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August, 2017

AZTEC TWIN-TEMPLE PYRAMIDS AS EVIDENCE FOR STATE RELIGION  
THROUGH SHARED ARCHITECTURE AND SYMBOLOLOGY

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department  
of Comparative Cultural Studies

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Twin-temple pyramids of the Late Postclassic in central Mexico became a distinct symbol of Aztec ideology. Nowhere is this demonstrated more than with Templo Mayor, the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán, the capital city of the Aztec empire. The deities worshipped and rituals conducted at Templo Mayor made it a beacon of ideological identity for the Aztec, both in religious belief and national dominance. The very aspects that made it so symbolically significant would also carry over to the other temples of similar construction outside the capital city. By examining the shared architectural features between Templo Mayor and nearby pyramids in cities under Aztec influence and control, their contribution to the state religion in place at the time becomes clear.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: STATE RELIGION AS CULTURE PATTERN	1
Introduction	
Characteristics of State Religion	
The Notion of the Sacred in Religion and Ritual	
The Contribution of Ethnographic Analogy	
Roman Catholicism as State Religion in Europe	
Ideological Continuity	
CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS	36
The Contribution of Archaeology	
The Contribution of Ethnohistory	
CHAPTER 3: AZTEC PERIOD OF THE LATE POSTCLASSIC	55
The Postclassic Period	
Aztec Rulers	
CHAPTER 4: AZTEC RITUAL AND SACRED SPACE	64
Sacred Elements in Aztec Religion	
Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli: Divine Duality	
CHAPTER 5: AZTEC TWIN-TEMPLE PYRAMIDS	77
Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán	
Tlatelolco	
Tenayuca	
Santa Cecilia Acatitlan	
Teopanzolco	
Witnesses from Ethnohistory	
The Common Traits	
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS	97
Analogy Between Catholic and Aztec State Religion	
Future Research	
REFERENCES CITED	103

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1	Example of Twin-Temple Pyramids	1
Figure 1.2	Religion Grid	11
Figure 1.3	Convergence of Sacred Elements	23
Figure 1.4	Example of Medieval Cruciform Layout	25
Figure 1.5	Layout of St. Boniface Monastery	29
Figure 1.6	Santiago de Compostela	30
Figure 1.7	Durham Cathedral	31
Figure 1.8	St Maria Maggiore	32
Figure 1.9	Chartres Cathedral	33
Figure 3.1	Map of Mesoamerica	55
Figure 3.2	Postclassic Timeline	57
Figure 3.3	Map of Postclassic Valley of Mexico	59
Figure 4.1	Sacrifice from <i>Florentine Codex</i>	69
Figure 4.2	Aztec Calmecac and Priest	71
Figure 4.3	Flint Knife	73
Figure 4.4	Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli	74
Figure 5.1	Zona Arqueológica Templo Mayor (roof top)	77
Figure 5.2	Tlatelolco Temple	83
Figure 5.3	Tenayuca Temple	84
Figure 5.4	Tenayuca Construction Phases	85
Figure 5.5	Tenayuca Serpent Head Sculpture	86
Figure 5.6	Santa Cecilia Acatitlan Temple	87

Figure 5.7	Sculpture recovered at Santa Cecilia Acatitlan	87
Figure 5.8	Teopanzolco Temple	88
Figure 5.9	Teopanzolco Serpent Head Sculpture	89
Figure 5.10	Teopanzolco Site Layout	91
Figure 5.11	Texcoco Temple from Codex <i>Ixtlilxochitl</i>	93
Figure 5.12	Tlacopan Temple from Codex <i>Telleriano-Remensis</i>	93

# CHAPTER 1: STATE RELIGION AS CULTURE PATTERN

## INTRODUCTION

Of all the various pyramid type ritual structures in Mesoamerica, the design of the twin, balustrade staircase leading up to a double temple zenith stands out as distinct to Aztec culture of the Late Postclassic period (Fig 1.1). They are not the only pyramids found in Mesoamerica throughout its pre-Columbian past with two staircases on their face, but the architectural design of *Templo Mayor* in Tenochtitlán has features that are not duplicated outside of the region dominated by Aztec control. Within that geographic area controlled by the Triple Alliance Empire during the Late Postclassic period, pyramids have been encountered and studied by archaeologists, whose similarities to *Templo Mayor* contribute to our understanding of Aztec state religion during their rule.

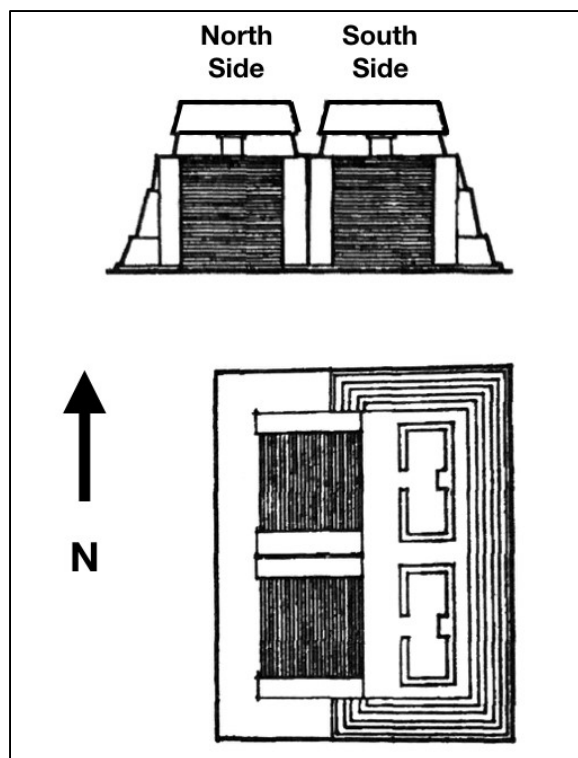


Fig 1.1 - Example of Twin-Temple pyramids adapted from *Aztec City-State Capitals* (Smith 2008:32)

Simply viewing them as independent ritual sites within close proximity cannot remain satisfying in light of observable habits of state religion dynamics elsewhere, yet this has been found in the bulk of literature that describes these sites. Whether by overt omission or by measured caution in the absence of clear ethnohistoric evidence to link them, the extant twin-temple, dual-staircase pyramids attributable to the Aztec period have not been examined as a network of ritual sites promoting religio-political control across the region. State religions, however, manifest in architectural and ritual continuity spread over the geographic area requiring ideological and political hegemony. There then is a discontinuity in Mesoamerican scholarship regarding the widespread assertion concerning Aztec state religion, and the treatment of ritual sites with such architectural similarity as independent of each other. Michael E. Smith demonstrates this dilemma all in one paragraph, stating that, regarding these distinct twin-temple, dual-staircase pyramids, “this became the prime visual symbol of political might at Aztec cities. It is likely that all of these structures had rich mythological symbolism of the sort known for Tenochtitlan Templo Mayor...although there is no reason to think that each city celebrated the same gods and myths at their central temple” (Smith, et al. 2008:103). There appears, accompanying the considerable hints that these sites are connected, an unwillingness to say so.

The goal of this study is to compile information for the twin-temple, dual-staircase Aztec pyramids attested in both the archaeological and ethnohistorical records, and demonstrate how their continuities (accounting for discontinuities) are consistent with state religion patterns of using multi-site ritual networks to promote regional political control. The central pyramids of Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco, Tenayuca, Santa



Cecilia Acatitlan and Teopanzolco (in modern Cuernavaca) have been available for archaeological investigation and their various reports will be compared (including their excavation histories, revealed building phases, offering caches and architectural distinctives). Double-temple pyramids in Tlacopan and Texcoco are attested in documentary evidence, but no archaeological finds for them have been forthcoming.

The data for these five pyramids also allow for comparison of their building phases to significant events in Aztec political history revealed from documentary sources. As the cultural-political picture is filled in concerning the construction phases for these ritual monuments, this study will posit that the sites in question represent a religious network promoting religio-political control for the empire. This behavior is consistent with state religion patterns observable in distant and unrelated cultures. The Roman Catholic Church of medieval Europe offers fitting ethnographic comparison for this pattern, with the cathedrals constructed during that period constituting a network pointing towards a central power as can be seen with Tenochtitlán.

While no “smoking gun” exists to exactly match the rituals and patron deities of “the four” satellite pyramids (outside of Tenochtitlán) to “the one” (Templo Mayor), comparison of the four to the one nonetheless will yield sufficient reason to set aside the assertion that the four operated independently of and with little similarity to the one. Instead the burden of proof should shift to those suggesting that such similarities and continuities can exist within a state religion context and still be unrelated ritual sites operating without a shared agenda. Aztec dominance in central Mexico rendered enough evidence for ideological continuity that connecting the one to the four should be a natural inference even without the “smoking gun” required by some. While Aztec state religion

throughout central Mexico should not be viewed as monolithic, I find justification for asserting a greater connection than is offered in dominant scholarship.

Because the Aztec controlled an area of central Mexico which included city-states featuring central temples like that of Tenochtitlán, I suggest a stronger link between these ritual centers than more cautious authors will assert. State-religion has distinct characteristics that are demonstrated through the shared architecture of the temples to be examined in this study, not dissimilar as to how Roman Catholicism reinforced religio-political control in medieval Europe in the cathedral churches dotting the landscape. In truth, both share many more characteristics of state-religion than mere architecture, thus making the analogy all the more reasonable; though speaking of a “catholic model” for Aztec religion may well go too far. In this case it is sufficient to say that twin-temple pyramids in Aztec-controlled cities were no accident; on the contrary, they add evidence to what politically has been known about the central polity of the time.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF STATE RELIGION

This trepidation to connect the dots is understandable, but unwarranted. Since scholars describing Aztec culture and religion are unwavering in their assertion of “state religion,” it becomes necessary to examine what is “state religion” and its accompanying characteristics. It is insufficient to simply label it as “theocracy,” since “rule by God” (the simplest definition) is too vague to be helpful. In fact, Dewey D. Wallace, Jr. offers a spectrum of subcategories for the term ranging from “hierarcacy” (rule by religious clergy or priestly structure; which Wallace suggests was evident in the Old Testament post-Exodus narratives under Moses and Aaron), to “eschatological theocracy” (wherein groups anticipate an idealized future in which Divine rule is fully realized) in his

treatment (Wallace 1987:427-430). In addition, Wallace describes “royal theocracy” that was common in the ancient Near East and Egypt, wherein monarchs are assumed to possess divine powers or divinity (Wallace 1987:428), and thus a state cult includes religious veneration for the ruler as well. The most common form of theocracy is what Wallace labels as “general theocracy,” wherein ultimate authority lies with divine law or a body of revelation, and is mediated through a combination of structures of politics (Wallace 1987:429). He applies this category to medieval Roman Catholicism, offering that “papal theocracy reached its height in the early thirteenth-century pontificate of Innocent III, who made good his claim to have authority to dispose earthly powers when he disciplined various European monarchs, including King John of England” (Wallace 1987:429).

Wallace does not include Mesoamerica in his definitions. This is fitting since the diversity of politics and religious structures throughout the region would not readily fit one of his descriptions. His categories of “royal” and “general” theocracies do apply though, and can be precursors to a working definition of “state religion.” For purposes of this study, *state religion exists where government and religious functions enjoy sufficient overlap to render inescapable the influence of each upon the other*. This broad statement includes Wallace’s categories of “theocracy,” but must also go beyond it.

Asserting “state religion” for a culture past or present suggests that at least four characteristics are observable from extant evidence, as follows: (1) national religious ceremony, (2) public ritual architecture, (3) clerical structure, and (4) codified sacred elements (times, space, rites, objects, offices, and myths) expressed across socio-economic strata. In addition, state religion assumes understanding of both “state” and

“religion.” In this case, a comprehensive definition of “statehood” will not be pursued because it is far from static. Chiefdoms, states and empires all exude characteristics pertaining to a level of socio-cultural integration that demonstrate a centralized polity, with their economic, military, and power structures. Thus “state religion” applies to more societies than just “states.” The focus here will be in the “religion” half of the term, with accompanying treatment of sacred “elements” that become codified and integrated with the state apparatus.

The characteristics of state religion mentioned above are observable both inside and outside of Mesoamerica, and what makes the combination of them distinct to state religion is the economic and political engines needed to generate them and keep them in existence. Indeed, *national religious ceremonies* assume official adherence to religious calendar dates as occasions for public spectacles and mass participation. This can take the form of a “national holiday,” but holidays alone do not demonstrate state religion since a Christmas tree on the lawn of the White House does not also involve an official clergy structure that others follow suit. However, government funds are used for the tree and subsequent decorations, so an argument could be made that it falls into a “gray area.” Wallace’s examples of theocracy certainly maintained such ceremonies, whether the festivals of ancient Egypt or Roman Catholic coronations of monarchs of medieval Europe. The Passover of ancient Israel is claimed in Judaism to have been a national event, and Egypt festivals involved both temples and the wider region “unifying the country on a grand scale” (Ikram 2009:149) and often “allowed for broad and direct public participation” (Teeter 2011:56).

*Public ritual architecture* demonstrates state religion because of the resources needed for the construction, maintenance and use of the site. The labor resources, whether contracted or compelled, represents collective “sweat equity” invested in the project that could not be marshaled without the central power structure. From rudimentary earth works, to ritual mounds and complex monuments, the efforts and skills of many individuals are necessary for the development of such sites, and for them to remain in operation. The example from Judaism is “Solomon’s Temple” written in the Old Testament, the replacement of which was razed by the Roman Army in 70 CE. The ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia and temples of Egypt fit this category, along with temple structures of the Greek and Roman periods as well. In the expanse of world history, the notion of worship spaces being funded and constructed by private resources is a rather recent one.

*Clerical structure*, by itself, would not be an indicator of state religion if not combined with the other aspects described here. It makes a distinct contribution though, depending on how formally that structure is supported and resourced by the central polity. In Roman Catholicism (RC), the structure is highly stratified, with “Bishops” fully invested as successors of the “Apostles” (1<sup>st</sup> century CE founders of Christianity according to Christian myth), forming the “episcopate” (the college of Bishops). Bishops have responsibility over regional jurisdictions, with “Archbishops” being the heads over combined regions (such as the “archdiocese of Galveston-Houston). RC structure has a singular head, the “Pope,” who is also the Bishop of Rome. As head of the RC church, the Pope may appoint designated advisors, called “Cardinals,” who also elect his successor in the event of his retirement or death. On rare occasions, not all Cardinals

have been clergy already. Bishops, on the other hand, have been “Priests” who have advanced to higher office. Priests are authorized to perform the sacred rites of RC tradition for the masses. Lower still is the office of “Deacon.” A young clergyman in training would carry the title of “Deacon” until such time that he is ordained to the priesthood. However, permanent deacons are not as common in the Roman tradition as with other major episcopal structured traditions of Anglicanism and the ethnic Orthodox. The basic threefold structure is shared across “episcopal” traditions of Roman, Anglican and Orthodox such that each Bishop was once a Priest, and before that a Deacon, with added layers of jurisdiction and authority in each advancement.

In the modern era, such structures are viewed outside of the public sphere, but the post-Enlightenment “separation of church and state” is a relatively recent phenomenon. In medieval Europe, economic resources flowed seamlessly from state politics to church interests for the funding of training facilities, monasteries, priest subsistence and bishop lifestyles. The integration of political office and clergy structure was demonstrated well when in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century Albert of Brandenburg, already an elector in Germany and possessor of two episcopal offices (or “sees”), sought to purchase “the most important archbishopric in Germany, that of Mainz” (Gonzalez 2010b:20-21). His methods for raising the necessary funds to pay Pope Leo X for the position would catch the attention of a young priest in his jurisdiction: Martin Luther.

*Codified sacred elements* demonstrate state religion in how the cultural expressions of religion within a given region appear to have little to no rivals. The elements of the sacred, by all appearances, are spread on a societal-wide basis, with full integration to the central polity. Virtually there is no disconnect among governmental

functions, societal everyday habits and religious expressions that are codified into a normative collection of behaviors and beliefs. These “sacred elements” are discussed below for their individual contributions to religion, but in a state religion context, the power of the state is brought to bear to enforce conformity, if indeed it is even the instinct of individuals to deviate from the collective norm. Enforcement of conformity to codified religion was evident when on June 6, 1415, the Czech clergyman, John Huss, was burned at the stake for deviating from acceptable doctrines of the time (Gonzalez 2010a:350-351).

By themselves, each of the above characteristics of state religion does not indicate state religion on its own. Examples of each could be cited wherein state religion is not a given, such as the *national religious ceremony* of White House Christmas decorations, the *public ritual architecture* of the Washington “National Cathedral,” the *clerical structure* of the modern Roman Catholic Church (which wields temporal power only in the Vatican City), or *codified sacred elements* that are enforced within relatively small religious movements entirely apart from the mainstream. Taken together though, state religion is the paradigm.

#### THE NOTION OF THE SACRED IN RELIGION AND RITUAL

For the purpose of our study herein, I define “sacred” as *elements of life for individuals or groups that explicitly facilitates their encounter with the divine or supernatural as measured by the criteria of their communal beliefs and traditions*. Such a definition remains generic enough to satisfy more specific ones that are offered by other authors. In addition, it is necessary to define the “sacred” before going into definitions of religion. In like manner that “sacred” needs a general definition, so also does “religion.”

Émile Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to *sacred things*, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1915:47), in his work to separate the “sacred” and the “profane.” Because of the modern use of “profane” to connote unsavory or vulgar speech, contrasting the “sacred” and the “common” would be closer to Durkheim’s intent to a present-day audience. For this reason, the “sacred” and “common” will be the terminology used for discussing religion theory.

Humans are spatial creatures. The obvious nature of this would border on absurdity, yet it is necessary to point it out for the sake of analyzing how space-specificity then applies to various habits of people and culture. “Sacred space,” therefore, is that designation ascribed to spatially specified area (geographic, topographic, environmental or architectural) that facilitates the interaction of individuals with the divine or supernatural in a manner that “common” space does not perform. Space is just one element of the “sacred” though. Religion, as Durkheim defined it, is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred *things*” (plural). I define religion as *the service of or interaction with the divine or supernatural through a system of attitudes, beliefs, and practices maintained within a given culture or community*, believing that this definition reflects the influence of Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and particularly Richard S. Hess (Geertz and Banton 1966; Hess 2007:15) as well. Nevertheless, because religion is this unified “system,” it is necessary to discuss the various sacred elements that emerge within a culture, since indeed any given ritual may be the nexus of these streams.

*Six elements of the sacred* emerge because of how they manifest in religion and ritual, and appear detectable in cultures even outside of the Mesoamerica context; these are: (1) sacred space, (2) sacred times, (3) sacred rites, (4) sacred offices, (5) sacred



objects and (6) sacred myths. The list and terms vary with ethnographers, yet these elements appear to include those aspects that impose themselves upon religion and ritual (phenomena that have considerable overlap without losing their distinction), both at the *official* and *popular* level. Figure 1.2 shows a “religion grid” that differentiates the practice of religion and ritual conducted by officials of that religion (official religion) within a culture versus what is performed by the common populace (popular religion).

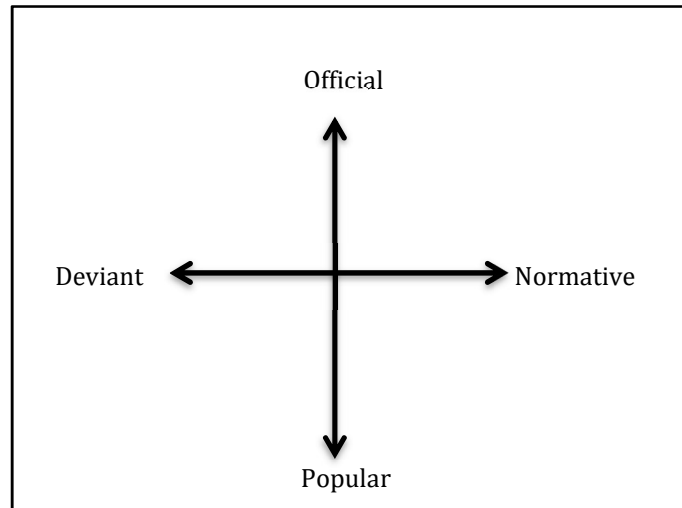


Fig. 1.2 - Religion Grid by A. Ott

Anthropology studies cultural, patterned and shared behaviors that may or may not be sanctioned, taught, or even required by officials conducting religious ritual in a formal setting. Many times practices are observable that develop within the population due to folk tales or superstitions that appear to have no root in the structural status quo; on the contrary, popular practices can often emerge in spite of the edicts and pronouncements of official religion figures. The official and popular religion can be differentiated, though, within cultural data, and thus should be identified appropriately when possible. Codices of sacred texts may show official religion as recorded by the literate elite, but archaeological finds may reveal deviations from that within the artifact record. Hess has demonstrated the great difference that exists between what might have been officially sanctioned religion among ancient Israelites and the popular practices that have left considerable remains to examine for the same period. He addresses honestly the

issue with, “the overwhelming sense of complexity and diversity attested by both the inner- and extrabiblical evidence compels a recognition of the multiple, diverse, and at times contradictory expressions of religious belief and practice within ancient Israel” (Hess 2007:348).

Since religion is defined here as “maintained within a given culture or community,” it naturally follows that boundaries materialize for those “attitudes, beliefs and practices.” However, the boundaries are drawn such that the culture or community gets to determine what is then in-bounds and out of bounds. For those attitudes, beliefs and practices that are considered “in bounds,” they are then *normative* standards by which such items are measured. Variations will arise that render the “boundary” circle flexible, and it may adapt to changing dynamics (political, environmental, etc.). Nevertheless, as much as the anthropologist desires not to judge cultural phenomena by declaring it “deviant,” there is a real sense in which those within the culture being studied can identify when something deviates from the norms to which they are accustomed or that they consider part of their religious structure.

Categories of normative versus deviant are difficult to determine in extinct cultures since there are no extant witnesses to give the “insider” perspective; however, evidence supporting differentiation between official and popular religion is available in the archaeological records. Clearly official religion is demonstrated in rituals carried out in designated public areas (*sacred space*), where ethnohistoric sources declare that those holding *sacred office*, performed *sacred rites*, at a *sacred time* (calendar day, time of day), using *sacred objects*, in a manner that rehearsed, reflected or re-enacted their *sacred myths*. The archaeological record also demonstrates, though, that individuals, in their own

spaces, carry out such acts on their own time as well. Demonstrations of the official/popular distinction are evident in the present day wherever religion is studied (consider the place of both mosque and prayer rug in the life of the Muslim).

### *Sacred Myths*

Stories are the treasure of a culture. They are what separate people/groups into distinct identities and ideologies with shared, collective memories regarding what relates to their past, organizing and making sense of the present, and de-mystifying the future. The term “myth” is not used to delegitimize or undermine the assumed historicity of the story. Instead it recognizes the story’s growth to such prominence and import that examining its factuality is no longer relevant. The fabled tale of a young George Washington felling a cherry tree is an example. Its factuality has become subservient to its value in teaching honesty to children that hear it. In like manner, those that focus on the historic details of tales related to creation and, in the Jewish tradition, the Exodus narrative, are seemingly missing the point. Most significant will be myths related to the creation of the world, as well as those that tell the story of a specific people group’s heritage; better still if the cosmogony/theology narrative draws a direct line to that society’s prominence in the world. National pride would appear to dictate it.

Myths are something of a “starting point” to other sacred elements, for it is the characters or episodes within these myths that other sacred elements are maintained to reflect. Emile Durkheim describes myths as “one of the essential elements of religious life” and asserts that, “If the myth were withdrawn from religion, it would be necessary to withdraw the rite also; for the rites are generally addressed to definite personalities who have a name, a character, determined attributes and a history, and they vary according to

the manner in which these personalities are conceived” (Durkheim 1915:100-101). He continues that, “Very frequently, the rite is nothing more than the myth put in action; the Christian communion is inseparable from the myth of the Last Supper, from which it derives all meaning” (Durkheim 1915:101). Before a practice or a rite can enjoy staying power, there must be a saga, a mythic tale or a story to give it meaning and a reason to exist. These myths can be local or universal in scope regarding deities or spirits that are responsible for the creation of the world or simply oversee some region part of it.

### *Sacred Times*

Time is a non-renewable resource that is heading towards total depletion, at least for the individuals experiencing it. Therefore, as a finite resource, it has been among the most valued “offerings” that a deity can receive. Holy days and special times related to ritual and culture are equally ubiquitous to sacred myths. It is no wonder that the development of calendar systems is accompanied by a roster of “holy” days that commemorate sacred myths within the collective memory. Often these days are associated with lunar cycles, requiring their observance several times a year. In other cases, these are related to agricultural cycles that can occur more than once a year. Annual commemorations are the chief calendric marker though, producing yearly observances of the manifestation of the collective identity in myth or labor.

Days of the week or of the calendar are not the only way that this emerges, but also in times of the day. Sunrise and sunset (again when the natural elements of Sun and Earth meet) create sacred times as well. Morning and evening sacrifice is attested in the Old Testament. In the Christian calendar, the feasts of Christmas or Easter remain high points in the modern context, but the medieval Church also included annual days for

“saints” and commemorations of Bible characters along with the weekly designated meeting days. The dividing of times with sacred meaning not only assures that the meaning holds real estate on the calendar, but also insures its regular and repeated observance. Durkheim agrees, sharing that. “The divisions into days, weeks, months, years, etc., correspond to the periodical recurrence of rites, feasts, and public ceremonies. A calendar expresses the rhythm of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity” (Durkheim 1915:23).

### *Sacred Offices*

No matter how egalitarian a society attempts to become or maintain itself, certain individuals will inevitably be designated the responsibility to perform ritual tasks that the commoner expects to undertake on their behalf. Whether it is the shaman, the priest or the medium of any type, designated individuals emerge in cultural evolution. These “ritual specialists,” as Catherine Bell describes them (Bell 2009:130-140), are the custodians of those aspects of religion that the *hoi polloi* cannot be bothered to maintain, being instead busied with the comparatively “common” trades of commerce, war, bureaucracy, agriculture, etc. The sacred is differentiated from the common in the very person holding this office. They do not merely hold the “sacred office” when performing sacred rites, but instead are authorized to perform those rites by means of their office. They themselves are among the symbols being employed in the ritual. In the biblical language of the Jewish scriptures (Christian Old Testament), titles such as “prophet” or “priest” are ascribed to such individuals called upon (respectively) to make revelatory pronouncements or operate in a “mediatorial” fashion between the Divine and a human audience. Every culture may not have fully dedicated “holy men” in this fashion, and

gender roles concerning sacred offices are far from universal. On the contrary, female oracles, mediums and priestesses are well attested elsewhere.

For the medieval Roman Catholic Church, sacred offices were manifested in the highly stratified clerical structure. Imbued with symbolism, priests and bishops mediated between God and man as dictated by accepted doctrine, decked with regalia that added layers to the symbolism both while conducting official rites and away from them. Even in the present day, catholic clergy are detectable by their characteristic white collar outside of performing religious ceremonies.

### *Sacred Objects*

The use of materials in human endeavors has existed since the time of the first observable tools, and religion is no exception. By being used for conducting sacred rites, and infused with religious meaning, the normal rules of practicality cannot apply to their design and function. Decoration and ornamentation are needed to reflect that meaning that would be not only unnecessary for common tools of comparable shape, but could actually impede their use. Artistic symbolism adorning a sacrificial knife would be wholly out of place on the knife used for butchering cattle intended for the marketplace.

The archaeological record is replete with such objects, and they often enjoy the most prominent displays in museums. The practical tool used for daily chores may attract the archaeologist seeking to understand common cultural practice, but only the elaborately decorated “tool” sporting inlaid jewels is “OVUG” (on velvet; under glass) worthy. Sacred objects are not relegated merely to handheld tools though, but can include objects that serve a function for the sacred differentiated from common use. Braziers adorning the temple platform are not merely for fires used in providing light and heat as

would a common household torch, but are also used to illuminate night rituals or generate smoke (and sometimes incense) for the daytime spectacle as well.

In the Roman Catholic context, few objects demonstrate this greater than the chalice. The focal point of catholic liturgy is Mass, the service of Holy Communion, in which the food elements of bread and wine are “consecrated” to symbolize the body and blood of Jesus Christ which (according to the Christian myth) were “sacrificed” during the Crucifixion to atone for the sins of humankind. Even words “this is my body” and “this is my blood” and “do this in remembrance of me” are recited from the sacred text (i.e. The Bible or “Scripture”) during the procedure to reinforce the symbolism.

According to catholic doctrine, the chalice is central to the rite because as it holds the wine, and the incantations are performed, the very substance of the chalice’s contents changes to mystically represent the properties of the blood shed at the original Crucifixion. In his classic work, “The Golden Bough”, Sir James George Frazer was early to find parallels between Aztec and Roman Catholic religions that would become inspiration for this study. He wrote, “the ancient Mexicans, even before the arrival of Christian missionaries, were fully acquainted with the doctrine of transubstantiation and acted upon it in the solemn rites of their religion. They believed that by consecrating bread their priests could turn it into the very body of their god, so that all who thereupon partook of the consecrated bread entered into a mystic communion with the deity by receiving a portion of his divine substance into themselves” (Frazer 1951:568). The chalice held the wine (representing Christ’s blood), yet in some liturgical traditions such as Greek Orthodox, the fragments of the bread are mixed with the wine in the chalice and fed the communicants with a spoon as they approach to partake.

### *Sacred Rites*

Measured and precise protocols must be observed to approach the divine or supernatural, in order to entreat for the desired outcome or conjure the desired affect. “Performance” is a term that has been ascribed to rites performed by officials in the public arena, but the term carries the connotation that such acts are not carried out with genuine belief behind them. Certainly such could be assumed of officials whose status is reinforced by public ritual, but not as much as those rituals maintained at the popular level. Whether or not genuine belief resides in those performing the rites, or those witnessing them, the precise incantations, gestures, movements and delivery are part and parcel of conjuring/appeasing the supernatural requirements that dictate the behavior.

Catherine Bell describes the process of “ritualization” as not merely the reenacting of traditional customs, but acts that fulfill the ongoing expectations and cognitive assumptions of all involved as well (Bell 2009:118-124). The community in which sacred rites are performed has expectations regarding the meaning that the ritual should convey. A “feedback loop” forms in which, at least in the sphere of official religion, rites that are performed to reinforce the *status quo* of power structures (at least as assumed in a *structuralist* reading of Karl Marx) can become the “prison” of those same power structures. Those performing rites in official religious capacities are not at liberty to deviate from the popular expectation in performing them.

While a “top/down” stream is often assumed concerning rites and protocols, if those performing them fail to meet expectations of the witnesses, their job security can be at risk. Certainly this is reflected by the modern demand for persuasive preaching among those donors whose absence would be felt by a congregation’s budget, but the medieval



picture for Roman Catholicism is quite similar. The popular expectation on official religious rites is fed by the piety evident among the populous apart from public ceremony. Even in state religion, the religious structure is not funded merely by the state and taxes, but also by offerings and donations brought by the populace as well. Without such popular piety, Albert of Brandenburg would not have been able to raise the money to become archbishop of Mainz if his controversial fundraiser, John Tetzel, could not prey upon that piety for his success (Gonzalez 2010b:21; Schwiebert 1950:309-311).

### *Sacred Space*

That space is set apart for sacred use can be observed back into the first cave paintings or burial rites. In fact once humanity evolved beyond the allowing of community members to simply decompose where they died, the principle of *sacred space* was at work with the first funerary practices. While the argument could be made that burial was practical to prohibit consumption of the deceased by animals, it begs the question as to why such care would be shown to the deceased at all if not for ideological reasons. This, in turn, resulted in space that was used for a distinct purpose and that differentiated it from other space not being used for remembering, honoring or preserving the dead; sacred space was held distinct from common space. In the practice of religious ritual, inevitably areas will be designated to facilitate expressions of that religion that common space cannot perform, at least not to the same degree.

*Geographic* sacred space often will emerge related to the stories (myths) held in common and in high value by the culture. The present-day national flag of Mexico features the “vision” that came to the early Aztecs, which is of an eagle eating a snake perched upon a nopal cactus. This vision was, according to myth, seen on the island out

in the midst of Lake Texcoco, where the Mexica would eventually settle and their capital (Tenochtitlán) would grow and thrive. Whether such myths are truly part of a religion's corpus of legends, or if they are reverse-engineered to legitimize lands acquired by more "secular" means are determined according to one's own bias. Nevertheless, such visions make the land a sacred space, and therefore affects the cultural ties to them. Modern disputes over land in the Levant relate to a supposed divine land grant that appears, according to both Jewish and Christian legend, in the biblical book of Genesis. While myriad other factors must be considered, and the United Nations' actions of 1948 do not constitute to many a clear confirmation of divine intervention, the legend of the land grant to Abraham nonetheless remains among the factors brought up among both official and popular arguments during disputes over the "Promised Land." Geographic sacred space can also take the form of "hallowed ground" that was a former battlefield (which also relates to the sacred myths of a culture) or place of community burial (i.e. Egypt's The Valley of the Kings).

Part and parcel to geographic sacred space is the concept of "pilgrimage." Once any geography becomes sacred, pious travel to that location either in a lifetime, on an annual basis, or with even weekly regularity, becomes culturally normalized. In the Roman Catholic tradition, pilgrimages to Rome or the "Holy Land" are encouraged at both the official and popular level, such that in the medieval period, it had become "one of the highest acts of devotion" (Gonzalez 2010a:293).

*Topographic* sacred space emerges particularly where the Earth meets the sky. High places are a common form of designated space for sacred use because of how the elevation creates a natural sense of awe among the observant. Height superiority is

recognized among species as creating an advantage in survival and in combat, and naturally has been manifested in architectural demonstrations of power. The CEO's office is usually near the top of the skyscraper. Seldom, if ever, are higher structures interpreted as anything else but a reflection of greater power on the part of the owner. Attempts to attribute the construction of different pyramid types throughout the world to diffusion from a central culture have fallen short because of the overlook-ably simple explanation that the powerful seek to build tall structures (for burial or ritual), and that the materials of the time did not allow for vertical sides. This architectural habit of humans, however, is reflective of the instinct to pick existing high places already. Mountains often work prominently into sacred myths for how they facilitate encounters with the divine (such as Hammurabi receiving the law code depicted at the top of his stele, and Moses receiving the law code atop Mount Sinai). Topography relates with height not just because of the show of superiority, but also because of the cosmology of the culture as well. If indeed the heavens are above, then high places are closer to the gods; they are thus more likely to see, hear and accept what it is that the ritual seeks to accomplish with them. This type of natural theology, or theology of natural phenomena, extends also to other areas, making it fitting that the Netherworld is seen as below since that is where the dead is buried.

*Environmental* sacred space develops when elements lend themselves to mystery and to the inexplicable. Forests (Willis 1993:262-263), caves (Carrasco 2013:118) and deep oceans (Ferguson 2009:23), all hold mysteries from which can launch a plethora of stories and superstitions, and ancestral myths. In the ancient Near East, the Mediterranean

Sea carried mysteries that lent themselves to biblical myths regarding the “waters of chaos” (Genesis 1:2) and creatures that lived in their depths (Job 41).

*Architectural* sacred space does not deal solely with the structures mentioned earlier (though this study focused on Aztec pyramids). By being constructed by human effort, it has distinct cultural value beyond that of geographic, topographic, or environmental sacred space. It is a principle that decisions are made in architectural design regarding how spatial orientation should create proper attitude and movement within the ritual that it is built to facilitate. Vertical movement is certainly an obvious application, with a theology of ascent/descent reflected in the layout. Lateral movement is a factor, though, that architectural design also facilitates. If *sacred rites* must be performed toward compass headings, or facing toward or away from common people who are present to observe, the construction is undertaken with that in mind. In the case of burial pyramids, the architecture appears primarily to simply create a tall monument to the deceased. Accompanying temples for the funerary cult is often some distance away. The pyramid is not built to facilitate movement on itself. With respect to ritual pyramids though, whether in the case of Mesoamerica temple pyramids or ziggurats of the ancient Near East, staircases and platforms were included precisely to facilitate the movements of sacred rites upon them. In terms of movement, vertical and lateral often go together because of how the ritual specialist moves eastward (away from the people) when ascending a pyramid with a west-facing staircase.

Ritual, as an expression of a religious system, whether at the official or popular level, is a behavioral intersection of these various elements of the sacred. Godfrey Lienhardt describes these interactions in his detail about the sacrificial practices of the

Dinka (Lienhardt 1961). All of these streams come together to form the symbolic meaning behind the ritual performed. It is the symbolic nature of sacrifice that must be appreciated anyway. Emile Durkheim has pointed out that those symbols trump the pragmatic benefits when weighed for significance. Making his case is that in offering sacrifices to the gods, men, in essence, strengthen themselves because of how the gods, which reside in the hearts of men, are strengthened by the sacrifices (Durkheim 1915:387-388). Eschewing the simplicity of mere material explanations, Durkheim offers the sound conclusion, “The things which the worshipper really gives his gods are not the foods which he places upon the altars, nor the blood which he lets flow from his veins: it is his thought.” The sacrifice is infused with meaning that cannot be merely contained in the material benefits derived from it. It is too big for that.

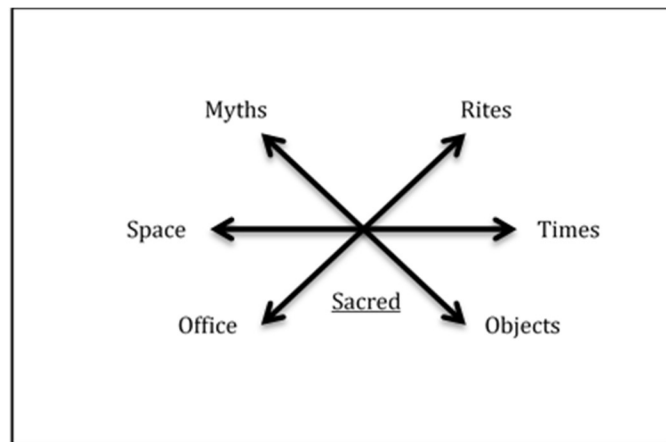


Fig 1.3 - Convergence of Sacred Elements  
by A. Ott

It is virtually impossible to separate these elements, so that a ritual practice could reflect only one of them. It is possible for some of these to stand alone, such as if a sacred myth is told in the community without accompanying ritual to symbolically reenact it, or if sacred times are marked merely on the calendar without an official or popular observance. In like manner, those holding sacred office still may be recognized for their status even when not performing ritual that demonstrates it. Even sacred objects can enjoy reverential focus even if not included in ritual, though in the majority of cases,

what makes the object sacred is its inclusion in ritual. Sacred rites are beholden to ritual as an official or popular behavior. In any event, even if elements of the sacred can be separated from ritual, ritual, when performed, is where these elements all connect (Fig. 1.3).

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGY

The phenomenon of imperial state religion is not unique to central Mexico of the Late Postclassic period. On the contrary, religious continuity across a wide region controlled through imperial politics is attested at the ancient Roman Empire surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, and the Inca Empire of South America, and many others. Pertinent to our study, as it concerns architectural continuity, is the examination and comparison of Roman Catholic cathedrals during the medieval period. When seeing the architectural similarities in medieval Catholicism (where none would assert that these do not represent ideological satellites to a central “hub”), the reluctance of many to find connectivity between ritual sites with as much architectural similarity within a geopolitically-controlled region becomes increasingly unwarranted.

Stylistic differences in cathedral design do not compete with the glaring continuities in use of space, orientation, and prominence to urban layout. Indeed, even the floor plans for these have ideological foundations as demonstrated in Figure 1.4 (Shannon 2015). Ideological rationale lies behind much of this design beyond the mere protocols of entering “sacred space”. The eastward orientation of these structures can be tied to Christian myth pertaining to afterlife and the entry of the deceased into it (called as “the Resurrection” in early literature). The altar at the rear of the structure has ritual

placement that is common to many cultures, but the “cross” layout is specific to Christianity in how it orients to a paramount sacred symbol.

In this way, cathedral architecture reflects more than mere utilitarian adherence to the common principle of scared space found across cultures, but instead demonstrates

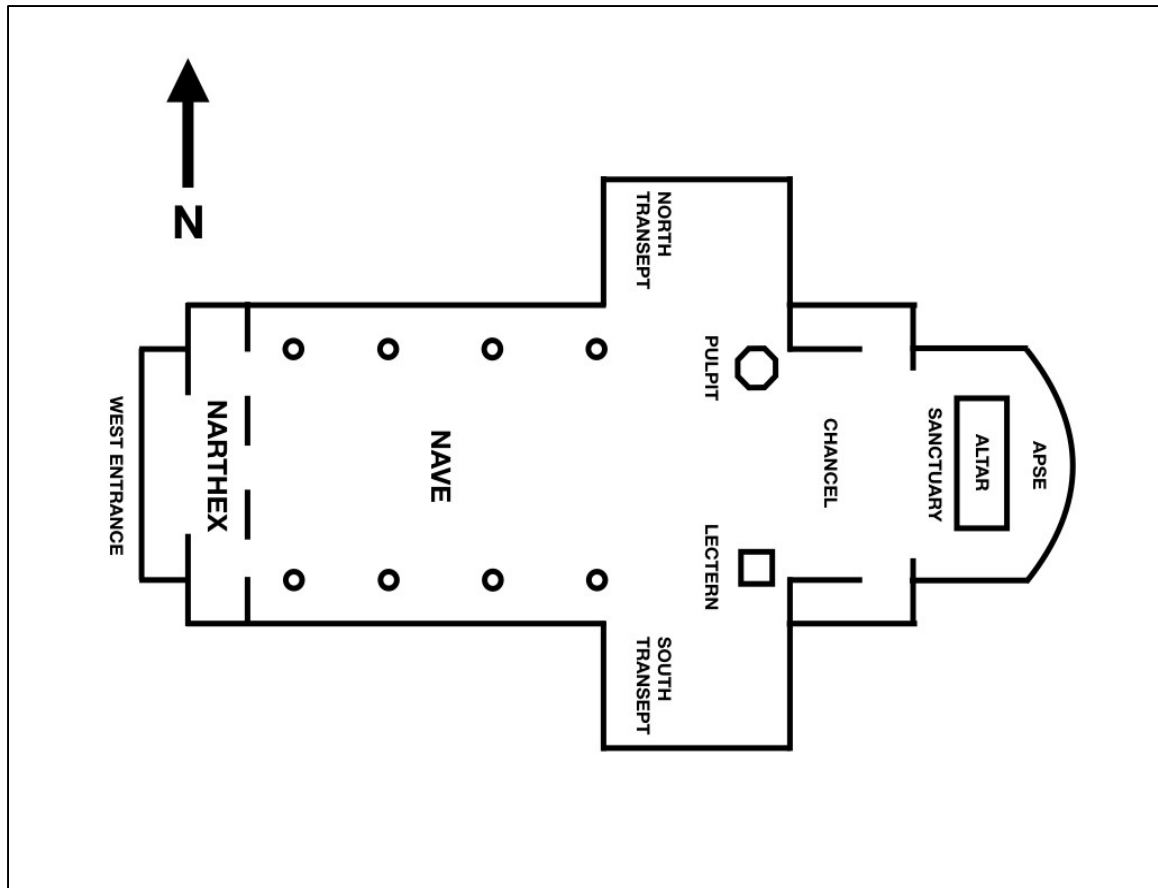


Fig. 1.4 - Example of medieval cruciform layout by A. Ott

shared ideology across a region that had been frequently under shared political control.

The analogy of medieval cathedrals does not, however, provide the “smoking gun” that would satisfy Smith and others reluctant to find that shared architecture among twin-temple pyramid in the Aztec period points to ideologically linked sites. With the combined evidence presented, however, a reasonable inference for such linkages can be made. This study seeks to posit this link.

## ROMAN CATHOLICISM AS STATE RELIGION IN EUROPE

The demonstrations of state religion by the medieval Roman Catholic Church shown above all suggest that those patterns are not unique to them, but shared across other cultures as well. Religion and social influence have always been inextricably linked, but the ancient world saw few (if any) examples where religion and political power were not inseparably integrated. For many in Western culture, a very familiar example of this can be found in medieval Europe, where the Roman Catholic Church wielded unrivaled power prior to the Renaissance and the rise of early Protestant Reformers. The Church's power was not always direct, but instead was exercised through state agents that either believed in the authority of the Church concerning divine matters, or feared its ability to withdraw support for state policy and rulers by means of its ubiquitous influence. In return for cooperation from state rulers, the Church's own structure and ideological messages often legitimized the status quo of the state. A symbiotic relationship is observable throughout history where "separation of Church and State" would have been the most foreign of notions.

### *Religious Symbolism*

For Christianity, the chief religious symbol was the Cross. According to Christian myth, crucifixion was the manner in which Christianity's central figure, Jesus of Nazareth, was executed for his claims of divinity. The four "Gospel" accounts in the Christian scriptures describe the unfolding narrative in which Jesus was crucified, and then according to their sacred myths, was "resurrected" two days later. Christian sacred times revolve around this sacred myth in that each year the Easter celebrations commence in commemoration of this event. In some cases it produces sacred space in that many will



undertake a “pilgrimage” to the sites in which these events supposedly occurred in and around the modern city of Jerusalem. In individual churches, sacred rites are conducted in commemoration of the Last Supper (Thursday evening) and the Crucifixion (Good Friday), all leading up to remembering the Resurrection (Easter Sunday). Those holding sacred office know that their churches will be uncharacteristically crowded in Easter Sunday, in that the significance of Easter to the Christian religion makes attendance and observance a greater requirement than the rest of the year.

The Cross, however, constitutes a sacred object when used as a decoration or ornamentation. For churches involving intricate liturgies, a Cross is carried at the head of the procession entering the space to perform (or participate in) sacred rites replete with symbolism for the religious observers. However, it is not merely an object. It also serves as a symbol to convey the totality of Christian beliefs whenever it is intentionally used in architectural design. Like most religious symbols, its meaning is only worth the knowledge held by the one observing it. To the Christian theologian, the Cross reminds them of all they know from religious study, but to the Muslim living in post-Crusades Levant, it represents something else entirely. Therefore, its use is more likely infused with meaning intended by official teaching when employed in an official capacity. Examples of official use of religious symbols are more glaring when used in the construction of sacred space through intentional architecture. The cathedrals of early medieval Europe certainly fit the description of official religion inasmuch as it presents a clear case of “top down” religious control.

### *Medieval Church Architecture*

For whatever personal piety may have been entertained at the popular level, the commoner was not able to affect the design and layout of major religious centers. On the contrary, the accumulation of wealth and medieval beliefs was poured into the construction of the early European cathedrals. The emphasis on studying church architecture is sometimes looked upon with askance, but Roger Stalley's defense of this is highly applicable to our current study:

“Architectural historians have been criticized for their preoccupation with ecclesiastical buildings, as if nothing else was constructed during the Middle Ages. Houses, palaces, castles, and other fortifications have been left in the domain of the archaeologists. The traditional response to this accusation is that church architecture attained a level of sophistication which was rarely matched in secular buildings. Although this reflects the accumulation of wealth by the Church, it was not simply a case of money. Even in castles, it was the chapel that received the most architectural attention. In devoting so much attention to religious buildings, early medieval society was scarcely unique: the architecture of the Greeks – or that of the Khmer in Cambodia for that matter – is principally associated with temple building. There is no ignoring the fact that, after the fall of the Roman Empire, church building became the highest form of architectural expression” (Stalley 1999:14).

He could have easily added Mesoamerica in that list and remained just as accurate. Indeed the dilemma between focusing on the architecture of sacred spaces and leaving the common structures to “the domain of the archaeologists” is by no means characteristic only of European history. Mesoamerica studies find a similar trend.

Stalley traces the development of church architecture throughout medieval Europe through a litany of specific examples. Tracing their growth in sophistication, he details

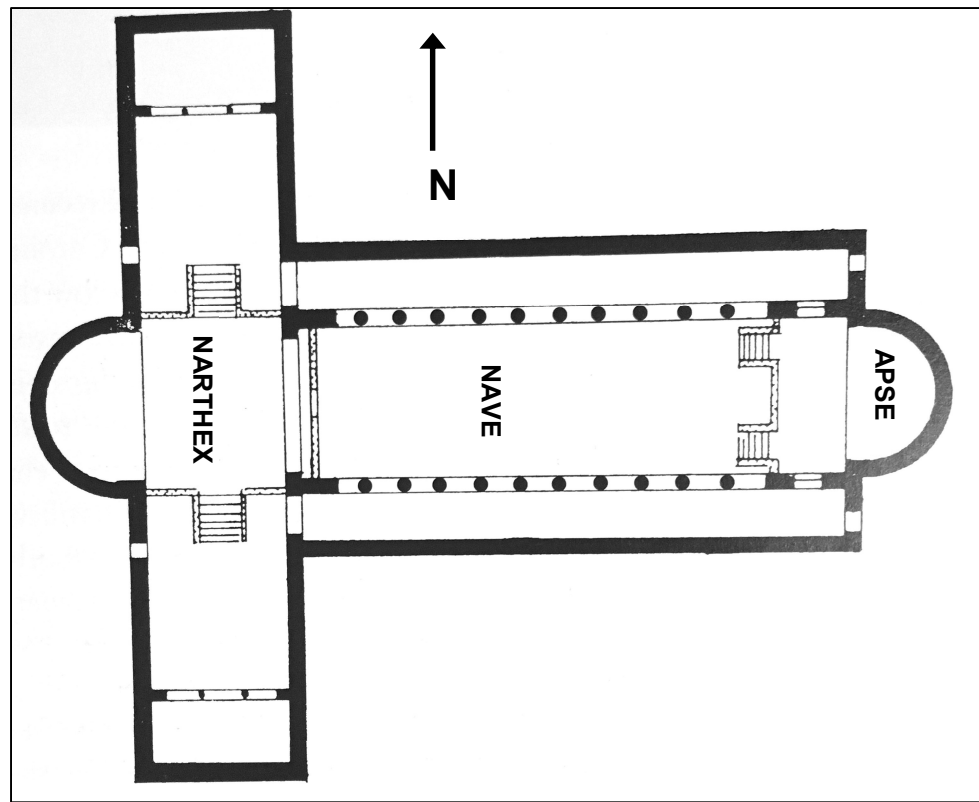


Fig 1.5 - St. Boniface Monastery adapted  
from *Early Medieval Architecture* (Stalley 1999:40)

the layouts, pillars and ceiling styles. An example of early simplistic design can be taken from Fulda in Germany. The monastery there was founded in 744 by a follower of St Boniface, “the Anglo-Saxon missionary who came to be venerated as the apostle of

Germany” (Stalley 1999:40). Between around 709 and 819, a church was constructed with a west-facing entrance, its apse to the east and a crypt below it (Fig. 1.5). The transept extended in a north/south alignment near the narthex, before attendees entered

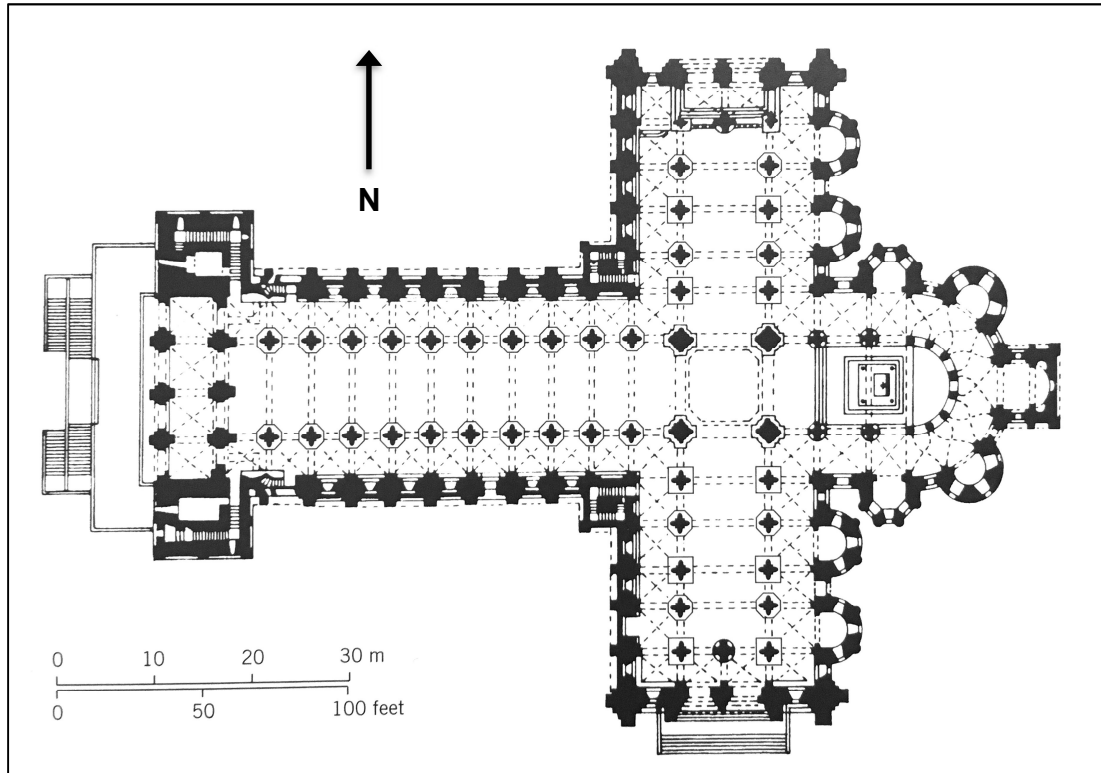


Fig. 1.6 - Santiago de Compostela adapted from *Early Medieval Architecture* (Stalley 1999:156)

the nave. This configuration enabled something of a “cross” configuration that spread across the region and beyond. Helen Gittos adds, with regards to Anglo-Saxon churches during the eighth century, “A cruciform plan became common with nave, west porch, twin porticos, and eastern chancel or sacristy” (Gittos 2013:160).

By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the sophistication was growing noticeably. The pillars and support designs showed their evolution but the basic components remained consistent. The apse to the east has been given various explanations. The reason that was given by

clergy in liturgical traditions (such as Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox) has been because of the imagery contained in one of the sayings of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew: “For just like the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so the coming of the Son of Man will be” (Matthew 24:27). In truth, many cultures associated the east with birth and the west with death. Ancient Egypt positioned their burial sites on the west side of the Nile River valley. Christian eschatology notwithstanding, ancient phenomenological theology simply saw that the Sun “rose” from the east (new life) and descended out of sight in the west. In addition, Anthony Aveni has shown that the sunrise at equinox created the effect of beaming sunshine directly between the dual temple atop the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán (Aveni, et al. 1988:295). The timing of ritual to take

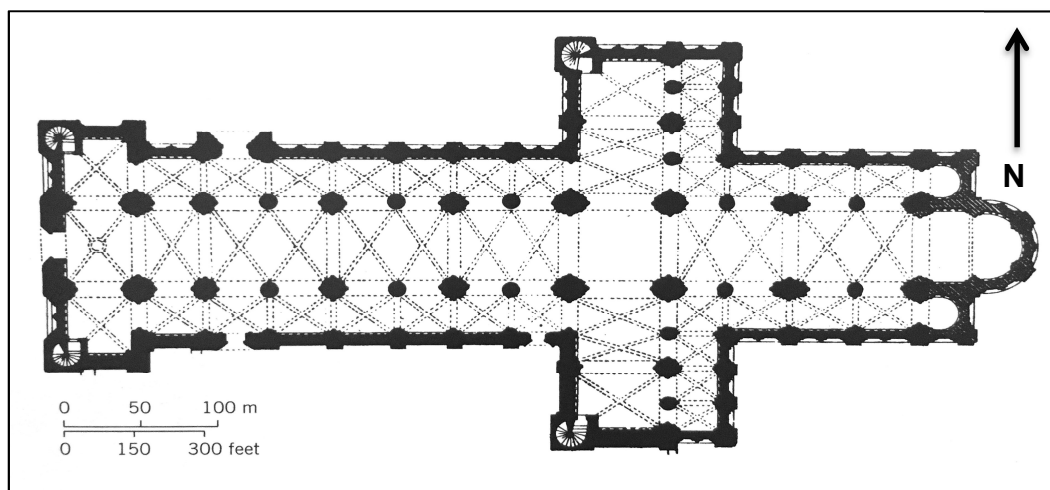


Fig. 1.7 - Durham Cathedral adapted from  
*Early Medieval Architecture* (Stalley 1999:217)

full advantage the sun’s course (whether at morning or evening) is hardly distinct to the Aztec pyramids. Church buildings have capitalized on this effect with the east/west orientation and stained glass windows at either end.

The evolution evident in the 12<sup>th</sup> century saw a significant development in style: the transept moved up towards the “head” of the church, where those holding sacred office conducted the Christian ritual. Santiago de Compostela (Fig. 1.6) was essentially

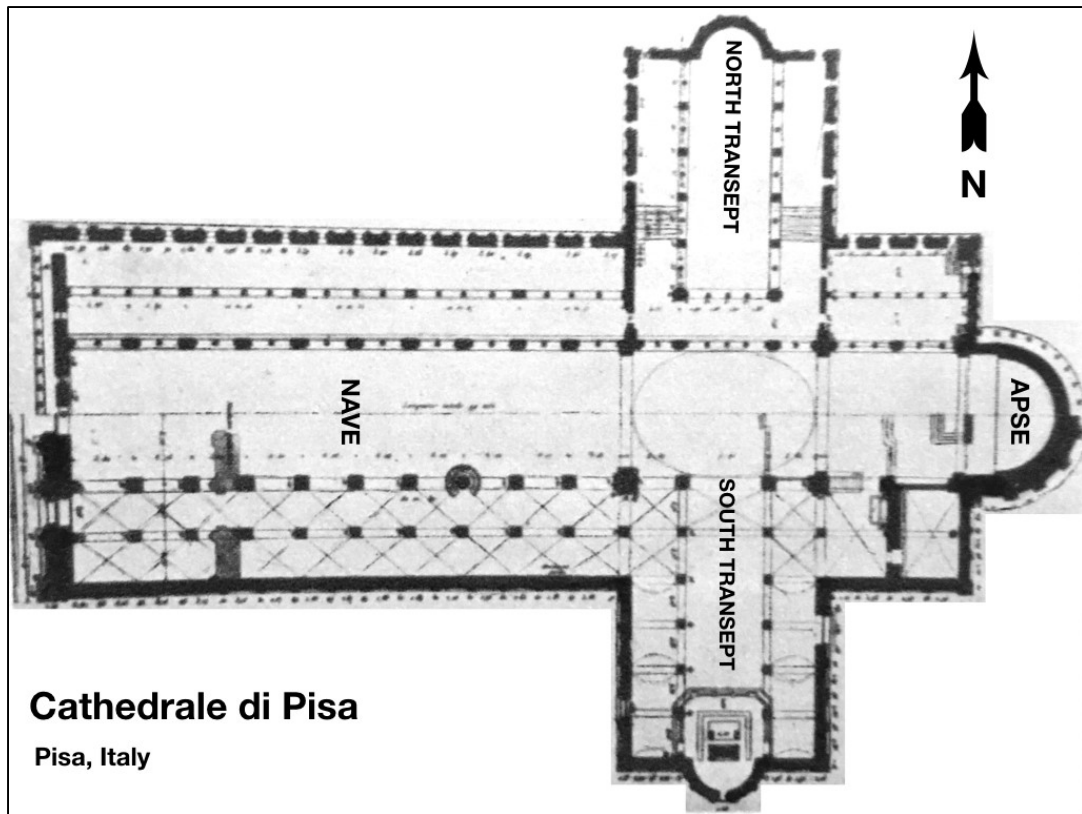


Fig. 1.8 - St. Maria Maggiore adapted from  
*Medieval Architecture* (Saalman 1962:ill. 98)

French in design, sharing many features with four important churches in France (St. Sernin in Toulouse, Ste Foi in Conques, St. Martial in Limoges, and St. Martin in Tours) that were all situated on routes taken by pilgrims (Stalley 1999:156).

Being over 500 miles away and across the English Channel, Durham Cathedral (Fig. 1.7) was nowhere near Tours or Toulouse for that matter, but shared a familiar architectural feature. Built within the same area, the transept placement reinforced the trend of shaping the layout closer to the Cross. The eastern apse continued the

consistency of the compass orientation and of the distribution of space for all involved, according to the usual plan of those attendees who are not conducting sacred rites but instead are observing the ritual performed on their behalf and occupying the area west of the transept. The same period saw this cruciform style in Pisa, as found at St. Maria Maggiore (Fig. 1.8), and the Chartres Cathedral (Porter 1909:285), which began construction in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrated it as well (Fig. 1.9). In the case of

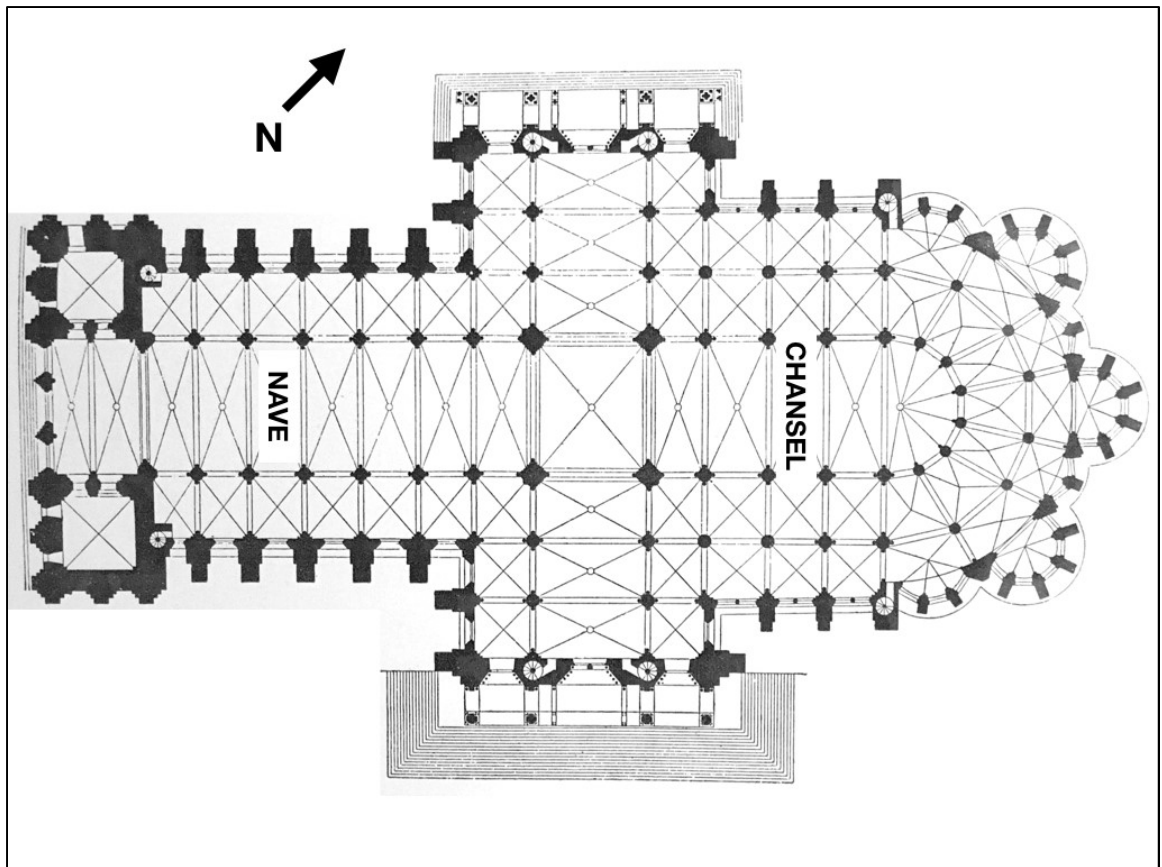


Fig. 1.9 - Chartres Cathedral adapted from  
*Medieval Architecture* (Porter, vol.1 1909:285)

Chartres Cathedral though, the standard eastern orientation could not be kept. Either due to topography or urban layout, the compass headings could not be followed without deviation. The consistent church layout of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries demonstrates a glaring common theme. Beyond the practicality of separating the ritual specialists from

the commoners by means of a transept transition in sacred space, the cruciform layout accomplished something distinctly “Christian” in its architectural symbolism. The combination of symbolism with architecture contributed to the structural “message” of the building design in a manner distinct to the official religion that built it.

The cruciform layout didn’t just resemble the Christian sacred symbol from satellite imagery (unavailable during the period anyway), it also facilitated similar experiences for occupants that entered at the various locations where the layout was used. Entering from the west, the common participant had a different experience than the sacred practitioner. For an early morning service, the sun shone through the windows above the altar to illuminate the nave in light that is possibly filtered through stained glass. The long nave offered places to sit as rites were performed, homilies were read from the pulpit or readings from the lectern were taken from the sacred text. The open space provided by the transept separated the sacred from the common personnel, with the seat of authority operating at the “head of the cross.” The design of sacred space in this manner not only reflected the symbolism distinct to the Christian religion, but assisted in generating appropriate religious sentiment and awe no matter which cathedral they encountered in their pilgrimages across Europe. Without a doubt, these structures formed a network of religious centers that shared common ideological goals in their very design.

#### IDEOLOGICAL CONTINUITY

While each of the cathedral structures examined above was the center of their own communities, each also pointed to a central authority that connected them all: Rome. The churches constructed in the eighth and ninth centuries did so at a time before Christianity encountered any major threats on the world stage. The religion sweeping



across North Africa and the Middle East (Islam) was still a curiosity, being called a “Christian heresy” by early polemicists, and the Great East/West Schism of 1054 was not even a fear on the horizon. After the Schism though, Rome had separated from the church in the East and developed independently. This is reflected in the rapid development of church architecture that was distinctly western, bearing no resemblance to earlier Byzantine brethren. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, several Crusades had demonstrated the power of Rome to summon resources and arms for those goals it deemed worthy of pursuit, and thus the power of the Church extended far beyond the ability to perform sacred rituals that reflected popular beliefs in the Divine.

The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century churches of France, Spain and England as examined above were most certainly Roman Catholic churches, and anyone who entered them either as common participants or sacred practitioners knew that all of the imagery, for as much as it pointed to Christ, also pointed to Rome. Official religious teachings would not have seen the link unreasonable, for in the teachings of the period, the worship of Christ cannot be separated from obedience to the “Vicar of Christ” operating with papal authority in the holy city. Spiritual and temporal power were inextricably linked in the net of medieval Christianity, and the architectural continuity across Europe reflected it.

## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

The data needed for this study comes from a plethora of sources ranging from archaeological to ethnohistoric in nature; from data as concrete as offering caches excavated at temple sites, to less tangible analysis born of ethnographic analogy. Chiefly it will be demonstrated how the material remains support such a hypothesis, and that it cannot be relegated to mere speculation. On the contrary, with archaeology, ethnohistory and cultural analogy working together, Aztec state religion emerges as an effective multi-site reinforcement of political will and power.

### THE CONTRIBUTION OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The archaeological data for the pyramids to be compared vary in their scope and detail. Templo Mayor, in the heart of modern Mexico City, has received by far the most attention and analysis of any site examined in this study. Understandably so, not only was Templo Mayor the largest of these monuments, but it sat at the center of the Aztec capital, creating an ideological “gravity” inward from the periphery to its spectacle. For this reason it enjoys the bulk of archaeological finds for analysis. In every category for comparison, Templo Mayor will represent the majority sample in both size and quantity. Excavations conducted under the direction of Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (Moctezuma 1987) and later of Leonardo López Luján (López Luján 2005) have revealed such a collection of artifacts, ranging from monumental architecture to offering caches, as to make the managing the data a formidable challenge by any standard.

The excavation history of Templo Mayor dates prior to 1978, but study of its structure and treasures truly began in earnest on February 12, 1978 when utility workers in Mexico City discovered a large stone sculpture. Analysts with the Instituto Nacional de

Antropología e Historia (INAH) (National Institute of Anthropology and History) would identify this as the Coyolxauhqui stone and, knowing its close association with the great pyramid, used it as a catalyst for intensive further research. The Proyecto Templo Mayor, started by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma as a result, would go on to yield the artifacts that have been useful for this study.

The pyramids at Tlatelolco, Tenayuca, Santa Cecilia Acatitlan and Teopanzolco have been excavated, with their artifacts collected in nearby museums, and even in some cases underwent restoration work. The comparisons they offer to each other and to Templo Mayor are primarily monumental, but their offering caches, artwork, braziers and other pieces hold significance as well. In each case their archaeological history, excavation reports and findings will be examined to generate as thorough a comparison as possible. Their value does not merely lie in those aspects they share with the others, but also in the features that make them distinct.

The usefulness of the archaeological data has specific boundaries though in both what it can reveal and what it cannot. Although archaeology is a sub-discipline within anthropology, its distinctiveness lies in its inability to observe the culture one is studying first hand, conduct interviews or otherwise observe the people in action as they go about performing societal functions and meeting relational expectations. It is an extinct culture, with actors long deceased and who are unable to offer personal accounts of daily life, or personal opinion regarding beliefs, myths and collective religious thoughts. Thus the scientist is left with only that evidence left behind with which they can approximate an assessment of the ancient religious structure. This is no small task considering how little of the immaterial culture the material remains will reveal. Nevertheless, to the degree that

the artifacts allow, archaeology must attempt reconstructing the ancient life ways as it relates to what a people believed, how they expressed it, what rituals emerged to organize that belief and how it bound them together.

Studying religion through archaeology is problematic because of how immaterial it can be. On this topic of archaeology and religion, Lars Fogelin has astutely pointed out that an archaeological study of religion will have to focus on ritual, since it is in religion's interaction with material culture through ritual that artifacts are made (Fogelin 2007:56). This, however, creates a precarious differentiation of religion and ritual that can leave analysis of either unsatisfyingly narrow. Julian Droogan assesses the state of religion of archaeology with: "Commonly the spiritual and the material have been treated as being the antithesis of one another and this has been to the detriment the examinations of human religiosity presented and published within the field" (Droogan 2012:23). Colin Renfrew also laments this obstacle with "from the standpoint of the archaeologist, religious activities are potentially open to observation only when they might be identifiable as religious by an observer at the time in question" (Renfrew 1994:47).

Beliefs leave no artifacts unless they are manifested in material remains. These remains include, but are not limited to, sacred structures, sacred objects and epigraphic codices describing their use, and they typically must be associated with a ritual or faith practice. Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson concur that without the mental representations of the culture's beliefs resulting in a ritual practice, it is unlikely that any artifacts will be produced for the archaeologist to study (McCauley and Lawson 2007:3-4). Beliefs have to become behaviors that utilize materials. Because of the difficulties,

Timothy Insoll decries the paucity of treatment for religion among archaeology textbooks (Insoll 2004:2-5).

Differentiating the “sacred” from the “profane” carries its own set of challenges as well. Signs that a structure is utilized in ritual practice, or that objects are designated for ritual use, are not always as obvious as they seem in present culture. As a point of ethnographic analogy: the carpet, chairs, door frames and spatial orientation in a contemporary Christian meeting facility (architecturally consistent with American Evangelical “megachurches”) may be indistinct from that any other concert hall or convention center. On the other hand, a structure that is centrally oriented in the settlement to facilitate sacred ritual, is decorated with symbolic carvings, sculpture and iconography, and can be reasonably associated with cultic artifacts nearby will fall under the category of “sacred space.” Defining what is “sacred” is not a simple task. Indigenous people decide for themselves what spaces are sacred to them. Jane Hubert helps to clarify with her explanation:

“The concept of sacred implies restrictions and prohibitions on human behavior – if something is sacred then certain rules must be observed in relation to it, whether it be an object or site (or person), must be placed apart from everyday things or places, so that its special significance can be recognized, and rules regarding it obeyed. Although the translation of words and concepts in other cultures may be inexact, the concomitant concepts of separateness, respect and rules of behavior seem to be common to sacred sites in different cultures. But the nature of the sacred sites themselves may be very different, and thus difficult for those

outside the culture to recognize, except by observation of the rules of behavior that pertain to them.” (Carmichael, et al. 2013:11)

For the archaeologist, “observation of the rules of behavior that pertain to them” is not part of the available data stream, and the artifacts do not explain themselves. Therefore the task is to interpret structures and objects according to their implied ideofunctional design. While it is certainly possible that a cutting tool adorned with images of ancestors has a strictly utilitarian purpose, it is improbable that the craftsman would expend the labor energy that is necessary to fashion it merely for common use. Making assessments from these artifact characteristics is the job of archaeology.

Once the artifact is categorized as having religious significance because of its probable inclusion in ritual, the characteristics of religious ritual come into play for determining the artifact’s function. Catherine Bell has offered a list of types (which are admittedly not exhaustive) for a workable ritual taxonomy (Bell 1997):

- Formalism: Rituals often employ more formal, or restricted, codes of speech and action than what people use in everyday life.
- Traditionalism: Rituals often employ archaic or anachronistic elements.
- Invariance: Rituals often follow strict, often repetitive, patterns.
- Rule-governance: Rituals are often governed by a strict code of rules that determine appropriate behavior.
- Sacral symbolism: Rituals often make reference to, or employ, sacred symbolism.
- Performance: Ritual often involves public display of ritual actions.

These all may have artifacts associated with them such that the archaeologist can attach the object or structure to the ritual type. For instance, structures will fall into both the formalism and performance categories of Bell's types because the structure is both set apart from the rest of the settlement and has a raised platform wherein the ritual can be conducted in full view of the on-looking public. Traditionalism comes into play because of how the structure may harken to ancestral architecture, giving the ritual a degree of continuity with a previous time romanticized by the contemporary practitioners. Bell describes invariance as "one of the most common characteristics of ritual-like behavior" and points out that more theorists than her even consider it the "prime characteristic" (Bell 1997:150). The archaeological context would not allow materials to be differentiated between invariance and rule-governance, but iconographic and epigraphic evidence can be used to place those artifacts within the specific rites of the culture in question.

Among the most obvious types that the archaeological record will reveal is that of sacral symbolism. Renfrew states plainly the importance of this with: "The most coherent insights into the belief systems of the past must come, if we exclude from the discussion the information available from written texts, from the analysis of symbolic systems. In such systems a coherent, non-verbal language is employed in such a way that someone familiar with the conventions can understand the significance of the symbols (i.e. what they signify) (Renfrew 1994:53)." Without symbolic clues to inform taxonomy, we are left with artifacts that either relate to the mundane chores of daily life and subsistence activities or sit unattached to the ritual function for which they were originally made and kept in use.

Still though, even artifacts replete with symbolic clues do not interpret themselves. At some point archaeology must overlap with philology for help from epigraphy evidence where available. Not all ritual practices are revealed in pictographic form on walls and tools. In fact, in prehistoric or band societies, no philological assistance will be forthcoming. Ethnographic analogy may play a role when a contemporary culture approximates the lifeways of the prehistoric culture in question (i.e. the Arctic Inuit), but archaeologists must admit to this limitation. For prehistoric studies, Bruce Dickson openly admits to these limitations:

“Reconstructions of the past generally work upward from the bottom, that is, they begin with the elements of culture most directly traceable in the material remains: subsistence and diet, settlement patterns, skeletal pathologies, technology, and such. The more daring among prehistorians venture on to inferences about social and political organization. Deductions about ideology and religion from such data are made only by the most foolhardy” (Dickson 1992:1).

Dickson places himself squarely in that camp, showcasing the difficulties in discerning the religion of cultures without the luxury of complexity in socio-cultural integration to offer the obvious trail of crumbs. Antiquity of the site is not the problem, but instead the corpus of material remains created by the culture. Band societies studied in North America dating from 500 C.E. to 1,000 C.E. will yield less religious material to examine than the Neolithic settlement Çatalhöyük sporting everything from cultic statues to wall-paintings (Mellaart and Wheeler 1967:77; Whitehouse and Martin 2004:17-43).



Fogelin admits that the task of associating artifacts with ritual practice has been a bumpy road and laments the tradition of referring to “any artifact or feature that was strange, aberrant, or inexplicable as religious, the assumption being that religion consists of those things that have no functional value or are just plain odd” (Fogelin 2007:59), giving rise to oft repeated archaeological “inside joke” that “if we have no idea what it’s for, it must be cultic.”

To the degree, though, that religion results in ritual, and ritual results in artifacts, the beliefs of that culture can be discerned according to the wealth of extant evidence left to examine. For prehistoric societies without structures to interpret, cave iconography, tool and even burial analysis (Pearson 1982) are launching points to unpacking the primitive religions. Doubtless those beliefs will be phenomenologically developed as bands deify the natural elements with which they interact, and even mythologize that most profound of human experiences: death. As levels of socio-cultural integration evolve, proportional to population growth, more evidence is generated. Structures and craft production will point to beliefs by means of the ritual materials. Specialized craft manufacturing develops and there would even be signs of mass production for household items bearing symbols related to collective myth. In essence, as cultures grow in size and complexity, from bands to “Big Man” societies and then to chiefdoms and to states, the degree to which the archaeologist must speculate about their beliefs because of sparse evidence decreases.

That religion, for all levels of societal complexity, interacts with the material world seems too obvious to constitute a mature assertion. Nevertheless, because religion can be such an immaterial aspect of the culture, many will balk at approaching it, electing

instead to remain in the relatively safer arena of subsistence analysis. Ritual analysis should not be considered unsafe though, for the evident trends toward the immaterial within a culture are both inevitable and understandable. For human beings, anything that produces a sense of awe has a potential to enjoy elevation to the divine, the spiritual or the sacred. Elements of the natural world such as meteorological phenomena or geological formations invoke particularization in the minds of the observer. Where environmental aspects meet has often been associated with the spiritual “thin place” (the barrier between men and gods is mostly “thin”) such as an ocean shore (where water meets the land), or a hilltop (where the Earth meets the sky). Arnold Van Gennep’s “liminal” area parallels this, where significant transition between phases of ritual is more easily facilitated in the mind of the participant (Van Gennep 2011). Along that line, high places in general become “thin places” because the height of it places the ritual participant closer to the “heavens” or simply creates that sense of awe by being taller than the rest of the settlement. If a mountain is not conveniently handy because of flatter topography, then it becomes necessary to build one such as the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia, or to build a designated ritual “mountain” in the case of Mesoamerica pyramids.

The drive towards phenomenological theology is consistent throughout human history, in no small part because human capabilities have also remained largely consistent and thus also that sense of awe about the natural world and our interaction with it. Dickson uses this to posit two assertions about the predictability of religious development: (I) All members of the species *Homo sapiens* share basically similar psychological processes and capabilities and thus show certain regularities throughout

time and across culture, and (II) Human culture is patterned, and this pattern is reflected in material aspects of life, including art, settlement and architectural forms, debris disposal, mortuary practices and so forth (Dickson 1992:15). It is no great stretch to imagine Homo sapiens developing similar religious beliefs as an ancient people given their cultural ecology.

As for the trend of Homo sapiens to develop beliefs based upon their experiences with the natural environment, few of those experiences can rival the profundity of death. Mortality is a universal phenomenon with which all creatures interact. Primates are observed mourning the loss of companions to predators (Averill 1968) and aquatic mammals appear to lament a death in the pod (Hooper 2011). Humans are no different, and have therefore reserved the most ideo-functional habits for association with that experience. Mortuary practices serve little functional value for the living apart from hereditary power structures that rely on continuity with ancestors for legitimacy. Reinforcing this, Pearson demonstrates how burial became a status symbol for the living during the Victorian era (Pearson 1982). Otherwise, how the living treats the dead speaks as to how much importance that the living has placed on the dead, and as to what status the deceased holds in the afterlife.

It is essential to apply the above principles to a specific example. The Mexica people of pre-conquest Mesoamerica left a plethora of material remains related to their various rituals – both formal and private. Official religion found expression in the public square through ritual use of architecture, sacrificial cutting tools and even sculpture representing their gods. The archaeological record contains this material evidence, offering clues to the belief practices. Epigraphic evidence taken from the Mexica's own

writings is helpful (Berdan and Anawalt 1997). Even more so is the ethnohistoric reporting bequeathed to us by Bernardino de Sahagún in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún, et al. 2012). However, archaeology as a distinct discipline makes its contribution to the overall picture by examining the artifacts associated with Aztec ritual.

The most obvious evidence lies in Aztec architecture. The structures filling their sacred precinct leave clues as to what manner of formal and public ritual took place there. Michael E. Smith describes three major alters used for public rites of sacrifice to the gods: (1) pyramids with twin-staircase design leading up to the sacrificial platform, (2) pyramids with single staircase design, and (3) circular pyramid design without corners (Smith 2012:220-229). Excavations have revealed that these structures served as the center for Mexica settlements, none being more prominent than Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan. These buildings are best associated with ritual because they are so obviously impractical for any other use. Even without the ethnohistoric evidence that inform historians as to what happened at the top of the stairs (i.e. human sacrifice), archaeologists could still reasonably conclude that these pyramids were not used as dwellings, food storage facilities or workshops. Their elevation above the rest of the settlement garnered them prominence not necessary for any other of those functions. Based upon human behavior patterns, it is unlikely that the necessary manpower and energy would be expended for those purposes as well. It therefore is not necessary to punt to “it must be cultic” as a catch-all for things that we don’t understand in this case.

These structures fulfill many of Bell’s types of ritual (Bell 1997). Formalism is evident in the structure itself, as well as in the ritual artifacts found with them (sacrificial blades and incense censers). Traditionalism can be seen in how the Aztec utilized the

architecture of Mesoamerican forebears. Manual Aguilar-Moreno makes the case that Templo Mayor's architecture resulted from the Mexica appropriating an earlier design at Tenayuca for themselves (Aguilar-Moreno 2007). Inheritance cannot be determined from excavating the temple structure alone. Ethnographic history provided by Sahagún speaks more to that. The same would be true for rule-governance; however, sacred symbolism and performance are hallmarks of temple architecture. Bell's categories of ritual find chief expression here in how the structural decorations and iconography point to which deity is being worshiped through abundant symbolism, plus the elevated platform makes the entire ritual a performance both for inspiring awe among the Mexica populace and fear in the hearts of visiting enemies.

Because of the architectural grandeur of the Aztec temple, getting at the immaterial by means of the material is not as problematic as has been lamented by both Fogelin and Dickson. Not only are all the elements of ritual available for examination, but elements of the sacred are quite evident also. The space surrounding the temple areas are set aside from the rest of the settlement, whether in Tenochtitlan or elsewhere. These are not located within a suburban setting as one of the many other structures, but instead in urban centers where the population dwellings and markets surround them as the *axis mundi* (ritual "center of the universe"). Dickson's anxiety regarding discerning ritual and belief based on little evidence does not apply here, and Renfrew would be satisfied that the abundant evidence of ritual in the Valley of Mexico has even Sahagún to explain it. Those studying the material remains of Aztec ritual may have the luxury of plentiful evidence in the archaeological context to examine, but the other side to that coin is that the abundance of evidence does not interpret itself. Interdisciplinary approaches are

inevitable as the archaeologist relies on ethnohistory and the culture's own epigraphy as well.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF ENTHOHIISTORY

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, archaeologists were more content to collect artifacts of past cultures, catalog them, and develop a culture history for the people group in question simply through chronology and style of what was found. As limiting the discoveries to culture history became increasingly unsatisfying, the need arose for responsible interpretative methods that could avoid unsubstantiated speculation. Philip Phillips' observation that "New World archaeology is anthropology or it's nothing" (Phillips 1955:246-247) demonstrated a clarion call for responsible reconstruction of past life ways that the artifacts alone could not provide. Compounding the limits of archaeology is the notion that religion is so intangible, dealing with cognitive and shared cultural ideology that may not leave corresponding evidence in the archaeological record. On the contrary, since archaeology deals with the material remains of past cultures, pursuing an "archaeology of religion" may seem defeating at best (too little evidence), and irresponsible at its worst (speculating hypotheses that the artifacts cannot support or disprove). For deciphering the meaning of the rituals that the evidence points to, Fogelin admits that heavy reliance on ethnohistoric and historic sources is still the norm (Fogelin 2007:66).

Original sources attesting to Aztec ritual come in primarily two forms: (1) accounts of early Spaniards reporting on the religious culture they found following the conquest of 1519-1521 C.E., and (2) pictographic codices drawn/painted in the native style that reflect pre-conquest history and tradition (none can be reliably ascribed a Pre-

colombian date). These are the earliest documents that illuminate the Mexica-Aztec religion, allowing historians to elucidate their cultural practices prior to turning to archaeology for architectural and mortuary analysis. Prehistoric archaeology would have to make do without such documents, but since they are available for examination, they comprise a vital piece of the ethnographic puzzle for the Valley of Mexico.

*The Florentine Codex: Fray Bernardino de Sahagún*

For original ethnography concerning the Mexica of Tenochtitlán, the first source that was consulted and is given greatest weight in secondary literature is Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590). His collection of works detailing Aztec culture in his “General History of the Things of New Spain” are compiled as the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún, et al. 2012). This body of work, published as a twelve-volume set, so thoroughly examined Aztec culture (from subsistence to ritual, from ideology to politics) as to earn Sahagún the accolades of “first anthropologist” and “pioneer ethnographer” of the sixteenth century (Alva, et al. 1988).

Following the Spanish conquest of the Mexica-Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City) in 1521, a “first wave” of cultural observers was among those already present for the military victory (Hernán Cortés among them) whose extant writings offered a picture of the first encounters (Alva, et al. 1988; Castillo, et al. 2012). Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan missionary, was among the “second wave.” Arriving in “New Spain” in 1529, eight years after the conquest, he was immediately enthralled with the beauties before him. Enamored with the Basin of Mexico and its topography, it was in this region, with its cities dotting Lake Texcoco, that he spent his time collecting source data from interviews and artwork. Born in Campos, Spain, his

early family life and education prepared him for the plethora of new experiences that await him, but it was his linguistic acumen that would serve him most.

The native tongue of the Nahua people (the collection of settlements at the Basin of Mexico) was Nahuatl. From 1529 to 1540, Sahagún had spent time at the college of Tlatelolco (twin city to Tenochtitlán), working with native students who had been brought into the monasteries to learn the language and customs of the conquerors. These students became his “trilinguals” who were able to assist in editing the manuscripts of his interviews with Nahua interlocutors later on. However, by 1540 he had become persuaded that more direct interaction was needed, resulting in his leaving the college “to work for nearly five years among the natives of the valley of Puebla” (León-Portilla 2012:103).

The credibility of Sahagún’s work has been tied to his methods for writing his ethnography, which were unparalleled at the time. His manner of finding trusted informants, who had personal knowledge of pre-Conquest Aztec society, could be considered also an early forerunner to the “focus group,” or “a survey or panel discussion”(D’Olwer 1990:109). In this manner he sought out his informants who could offer him reliable oral history, who were knowledgeable about the Aztec culture, and who had access to its glyphs and art and could explain their meaning. It could be said that, like modern anthropologists, he found his “consultants” (León-Portilla 2012:144). Having prepared a questionnaire or *minuta* (D’Olwer 1990:108) – as he called it – allowed him to focus on matters relevant to the material and intellectual culture of the Aztec in the Basin of Mexico.



Sahagún's enterprise is, more than other pursuits, a linguistic exercise. His labors to preserve the Nahuatl language, recording vocabulary and phrasing, were holdovers from his multi-lingual background. León-Portilla itemized eight points of Sahagún's methodology, the first of these being "the consistent use of the native language in the research. He and his collaborators (former students at Tlatolco) were profoundly knowledgeable about it, the latter as native speakers. They also had deep familiarity with grammar" (León-Portilla 2012:260). The *Florentine Codex* is replete with vocabulary terms that are transliterations of the original pronunciation. It is from this document that the names for gods, rulers and place names are preserved for later use. Names of deities such as Huitzilopochtli (patron deity of the Mexica), Huehuetēōtl ("old god of the hearth"), and Tlaloc (Aztec god of rain and crops), are extant in both identification and pronunciation because of Sahagún's meticulous attention to developing a Nahuatl lexicon that could be ascribed to the elements he recorded. This "ethnological-historical-philological-linguistic method" (León-Portilla 2012:163) served to preserve the testimonies in the native tongue, ensuring that the early records could "constitute genuine examples of pre-Hispanic literature in Nahuatl" (León-Portilla 2012:162).

It was not merely the selection of informants for which Sahagún resembles modern ethnographers before it was considered "cool". He also sifted his data through focus groups gathered in three different locations (Tepepulco, Tlatelolco and Mexico City) to ensure that they represented the pre-Conquest Aztec culture. In addition, he employed the help of his trilingual associates "from the Colegio de Santa Cruz, who could write down and explain the meaning of the paintings in Nahuatl, Spanish and

Latin” (D’Olwer 1990:108), to ensure that the final collection was faithful to Nahuatl tradition as well.

The methods used by Sahagún in gathering and developing his ethnographic data followed, seemingly without realizing it, the rigors and procedures of modern ethnographic science. His process for developing the “focus group” at Tepepulco and then sifting that data through similar groups in Tlatelolco and Mexico City (formerly the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán), all the while utilizing trilingual associates to ensure that the Nahuatl language was preserved throughout, adds together to form methods that can withstand the scrutiny of ethnographic introspection well into the present day.

*Fray Diego Durán*

For an illumination of Aztec ritual, Fray Diego Durán (Durán, et al. 1971) makes a significant contribution as well, in addition to his history concerning the Nahuaspeaking people (Durán 1994). His addition to the ethnohistoric corpus, however, differs considerably from Sahagún in that his intent was less benign according to modern ethnographic methods and sensibilities. Concerning rites and ceremonies related to the worship of Huitzilopochtli, he writes:

Some resemble those of our Christian religion; others, things of the Old Testament; and still others, diabolical and satanical, were invented [by the Indians]...I shall speak of that which is essential and necessary for the instruction of clergy. This is our principal aim: to warn them of the confusion that may exist between our own feasts and those [of the Indians]. These, pretending to celebrate the festivities of our God and of the Saints, insert, mix, and celebrate those of their gods when they fall on

the same day. And then introduce their ancient rites in our ceremonies. It should not surprise us if this happens today, for our movable feasts and their ancient and most important ones often coincide and at others times fall close to one another. [The people] will honor their idol; then they will observe the solemnities of the feast, take pleasure, dance, and sing! They are merrier than when [the feasts] fall on different days, for when they coincide they celebrate with more freedom, feigning that the merriment is in honor of God – though the object is the [pagan] deity. (Durán, et al. 1971:70-71)

Durán covers fewer categories than Sahagún does in the *Florentine Codex*, but writes more about the subjects that he covers. This is not entirely helpful though, for his alarm at the ceremonial details is evident in his report. Because of this, some embellishment can be reasonably expected. This is possibly not the case, but Durán's tone is a stark contrast to Sahagún's detached neutrality. As with Sahagún though, Durán is a compelling cache of narratives concerning the Mexica practices and beliefs. In his descriptions concerning temple sacrificial ritual, he references only Tenochtitlán.

#### *Aztec Codices*

The inclusion of ethnohistory must, by necessity, expand beyond Sahagún and Durán to include Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1997), Codex Borbonicus (Borbonicus 1974) and Codex Telleriano-Remensis (Quiñones Keber 1995). While references to the specific place names examined in this study are sparse, if extant at all, their greater value lies in illuminating further those aspects of Aztec ritual practice that

the archaeology will suggest can be found at similarly designed ritual sites. As with all such 16<sup>th</sup> century documents, taking them at “face value” can be problematic, but their contribution in a multi-disciplinary approach remains secure.

### CHAPTER 3: AZTEC PERIOD OF THE LATE POSTCLASSIC

The term “Mesoamerica” has to do with the region that today constitutes much of Central America, extending from central Mexico at its north end into modern Costa Rica in the south. The cultures examined in Mesoamerican studies enjoyed such diversity that the modern geopolitical boundaries bear little resemblance to the borders and times that separated the various people groups that range from the Olmec of the Early Preclassic (or “Formative”) Period (situated along lowlands adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico), to Late



Fig. 3.1 - Map of Mesoamerica by A. Ott

Postclassic in which the Aztecs dominated until the Spanish conquest in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Early archaeologists, enamored with the preponderance of cultural finds for the Maya (southern Mexico, highland Guatemala, Belize and the Yucatan peninsula), posited a distinguished culture in its “classic” period” not given to wars or the barbaric practices

observed by Spaniards later on. This assumption has been long sense abandoned, but the time designation remained. Thus, the Classic Period (Early, 200-600 CE; Late, 600-900 CE; Terminal, 800-1000 CE) is a timeline category given to cultures of Mesoamerica operating during that same period, whether inside or outside of the region ascribed to the Maya by language, art or architecture.

By extension, timelines (both pre and post) are ascribed to those cultures dating to before and after this Classic Period. In the Early Preclassic (2000-1000 BCE), the Olmec culture along the Gulf of Mexico developed complex settlements with architecture indicating a highly stratified society (Coe and Koontz 2013:61-80). The place name for these people comes the Nahuatl term *Oلمان*, or “Land of Rubber,” and thus the Aztecs referred to them as the *Olmeca* (Pool 2007:5). In Central Mexico, the communities of Chalcatzingo and San José Mogote (in the Valley of Oaxaca) developed as well (Coe and Koontz 2013:93). The Middle Preclassic (1000-400 BCE) saw the continuing rise of the Olmec culture along the coast, with growth in the Mayan regions as well as with Monte Albán in Oaxaca (Pool 2007:270-271). It was the Late Preclassic (400 BCE - 200 CE), however, that saw the rise of a city in central Mexico whose “footprint” in the archaeological history cannot be ignored.

The Classic Period (300-900 CE) saw the development of considerable writing and architecture in the Maya region, but it was Teotihuacán, in the central plateau, that rose as a major metropolis. It declined around 700 CE (Sanders and Price 1968:29), but its ruins demonstrate dominance in the Valley of Mexico, and its sculpture would show that artistic depictions of deities for that region would last well into the Postclassic. Teotihuacán derives its name from the Nahuatl term meaning “place of the gods”

(Aguilar-Moreno 2006:12), and its monument works and urbanization would serve as examples for Aztec construction (Berdan 2014:33-36). Outside the Valley of Mexico, Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca also thrived as a major polity (Coe and Koontz 2013:128-135), with developing urban centers increasingly siphoning commerce and populations away from Teotihuacán by the end of the Classic period (Coe and Koontz 2013:135).

## THE POSTCLASSIC PERIOD

The Postclassic period developed near the end of the first millennium and continued until the Spanish conquest of 1521 (Fig 3.2). Migrations of people in response to ecological changes, and militarism characterized this period. Tula, the center of the Toltec culture, grew and thrived early in this period, becoming the largest city in Mesoamerica at the time. Moreno describes the scope of its reach: “The Toltec

Date	Archaeological Period	Event	Year
	Late Aztec B	Spanish Conquest	1519
1500			
	Late Aztec A	Triple Alliance Empire Formed	1428
1400			
	Early Aztec	Tenochtitlán Founded	1325
1300			
1200	Early Aztec	Arrival of Aztlan Migrants	1200
		Fall of Tula	1175
1100	Early Postclassic		
1000		(Tula and Toltec culture)	

Fig. 3.2 - Postclassic timeline adapted from *Aztec City-State Capitals* (Smith 2008:26)

influenced much of Mesoamerica, as well as much of northern Mexico, parts of the Guatemalan highlands, and most of the Yucatán Peninsula. Later central Mexican cultures and Mayan dynasties did not fail to claim descent from the Toltec” (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:16). Tula lies approximately 60 kilometers northwest of Teotihuacán. Its urban growth and major occupation spanned just 200 years from 950 to 1150 CE (the “Tollan” phase). Following a series of droughts though, it went into decline. The majority of its population had moved, leaving the city weakened, when it later appeared to have been militarily overcome (Coe and Koontz 2013:170).

Not long after the fall of Tula, migrants moved southward, calling themselves as “Mexica” who had supposedly originated from a legendary place called “Aztlán” (Durán 1994:21). Whether this is an actual location beyond mere legend has not been determined, and attempts to relate it to sites in northwestern Mexico have not yielded satisfying results. The migration narratives given in ethnohistoric accounts would appear fanciful on some fronts, yet since their stories are placed within actual historic scenarios and it can be shown that the Nahuatl language did indeed enter the Valley of Mexico from the north, a “historic core” to their tales of settling in the valley can be entertained (Smith 2012:36-37).

The warlike Aztecs found difficulty in settling into the Valley of Mexico. Their customs and beliefs ran afoul of friendly relations, and prevented the welcoming reception needed to end their wandering. In 1313, when the ruler of Colhuacan offered his daughter to the Mexica chief in order to form an alliance, predictably they were expelled when he came to the celebration honoring the union, only to find that the



Mexica had sacrificed her already (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:19). Whether the Mexica settled on an island in Lake Texcoco because of the vision given to them by Huitzilopochtli, their patron deity, or whether because they were run out of everywhere else cannot be known. Nevertheless, when they reached the island near the swampy western shore of the lake, they settled there and split into two groups, founding Tenochtitlán (after their chief Tenoch), and Tlatelolco just to the north.

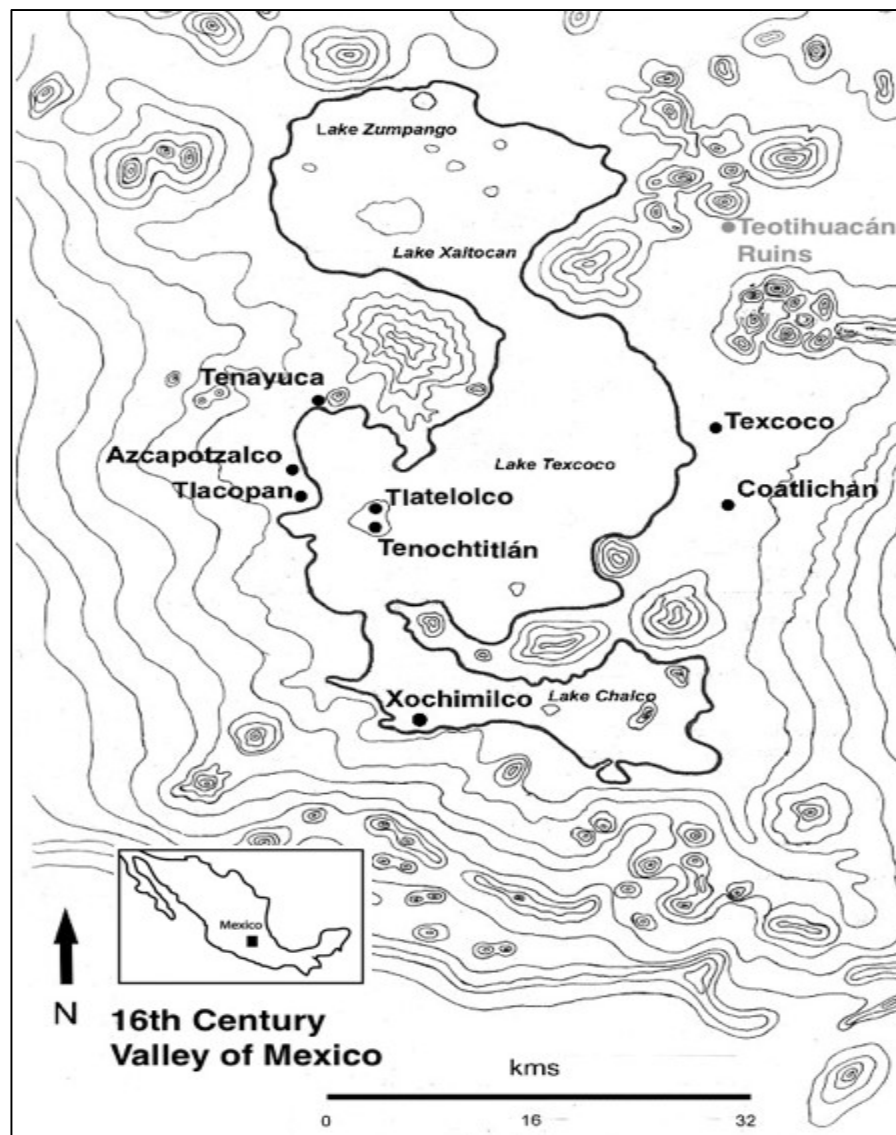


Fig. 3.3 - Map of Postclassic Valley of Mexico by A. Ott

In 1325, the city of Tenochtitlán was founded, marking the beginning of Mexica settlement that would eventually rise to dominance within a span of 100 years (Smith 2012:46-49). It was during this period that, because of their origin myth of coming from Aztlan, the term “Aztecs” (people of Aztlan) was applied to them. Durán adds that, “because the Aztlan name means “whiteness” or “Place of the Herons,” the term Aztec would also mean “People of Whiteness” (Durán 1994:21). The Nahuatl language spread rapidly in the region,

#### AZTEC RULERS

The first king, Acamapichthli, was crowned in 1375 CE. At the same time, construction of a temple that would become not only the city center, but also the ideological center for Aztec culture, began with temporary materials of reeds and straw. A humble shrine was built for their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli (“hummingbird on the left”), and for Tlaloc (well-attested deity of rain and harvest in central Mexico).

Acamapichthli ruled for 20 years but produced no heir and Tenochtitlán was, at the time of his death, still under control from nearby Azcapotzalco. In 1396, Huitzilihuitl was elected as the successor and ruled for just over 20 years. Through alliances secured through his marriage to Ayauquiatl, daughter to King Tezozomoc of Azcapotzalco, he helped to further establish Tenochtitlán as a political entity among the city-states of the Basin of Mexico. His son and successor, King Chimalpopoca, followed his father’s practices and showed respect towards his maternal grandfather, King Tezozomoc.

However, unrest in the royal court of Azcapotzalco resulted in a threat of war with the Aztecs. While this war did not materialize, enough malice was generated in the intrigue that Chimalpopoca and his only heir were assassinated in the palace as they slept.

The aftermath of this event left, for the Aztecs of Tenochtitlán, a desire for stronger leadership that would act firmly with their enemies, from which they lived in fear of annihilation. They found it in Itzcoatl (r. 1427-1440), who not only roused the people of the city to battle with his speech, but allied with Tetzcoco and Tlacopan to free themselves from the tyranny of the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco. This period would prove pivotal, for not only did the power shifted from Tepanec to Aztec, but it laid the foundation for what would be known as the Triple Alliance Empire going forward as the Coyoacans and Xochimilcas were defeated in the same manner (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:41).

The death of Itzcoatl in 1440, due to disease, left big shoes to fill. King Moctezoma I was up to the task. He further established relations with the King of Tetzcoco (Texcoco) through ceremony and mock battles that celebrated their alliance and actually ceased military activities between them. Moctezoma also ordered the expansion of the Great Temple but this required stones to be quarried offsite and labor to assist with the work. For this he looked to the kingdom to the south of Chalca. The response of the Chalcas to the demand was so sternly negative though that war ensued from the insult. The resulting end was that the Chalcas were defeated and the prisoners were then sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli. The Chalca control territories were thus annexed into the expanding Aztec empire.

The run of strong leadership that was enjoyed by Tenochtitlán ended with Moctezoma I, as the successor, Axayacatl, was not like his two predecessors. Having inherited an expanding empire, he set his sights unwisely against enemies that were stronger than anticipated. While his victory in the Valley of Toluca offered some

promise, he suffered horrible defeat attempting to subjugate the Tarascans. This sign of weakness led to intrigues closer to home, when the ruler of neighboring Tlatelolco attempted to throw off Tenochtitlán's rule. The rebellion was put down, but Axayacatl's reputation was tarnished as a result. His attempts to save face with further military campaigns to expand the kingdom would prove fruitless.

King Tizoc served during the comparatively unremarkable episode in the history of Aztec kings. Reigning for only five years, his major contribution was to commission a construction phase of the Great Temple in which it was expanded; yet even this is part of his disappointment. Durán illuminates the events of his death:

During this time Tlacaelel urged Tizoc to finish the building of the Great Temple because only a small part had been constructed. But before the work could begin, members of Tizoc's court, angered by his weakness and lack of desire to enlarge and glorify the Aztec nation, hastened his death with something they gave him to eat. He died in 1486, still a young man (Durán 1994:307).

The successor to Tizoc was nothing like him. King Ahuitzotl was a military commander who set about to expand the kingdom further. He also expanded the Great Temple, calling all the surrounding inhabitants into Tenochtitlán for a four-day ceremony that supposedly sacrificed over 80,000 victims (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:44) during that time frame. The high number may be an exaggeration, but the continuous stream of blood cascading off the temple steps is quite plausible, if indeed accounts are to be believed regarding how the populace gathered the blood for their own use "as a blessing."

Ahuitzotl was known not just for his military successes and for expanding Aztec territories, but also for his attention to the urban development of Tenochtitlán. He died in 1502 just after the inauguration of a new aqueduct system.

Moctezoma II held the unfortunate place of being the final Aztec *huey tlatoani* prior to the Spanish invasion of 1519. His reign was marked by rebellions and struggles with colonized territories that often resisted the confiscatory tributes that they had to send into the capital. During these skirmishes, the list of enemies that would eventually align with the Spanish invaders was expanded. The situation was ultimately untenable in that as different groups demanded their autonomy, this forced Moctezoma II to rule with an iron first, which in turn produced more resentment among the colonies. The downward spiral was born as a seeming inability, on the part of Aztec rulers and ruling classes, to ever be content with what had been won already. Expansion was mandated, which would ultimately lead to their undoing.

## CHAPTER 4: AZTEC RITUAL AND SACRED SPACE

*When the masters of the captives took their slaves to the temple where they were to slay them, they took them by the hair. And when they took them up the steps of the pyramid, some of the captives swooned, and their masters pulled them up and dragged them by the hair to the sacrificial stone where they were to die.*

*Having brought them to the sacrificial stone, which was a stone of three hands in height, or a little more, and two in width, or almost, they threw them upon it, on their backs, and five [priests] seized them – two by the legs, two by the arms, and one by the head; and then came the priest who was to kill him. And he struck him with a flint [knife], held in both hands and made in the manner a large lance head, between the breasts. And then into the gash which he made, he thrust his hand and tore from [the victim] his heart; and then he offered it to the sun and cast it into a gourd vessel.*

*After having torn their hearts from them and poured the blood into a gourd vessel, which the master of the slain man himself received, they started the body rolling down the pyramid steps. It came to rest upon a small square below. There some old men, which they called Quaquacultin, laid hold of it and carried it to their calpulco, where they dismembered it and divided it up in order to eat it. (Sahagun, et al. 2012:3:3)*

The examination of Aztec ritual space and architecture naturally requires a corresponding look at Aztec ritual that occurs within that space or upon those monuments. It is not enough to simply describe the rituals performed, but to place them within their larger religious context, discussing what the cultural significance of those rituals are to the society that performs them. The lengthy quote from Bernardino de

Sahagún above is necessary to appreciate why such practices, alarming to sensibilities of the Judeo-Christian West, would be entertained within a society not lacking in arts, sciences for the times, and even elaborate moral codes that paralleled those of their Spanish conquerors. Aztec religion was varied and rich with diverse symbolism and rituals, and reflected all of the sacred elements one might expect.

#### SACRED ELEMENTS IN AZTEC RELIGION

Codified sacred elements are a key characteristic of state religion, and the Aztecs maintained robust expressions of all of them. Well attested in ethnohistoric codices, these elements of the sacred prove both comprehensive in scope and indicative of multi-stratigraphic piety, such that 16<sup>th</sup> century interviewers lacked any doubt of the Aztec devotion. Some examples of each are needed to complete the picture.

##### *Sacred Space*

Templo Mayor was situated in the center of the sacred precinct temple complex, which was arranged in the center of the capital city, that sat on an island “prophesied” by their patron deity Huitzilopochtli, as their new home (Durán 1994:42-44). This geographically placed Tenochtitlán at the center of the universe, and the Great Temple was the center of that. Architectural sacred space differs from environmental, topographical and geographical types because it is culturally constructed; yet the Great Temple was all of these things as well. Often environmental aspects develop “sacred” power because of their ability to inspire awe, which was certainly the reaction of the first Spaniards that saw this city on a lake (Díaz 1963:216), who could not be certain what they saw was even real. This made the city sacred in a geographic manner as well, with causeways approaching the metropolis from the shore, stretching to from the south,

west, and north. Aztec temple structures were also topographically effective and inspiring awe for their elevation above the surrounding structures. Aztec ritual structures also took diverse forms: single temple pyramids, twin-temple pyramids, circular temples, plus various other altars and shrines (Smith 2008:97-113). Not lacking in religious architecture, the Aztecs maintained a wealth of sacred spaces (plural) for the vast diversity of deities and rituals interwoven into their calendar.

### *Sacred Times*

For Aztec religion, the 260-day ritual calendar (the *tonalpohualli*, “counting of the days”) was in use during the Aztec period, but was widely used for the cultures across Mesoamerica long before the Aztecs (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:290). This ritual and astronomical calendar was used for horoscopes, holy days for ceremony, a record of significant historic events, and to even determine good or bad days for conducting commerce, going to war or traveling. A 365-day annual calendar (*xiuhpohualli*), along with the 52-year round calendar (*xiuhmolpilli*) were employed for determining the recording of events or keeping annual harvest and feast celebrations. The 52-year period formed what can be interpreted as a Mesoamerican “century” (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:290-294). Upon the conclusion of each 52-year cycle, the Aztec conducted the “New Fire ceremony” in which all fires (public spaces and households) were extinguished in order to be reignited at night as the Pleiades became visible. When they reach their zenith in the night sky, the priests sacrificed a man, built a new fire over the chest cavity where his heart had been removed, and used that one flame to reignite all other fires in the Valley of Mexico (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:298-300). Francis F. Berdan describes what an anxious time this could be: “hearths were central to domestic life,



temple fires were perpetually maintained and the Aztecs' most stressful ritual occurred every fifty-two years as the New Fire ceremony" (Berdan 2014:231). This "stress" was due to more than merely the necessity of fire in households and public spaces for illumination, warmth and food preparation, for indeed their myths included stories of the world ending in previous times on such an occasion. With each New Fire ceremony, disaster had been averted for the time being.

In "The Ceremonies," Sahagún describes the annual feasts and rituals being undertaken that his informants relayed to him, which forms a list for the Aztec sacred calendar of occasions to be kept and observed. In the Tlacaxipehualiztli ceremony, or "the Feast of the Flaying of Men," the one being honored would, while costumed in bird feathers and various decorations, receive a ritual meal that included a bowl of dried maize and a piece of flesh from the captive they had brought (Carrasco 1999:84; López Luján 2005:218). Sacred time observances at both the official and popular levels are perceptible in historic sources (López Austin and López Luján 2017:612), with evidence that the state cult followed the 365 day calendar to promote the great national deities, and the community 260 day calendar, focusing more on local patron deities.

Various festivals were observed in the community as well such as Atamalqualiztli, "The Eating of Water Tamales," in which every eight years a seven day fast was followed by a feast and dancing (Sahagun, et al. 2012:3:177). As with other religious cultures though, sacred times did not merely mean days on the calendar. This could also mean times throughout any given day. Sahagun recounts how often incense was offered: "it was four times during the day and it was five times during the night. The first time was when the sun showed itself here. The second time was when it was

midday. And the fourth time was when the sun had already set. And at night, thus was incense offered. The first time, it was when it was dark. The second time was when it was time to go to sleep. The third time was when the shell trumpets were sounded. The fourth time was at midnight, And the fifth time was near dawn. And when it was dark, incense was offered; the night was greeted” (Sahagun, et al. 2012:3:216). With this the Catholic monastic regimen of prayers given at *matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none,* and *vespers* would have seemed similar to the Franciscan friar.

### *Sacred Rites*

Leonardo López Luján sufficiently summarized the centrality of sacred rites with “The chief purpose of any rite is communication with the supernatural, and to facilitate contact, ritual ceremonies must take place at specific times and places” (López Luján 2005:37). The popular expectation on official religious rites is fed by the piety evident among the populous apart from public ceremony. In Book VI “Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy” of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún describes the prayers that were said during the public ceremony that had so become formalized as to warrant their delineation on their own. The headings of the first eight chapters vary slightly, but a few will be given to show their significance:

*First Chapter. Here are told the words which truly issued from their hearts when they spoke, at the time that they supplicated him who was their principle god, the [who was] Tezcatlipoca, or Titlacauan, or Yaotl, at the time that a plague prevailed, that he might destroy it.*

*Third Chapter. Here are related the words which they uttered from their very hearts as they prayed to Tezcalipoca, whom they named Yaotl, Necoc yoatl, Monenequi, to request aid when war was waged.*

*Eight Chapter. Here are told the words which they uttered from their very hearts when they prayed to Tlaloc, to whom they attributed the rain. (Sahagún, et al. 2012)*

The consistent theme is that such incantations “issued from their hearts” or were “uttered from their very hearts.” The prayers and confessions that were recorded by Franciscan anthropologists are reminiscent of an Anglican Book of Common Prayer or Roman Catholic missal. In the measure of official versus popular religion, the 16<sup>th</sup> informants painted a picture of a religious society from the greatest to the least.

It is Aztec sacred rites, however, that are evident in official religion that make the twin-temple pyramids so significant. Sacrificial rites are among the most culturally potent, particularly in the case of “mortal sacrifice” (involving the death of a living victim). Not all blood sacrifices are “mortal” though. The Aztec practice of autosacrifice

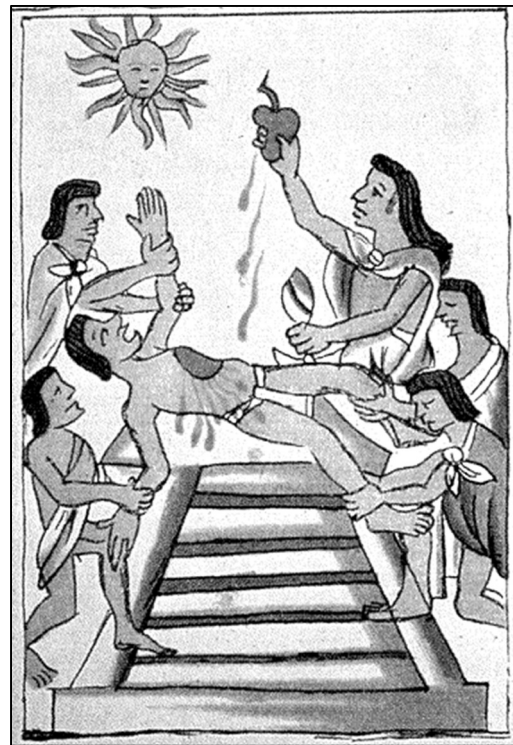


Fig. 4.1 – Sacrifice from  
*Florentine Codex*  
(Sahagun, et. al. 2012:folio 52)

was the offering of one's own blood by stabbing ears, tongue or genitals (Smith 2012:219-220). One's own life blood was certainly a valuable substance to offer to the gods, but to offer the life of a living victim (specifically by extracting the heart upon a sacrificial stone) was symbolically unrivaled (Fig. 4.1).

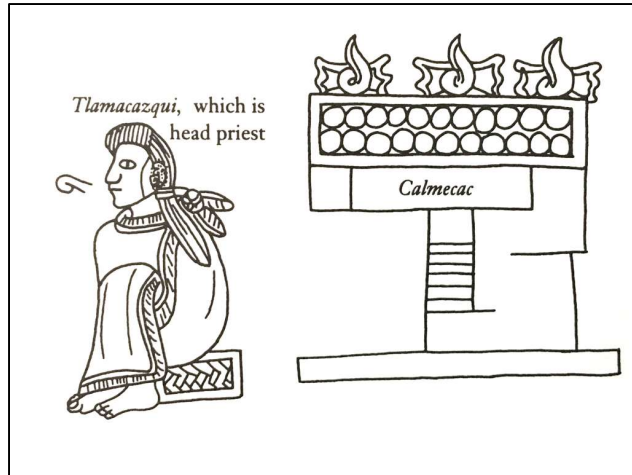
For many human sacrifices, the victim underwent ritual preparation and costuming in order to serve as an *ixiptla* (deity impersonator). They were dressed like the deity they were to symbolize and reenacted events associated with the legend of that god (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:154). This practice figures prominently in the Aztec calendar of rituals. In most instances of mortal sacrifice held at the zenith of the Great Temple, the victims had been war captives. By contrast, to be chosen as the *ixiptla* was a tremendous honor that resulted in up to a year of preparation prior to the sacrificial event (Smith 2012:222). Those chosen as the *ixiptla* were trained in music and dance, and were dressed as the deity they were to impersonate (Carrasco 1999:83).

Interestingly, Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján used the term “centralized liturgy” to describe the ever-present Aztec rituals both at the official and popular levels (López Austin and López Luján 2017: 612). In Catholic circles, “liturgy” is popularly defined as “the work of the people,” to stress its participatory aspects. While speaking of “Aztec liturgy” may appear to apply Catholic terms out of their context, the description fits and only strengthens the analogy between state religions.

### *Sacred Offices*

The clerical structure of Aztec religion demonstrated formal organization and state-religion characteristics. In like manner to the Roman Catholic paradigm, youths were received into the Mesoamerican equivalent of “seminaries” and trained in those

aspects of ritual, myth, and behavior that was required for their office. The “priest” label certainly applies to Aztec religion, and in Sahagún’s book of “The Ceremonies,” he lists 37 names of such ministers, or *tlamacazque*,



“who served in the homes of each of the Gods” (Sahagún, et al.

Fig. 4.2 - Aztec Calmecac and Priest courtesy of Frances F. Berdan (Berdan and Anawalt 1997:4:127)

2012:206-215). Like the rest of Aztec society, the structure of the priesthood was highly stratified. The upper echelons serve chiefly at the behest of the *tlatoani* (king). Young men were raised by parents to enter the priesthood, and at ages 10 to 13 could enter the *calmecac* for education in the sacred trade. The main duties of priests included performing rituals, administrating and caretaking, and educating others (Fig. 4.2). They led chaste and devout lives, with strict moral codes and harsh punishments for violations. Their appearance differentiated them as ritual specialists, as they went about their duties of sacrifices, keeping the ceremonial fires burning, and offering prayers according to the times of the day (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:87-91).

The parallels between the structure of the Aztec priesthood and that of Judeo-Christian traditions are not difficult to perceive. Indeed, Fray Diego Durán noted these long before the intimations of this study. Regarding these comparisons, he writes:

“Other youths were more bent, more inclined, to religious matters and to cloistered life. When their inclination was noticed, they were

immediately set aside and brought to the chambers and sleeping quarters of the temple and were decked with the insignia of the priesthood, as in our own Holy Church. When our boys show a vocation for the ecclesiastical life, they are given a tunic and a cap, the insignia and garb of the priesthood. Later they will be tonsured and ordained in the first minor order. Thus these natives took the youths from the schools and centers where they had learned the ceremonial and the cult of the gods and sent them to a house of higher learning” (Durán, et al. 1971:113).

With regards to the official religion in an Aztec context, however, these men were not difficult to identify. Many wore black hoods and long gowns, with hair matted together by countless bloody ceremonies (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:91). Estimates place more than 5,000 residents in the precinct of Templo Mayor, and due to the variety of priests, entering the clergy presented a promising career (Rojas 2017:225).

### *Sacred Objects*

Sacred objects demonstrate authority of the ritual specialist as well as contribute to the symbolism of the ceremony. In many cases, they include the very ornamentation on the clothing for those holding sacred office, and can indeed be the clothing itself. The importance of these objects cannot be overstated. David Carrasco agrees, calling them “some of the most potent vehicles for the communication of religious meaning and social hierarchy” (Carrasco 1999:129), and reminds us to include “sculpture, costume, masks, wall paintings, sand paintings, pottery, amulets, and architecture” in the

category. Decorative flint knives (Fig. 4.3) are a prime example sacred objects designed for used in sacred rites. Even without the ethnohistory to illuminate their intended use, the decoration indicates willingness to invest “sweat equity” into an instrument that is designated for greater things than mere household utility. Such objects were not merely valued for functionality though, as many would become offerings included in caches, along with “obsidian artifacts, godly statues, miniatures, stone containers, stone masks, sacred insignia, and marine sand” (Berdan 2007:258).



Fig. 4.3 - Flint knife; photographed by A. Ott

### *Sacred Myths*

As is often the case across cultures, Aztec sacred myths are the arena where tales about the gods determine the nature, use and observance of all the sacred elements. So extensive and varied are they that a full examination of them is beyond the scope of this study; however, what must be covered are the myths that dictate the architecture central to this study, those being: the gods Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli.

### TLALOC AND HUITZILOPOCHTLI: DIVINE DUALITY

The two deities represented by the twin-temples of Templo Mayor were Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. Tlaloc had been well attested in the Basin of Mexico, with Classic period representations of the “storm god” at Teotihuacán bearing close resemblance, and is associated with rain and the bountiful harvest that it could provide. Huitzilopochtli was the patron deity of the Aztecs, featured prominently in their migration myths, and was associated with war and conquest (Moctezuma 1987:26).

The duality represented by these deities being paired atop the Great Temple has both ideological and economic implications. From the viewpoint of national ideology, they represent both heritage and achievement. Tlaloc has been worshipped in the Valley of Mexico long before, and links the Aztec to Teotihuacán (the place where the gods became). Huitzilopochtli, as their war deity, represents their rise from obscure and humble beginnings to their dominance through fierce tactics and conquest. Tlaloc = the

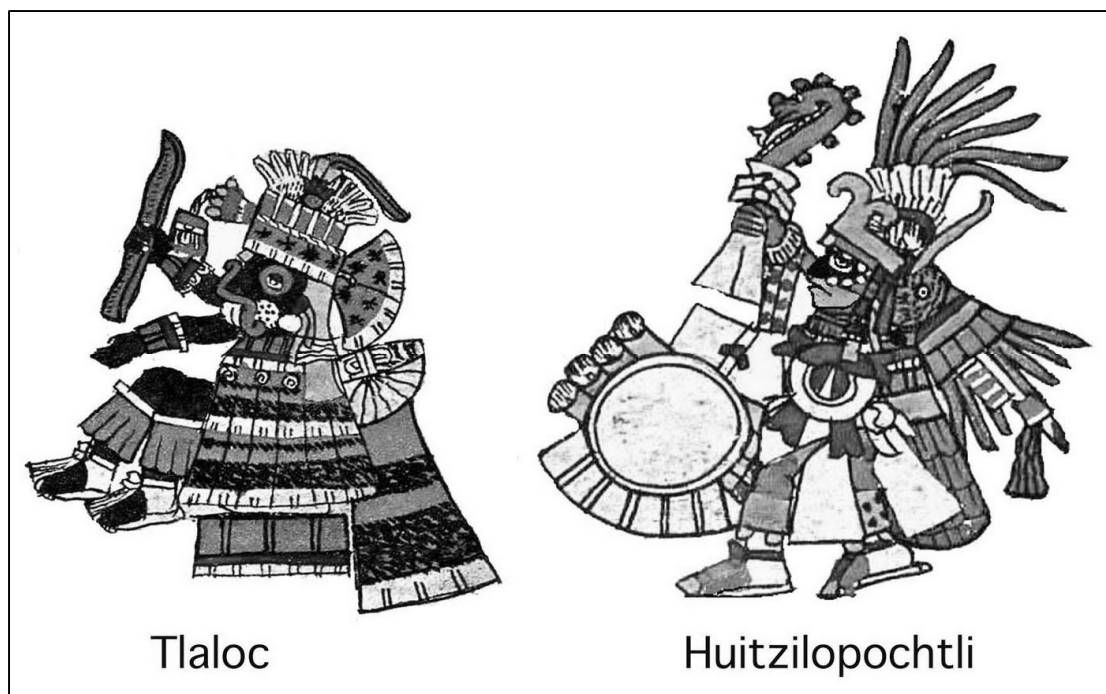


Fig. 4.4 - Images adapted from *Codex Bordonicus*

greatness that was; Huitzilopochtli = the greatness that is. Observable in many conquest states is the arranging of history to show how they constitute the high point to which all history was moving. With Tlaloc’s temple atop the pyramid, having a blue painted roof, and Huitzilopochtli’s red temple beside it, the national symbol of the Aztec’s “providential” dominance would be a gleaming reminder of their birthright as the greatest kingdom that Mesoamerica had seen.



The divine duality served as another symbol though; that being the two dominant halves of their economic engine. Tlaloc brought water and fueled agriculture.

Huitzilopochtli brought war and conquest, which fueled tribute and taxes. Moctezuma refers to this as the “essence” behind the “phenomena” (Moctezuma 1987:26). While he does not state this narrowly, to categorize the material allusions present in the duality as the “essence” is to lean too heavily towards a materialist reading of the rituals.

Nevertheless, it is unavoidable that the architecture and imagery would serve a multi-layered purpose, with economics always being one of them.

Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlán facilitated rituals for events of the sacred calendar year round, not just for those occasions honoring Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. As a multi-use ritual space, sacrifices were conducted in the worship and commemoration of other deities and state events as well. It was the construction itself that served as an ever-present symbol of the divine duality linking the old with the new, history and achievement, economic and ideological vitality.

The above elements of the sacred all apply to Aztec ritual and are evident in every description. The sacrifices conducted at Templo Mayor, described by Sahagún and Durán, and depicted in ethnohistoric imagery, employ every element. But it is the structure itself, The Great Temple, which serves as a continual reminder of the sacred as well. The very architecture reflects Aztec sacred myth while constituting sacred space. Visible from throughout the city and even to the shores of the lake, the fire of its braziers, illuminating the structure at night and generating smoke pillars by day, reminded all onlookers that sacred rites were continually conducted on their behalf by those holding sacred office, according to the sacred myths known to all. The double staircase, twin-

temple pyramid was a distinctly Aztec symbol of religious and national significance. No other explanation accounts for its design in central Mexico.

## CHAPTER 5: AZTEC TWIN-TEMPLE PYRAMIDS

Examining the full variety of Aztec temples, ritual structures and ritual spaces is beyond the scope of this study; therefore, the focus is on the main ritual space, Templo Mayor, and those places where its design was duplicated in the territory of the Triple Alliance. In each case, parallel staircases leading up the double temple zenith are the common element. Offerings and sculptures vary, but the architecture remains consistent



Fig. 5.1 - Zona Arqueológica Templo Mayor (roof top);  
photograph courtesy of Rick O'Loughlin

for the sites of Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco, Tenayuca, Santa Cecilia Acatitlan, and Teopanzolco. Codex Ixtlilxóchitl attests twin-temple pyramids at Texcoco and Tlacopan, but no archaeological remains for them have been unearthed (Ixtlilxóchitl 1976). Therefore, their architecture cannot be examined or dated.

### TEMPLO MAYOR OF TENOCHTITLÁN

The focal point of the universe, the *axis mundi*, as far as the Mexica were concerned, was “Coatepec,” the Great Temple (Templo Mayor) at Tenochtitlán, an

architectural and ritual center of the world expressing dominance over the peripheris (Carrasco 2013:70; Moctezuma 1987:38; Reese-Taylor 2012:754). All aspects of the Great Temple (Fig. 5.1) drew the cultural consciousness inward to the center. The structure represented the full integration of religion and state. López Austin and López Luján summarize this well with, “Religion and politics were not only mutually dependent of each other, but both had blended together and become transformed in order to form the foundations of an ever-expanding state.” They agree that this central structure to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc represented a ubiquitous symbol to “the two determinants of the Mexica state: the tribute regularly paid by militarily conquered peoples and the annual crops resulting from the agricultural activities” (López Austin and López Luján 2017: 608).

Excavations of Templo Mayor began in earnest shortly after its discovery in February of 1978, with the first director of *Proyecto Templo Mayor*, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, taking the helm (Moctezuma 1987). With this initial work, the various construction layers and outline of the Great Temple were revealed. Like those twin-temple pyramids that had already been discovered above ground, it had a west facing orientation with twin, parallel staircases rising from the floor. The Spanish destruction had essentially flattened the site, revealing its construction phases which has been likened to a “layer cake.” Because of the proximity of the temple, the construction, offering caches, sculpture and how it matched descriptions from ethnohistoric sources (plus the proximity of the stone depicting the dismembered body of the goddess Coyolxauhqui), there was no doubt that this was the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán. The work of Moctezuma consisted of three phases in which the project (1) collected all materials

concerning the Great Temple, whether in ethnohistorical sources or archaeological studies, (2) performed actual excavation and mapping on the site, and (3) employed an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the finds (Moctezuma 1987:24-25).

Excavations revealed that the temple was enlarged on several occasions, for different reasons, with the newer temple constructed over the remains of the older one. This was undoubtedly done because of subsidence under the structure, lowering it into the soft swampy soil. New construction phases would have been necessary just to retain a respectable height for its visibility to the surrounding area. However, as the kingdom expanded and rulers grew in power, there can be little doubt that the motive behind expansion would have been to reflect the growing prestige of the empire. It cannot be asserted that the last temple phase was the same height as the earliest ones. Seven construction phases were identified, with 100 offering caches having been discovered that are associated with its various phases. A summary of the project's discoveries follows below (Moctezuma 1987:32-47):

Phase I relates to the earliest temple that was made of temporary and perishable materials. No evidence remains for it because of this, and excavation is not possible.

Phase II remains as a nearly intact structure in its original form. Dating to approximately 1390 BCE, the distinct double staircase leads to the temple houses for Tlaloc on the north side and Huitzilopochtli on the south. Original paint for the temple shrines still exists, along with the sacrificial stone on the platform at the top of the southern staircase and the Chac Mool on the platform on the northern end. Excavations revealed nine offering caches associated with this period; six associated with the shrine of Huitzilopochtli and three with that of Tlaloc. Moctezuma points out that, "No marine

items are present; this is significant, for it indicates that there still was no military expansion towards coastal areas and that our chronology may be correct in the sense that they were still under the control of Azcapotzalco” (Moctezuma 1987:40).

Phase III was associated with the reign of Itzcoatl because of the glyph of 4 Reed carved into the rear platform wall of Huitzilopochtli’s stairway (about 1431 BCE). This corresponds to construction carried out following the liberation by Itzcoatl. Thirteen offerings were found in this phase; ten in the north half (the Tlaloc side) and three in the south half (Huitzilopochtli). At this stage, marine items are present, showing that importing fine goods from distant regions is now showing the growing trade and commercial reach of the empire (Moctezuma 1987:40).

Phase IV, dating to approximately 1454 BCE, revealed one of the richest phases in terms of temple decorations. So extensive was the find that the project separated it into two stages: (a) dating to the beginning of the construction project in 1454, (b) dating to approximately 1469, at the beginning of Axayacatl’s reign. Of the construction phases generating offering cache discoveries, this was the most generous, revealing seven offerings in IVa (six containing marine items) and thirty-two offerings for IVb, with twenty-two containing marine items. The decorated braziers for this phase, as well as sculpted frogs and serpent heads, demonstrate considerable artwork. The remains of marble flooring showed wealth applied to the temple dedication. The monumental stone sculpture of Coyolxauhqui was found at the center of the southern side of the platform.

Phase V revealed only the general slab covered with stucco (dating to approximately 1480 or shortly thereafter), and four modest offerings. This is consistent with the brief and disappointing reign of Tizoc, whose failures were previously described.

Phase VI dates to approximately 1500. Its modest offering cache remains (three in all) as it appears are due to destruction and looting by the Spanish, being closer to the surface after the temple destruction. Nevertheless, this phase saw construction of new shrines north of Tlaloc's temple (including one *tzompantli*; skull rack), as well as the "Eagle Knight Precinct". Moctezuma's belief in the addition of the Eagle Precinct is that "this complex was used for ceremonies of that military order so important to Mexica society" (Moctezuma 1987:35). The precinct has a general hall structure, covered by roofs, that is approached by a staircase.

Phase VII can be associated with the reign of Moctezuma II and is the final structure that the Spanish would have observed and early accounts described upon entering the city (Castillo, et al. 2012). Five offering caches were recovered from the project. Moctezuma laments, "All that remains is part of the stone floor of the ceremonial precinct and a trace of the place where the temple stood before it was eradicated" (Moctezuma 1987:35). These building phase dates are not without dispute, with Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Emily Umberger differing on their analysis on stages IV through VI (López Luján 2005:52-54). In addition, whether all of the offerings represent items from conquered territories has been questioned as well. Emiliano R. Melgar Tisoc and Reyna B. Sólis Ciriaco, having examined Teotihuacán style masks in among the Templo Mayor offerings, found that off the seven that were studied, two of them potentially were of local manufacture and not looted from the ancient Classic period ruins to the northeast (Tisoc and Ciriaco 2014). This supports the idea that by the Late Postclassic, the Aztec were, instead of importing all important ceremonial goods, began their own manufacture and developing an "imperial style" of their own. Contributors at the 2015 Annual

Meeting for the *Society for American Archaeology*, in a symposium titled “Crafting the Tenochcan Identity and Style,” such Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Adrián Velázquez, Emiliano Meglar, Reyna Solis, et al., would concur . This also comports with what is known of state religions elsewhere, when the production of sacred objects comes under the watchful control of religious structures also.

*Proyecto Templo Mayor* is ongoing under the leadership of Leonardo López Luján, who continues the work of not only further excavation, but thorough analysis of the offering caches that have been unearthed since 1978 (López Luján 2005). His exhaustive study demonstrates the full diversity of offerings embedded in the construction phases of Templo Mayor, and the specific regions from which they were brought. In addition, his analysis extends to the level of interpreting the “ritual syntax” of offerings for their arrangement not only within the specific caches, but their distribution around the entire ritual structure (López Luján 2005:113). Groundwater under Mexico City and urban obstacles are among the logistical challenges faced for archaeological study of the site, yet it continues to yield new data as artifacts that are well-preserved are discovered because of their lack of exposure. The Phase II platform is visible to the touring public, and a roof has been constructed over it (Fig. 5.1), preserving its paint and features from the weather and sun.

More than any other structure of central Mexico, Templo Mayor yields insights into the ideological and ritual focus for the Aztec culture, a society that rose to such dominance in a relatively short time. Taking some inspiration from the ancient ruins of Teotihuacán to the northeast, they exceeded that legacy and crafted a sacred structure that



uniquely reflected their values. Similar features in other nearby temples deserve analysis and posited explanation.

## TLATELOLCO

While Tenochtitlán was the undisputed Aztec capital, Tlatelolco (Fig. 5.2) deserved its label as the “twin city” in both history and grandeur. 1.93 kilometers northwest of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán lies the “templo mayor” of Tlatelolco. As



Fig. 5.2 - Tlatelolco temple; photographed by A. Ott

with Tenochtitlán, the temple of Tlatelolco underwent several construction phases as well. The city was founded 12 years after Tenochtitlán, on the island of Xaltelolco (“on the hillrock of sand”) when the original settlers split into two groups. The island had been previously inhabited by groups related to Teotihuacán and the Tepanecs, and so was suited for the new settlers (Aguilar-Moreno 2006:241-242). The city developed independently of Tenochtitlán until it was annexed during the reign of Axayacatl in 1473.

Once the twin-cities shared a single polity, it developed into one of the largest markets in Mesoamerica.

While the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán has received the bulk of excavation and study in literature (deservedly so), the twin-temple pyramid of Tlatelolco matches it in “size, grandeur and architectural history” (Smith, et al. 2008:102). Frontal depictions of the temple in Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1997:10r) and Telleriano-Remensis (Quiñones Keber 1995) show double staircases leading to twin temples, as with Tenochtitlán. While the temple fell into disuse after the Axayacatl rebellion, Moctezuma II allowed its refurbishing and reactivation. Bernal Díaz del Castillo described the destruction of the Templo Mayor at Tlateloco, as well as the discovery of offerings there (Castillo, et al. 2012:194). The distinct construction phases are visible to the present day and its artifacts are housed at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City.



Fig. 5.3 - Tenayuca temple; photographed by A. Ott

## TENAYUCA

Earliest of the sites under examination, this Chichimec city was founded by the legendary Xolotl in 1224 C.E., prior to Aztec control of the region. The pyramid (Fig.

5.3) remains the most intact of the twin-temple pyramids for examination. Because of the early date for the founding of Tenayuca and its pyramid construction, it is viewed as the early influence for the contemporaneous twin-temple in Teopanzolco (examined below) and the later Templo Mayor(s) of Tenochtitlán and Tlateloco.

It underwent six construction phases during its tenure, and as with Templo Mayor, each was built atop the remains of the previous one (Fig. 5.4). Moreno summarizes the construction periods, starting with the earliest temple being “carved stone slabs facing a rock core. Thereafter, the current pyramid would be used as a core for the next successive layering/construction

phase. Slabs were coated with cement made from sand, lime, and crushed *tezontle*.

Color would then be applied. Carved stone serpent heads, year

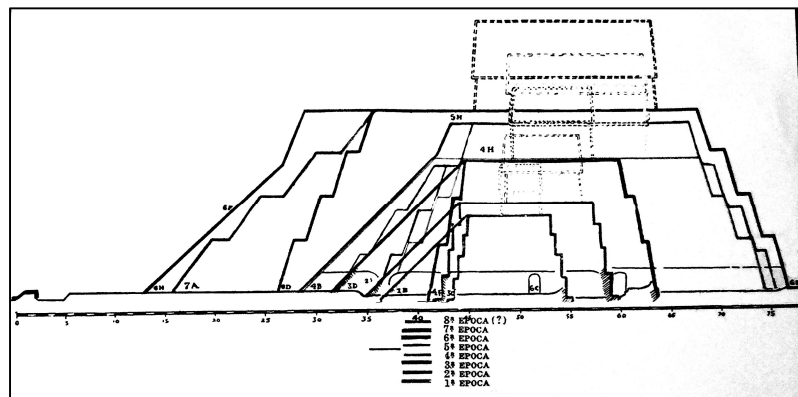


Fig. 5.4 - Schematic of construction phases displayed in the museum at Tenayuca Zona Arquelógica; photographed by A. Ott

glyphs, shields, knives, and other symbols were used for decoration. The low platform that projected from the pyramid was ornamented with bones and sculpted crossed skulls” (Aguilar-Moreno 2006). Lined with serpent sculptures, it is understandable that Bernal Díaz del Castillo would label it as a “town of serpents.” Serpent heads also protruded from the walls as a decoration motif (Fig. 5.5). Smith adds that “the symbolism of the twin-stair pyramid was important enough for the Mexica to copy this style when they

started building the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán in the Late Aztec period” (Smith 2012:44). He considers that the Mexica use of the archaic style can be likened to use of Greek and Roman styles in European cities. However, this does not fully explain as to why the style was utilized for the capital ritual center. Moreno and INAH both describe that the twin-temples of Tenayuca related to the duality of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli as with Tenochtitlán. While it is possible that the earlier twin temples carries other meaning, by the time that the region came under

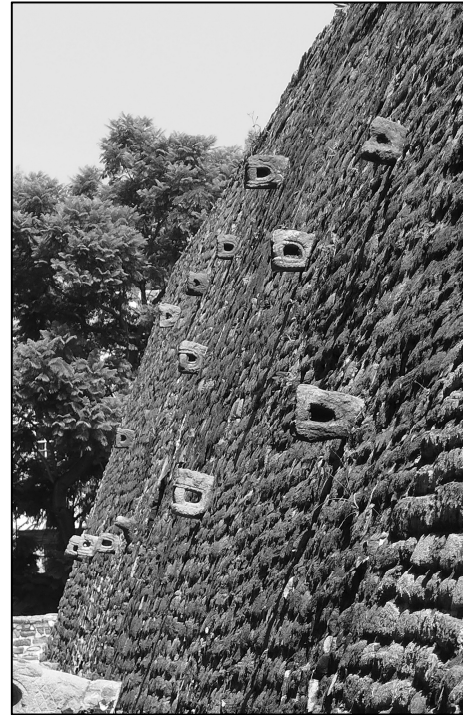


Fig. 5.5 - Tenayuca serpent head sculpture; photographed by A. Ott

Aztec control, such a difference in symbolism for such potent national imagery appears less likely. Its excavations were carried out in the 1920’s under Ignacio Marquina. They revealed that most of the enlargements were in the Early Aztec period, with the final addition made in the Late Aztec period (Smith, et al. 2008:31).

#### SANTA CECILIA ACATITLAN

While the first excavations were carried out here in 1923 by José Reygadas Vértiz, it was the archaeological and restoration work of Eduardo Pareyón in the 1960’s that enabled the significance of the site today. Four construction phases are observable at the Santa Cecilia Acatitlan (Fig. 5.6), but their exact dates have not been determined. The temple had deteriorated almost completely, and Smith considers the restoration work to be “fanciful reconstruction based on images in the codices” (Smith, et al. 2008:59). Of

the original structure, however, in each construction phase, the characteristic double staircase, with accompanying balustrades, are visible, leading up to a platform holding dual temples. As such, it is the smallest of the twin-temple pyramids of central Mexico.



Fig. 5.6 - Santa Cecilia Acatitlan temple; photographed by A. Ott



Fig. 5.7 - Santa Cecilia Acatitlan sculptures: (a) eagle relief, (b) standing female, and (c) brazier; photographed by A. Ott

Without knowledge of Pareyón's work, visitors are amazed at the relatively pristine condition of the southern temple, with its braziers, sacrificial stone and Chac

Mool still intact. Because of this, the dimensions of the temple as it stands today do not add to comparative analysis between the five extant twin-temple pyramids, but the basic structures of the double staircase leading to twin-temples is retained. In addition, various sculptures excavated at the site are available at the adjacent museum maintained by INAH, including braziers, human sculpture, and eagle art style reliefs (Fig. 5.7).

#### TEOPANZOLCO

The main temple at Teopanzolco is the outlier in our study because of a lack of evidence to suggest that it was in use concurrent with the others. This site was likely the center for the Cuauhnahuac, and Smith identifies it as “one of the more powerful Early



Fig. 5.8 - Teopanzolco temple; photographed by A. Ott

Aztec city-states, a peer and trading partner of Tenayuca” (Smith, et al. 2008:33). The main ritual center sits within a single city block of modern Cuernavaca. Ceramics date this site to the Early Aztec period, and evidence for mass burial refuted claims by the “Tlahuica informants made to Spaniards in 1570 that their ancestors did not carry out human sacrifices until they were forced to after being conquered by the Mexica” (Smith 2003). With the early date of the temple construction, it cannot be asserted that the

Teopanzolco twin-temple received its inspiration from Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán, and herein lies the crux of this study.

Teopanzolco is the archaeological outlier in supposing that shared ideology reflected in shared architecture across the region, lacking evidence that it operated concurrent with Templo Mayor. However, Smith points out that “sacrificial burial provides dramatic evidence for human sacrifice among the Tlahuica in Early Aztec times” (Smith 2003), operating concurrent with Tenayuca. In addition, he asserts that “the pyramid is one of the best examples of the Early Aztec twin-stair pyramid type, and shows the model that the Mexica imitated when building their Templo Mayor” (Smith 2003). Thus by Smith’s own admission, the chance for cultural cross-pollination is plausible. Ironically, with Moreno suggesting that Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán is patterned after Tenayuca (Aguilar-Moreno 2007) and Smith also suggesting that Teopanzolco was built to imitate Tenayuca (Smith, et al. 2008:102), the possibility for cross-pollination between the sites is strong. This is true not only because of the architectural similarities, but also due to the serpent head sculpture protruding from the wall on the southern temple (Fig. 5.9). The serpent artistic motif adds to the artistic style that goes beyond the mere practicality of the structural design. In fact, this sculpture adorns both sides of the south temple entrance atop the pyramid (Fig. 5.10).



Fig. 5.9 - Teopanzolco serpent head sculpture; photographed by A. Ott

It is the plaque left for tourists by INAH, at the present-day site, that Smith remains skeptical about. It reads:

“The monument base upon which the twin temples of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli rested was built to look like Tenochtitlan’s Main Temple. Such temple had thatch roofs held up by wood framework, as was the custom in the capital. The north temple, dedicated to the rain god Tlaloc, was the least high of the two, the one on the south side was consecrated to the war god Huitzilopochtli. Both temples, as well as their huge pyramidal base, were originally stuccoed and painted in bright colors. The inner base on which the temple remains are found is the older of the two, between which there is a wide gap. Apparently, the more recent base was under construction when the Spanish conquest took place; it was meant to cover the old one. The space between the two stages was originally filled in to facilitate the newer building’s construction. Today the debris has been removed to enable visitors to view both constructional stages.”

For Michael Smith, the ceramics dating to the Early Aztec period suggest an early construction for the Teopanzolco temple, yet the lack of ceramic evidence for late date (Smith, et al. 2008:34) operation suggests that the site was abandoned during the Late Aztec period, with the ritual center being moved to what is now the center of modern Cuernavaca. He admits that the reason for the move is unknown (Smith 2003). Smith’s critique of the connection assertion is so specific as to deserve being fully quoted:



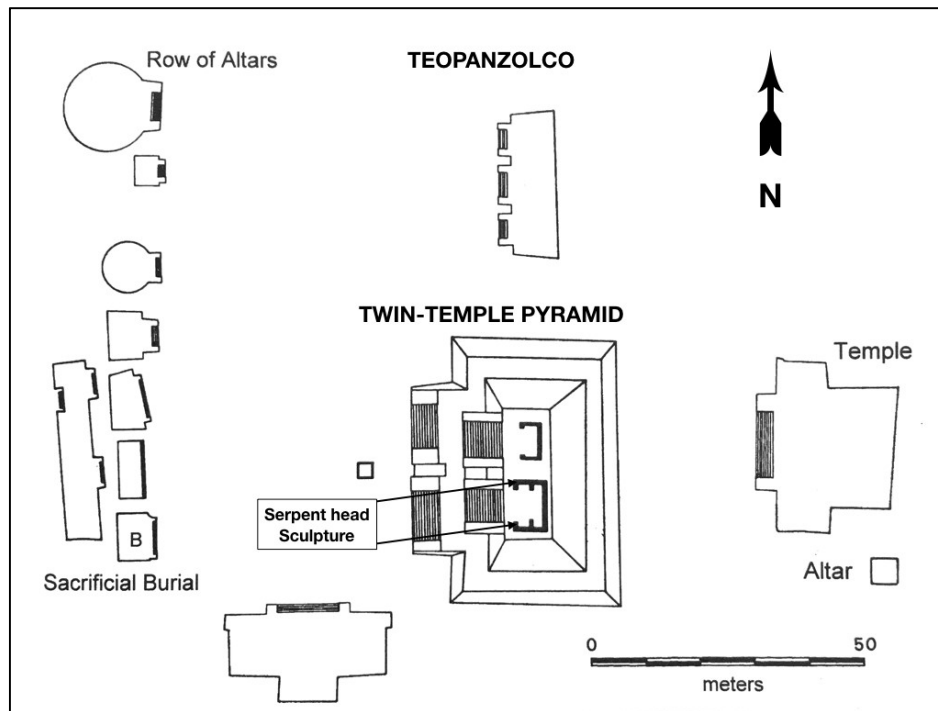


Fig. 5.10 - Teopanzolco site layout adapted from *Aztec City-State Capitals* (Smith 2008:33)

Many authors have extrapolated the symbolism and meaning of the Tenochtitlan Templo Mayor to the other examples, but this produces speculative and even absurd interpretations. It is amusing, for example to read the tourist signs at Teopanzolco, which claim that this pyramid was copied from the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan including the patron deities of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli... There is no surviving evidence on the deities housed in the Teopanzolco temples. Although the ancient Tlaloc is a reasonable guess, it is extremely unlikely that Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica patron god, was worshipped at Teopanzolco at a time before the Mexica had even started building their temple and city (Smith, et al. 2008:102).

Therein lies the chief discrepancy. INAH claims that the twin-temple design in Teopanzolco is a result of architectural diffusion from the Aztec capital outward, yet Smith demonstrates that the ceramic evidence tells a different story. The Teopanzolco temple predates Tenochtitlán, and therefore could not have gotten architectural inspiration from the capital. There is simply no evidence to support the claims of the INAH tourist plaque. However, what is also lacking is evidence to support the competing claim: that the Aztec worship of the Tlaloc-Huitzilopochtli duality, which is accepted with regards to the other twin-temples extant in the Basin of Mexico, is most certainly *not* reflected in the architecture of Teopanzolco. Smith himself admits that the excavation and restoration work of Alfonso Caso and José Reygadas Vertiz in the 1920's were never published (Smith, et al. 2008:34). There is no reason to doubt Smith's own analysis of the available ceramics: that they reveal an Early Aztec dating for the site, with no Late Aztec ceramics being included. The author only offers here that if original excavations were unpublished, and human remains demonstrate comparable sacrificial practice to other twin-temple pyramids, asserting that Teopanzolco bears no ideological connection to the others is overstating it. In the absence of clear ceramic, epigraphic or biologic evidence to the contrary, the architectural evidence and proximity make a stronger case than Smith is willing to acknowledge. Having said that, it must also be admitted that the INAH plaque is making unqualified assertions that are too easily refuted. It is better then to declare that "the jury is out" than to state what is not clearly known.

## WITNESSES FROM ETHNOHISTORY

A twin-temple is listed for Texcoco in *Ixtlilxochitl* (Ixtlilxóchitl 1976:38), but no archaeological remains for it have been discovered (Fig. 5.11). Texcoco was one of the three capitals of the Triple Alliance Empire. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl was a descendant of Nezahualcoyotl, one of the most accomplished and celebrated of Aztec kings (Smith, et al. 2008:37), and chronicled the life story of that ruler soon after the Spanish conquest. The urban development of Texcoco reflected his strength of administration, and the temple that he built for Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli rivaled its counterpart in Tenochtitlán. The archaeological zone, however, lies under the modern city of the same name, and has not been excavated to confirm the witness of historic sources.

Tlacopan (Fig. 5.12) also had a twin-temple attested in *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (Quiñones Keber 1995:40r). Smith interprets the image as accurately depicting a double-staircase, twin-temple pyramid, but that it should be taken as a conceptual drawing and not an exact representation. The date glyph is 12 Reed, which corresponds to 1491 CE, marking when the ceremony that was depicted had

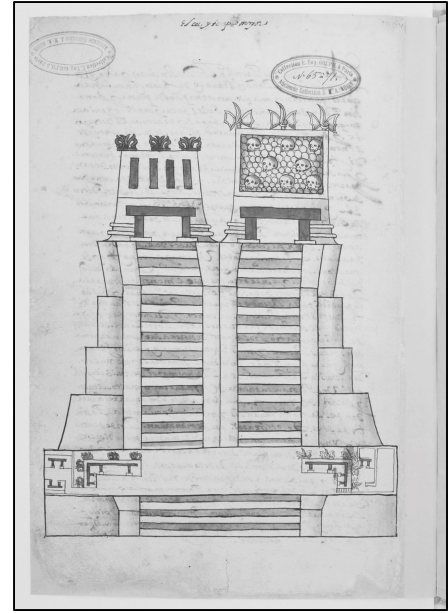


Fig. 5.11 - Texcoco temple from *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*

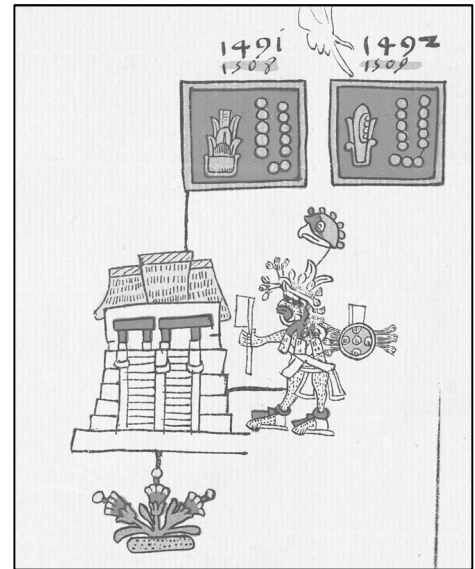


Fig. 5.12 - Tlacopan temple from *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*

occurred. This is the third of the cities of the Triple Alliance Empire. While its temple has not survived to be excavated and examined, the Codex containing it has not lost credibility in its other history depictions. It therefore can be listed among the twin-temples operating in the Basin of Mexico during the Late Aztec period.

To avoid confusion, it must be stressed that the mere presence of a double-staircase, twin-temple design is not the only common factor. While other monuments have been discovered in Mesoamerica showing this design feature, they do not meet the measure of being under clear Aztec control during the Late Postclassic. Carlos Navarrete, with his paper on “Some Mexican influences in the southern area during the Late Postclassic” (Navarrete 1976), makes the case for Aztec architecture influence pushing as far south as Maya-controlled areas of the highlands of western Guatemala, specifically for the structures at Zaculue. While the study is ambitious and the images shown demonstrate a similarity to the Aztec temples that were examined above, the Zaculue structures must be dismissed because (1) the earliest of these structures date to preclassic times, and (2) the ethnohistoric sources and cultural materials so necessary to demonstrate control for the other sites are lacking for the highlands of Guatemala.

#### THE COMMON TRAITS

Seven locations fit the search criteria of being within the Aztec-controlled territory during the Late Postclassic and that shared double-staircases and twin-temples at their peak. Two of these have left no archaeological record, so it cannot be confirmed whether they also face west in order to have the same effect for rituals conducted based on the time of day; however, those temples that have survived for examination all share the west facing orientation. Tenayuca and Teopanzolco are the earliest of these, with

Santa Cecilia Acatitlan appearing concurrent with Tenayuca (though this date cannot be confirmed). Teopanzolco operated contemporaneous to Tenayuca, performing human sacrifices, but lack of evidence for its late operation has led authors such as Michael Smith to believe that it was not in use contemporaneous to Tenochtitlán. Tlatelolco operated during the period when Tenochtitlán was the center of power, but laid dormant during a period of over 30 years following the 1473 rebellion, only later to be reinstated under Moctezuma II. In no cases do the temples appear destroyed or “decommissioned” prior to the Spanish conquest of 1519. On the contrary, the accoutrements of sacrifice were present at each when examined by archaeologists later on.

Ethnohistory describes those temples (Tlacopan and Texcoco) that cannot be excavated for confirmation as having been in operation, and their credibility is entertained in that regard. At least four such temples were in operation at the end of the Late Postclassic (Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco, Tlacopan and Texcoco), with intact structures serving as city centers for the other three. For these reasons, we must conclude that inhabitants of the period would see in these structures greater ideological connection than is allowed by the skeptical approach. Certainly while some tourist plaques may overstate the connection, the reaction should not be to understate it either.

In sum, four characteristics link these temples as symptoms of Aztec state religion. None is conclusive on its own, but taken together they are compelling:

- (1) Twin, parallel staircases with balustrade, ascending a stepped pyramid. This is the most unique aspect and which has survived for each temple structure.
- (2) Twin temples on the top platform either attested in ethnohistoric sources or remains existing for archaeological examination. These temple structures atop

the pyramids were clearly dedicated to the Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc in Tenochtitlán, and our assertion here is that similar symbology for the others is a reasonable inference.

(3) West facing pyramid structure, allowing performance of similar rites for times of the day related to sunrise and sunset rituals, plus symbology related to rites involving directional continuity.

(4) All fall within areas (even Morelos) attested to be under Aztec control in the Late Postclassic.

These structures have architectural continuity that could facilitate codified sacred elements, as with any state religion, with each being a reminder of the Great Temple, for the traveler or the outlying rural community.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

If archaeology is the study of material culture for past lifeways, then it behooves archaeological study to imagine the lifeways that the material remains represent. It is insufficient to merely catalog and document the artifacts; instead they must be placed within the context of their cultural roles at the time. In the case of religious practice, beliefs and behaviors intertwine, often leaving material markers to “connect the dots.” When those markers take the form of imposing structures resting at the heart of a city-state, their importance is rightly given disproportional weight in the broader religious context. In the case of the twin-temple pyramids for central Mexico, the importance lies not merely with their individual dimensions, but in their similarities and common attributes.

The Aztec religious apparatus bore all the characteristics of state religion examined above. *National religious ceremony* was well attested in ethnohistoric sources such as Sahagún and Durán, in addition to 16<sup>th</sup> century codices. Those same sources revealed an intricate *clerical structure* that was highly stratified, with a system for advancing from the young entering the calmecac to serving as priests at Templo Mayor. Certainly *codified sacred elements* are well attested in the Aztec religious picture. The sacred times of festivals and ceremonies, wherein sacred rites were performed by those holding sacred office using sacred objects to symbolize and remember sacred myths in practice, all made use of culturally constructed sacred space. That sacred space can be geographic, topographic, and environmental, but it was the architectural “space” that was the focus of this study.

Because sacred architecture is so culturally generated, finding it repeated in structures dotting a common controlled landscape can be no small matter. On the contrary, where the other characteristics of state religion are present, shared architecture can be reasonably viewed as supporting it also. Is the INAH plaque at Teopanzolco overstating the speculation that the gods that were worshipped there reflect those of Tenochtitlán? Our decision here is: no, it is not. On the contrary, it represents a reasonable inference based on the habits of state religion found both in Aztec culture and elsewhere.

#### ANALOGY BETWEEN CATHOLIC AND AZTEC STATE RELIGION

The state religion of the Aztec was not focused on a single symbol, but not all of its symbols weighted equally either. Johanna Broda considers that it is legitimate to study Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán as a symbol of political power because of the ways in which statecraft was integrated to its ceremonies and sacrifices, and how expansion levels of the temple construction can reliably be collated to periods of expansion in the kingdom (Broda 1987:67). All literature on the study of Tenochtitlán's Great Temple agree that it served as both the chief religious symbol for the Aztec period of dominance as well as the symbol of Aztec dominance. Its centrality is not in dispute.

What has not been examined and which remains a plausible scenario is that other temples in the region that share the same architecture of Templo Mayor, operated (if not continuously) periodically as additional symbols of dominance. If at any time the lesser temples, sharing the same ideological imagery as the greater one, were offering sacrifices like the greater temple, it is likely that they did so with an awareness of them mimicking the greater temple.



In the case of the medieval churches, the cruciform layout is distinct in its Christian symbolism. It is unlikely that an archaeologist, happening upon the foundations for such a structure, would treat it as an independent ritual site, with little to no connection to others in the region of like design. Similar to the church designs, the temple forms a symbol that is distinct to Aztec ideology and dominance. No evidence has been advanced to explain the twin-staircase, dual temple construction in central Mexico apart from the duality of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli so clearly symbolized by Templo Mayor.

For those temples within the regional control by the Triple Alliance, we do not know the compass orientation of those that cannot be excavated, but the extant five that remain are all west-facing. Similar to the medieval churches, open spaces for the people in attendance are to the west, while ritual specialists conduct their work to the east of them. For those observers watching the spectacle, the ritual is conducted higher than they are. In the case of Tenochtitlán, the structure can symbolize the mythic mountain of Coatepec, but for the other temples, it may simply be that the higher platform is consistent with authority and mystery. The various elements of the sacred that are all shared by the twin-temple pyramids render them as having more in common than they are not. Nobody at the time would have questioned that Tenochtitlán was the center, but the satellites plausibly operated with full knowledge that their rituals pointed inward toward that center.

So religious a society was the Aztec culture that Sahagún would comment on their piety and personal practices as having exceeded the rites performed in the public arena (Sahagun, et al. 1981). This was a society that “went to church” (colloquialism applied from Southern Baptist slang), and monuments were in abundance to reinforce allegiance

to official religion and to foment it at the popular level. The ever-present reminders of Aztec cosmology and divine attention, in addition to eschatology concerning the threat of apocalypse, would have been part and parcel to the common experience. With the Great Temple at Tenochtitlán serving as the chief symbol for this, all elements of the sacred were kept fresh in mind merely by glancing in the direction of the capital city. However, for nearby cities such as Tlatelolco, with their own historic identity, it may chafe to only have Tenochtitlán as their symbol of divine favor. In like manner, to communities onshore like Tenayuca or Santa Cecilia Acatitlan (the place of reeds), the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán may be too far away to offer any meaningful reminder of Aztec supremacy (unless, of course, one was standing atop the Tenayuca pyramid conducting sacrifices). To the south, Tenochtitlán is not visible from Teopanzolco at all, and yet that temple stood as a miniature version of Templo Mayor, operating before it and left standing during its tenure. The twin-temples at Tlacopan and Texcoco might have even rivaled its size and grandeur, but they are no longer in existence for study.

The twin-temple pyramid was a symbol of distinct importance and ideological significance, and there were several dotting the landscape to feed the popular devotion to the imperial machine. While offering caches at Templo Mayor reflect Aztec wealth and the scope of the imperial reach throughout Mesoamerica, artifacts that are housed at the museums for the smaller temples reveal their importance to the communities in which they stood. It was in these local expressions of the Aztec religion that the popular devotion was grown and nurtured, likely with those in the country making only periodic pilgrimages to the spectacle of Tenochtitlán when the occasion warranted or allowed.

The process undertaken has been to examine the architecture and pertinent artifacts related to the double-staircase, twin-temple pyramids of central Mexico during the Late Postclassic period, specifically in a region agreed upon by relevant scholars that it was under Aztec control at the time. In comparing them, the similarities eclipsed the differences such that treating them as being independent of each other stretches credulity. Within the realm of normal human behavior, the elements of the sacred make these similarities between the sites inescapably linked. It does not follow that because two churches have different paint that they don't both point to Rome. The ethnographic analogy of the Roman Catholic Church was employed as a comparative model to show a similar instance where shared architecture is indicative of shared ritual and ideology, but also how it points towards a unifying center. It may not therefore be too far-fetched to speak of a "catholic" model for Aztec religion, but this needs to be asserted humbly since it is arguing from inference and not from direct ethnohistoric evidence for support.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

The Great Temple of Tenochtitlán has been the focus of grand study and its importance is well established. The case for its influence in the Valley of Mexico is strongest, both from archaeological and ethnohistorical material. The Teopanzolco ritual center is the outlier (quite literally) from this strong localized homogeneity. Therefore, it represents the greatest conformation of or challenge to the hypothesis presented in this study. The published findings from excavations at Teopanzolco have been far more sparse than with Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco, or Tenayuca, and even lacks the adjacent museum found at Santa Cecilia Acatitlan. Teopanzolco, along with contemporary

settlements in the valley of Morelos, deserves considerable future study for testing the notion of Aztec-state religion outside of the Valley of Mexico.

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