the *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan, Itzcoatl, destroyed the pictorial manuscripts stored in the state archives and created a new official history, to prevent the spreading of 'falsehoods' and stop the government being 'defamed' (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1974, 191). Written at a time when the Aztecs were rising to power as part of the Triple Alliance and seeking to consolidate their authority, these official histories consciously manufactured and deployed an ideology which placed war at the heart of Aztec identity (Dodds Pennock and Power 2018, 101–102). Encouraged to embrace warfare as their sacred destiny, and motivated by social structures which rewarded military excellence, the population became an army. By 1521, when Tenochtitlan fell to the conquistadors, the Aztec realms covered some 200,000 square kilometres with a population of five or six million (Brumfiel 2001, 284). The Aztecs had fulfilled their destiny and conquered a mighty empire, but they also had to manage it. War was an obligation which was engrained in the mythical past, as well as essential to a successful imperial present (Smith 2001, 128–154; Conrad and Demarest 1984, especially 11–83).

The problems of sources and scholarship

The creation of an official history in 1431 is just one of a slew of source issues which plague historians of the Mesoamerican world. Evidence from the period before European contact is sparse, consisting of scattered archaeology and a handful of pictorial codices that survived the destructive fervour of the early missionaries (Matos Moctezuma 2017; Rosado 2017.) Such material culture can be particularly helpful in accessing official political and religious narratives, which often appear in monumental architecture and *tonalamatl*, day-books or almanacs (Brumfiel 1998). Elite perspectives also dominate the early colonial alphabetic texts that are the principal source of this article. Compiled largely by Spanish missionaries with the aid of Indigenous informants, these alphabetic 'codices' must be treated with extreme caution, for they create a standardized and collective view of the past from an almost exclusively elite-male perspective. Some authors, such as the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, had apparently sincere ethnographic intentions; his *Florentine Codex* (completed c.1575–77) is an unparalleled collection of twelve detailed books in Nahuatl and Spanish, covering Aztec history, society and religion. Created with the aid of hundreds of Indigenous informants and collaborators – men such as Antonio Valeriano, Alonso Vegerano, Martín Jacobita, and Pedro de San Buenaventura

(León-Portilla 2002, 144) – the *Florentine Codex* is an incredible resource for scholars; the confiscation of Sahagún's work in 1577 for fear of idolatry is testament to his 'pro-Indian' tendencies. Despite the authors' often-painstaking research, however, such texts remain heavily filtered through Spanish, Christian perspectives. They tend to lack individual voices, and are often structured according to European categories of thought, eliding the complexity, diversity and sophistication of the Indigenous worldview. Nonetheless, with careful and critical handling, these documents – especially those drawn from the Indigenous oral tradition – can provide vital insights into Aztec culture, cutting across the idealized picture of the past which they create at first sight. Problematic though they are – these documents allow us to peek at the people hiding behind the formal façade and give us the detailed context which is vital to understanding personal and everyday perspectives (Dodds Pennock 2012b). As a cultural historian, I often find myself reading these texts against the grain to find individuals among the crowd but, in understanding the relationship between religion and war in Aztec culture, the most accessible and collective concerns of the alphabetic codices – the structures and ideals promoted by the elite – are also significant.[3] These official scripts reveal the ways in which religious narratives combined with social expectations in Tenochtitlan to create a 'warlike culture': a society which was structured and conditioned for war.

Perhaps because of its martial focus, Aztec culture has too often been the subject of studies which focus on its 'uniquely violent' practice of human sacrifice, dehumanizing the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan at the expense of understanding their motives, attitudes or actions. Lévi-Strauss (1964, 388) is far from unusual in claiming that the Aztecs had 'a maniacal obsession with blood and torture'. Even quite serious scholars have compared human sacrifice to the Holocaust; Davis Hanson, discussing the 1487 rededication of the Templo Mayor, wrote: 'the killing rate of fourteen victims a minute over the ninety-six hour bloodbath far exceeded the daily murder record at either Auschwitz or Dachau' (Ingham 1984, 392–393). Yet despite the stereotypes, levels of interpersonal and illegal violence seem to have been relatively low in Tenochtitlan, and even the available sources for human sacrifice do not provide compelling evidence that homicide rates were especially high in the Aztec capital (Dodds Pennock 2012a). Were the often-cited figure of 80,400 victims in these four days (*Codex Chimalpopoca* [1558-70] 1992, 118; Durán [c.1579] 1971, 339; Dodds Pennock 2012a, 2012b, 280) correct (and it is probably not, for practical reasons if nothing else) then the statistical comparison would be fair, but the analogy is wildly inappropriate. The Aztecs believed that all people (whether from Tenochtitlan or another community) were part of a 'power-filled cosmos of motion', which they fought constantly to keep in balance (Read 1994, 45). And vital to this balance was the Aztec responsibility to feed the earth with blood, an obligation rooted in the birth of humanity. In the mythical histories which explained the creation of this, the fifth, age of the world, heroic gods sacrificed their blood, and in some cases their bodies, to bring life to humans, to mould the land, to ignite the sun, and to give it the energy to move (e.g. *Codex Chimalpopoca* [1558-70] 1992, 145–146; Sahagún [1575–77] 1977, 3–7; *History of the Mexicans* [c.1530] 1883, 616–651; López Luján 1994, 255). Such divine offerings are common in the creation narratives and are the basis of the 'blood debt' that required the Aztecs to nourish their gods with blood in return for the vital fluid spilled during their own birth. These reciprocal obligations to the gods underpinned the cycle of religious violence that sustained the Aztec universe and

structured their world. The Aztecs were not mass murderers; they believed that human sacrifice was necessary for the successful continuation of the world, and they offered their own children to fulfil their contract of blood (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1981a, 8, 42–43). Sacrifice was practised across the Valley of Mexico, and Aztec warriors accepted that they might receive the 'flowered death by the obsidian knife' as their own likely, even desirable, destiny (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 172; Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979b, 172). This was no murderous genocide, but a complex inter-city exchange of victims, albeit one in which Tenochtitlan became increasingly voracious.

As a reaction against sensationalist caricatures of Aztec culture, some scholars have attempted to extricate religious ideology from warfare, seeking alternative, 'rational' explanations for ritual violence. The archaeologists Graham, Scott and White have argued that religion does not provide sufficient explanation for military and sacrificial violence. They contend that 'because vast differences existed in the cultural rules of fighting, Maya (and Aztec) warfare has long been misinterpreted as being dominated by religion, and religion has been assumed to have had a unique role (e.g. "human sacrifice")' (Graham, Simmons, and White 2003, 170). Graham prefers economic motives for ritualized warfare, seeing it as a 'mechanism of wealth transfer' (2008, 116).[4] Ross Hassig has also argued that one should not overestimate the significance of the 'supernatural' dimensions of warfare in Tenochtitlan stating, quite rightly, that 'Aztec practices were shaped by political realities and practical necessities'. But while Aztec imperial policy was undoubtedly pragmatic, warfare was also practised in a highly formal and religiously charged fashion, as we will see. Hassig sees 'religious explanations [as] … ex post facto rationalizations for warfare – ideological overlays to justify actions they were determined to take. In short, religion and ideology were manipulated in the service of the state, rather than the reverse' (1988, 10–11). I will argue rather, that both this <u>and</u> the reverse are true. The state undoubtedly manipulated ideology for political purposes – most obviously when the *tlatoani* Itzcoatl rewrote history to suit present-day priorities – but Aztec practices of war were deeply shot through with spirituality, and the state and the wars it pursued were also shaped by religion.

Institutions and 'indoctrination'

Critical for my argument – that warfare was inextricable from belief in Aztec culture – is the fact that the sacred underpinnings of Aztec warfare and the mytho-historical foundations of their shared warrior identity would have been widely understood by both men and women of every status. Although transmitted to the friars primarily by noble men, the narratives and values revealed in the codices were no purely elite concern. The communication of a standardized mythical history and ideology was fundamental to Aztec identity, and so they established a universal education system, ensuring that all young men and women would have been aware of their collective history and religion. Every adolescent boy and girl attended the *cuicacalli* ('house of song') where they learnt the ritual discourses, mythical histories, and sacred songs which would shape their religious understanding. They also learned the basics of the *tonalpohualli* (the 260-day count that structured the ritual calendar), which underlay the complex set of day signs and astrological tables that would form the contours of their existence. Individual engagement with heritage and belief was seen as vital. According to the sixteenth-century

Dominican friar Diego Durán: 'Attendance at these schools was so important and the law [in regard to attendance] was kept so rigorously that any absence was considered almost a crime of lese majesty.' (Durán [c.1579] 1971, 289–291) This was no culture of opaque liturgy with comprehension reserved to a privileged few; all Aztecs were expected to know their role in the cosmic community. It is impossible to state with any certainty the extent to which the intended lessons were learnt but, in this society of rigorous conformity and communal activity, the evidence suggests that shared ideologies were deeply embedded and that the underlying messages of ritual performances and architecture would have been intelligible to society as a whole.

The structures and expectations of warfare were deeply ingrained in Tenochtitlan. With the exception of enslaved people, every Aztec man was trained to fight and bound to military service. The importance of this military obligation is underlined by the fact that it included even the *tlalmaitl* (lit. 'hand of the earth'), a group of landless labourers of obscure origin, who did not hold citizen status and so were exempt from tax and labour-service obligations, as well as holding none of the privileges of citizenship (Zorita [1585] 1965, 183). From birth, young men were dedicated to a warrior destiny, miniature weapons pressed into their tiny hands (*Codex Mendoza,* [c.1541] 1992, f.574; Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 201–207) and their umbilical cord buried on the battlefield by the experienced warriors of their district (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 171). At only twenty days old, male infants further had their path laid out for them when their parents dedicated them to one of the temple schools. While a few, largely elite, children were dedicated to the *calmecac* (priestly school), for most their future lay in the *telpochcalli* ('house of warriors'). Through their dedication to the warrior school, these tiny babies became the 'possessions' of Tezcatlipoca ('Smoking Mirror'), all-powerful god of the fates, and patron of rulers, sorcerers and warriors. This not only protected the babies, placing them in the care of a powerful divine patron so that they 'would not quickly die' (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 209), but also formed an early part of the extensive mechanisms used to reinforce (one is tempted to say indoctrinate) social expectations in Aztec culture. The infants' martial future was never in doubt. As adolescents, the boys would fulfil their parents' vow and commit themselves to the temple and train to be warriors. This is a striking example of the conjunction of war and religion in Tenochtitlan; warrior identity was instilled in men throughout their lives, but this was framed as a religious duty. Youths trained for war in the temple, and their future was assured by the gods who guided and guarded them.

Religion also played a major role in the official structures and customs of war. The gods held the fates in their hands and were consulted on declarations of war. The *tlamatinime* ('people who know things') and *tonalpouhqui* (diviners, readers of the day signs) scrutinized the *tonalamatl* (day books or almanacs) to determine whether the signs were auspicious, and to ensure the campaign had the best chance of success. Warriors and rulers made offerings to the gods before they went on campaign and prayed before they went into battle. Families and priests at home prayed for the success of armies, and conducted rituals intended to promote their success and bring them home safely. Priests accompanied the army, consecrating their endeavours, and carrying the gods with them. Essentially, we see the sort of functional interaction between religion and warfare that is common to many civilizations.[5] More unusual (though far from unheard of), were the senior religious figures we see fighting alongside warriors from Tenochtitlan,

and receiving the same rewards and recognition, an idea which seems to have been so unusual to the Catholic chroniclers that warrior priests remain rather obscure in the sources. It does seem, however, that a parallel hierarchy existed; not only warriors but also warrior-priests were ranked according to how many captives they had taken (*Codex Mendoza* [c.1541] 1992, ff.64v-65r; Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1981a).

Religion was also part of the process of imperial incorporation. Empire in Central Mexico was hegemonic, resting on the submission of cities to superior force, so extensive urban destruction was uncommon. Instead, the Aztecs relied on a spiritual and symbolic transfer of power to confirm their authority. When a city surrendered, the temple precinct was burned – the pictoglyph for a conquered town is a burning temple with its roof askew (Figure 1) – and the gods were carried off to the *coateocalli* ('house of many gods') (López Austin and Luján 2016, 610).[6] This is a similar process to the ancient Roman ritual of *evocatio deorum* (the 'calling out of the gods'), by which the tutelary deity of a besieged city was exhorted to leave its temple and voluntarily come to Rome, where it would be given a temple and cult, asserting Roman superiority and weakening the city by removing its divine protection (Eastman 2011, 103–104; Bruun 2014). The Aztecs also saw these patron gods as emblems of defeated rivals, and their 'idols' were, quite literally, incorporated into the imperial capital, held in the Templo Mayor precinct at the heart of Tenochtitlan. In contrast to Rome, however, due to the broadly shared ideology of the valley of Mexico, these were not seen as 'foreign gods' so much as alternative incarnations of familiar deities, which were merely being rearranged to reflect shifting power relationships.

The home front

'Professional' soldiers played a prominent role in Tenochtitlan, not only in military affairs, but also as administrators and participants in ritual practice, and colonial authors – impressed by the efficiently centralized state and military machine of the Mexica, and informed by the remnants of the male nobility – often focus heavily on public, high-status, roles. Brutal sacrificial priests and ferocious warriors overshadow our sources, producing an image of Aztec ideas of warfare that is both masculinized and dominated by the nobility. Later authors too, unsurprisingly, found the colourful charisma of the expert Eagle and Jaguar orders alluring, and accounts of Aztec society often focus on these largely noble warriors. But the disproportionate focus on such elite forces obscures the extent to which warfare was a key organizing principle of both life and belief in Tenochtitlan, and something which was deeply embedded in the experience of all Aztecs of every status, male and female.

Tenochtitlan was seen as a perpetual battlefield. The city was a space where military fates were, at all times, held in the balance. Even in their homes and during peacetime, the Aztecs were implicitly preparing for war; domestic actions were believed to directly affect military performance. If a wife let her husband eat a tamale that had been stuck to the cooking pot then he was destined to fail in battle: 'the arrow which was shot would not find its mark'. A man who was disrespectful enough to kick the hearthstones, the heart of the home, metaphorical seat of the 'Old God' Huehueteotl, would find his feet 'deadened' when he went to war: 'quickly he would fall into the hands of the enemy' (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1981b, 184–185, 194). These practical combat consequences of seemingly quite mundane actions underline the ways in which warfare was woven

Figure 1. The foundation of Tenochtitlan, from *The Codex Mendoza*, c.1541, fol. 2r. [The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, CC-BY-NC 4.0].

throughout Aztec belief. And, if we look beyond everyday domestic practice to explicitly ritual behaviours, it becomes clear how deeply rooted were pervasive military convictions.

Despite the collective glorification of military endeavour, wartime was nonetheless marked as a period of 'sadness and mourning, [women] did not wash their faces but left the dirt on them, from the day their husbands left until they returned' (Durán [c.1581] 1994, 161). This visible marking-out of military wives must have sent an unmistakeable message to the community: these women were tasked with ensuring spiritual support for their husbands' endeavours. The only other group in this remarkably clean

city who did not wash regularly were priests, so the women's filthy faces were not only a symbol of private anxiety, but also a public reminder that these women held powerful religious obligations. Throughout the time that her husband was deployed, a woman swept the street outside her house at dawn, midday, sunset and midnight, seeking to ease the path of the Sun, Huitzilopochtli, so that he, in his alter ego as the god of war and patron god of the Aztecs, might favour their troops with victory. Sweeping – a distinctively female obligation – was a powerful ritual act and an essential religious duty, a way of attempting to control the *tlazolli* (filth, trash or corruption) of the world which, left unchecked, had the potential to unbalance humans' fragile survival. Although the term *tlazolli* is often translated as 'sin', Indigenous thought operated in less binary terms. Instead, the Aztecs privileged moderation. They recognized that a degree of *tlazolli* was necessary (in sex and procreation for example) but too much was seen as damaging; then, it became 'stuff out of place' (Sigal 2011, 23; Maffie 2015, 97). Thus, through their constant sweeping, women sought to balance universal forces by keeping in check the *tlazolli* that threatened to tumble their world into chaos. While their husbands were in battle, women were the city's spiritual defenders: the frontline against cosmological anarchy. As Burkhart famously put it, 'The broom *was* a weapon: it was the housewife's defence against invading dirt and disorder, peripheral forces that, like the enemies of the state, threatened the maintenance of order and centrality' (Burkhart 1997, 35).

Sweeping was only one of a series of painstaking and time-consuming rituals which women were required to complete throughout the period their husbands were away. A military wife would rise at midnight and build a fire then, when it was burning, would sweep and bathe 'without allowing the water to touch her face or head'. After grinding corn and making small, hard tortillas, she went to the temple, carrying the leg bones of her husband's previous captives. These trophies were wrapped in paper and hung from the beams of the temple, presumably as a reminder to the gods of her spouse's faithful service in the past. The woman then petitioned the gods for her husband's life:

> O Lord of all Created Things, of the Sky and the Earth of the Wind and the Sun, of the Water, of the Night and of the Day, have pity on your servant, on your creature who goes about the hills and the valleys, about the plains and rocky places, offering you his sweat and his panting breath. He is your eagle, he is your jaguar who works incessantly, without rest, to serve you in this woeful life. I beseech you, O Lord, I beg you to lend him life, to allow him time to enjoy this world. Hear me, O Lord! (Durán 1994, 161–162)

This nightly activity had profound sacred significance, and must also have been physically and emotionally exhausting for the woman, a constant reminder of her husband's physical peril and her personal responsibility for his well-being. While their men fought physical enemies on a literal battlefield, women fought the forces of the universe on a metaphysical one, attempting to ensure the necessary cosmological equilibrium and secure the divine favour that would allow their husbands to triumph. Burkhart put it in a nutshell: 'Domestic space was, quite literally, a "home front", and women were its army' (1997, 26).

Tenochca society was based on a parallel, complementary model of gender, in which men and women fulfilled discrete, quite different, roles, which were believed to be equally essential for their society's prosperity (Kellogg 1997); just as women were seen as essential to society, so they played a vital religious role. Only women could maintain the cosmic

balance and secure the divine favour which ensured military success. Where a boy's umbilical cord was dedicated to the battlefield, a girl's was buried by the hearth; this not only represented women's connection to the domestic sphere, but also bound them to Huehueteotl, an ancient fire god who, from his place at the centre of the universe, maintained the balance of the world (Figure 2) (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 171–173).

In this layered world, the household was a microcosm of the cosmos, nested within the sphere of the city, which also mirrored both home and universe (Dodds Pennock 2011). While men ranged to the battlefield, women, the guardians of the hearthstones, held the centre of the universe in their hands. June Nash has argued that the increased militarism which followed the Aztec victory over the Tepanecs during the reign of Itzcoatl (1429–1440) reduced women's importance in Tenochtitlan, because they were not 'part of the new predatory economy of war and tribute' (1978). But even Nash – one of the few modern scholars who contends that Tenochtitlan was male dominated, rather than based on a system of gender parallelism – accepts that women's role in the domestic space was undiminished and, in a spiritual sense, it was in this domestic space, on the 'home front', where battles were believed to be won and lost.[7] The domestic realm was vital to the success of the army. As marketplace overseers, women provisioned the army; as mothers, they delivered the next generation of warriors; as wives they supported the soldiers. But women were not merely accessories and auxiliaries. Standing guard over

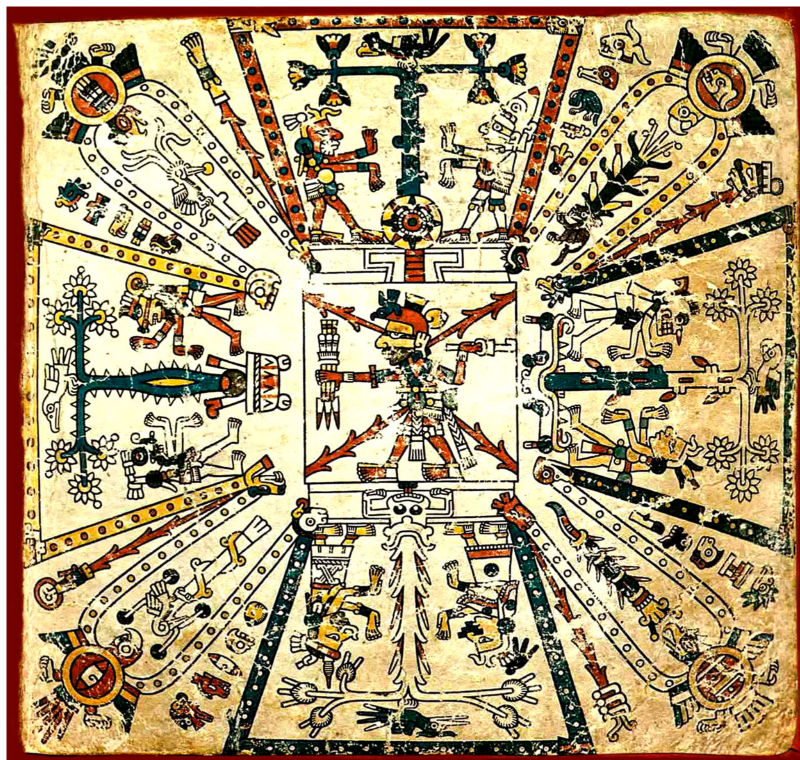

Figure 2. Huehueteotl (in his aspect as Xiuhtecuhtli, 'fire god') at the centre of the world, from the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer,* pre-1521, p. 1 [FAMSI via Wikipedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 4.0].

the heart of the universe, at the hearth of the home, holding the forces of chaos at bay through their actions every day, women were warriors.

Women as warriors: fighting with femininity

This was a city that was not only structured to serve the demands of a military life in practical terms – central systems provided for training, provisioning, and conscription (Hassig 1988, especially 17–121) – but was also pervasively imagined in martial terms. Mock battles were fought in the streets of Tenochtitlan during five of the eighteen *veintena* (month) festivals. Midwives, youths, maidens, priests, warriors and sacrificial victims all skirmished in the streets in a performance of war which reinforced military ideals and behaviours (Brumfiel 2001, 297). As part of the festival of Tlacaxipeualiztli ('the Flaying of Men'), the so-called 'gladiatorial sacrifice' was a pageant of bloodshed which displayed the skill and courage of elite warriors. This carefully managed dance of violence was a sacred battle, the ritual distillation of the religious ideology of warriorhood. In the 'striping', a captured warrior was furnished with weakened weapons and tied to the *temalacatl* (sacrificial stone) (Figure 3). Aztec warriors then confronted him in turn, each trying to delicately slice (or 'stripe') his skin, so the precious blood flowed onto the stone (Durán [c.1579] 1971, 172–185; Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1981a, 47–56). This was a spectacular display of skill, courage and brutality, a performance of warrior masculinity in the heart of the city. The sensory aspect of this should not be underestimated. Ordinary Aztecs did not merely witness these intense dramas of life and death; warriors also passed through the city, spreading blood to every quarter. Carrasco rightly sees such rituals as possessing spiritual power, transmitting 'charismatic' energy to the community through 'a fantastic display of sound, sense, body, and fury' (1995, 10). But, more than that, they brought the sights and sounds of combat to the city. All Aztecs – men, women and

Figure 3. 'Gladiatorial' sacrifice, from the *Tovar Codex*, c.1585 [Library of Congress, Jay I. Kislak Collection].

children – witnessed the dazzling display of skilled warriors in combat, swirling in their feathers and fur. They could smell the blood, sense the fear, join the frenzy. They could, for a moment, be on the battlefield.

The ideals and structures of war were also brought into the city in subtler ways. Mothers and warriors were strikingly paralleled in Aztec ideology. During childbirth, women were seen as battling to 'capture' a baby and, if they emerged successful, they were heralded as a soldier coming home from war:

> My beloved maiden, brave woman … thou hast become as an eagle warrior, thou hast become as an ocelot warrior; thou hast raised up, thou hast taken to the shield, the small shield. Thou hast returned exhausted from battle, my beloved maiden, my brave woman; be welcome. (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 179)

During the struggle of childbirth, a woman was believed to be physically imbued with the presence of the earth goddess Cihuacoatl (Woman Snake), whose power remained trapped in her body if the woman died during the delivery.[8] When a young warrior, attempting to improve his chances in battle, stole a piece of her corpse, he was attempting to carry female power onto the battlefield, appropriating Cihuacoatl's intense and brutal energy for himself (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 161–162).[9] Childbirth was not only framed in military terms but, strikingly, women who died in childbirth were also believed to share an initial afterlife with men who died in battle or as a sacrifice, both becoming companions of the Sun on his glorious journey across the sky (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979a, 13; 1981b, 41; 1977, 27). A woman who died in childbirth was, quite literally, raised to the ranks of warriors.

Weaving, the archetypal female activity, was also framed in military terms. Goddesses were frequently depicted carrying shields and wielding weaving battens like swords. The complex interaction between femininity and war is evident in the depiction of Cihuacoatl in the *Codex Borbonicus*, probably the earliest, and certainly the most faithful, surviving Aztec pictorial manuscript (Figure 4). Here, we see the ubiquitous goddess Cihuacoatl, the Woman Snake, patron of midwives, brandishing her sword and feathered shield as a warrior, displaying both feminine spiritual power and masculine military strength. And the complexity of this symbol is compounded by the fact that the figure was, in reality, a man dressed as a woman. The image depicts the *cihuacoatl* (something akin to a first minister) in his ceremonial dress. We see a man, dressed as a female deity, holding the weapons which display both domestic and military power. I would argue that this represents the balancing of political imperative (which required a man hold this high office) with philosophical structures, which demanded that the female influence dominate in the 'domestic' sphere of the city (Dodds Pennock 2011). Nevertheless, Cihuacoatl here wields weapons of war, and goddesses frequently appear in the codices carrying weaving battens as swords, including Toci, Tlazolteotl and Ilamatecuhtli (an ancient aspect of Cihuacoatl). Xochiquetzal (Precious Flower), goddess of fertility and pleasurable sexuality, is depicted in the *Codex Cospi*, a Pre-Columbian divinatory screenfold believed to be from the Puebla/Tlaxcala region in the southeast highlands of Mexico, holding a shield and *atlatl* spear-thrower, but in place of the lances she has spindles with whorls. The metaphorical connection between weapons and weaving implements is ubiquitous and inescapable. Battens are still known as '*machetes*' in some regions of Mexico today (Maffie 2015, 493).

Figure 4. Cihuacoatl holding shield and weaving batten, from the *Codex Borbonicus*, f. 23, c.1520 [FAMSI, via Wikipedia Commons].

The use of battens as weapons was not merely figurative; female implements also possessed metaphysical power which could be deployed in the real world. In 1473, during the civil war between Tenochtitlan and its 'twinned' city of Tlatelolco, the desperate Tlatelolcan women went into battle themselves. Some stripped naked, carrying traditional shields and obsidian-bladed clubs, and squeezing milk from their breasts to sprinkle on their assailants. Others threw up their skirts to show their buttocks to the enemy, or threw brooms and weaving implements at their enemies: battens, frames, brooms and spindles rained down on the Tenochca warriors. This would undoubtedly have embarrassed the Aztec men, but also shows the practical use of sacred power in battle. These objects, profoundly infused with spiritual significance, brought women's primal force to bear on the battlefield. The juxtaposition of women's tools – symbolic objects of femininity – with the aggressive display of female sexuality is striking: this was a frantic (and ultimately

unsuccessful) final attempt to use all the military force at the Tlatelolcas' disposal, by wielding women's supernatural power in battle (Tezozomoc [c.1598] 1878, 392–393; Klein 1994).

The archaeologists Sharisse and Geoffrey McCafferty have argued that the violent symbolism of weaving was visible in a more everyday sense. Weaving was closely entwined with female identity in Postclassic Mexico; design motifs were often associated with important goddesses, suggesting that these 'weapons of women' provided a space for the expression of female spirituality. Patterns on spindle whorls, which were known as *tehuehuelli* ('little shields'), show direct parallels with shield design, being used to express geographical and tribal identity in the same way as shields, and the McCaffertys even go so far as to speculate that, if pierced with a sharp batten, the whorl might have made a serviceable small weapon. As they were usually wooden, weaving battens do not often survive in archaeological deposits but, in addition to depictions of goddesses brandishing battens, we know that women used weaving battens as 'knives' to 'sacrifice' human effigies (McCafferty and McCafferty 1991, 1995).[10] We can turn for further insights to Monte Albán, the capital of the Zapotecs of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, which flourished from c. 400BC until the Spanish conquest, peaking in around 700AD.[11] A unique discovery there – one of the richest Pre-Columbian finds ever – included thirty-four bone weaving tools, among them miniature battens, spindle whorls, spinning bowls and a carved-bone weaving comb. These items were part of a burial shrine, Tomb 7, which was dedicated to an earth/fertility goddess, possibly Cihuacoatl or the Mixtec goddess 9 Grass (McCafferty and McCafferty 2012, 634; McCafferty 2010 for images). These beautiful objects suggest a strong connection between weaving, identity, gender, and religion. The same goddesses who, with their shields and battens, alluded to the importance of female power on the battlefield, appeared on the tools that women used every day; the repetitive spinning and weaving motions could almost be seen as a small, repeated invocation of the goddess, a connection to Mother Earth. Weaving objects were buried with women, and carried by goddesses. Like brooms, they were a weapon in a supernatural battle, as well as central to women's terrestrial obligations. These same symbolic objects were used to produce the cloth which was so central to the economic success of the city and contributed heavily to funding the army when it travelled on campaign. Women's importance in provisioning the army fell not just to marketplace overseers; all women were integrally involved in the Aztec economy because cotton was one of the core media of exchange in this barter system. With their bodies, as mothers, and with their looms, as weavers, women fashioned the army. This is a cobweb of meanings, hints of a ubiquitous military ethos which was intrinsically, but at times almost intangibly, woven through the fabric of Aztec life. Without first-person accounts, we can only speculate about their significance of such connections to individuals. But it is clear that symbols and structures of war pervaded Aztec society and spirituality, shaping structures of belief and practice and making Tenochtitlan both a literal and metaphorical site of warfare with powerful consequences for social behaviours as well as for military performance.

Holy war?

Thus, the values of war were dramatized and re-enacted at every level of Tenochca society. Non-combatants – principally women, children and the elderly – were to some

extent protected from the realities of war, but the sacrifice of captives after each campaign brought the brutality of battle home to Tenochtitlan, and to every one of its inhabitants, in a visceral sense. Although the first captive was sacrificed on the battlefield (Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979b, 53), the majority were dragged from the field, bound, and taken to Tenochtitlan where they would be offered to the gods. Although it was both profitable and politically significant, the Tenochca system of warfare was deliberately designed to provide opportunities to secure victims for sacrifice and meet the gods' relentless demands for blood.[12]

The importance of religion to warfare in the Valley of Mexico is perhaps most obviously expressed in their preferred form of battle: warriors would engage in structured one-on-one combat, aiming to weaken their opponent sufficiently that they could be captured for the purposes of human sacrifice. The strategy of capture rather than kill was, unsurprisingly, more common in small-scale combats than during a siege or pitched battle, but it seems to have been the prevailing approach to warfare in all contexts (Acosta [1590] 1880, 346, 352; Las Casas [c.1555-9] 1967, vol. 1, 346). Even against the Spanish, except in the last desperate days, the Mexica aimed to capture rather than kill and, when they could not, tried to club the conquistadors on the back of the head like criminals. They wanted to avoid granting an honourable, sacred, death to their dishonourable opponents (Clendinnen 1991). During the *xochicayotl* ('Flower Wars'), which were probably intended for the taking of captives through ritual warfare, the structured individualism of combat was heightened (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin 1997a, i, 209; *Codex Chimalpopoca* [c.1579–1660] [1558-70] 1992, 73). There even seems to have been a 'formal rhetoric of gesture', with the combatants using specific stances to indicate their readiness, much like in modern-day fencing (Clendinnen 1985, 62). It is possible that the grabbing of the warrior lock – the symbol of dominance and captive-taking in the pictographic sources – was regarded as a formal confirmation of victory in such stylized encounters (Figure 5).

The *xochicayotl* were the most explicitly religious wars in Aztec history, designed to fulfil spiritual obligations by taking captives for sacrifice. There has been some scepticism on this point in recent years – Hicks in particular has argued that the Flower Wars were used for training purposes – but this appears unlikely because the *xochicayotl* seem rather to have featured the most able warriors (Clendinnen 1985, 62). It also sits awkwardly with the evidence of the renowned *mestizo* author and *copista* Chimalpahin (1579–1660; see Schroeder in Chimalpahin Quahtlehuanitzin [1997b], preface), who stated that, after 1415, in a period when Aztec military ambition was escalating, noble captives (previously exchanged at the end of battles) became sacrificial victims along with the rest (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin 1965, 182; 1997, 124-125). These were occasions when the elite warriors attempted to achieve the perfect 'aesthetic of war' (Hicks 1979; Clendinnen 1985, 61–62). The battles were themselves almost religious acts; the combat itself, as well as the outcome, brought honour to the gods (Carrasco 1995).

This type of individualistic combat has little to recommend it as a pragmatic campaign strategy, so why, then, did Aztec warriors seek to capture their opponents in battle rather than kill them? On an individual level, this system did function to provide the basis for honour and hierarchy – soldiers received social, political and military rank and rewards based on their ability to beat opponents in battle (*Codex Mendoza* [c.1541] 1992, ff.

Figure 5. A youth takes his first captive, from the *Codex Mendoza*, c. 1541, f. 64r [The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, CC-BY-NC 4.0].

64r-65r; Sahagún [c.1575–77] 1979b, 56, 65; Zorita [1585] 1971, 267; Hassig 1988, 37–47) – but the entire system was underpinned by the explicit aim of securing victims for human sacrifice. Single combat was certainly seen by the Aztecs as the ideal form of battle – this was a culture of individualism which valorized displays of personal skill – but capture rather than kill only makes sense as part of military efforts if one prioritizes the sacred dimensions of warfare over the purely pragmatic.

Religion and warfare were inextricable in Aztec culture. The Templo Mayor stood at the heart of Tenochtitlan, at the centre of the terrestrial and celestial planes: a tangible expression of the Aztecs' mytho-historical destiny. On this sacred mountain, origin stories were re-enacted and collective identities reinforced. According to the mythical histories of the Aztec migration established by Itzcoatl in the 1430s, Huitzilopochtli killed his sister Coyolxauhqui, and cast her from the peak of Coatepec ('Snake Mountain'): 'And her body came falling below; it fell breaking to pieces; in various places her arms, her legs, her body each fell' (Sahagún [1575-77] 1978, 4). This was Huitzilopochtli's first victory, and the triumph of Tenochtitlan's patron god, the god of war, was perpetually reiterated on the Templo Mayor, a 'new' Snake Mountain, adorned with stone serpents.[13] Victims were sacrificed on the temple summit before being thrown down the steps and decapitated. Their broken bodies were a striking reminder of Huitzilopochtli's victory over Coyolxauhqui, making an assertion of Aztec military might which layered immediate power and threat with historical and mythical nuances. The pyramid was the axis of the practical (politics and economics) and ideology (religion and belief), the nexus of structure and

superstructure (Matos Moctezuma 1985, 800). Mythical histories were constantly played out at this hub of belief, at the temples of Tlaloc (water, fertility, agriculture) and Huitzilopochtli (war), which together epitomized the economic and political bases of Aztec power at their most sacred site.

The link between religious and political power is made explicit in a magnificent stone monument which was discovered in 1831 near the palace of Moctezuma II in Mexico City (Figure 6). Variously called the 'Monument of Sacred War', 'Monument of Holy War, the *Teocalli* (temple, lit. "god/divine power house") of Sacred War', or the 'Throne of Moctezuma II', the stone chair probably commemorates the Xiuhmolpilli ('Binding of Years')

Figure 6. *Teocalli* of Sacred War, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City [Wolfgang Sauber via Wikipedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 3.0].

of 1507, which marked the end of the sacred calendrical cycle (Caso 1927). A symbolic throne in the shape of a pyramid, it epitomizes the conjunction of war and belief which lay at the heart of Aztec culture. A relief of Tlaltecuhtli – the goddess who sacrificed herself to become the earth – appears on the seat, while Huitzilopochtli and Moctezuma II face each other across a great disk of the sun on the front. The monument is a marker of both political and religious authority which, scholars have speculated, could have been used during the so-called 'New Fire Ceremony' in 1507, which allowed the world to move between cycles. Given the Aztecs' literal belief that the sun might fail to arise at the end of the *nemontemi* (dead days), when Moctezuma II used the *teocalli* he would have had all the forces of the universe swirling about him, forces which he fought to control and appease in order to secure the continuation of the next cycle, as well as the continuing dominance of the Aztecs.[14] The *tlatoani* held the universe in balance, ruling not only through his terrestrial influence but also by his ability to command the sacrifices needed to feed the gods. Every figure on the monument speaks the glyph for *atl-tlachinolli* ('water-something burnt or scorched'): a metaphor for sacred war. Moctezuma II and the four gods all hold sacrificial implements, and *cuauhxicalli* ('eagle vessels') bowls, which held the hearts of sacrificial victims, appear above the date glyphs for 1 Rabbit and 2 Reed. Even the dates are markers of the inextricability of terrestrial and metaphysical concerns, for they commemorate the fact that the last Xiuhmolpilli festival was moved from the famine-riddled year of 1 Rabbit to the more auspicious 2 Reed. Humans were not, it seems, mere victims of fate, but could manipulate the cosmos for their benefit: belief was not irrational, but purposeful. The *tlatoani* appears alongside the gods, elevating his own status, and making human and divine affairs part of a single continuum (Buc 2016, 8) and the political status quo is endorsed (Hassig 2001, 108). The connection of the *tlatoani* to the earth (Tlaltecuhtli) and the Sun (Huitzilopochtli) through human sacrifice is put at the heart of a matrix of meaning which shows sacred war as central to the Aztec cosmos (Barnes 2016/17; Umberger 2010).

Conclusion

It is easy, writing from our safe, and largely secular, western context, to be cynical about deeply held spiritual impulses. Graham (when writing, admittedly, to engage a young audience) dismissed the Aztec gods as 'a nice handy excuse' for war, claiming that 'no civilization has ever endorsed killing on such a massive scale, and repeatedly, only to please gods!' (Graham 2009) And no scholar would argue that religion was the sole motivation for warfare in Aztec culture. But to ignore a people's professed reasons for doing something is, at best, patronising. The Aztecs are ideal fodder for those reductionists who wish to argue that 'religion causes violence'. But for Tenochtitlan, no less than for the West, 'essentialist attempts to separate religious violence from secular violence are incoherent. What counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of different configurations of power' (Cavanaugh 2009, 3–4). Only by seeing the Aztecs within their own cultural frame of reference, giving value and meaning to their rituals and mythical histories, can we understand the inextricability of religion and war in their embracing and active vision of the cosmos.

Attempts to 'rationalize' Mesoamerican approaches to warfare often stem from a laudable desire to demystify Indigenous cultures, to recognize their complexity and

sophistication, and to refute accusations of superstition and savagery. But any attempt to disentangle religion from practice deprives Aztec structures of the very logic which scholars are seeking to instil. For the Indigenous peoples of Mexico, religion was rational: it provided explanations, motivations, structures and identities. One did not go to war solely for religious reasons, but the process of reasoning, of decision making, occurred within a universe in which the physical and metaphysical were interwoven. For the Aztecs, warfare was a sacred act performed in the service of the gods. They framed themselves as warriors, not only in tangible terms, but historically, mythically and metaphorically. Yet, rather than attempting to reconcile practical politics and religious conviction – to integrate functional imperatives and spiritual ideals – scholars are determined 'to see beneath the religious cloak to the underlying material causes and issues' (Hicks 1979, 87). It is enormously difficult to uncover soldiers' true motives for fighting in any era and the sources for Aztec culture are problematic in the extreme, but that is no excuse for imposing an interpretation which separates warfare and religion, politics and faith, simply because we find it difficult to comprehend. As Nancy Jay (countering René Girard) wrote: 'The moment we say "The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act" … , we have lost any possibility of gaining any understanding beyond the one we already had and brought along with us' (Jay 1992, xxv).

Notes

1. The 'Woman of Discord', a disruptive female figure, is a recurring trope in the foundation stories: a woman who provides an opportunity for the assertion or stabilisation of state power. See Gillespie (1989, especially 3–120) and Dodds Pennock (2018).
2. After their settlement at Tenochtitlan – seeking to balance savagery and authority – the Mexica deliberately emphasized their dual origins as children (spiritually, if not literally) of both the 'warlike' nomadic Chichimec hunters and the 'civilized' Toltecs (Berdan 2014, 37–42).
3. I do not have time or space here to elaborate fully on the extraordinarily complex nature of the Aztec sources. For a short summary of the issues and my approach to them see Dodds Pennock (2008, 3–10). On Sahagún, see also Edmonson (1974), Klor de Alva, Nicholson, and Keber (1988) and León-Portilla (2002). For Anglophone readers' convenience, I have referenced English translations of sources where they exist unless there is specific a reason to cite the original.
4. Graham's work (which unhelpfully elides Aztec and Maya practices) argues that capturing elite warriors in battle, 'opened the door to accessing tribute – or to trade via tribute' (Graham 2008, 116). There is, however, no evidence that tribute obligations, which were highly localized, were directly transferable in the Mexica world. On tribute (although he would prefer I call it 'taxation') see Smith (2015).
5. This is only a small selection of the ways in which religious imperatives influenced the practice of war. See for example Brumfiel (2001).
6. Diego Durán claims that the *coateocalli* was founded under Moctezuma II as part of the process of consolidating the empire and reinforcing Aztec authority against rebellious groups (1994, 431).
7. I have elsewhere argued that, for the Aztecs, the term 'domestic' should be understood in the political sense, as suggesting an opposition to 'foreign' rather than 'public', spaces (Dodds Pennock 2011, especially 530).
8. Cihuacoatl had multiple aspects (Read 2000), including an association with the 'war woman' Yaocihuatl (Dodds Pennock 2018, 7).
9. For more on the multifaceted nature of female power and its profound creative/destructive potential, see Clendinnen (1991, especially 216–297); Dodds (2007); Klein (1988).

10. I am indebted to Geoff McCafferty for sending me a copy of his 1995 paper and for his permission to cite it.
11. It is obviously important to be aware of cultural distinctions, but the Indigenous cultures of Postclassic Mexico originated in a shared cultural tradition and so such evidence can provide a valuable complement to our sparse sources if carefully handled.
12. For an excellent summary of the evidence for human sacrifice, and a rebuttal of recent 'revisionist' works which deny mass sacrifice was practised among the Aztecs, see Mendoza (2007).
13. For more on the parallel with Coatepec, as well as a hypothesis regarding its geographical location, see Gelo (2014).
14. On the conjunction of religious and political significance in the Xiuhmolpilli rituals see Smart (2018, 142–208).

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