

Tenochtitlan

Capital of the Aztec Empire

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Foreword by Michael E. Smith, Marilyn A. Masson, and John W. Janusek

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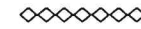
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the 10,000 inhabitants cited in A.D. 1325 grew constantly at an annual rate of 1 percent (twice the rate that is mentioned), the city's population would have reached nearly 70,000 in 1519. But as we have seen, there were two episodes of depopulation of unknown quantity during that time. If we believe the descriptions of the two catastrophes offered in the documents, the population loss in the period A.D. 1451 to 1454 must have been significant.

5



A Visit to Tenochtitlan

After Motecuhzoma found lodging for them in Axayacatl's palace, the Spaniards, led by Hernán Cortés, were able to visit the city. The first descriptions of the city and the only description of the pre-Hispanic city before the conquest derive from this visit: Cortés's Second Letter, dated October 30, 1520. Other descriptions are based on this account, although they differ in some details. In addition, the role of some narrators in the conquest has been questioned recently. This is true, for example, of Bernal Díaz (Graulich 1996; Rojas 2004).

Temples and Other Religious Buildings

In these accounts, as is to be expected, the temples stand out as much for their size and splendor as for the importance of religious beliefs for both the Mexicas and the Spaniards. This is precisely why they were the first buildings the Spaniards demolished after the conquest. The materials were used to build the new city. It is a very interesting exercise to compare the descriptions of the Templo Mayor by figures such as Cortés and Clavijero with the findings of the excavations undertaken since the end of the twentieth century. This comparison links the work of the archaeologist with that of the ethnohistorian.

Let's start with Cortés's description:

There are as many as forty towers, all of which are so high that in the case of the largest there are fifty steps leading up to the main part of it; and the most important of these towers is higher than that of the cathedral of Seville. They are so well constructed in both their stone and woodwork that there can be none better in any place, for all the stonework inside the chapels where they keep

their idols is in high relief, with figures and little houses. (Second Letter, [1519–1526] 2001, 105–6)

The Templo Mayor

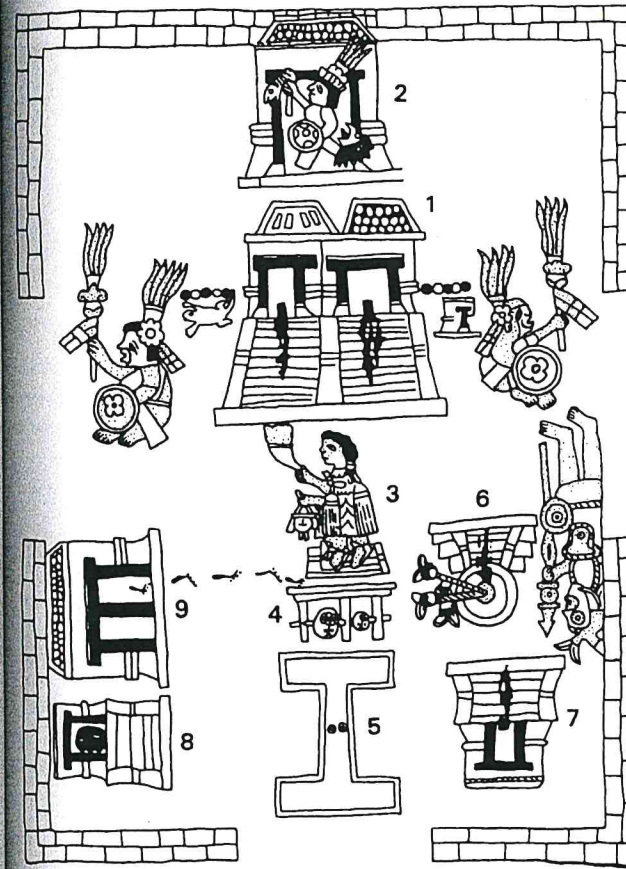
There is some doubt as to whether the temple Cortés described was the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan or that of Tlatelolco. The description follows that of Tlatelolco market, and the ruins visible in the Plaza of the Three Cultures in contemporary Tlatelolco are similar to those of Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan.

A very well-known description and illustration come from the Dominican friar Diego Durán (1570, chap. 2 [1967, 2:19–24]). He states that the temple had 120 steps; two upper chambers filled with figures, one dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and the other to Tlaloc; and a stone for human sacrifice in front of the chambers. Situated around the Templo Mayor were other temples, the schools of priests, and the skull rack, which I will discuss in more detail below.

Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún spent a considerable amount of time describing the Templo Mayor (Figure 5.1). At the beginning of Appendix II, Book II he describes the seventy-eight buildings in the enclosure surrounding the temple (see Text Box 5.1).

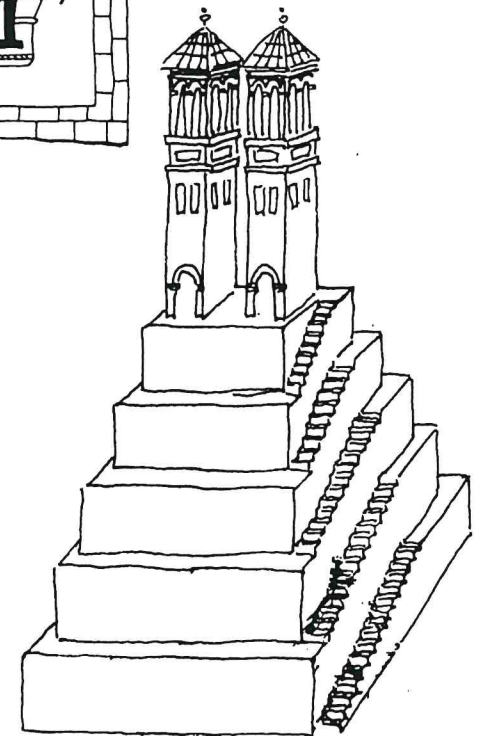
The similarities between the Durán's image and de Sahagún's description are obvious. This does not happen with later texts, like that of Clavijero, which is described in Text Box 5.2 and Figure 5.2.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, various detailed excavations have been undertaken in the enclosure of the Templo Mayor. The discovery of several emblematic pieces of Aztec art during these excavations is well known. The Sun Stone, or the Aztec Calendar (Figure 5.3), was uncovered on December 17, 1790; the monumental statue of Coatlicue (Figure 5.4) was discovered on August 13, 1790, the anniversary of the date Tenochtitlan fell (August 13, 1521); and the Stone of Tizoc (Figure 5.5) was found at the beginning of 1791. After being exhibited in several locations, these artifacts were reburied, although they were unearthed again for illustrious travelers, such as Alexander von Humboldt. More than a century would pass before archaeological work was done in the zone of the Great Temple under the supervision of Leopoldo Batres, and nearly another century before the Templo Mayor saw the light of day again. The fortuitous finding of the Coyolxauhqui sculpture took place on February 21, 1978 (Figure 5.6). The monolith, which is almost



Above: Fig. 5.1. The sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan. From Smith (1996, 229). Courtesy of Michael E. Smith.

Right: Fig. 5.2. The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan as described by the Anonymous Conqueror, sixteenth century. Drawing by the author.



5.1. The Templo Mayor Precinct

[In] the [great] square of [the Temple of] Uitzilopochtli, all was thus, [as followeth]:

It appeared to be perhaps two hundred fathoms [square]. And here, in the center [of the square], were very large temples, which were temples of demons. The one which was tallest, of greater height, was the house of Uitzilopochtli, or Tlacuepan Cuexcochtzin. This one was very large, very tall.

And this one was in the middle [of the square]. And with it was the house of Tlaloc. Both were together, side by side. And at the very top, [one] stood a little high[er]—perhaps as much as a fathom.

[Of] both of these, [one] was taller, rising higher; only they were quite similar. And at the top of each was a temple; at the top was a house.

Here was the image of Uitzilopochtli, also Ilhuicatl Xoxouhqui. And in another [house] there was the image of Tlaloc.

And also at the top [of the pyramids] were circular stones, very large, named *techcatl* [offering-stones], upon which they slew victims. Thus they paid honor to their gods. And the blood—the blood of those who died—reached the base, flowing thence. All were thus in all the temples which were of the devils.

And this temple of Uitzilopochtli and of Tlaloc faced the setting of the sun. And its stairway was very wide. It reached up to the top, whereby all ascended. And for all the temples there were stairways; all were alike. Very straight was its stairway.

Sahagún (1577, Book 2, Appendix 2; [1577] 1951, 165; 1975, 158).

three meters in diameter, represents Huitzilopochtli's sister, who died when he was born. After that discovery, obstacles were overcome and the Templo Mayor project began. The project was directed by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma. Since then, the area has been exposed so that it is possible to visit most of the temple. A museum that surrounds the main part of the ruins allows visitors to see the Coyolxauhqui sculpture from all floors of the building.

The excavations have revealed the structure of the temple in several stages of historical development and one double frontal staircase that rises to the upper stage where there are two temples, one dedicated to

5.2. Francisco Javier Clavijero Describes the Templo Mayor

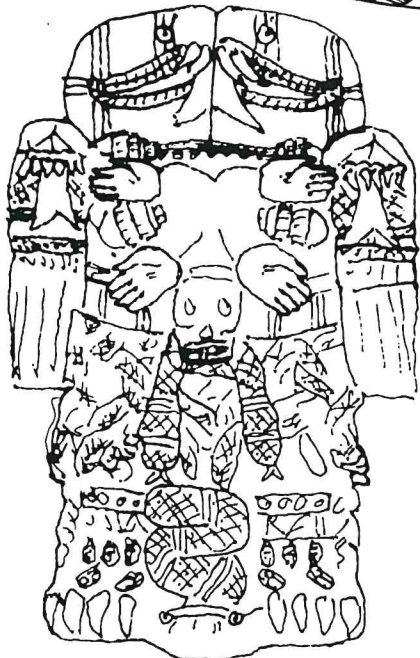
Clavijero, a Jesuit priest, describes the enclosure of the temple:

In the middle of this area rose a vast solid rectangular building, its exterior covered with square stones of equal size, and composed of five stages almost equal in height, but unequal in longitude and latitude because the higher they were the more narrow. The first stage, which served as the base, was 120 yards (Castilian) from east to west and less than 100 from north to south. The second stage was about seven feet smaller than the first on each side; the third was again smaller than the second, and in the same proportion as the others; and thus on each story was a space through which three to four men could walk shoulder to shoulder following the contour of the stage. The stairs that were on the south side were of large, well-worked stone and consisted of 113 steps, each of little more than a foot high. These stairs were not totally continuous as represented by Prevost and those in the letters published by Cortés in Mexico, but rather divided in as many sections as there were stages. Each section ran diagonal to its frame until reaching the hall or space left by the smaller amplitude of the following story; in such a way that in reaching the top of the first stairs, it was necessary to round the corridor to the east, north and west, to take the second stairs, and reaching the top of this it was necessary to give another similar turn to take the third, and so on for the fourth and fifth flights; which will be understood better in the image of this temple which we presented, based on that of the Anonymous Conqueror, although corrected as already noted, in the measures he and other historians provide. (Clavijero [1780] 1976, 160–61; translated by Kristin Sullivan)

This description is better understood by considering the image in Figure 5.2. The source Clavijero used was a sixteenth-century text by the Conquistador Anónimo. It was published in Italian in Italy, and Clavijero preferred it over other accounts. Clavijero's text said that the temple was 126 feet high. This did not include the towers, which would add another 66 feet. One of the towers was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and the other to Tezcatlipoca, and the sacrificial altar in was located in front of the two temples. It is important to note that those who give exact numbers are not always more credible than those who give estimates.



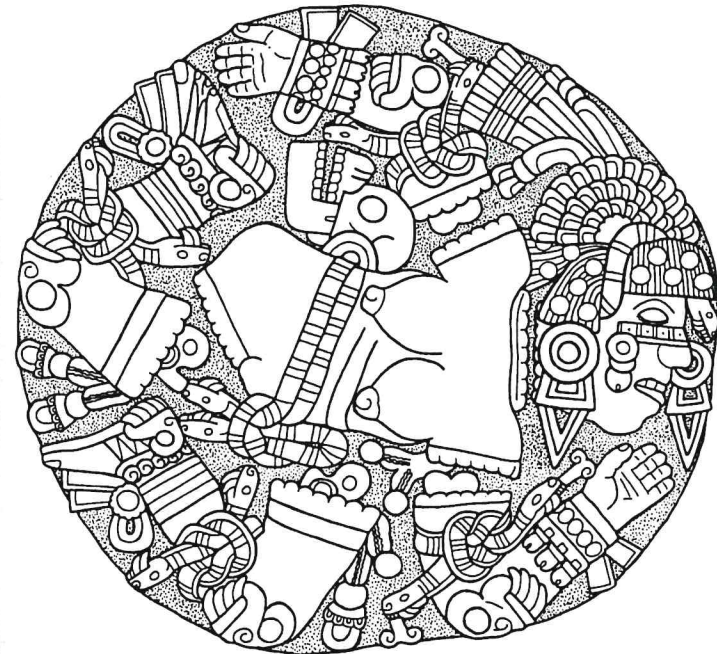
Above: Fig. 5.3. The Calendar Stone (Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México D.F.). Drawing by Emily Umberger. From Umberger (1996b, 99). Courtesy of Emily Umberger.



Left: Fig. 5.4. Coatlicue (Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México D.F.). Drawing by the author.



Left: Fig. 5.5. Detail of the Stone of Tizoc. Drawing by Emily Umberger. From Umberger (1996b, 101). Courtesy of Emily Umberger.



Below: Fig. 5.6. Coyolxauhqui. Drawing by Emily Umberger. From Umberger (1996b, 93). Courtesy of Emily Umberger.

Tlaloc and the other to Huitzilopochtli. The temples correspond to the second of a total of seven identified phases and date to ca. A.D. 1400. In front of the temple of Tlaloc, to the north, was the statue of a human figure lying on his back, known as Chacmool, and a sacrificial stone was located next to the temple of Huitzilopochtli, to the south. The excavations have made clear that the Mexicas followed the Mesoamerican practice of enlarging structures by covering existing ones. This technique allowed them to enlarge the building quickly and economically, and it had the added merit of covering commemorations to previous leaders. This is in accordance with what the sources repeatedly tell us—that each lord increased the size of the temple (Figure 5.7). It also reinforces Graulich's idea that each leader rewrote history when he rose to power. As can be seen in Figure 5.7, the statue of Coyolxauhqui was on the Phase IV platform.

The excavation was not limited to the main building; many of the buildings described by the chroniclers have come to light, as well as some structures whose existence had previously been ignored. Notable among these are the skull rack, the Red Temples, the House of the Eagles, and various portable altars. More recently the Urban Archaeology Program has increased the excavation area and the excavations under Mexico City's Christian cathedral, enabling the discovery of the ball court and the Temple of Ehecatl, which is uniquely circular (Matos, Hinojosa, and Barrera 1998). The number of people involved in the discoveries at the Templo Mayor is enormous, as is the number of pieces that have been recovered. All of this contributes to a visual image of the Mexica Empire that was not possible until recently. Some surprises have emerged; for example, our understanding of the way the Mexicas (and likely other previous and contemporary Mesoamerican groups) expanded on past cultures has changed. Some buildings are of a clear Toltec style, and among the artifacts are many pieces that could be classified as pertaining to other cultures, such as the Olmec or Teotihuacan. In some cases these are ancient pieces that were reused, and in others they are pieces that the Mexica made in the style of other areas. An example of this use of the past is the relation the Mexicas had with the other great city of Central Mexico, Teotihuacan, which was already in ruins when Tenochtitlan was founded (see López Luján 1989).

The literature on the Templo Mayor continues to increase. Some studies are general (Matos Moctezuma 1982; Boone 1987; Broda,

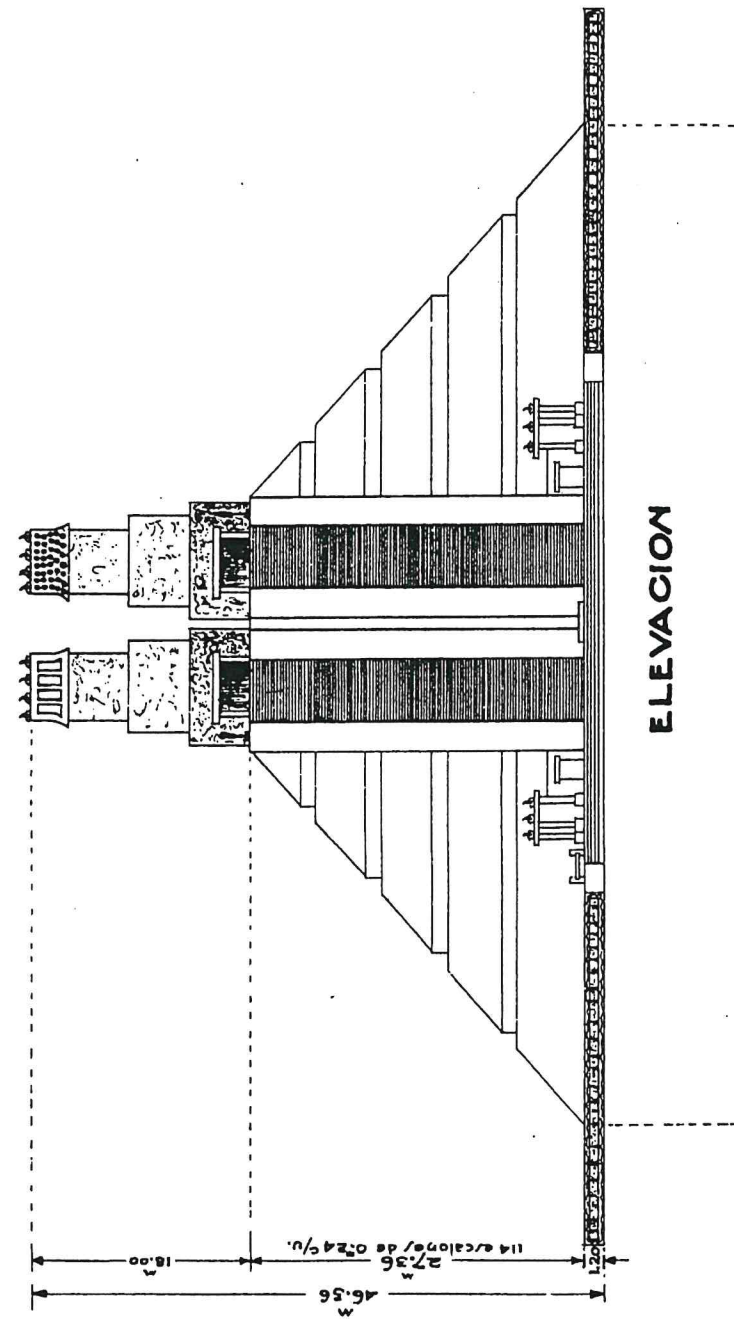


Fig. 5.7. Reconstruction of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. After Alcocer (1935: between 28 and 29).

Carrasco, and Matos 1987), while others focus on particular issues such as the offerings at the temple (López Luján [1994] 2005) or particular buildings such as the Casa de las Águilas (House of the Eagles) (López Luján 2006) or the Red Temples (Olmeda 2002). Numerous articles have been written on gods such as Tlaltecuhli (Barrera, Islas Domínguez, López Arenas, Barroso Repizo, and Lina Hernández 2007; Matos and López Luján 2007) or the color used in decorations on buildings and statues (López Luján et al. 2005). The Templo Mayor is now the better known part of Ancient Tenochtitlan, and it is the main link with the Mesoamerican past.

All of these finds force us to reconsider our vision of Mesoamerican artistic styles and pay better attention to the pieces that have been recovered outside archaeological contexts.

Other Temples

Let us now consider the enclosure of the Templo Mayor as described by the chroniclers. Among the seventy-eight buildings that surrounded the temple that Friar Bernardino Sahagún lists (Text Box 5.1), several *calmecacs* (religious schools for noble children) stand out. Recently Barrera and López excavated a building in the Templo Mayor precinct that may have been a *calmecac*, although the identification is very tentative (Barrera and López 2008, 25).

The other buildings around the temple included a *coacalco*, which was a type of jail in which the Mexica imprisoned the gods of conquered areas; a temple dedicated to the *Huitznahua*; and a building known as the *tlacoacalco*, which was like an armory. A building called the *netlatiloyan* housed the skins of sacrificed victims, which were removed during the celebration of Tlacaxipehualiztli, and another with the same name housed the skins taken in celebration of Ochpaniztli. Another building was dedicated to the Centzontotochtin, or “400 Rabbits,” the innumerable gods of drunkenness. It was said that they were innumerable because a person gets drunk differently each time, suggesting they are possessed by different gods. There were skull racks, or *tzompantli*. There were also numerous *temalacatl* (sacrificial altars for gladiators) where the so-called gladiatorial sacrifices took place. In most of the temples, human sacrifices took place on particular dates. However, the most important were done in the Templo Mayor and were related to conquests and the enlargements of the building.

Human Sacrifice

The number of sacrifices that appear in documents (and are frequently taken at face value by investigators) is quite high. The most well-known example of massive sacrifice is Ahuitzotl’s inauguration of the Templo Mayor in 1487, which Graulich (1991) has analyzed.

Different numbers appear in the sources about this event, but the most commonly cited figure is 80,400 sacrificed prisoners. The discussions about the accuracy of this number have focused on Friar Diego Durán’s description of the ceremony and the time needed to carry out the various operations. Graulich (1991, 129–30) has shown how the interest of each investigator has led him or her to accept particular numbers or invent justifications for accepting, without question, figures given in a primary source. Graulich argues that Durán’s figure may have referred to the number of spectators rather than to the number of sacrificial victims. In Durán’s description, the sacrifice lasted four days, from dawn to sunset, and four sacrifices occurred at a time (1581, chap. 44 [1967, 2:343–49]). First to be sacrificed were the lords of the three capitals of the Triple Alliance—Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan—and Tlaxcelil, who was second in command to Ahuitzotl. When sacrificers got tired, they would be relieved by a new crew, a practice that allowed them to keep the numbers high. The prisoners formed four lines, each of which had 20,100 people. This is where the calculations begin. Although not all of the prisoners would be in line at the same time, each line extended for several kilometers. The calculations that have been used assume 1 meter of space per individual, which supposes that they were quite close and that it would have been difficult for them to walk. Using this calculation, each line would have had to have been more than 20 kilometers long. Mariano Cuevas (Clavijero [1780] 1976, 121n15) states that the high totals would have been possible if, in order to save time, new prisoners were put in line to replace those who had been sacrificed. In any case, that only transfers the problem to another part of the event, because those who were to be sacrificed had to be located somewhere, and someone had to make sure each that each prisoner occupied his position and didn’t rebel.

But let us return to the calculations related to the sacrifices. Graulich (1991, 125–27) provides us with the numbers given by a variety of authors, but here I will present my own calculations: 80,400 prisoners

sacrificed in four days by four sacrificers makes 5,025 sacrificed each day on each altar. Assuming twelve hours from dawn to dusk, the sacrificers would have had 8.59 seconds for each sacrifice. During that time they would have had to have laid the prisoner on the stone, opened his chest with a flint knife, removed his heart, and removed the body from board so that the next prisoner could be put into place. Since this seems impossible, many authors have chosen to accept a lower number of sacrificed victims. Some have chosen to multiply the number of sacrificers and say that they were placed all over the city, using the indications of blood in other temples as evidence for their hypothesis (see Graulich 1991, 126). In order to maintain the rate, it would have been necessary to restrict the ritual associated with each sacrifice to the minimum (ibid., 125). To my mind, this is a contradiction in terms that diminishes the importance of the ceremony. However, there is one point that other authors have not yet considered, perhaps because it is not even mentioned by Durán: what happened with the bodies of those who were sacrificed? They could walk up to the sacrificers and accept their destiny, but that was no longer possible after they were killed. The fastest way to get rid of the corpses would have been to throw them to the patio, but without a system to remove them, they would have quickly piled up. It seems that we have never considered seriously how much space 80,000 bodies would take up. In summary, these numbers are impossible to accept from a practical point of view.

(A similar exercise can be done with the size of the armies that appear in the primary sources. Of particular importance is the fact that the soldiers moved on foot, which considerably reduces the speed of the operations. Some sources mention armies of 200,000, but in that case the vanguard would have finished their day before the rear would have been able to begin their march.)

Returning to the human sacrifices, what we do know is that throughout the year, they were conducted in a variety of places and at different celebrations, and that particular types of sacrifice were associated with particular deities, according to Durán. This includes particular ways of killing and particular types of sacrificial victims, from military prisoners to children offered to Tlaloc to slaves bought in the market for this purpose.

Practically every sacrifice was related to ritual activities that included spectators. In the large ceremonies, such as the inauguration of the

5.3. Fray Diego Durán Describes the *Tzompantli*

In front of the main door of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli there were thirty long steps about one hundred eighty feet in length. These were separated from the courtyard wall by a passage. On top [of the platform] was a walk thirty feet wide and as long as the steps. The passage was plastered, and its steps were finely worked. Along the center of this ample and long walk stood a finely carved palisade as tall as a great tree. Poles were set in a row, about six feet apart. All these thick poles were drilled with small holes, and the holes were so numerous that there was scarcely a foot and a half between them. These holes reached to the top of the tall, thick poles. From pole to pole, through the holes, stretched thin rods strung with numerous human heads pierced through the temple. Each rod held twenty heads. These horizontal rows of skulls rose to the height of the poles of the palisade and filled it from end to end. One of the conquerors assured me that they were so numerous they were impossible to count, so close together that they caused fright and wonder. These skulls were all that remained of those who has been sacrificed.

After the latter were dead and their flesh had been eaten, the skulls were delivered to the ministers of the temple, who strung them there.

Durán (1570, chap. 2 [1971, 78–79]).

Templo Mayor, the lords of the different parts of the empire were present as well as the lords of vanquished places or their representatives. However, according to Durán and Tezozomoc, the lords entered secretly to view the ceremonies and thus directly experienced the power of the hosts.

Related to the problems associated with the number of sacrificed victims in the primary sources and in the secondary literature is the presence of a variety of *tzompantli*, or skull racks, that were located in the enclosure of the Templo Mayor (see Text Box 5.3 for a description).

The account of the skulls on the *tzompantli* comes from the conqueror Andrés de Tapia (1971, 583), who states that there were heads on poles with the teeth facing outward. Others were strung along poles one yard long with five skulls on each, supported by beams. He and Gonzalo de Umbría counted the poles, multiplied them by five, and

found that there were 136,000 skulls, “not counting those of the towers.” Based on Tapia’s data, Graulich (1991, 131) reaches the conclusion that the beams were at least fifty meters tall, and that the entire interior surface of the skull rack had to have been covered with skulls. These numbers are again unbelievable.

What the excavations have shown us is that the platforms were decorated with skulls. They are much smaller than the size required to accommodate the numbers the chroniclers cited. Smith (2008, 110) states that these were not *tzompantlis* but monuments dedicated to the *tzitzimime* (goddesses).

The Birth of Huitzilopochtli and the Templo Mayor

Despite these discrepancies, the evidence archaeologists have unearthed in the Templo Mayor of buildings and sculptures corresponds with the events mentioned in the account of Huitzilopochtli’s birth. The god is represented at the top of the temple as a personification of Coatepec. At the foot of the temple lies the dismembered body of the lunar goddess, Coyolxauhqui. The myth tells us that she was pushed down the mountain. We also find statues that may represent some of the *huitznahuas* (gods of the southern stars) (Matos 1986, 75). Following the description given by Andrés de Tapia, Leon-Portilla (1978, 49–50) argues that Coatlicue was represented at the top and that this representation could be the statue that was found in 1790. The placement of the Temple of Tlaloc next to that of Huitzilopochtli may correspond to another myth. Matos (1986, 80–81) argues that Tlaloc might symbolize fertility and life and that Huitzilopochtli may symbolize war and death. Alternatively, the temples may represent the earth (Coatlicue), water (Tlaloc), and the sun (Huitzilopochtli), three elements necessary for life.

In many ceremonies, the blood came from the sacrifice of quails or the bloodletting that priests or some of the faithful performed on themselves. The most common method was to draw blood from the ears, the tongue, or the legs, although the penis was sometimes bled.

Although there is a tendency to call the 365-day Mesoamerican calendar “civil” and the 260-day calendar “religious,” both were in fact religious and marked the timing of the ceremonies dedicated to the different gods. The expression “movable feasts” is an unfortunate expression that appears as early as the writings of Sahagún, who talks about the

5.4. The Mexica Calendar

The calendar system the Mexica used was the traditional Mesoamerican one based on two calculations: a 365-day year and a 260-day year. Each day corresponded to a date in each calendar, and the combination of the dates from the two systems made practically any date unique in the life of each person because each combined date took 52 years to repeat. We refer to this 52-year period as the “Aztec century.”

The 365-day calendar, or *xiuhpohualli* (“count of years”), was made up of eighteen months of twenty days each. Five additional days, or *nemontemi*, were added each year to reach 365 days. These additional days were considered unfavorable for people. This calendar was roughly similar to ours, with the name of the month changing after 20 days. The largest celebrations were held at the end of the month.

The 260-day calendar, or *tonalpohualli* (“count of days or destinies”), was composed of twenty thirteen-day periods and twenty day names. Both lists advanced a position every day until the number one coincided with the first day, or *cipactli*, once again. This happened every 260 days.

The combination of both calendars is known as the Calendar Round. In it every day was denominated by its position in both systems. A given date was repeated every 18,980 days, which is 52 years of 365 days or 73 years of 260 days.

Every day of the 365-day count could be combined with only four names from the divinatory calendar. These names were combined with a number from 1 to 13, and the last day of the year had a title that can be loosely translated as “Year Carrier” based on the images in the codices. An understanding of this system has helped investigators situate chronologically the incomplete inscriptions with only a small margin of error. The celebration that took place every 52 years and involved the lighting of the New Fire on the Hill of the Star was known as the “Tying of Years.”

festivals on the 260-day calendar that have different dates on the 365-day calendar from year to year (see Text Box 5.4). In fact, in one calendar, these were fixed celebrations, but in the other calendar the date of the ceremonies changed each year. The month with the most activities was Panquetzaliztli; the preparations began eighty days before. Altogether, researchers have identified festive activities on 139 days in the 365-day calendar. To this we must add those of the 260-day calendar, which sometimes coincided with festival days of the 365-day calendar (Rojas 1998a). That does not mean that everyone had to participate in every ceremony, but the religious activities were quite extensive and constituted an important part of daily life within the city. Not all of the rites were bloody. Dances and banquets were an important part of each celebration. Sanctioned drunkenness seems to have been part of the Mexica system of laws, as happened on day ten xocotlhuetzi, when there was “great drunkenness” (Durán 1579, chap. 13 [1967 1:272]). Also, during the month of Quecholli, when the Mexica celebrated the production of pulque, a single earthenware jar was continuously refilled and all were invited to partake. Some dances were not so innocent, if we take at face value the complaint of friar Diego Durán (1570, chap. 21; 1967, 1:192–93), who wanted them prohibited.

Education

In the enclosure of the Templo Mayor were *calmecac*, one of two types of training centers in Tenochtitlan. According to Sahagún’s description (1577, Book 2, Appendix V; [1577] 1975, 172) the students at the *calcamec* were trained to be priests. The discipline was very strict. The students worked as guards at night and had to provide firewood for the temples in addition to participating in projects to maintain public infrastructures (1577, Book 3, chap. 8; [1577] 1975, 213). Their teachers were called *tlamatinime* (wise men):

Thirteenth: Most especially was there teaching of good discourse. He who spoke not well, who greeted others not well, they then drew blood from [with maguey spines].

Fourteenth: Especially was there teaching of songs which they called the god’s songs inscribed in books. And especially was there teaching of the count of days, the book of dreams and the book of years. (Sahagún 1577, Book 3, chap. 8; [1577] 1978, 67; 1975, 214)

The second type of training center was the *telpochcalli*, or house of youth, where young men were educated. There was one in each district. It has often been mentioned that the *calmecac* was reserved for the children of nobility and the *telpochcalli* for the children of *macehuales*, or commoners. However, the distinction is not so clear (Rojas 1986, 191) because there is evidence that some noble children attended the *telpochcalli*. The teachings at the *telpochcalli* seem to have been less spiritual and the young men returned to their homes to sleep. It seems that general lessons were taught in these schools and that the young men learned the occupations of their families there (ibid., 193).

Palaces and Houses

The information on houses at Tenochtitlan has been discussed in Chapter 4. There have been some studies of houses in locations other than Tenochtitlan (Novic 2006; Smith 1993; Smith, Heath-Smith, and Montiel 1999), but there are no descriptions of what the common houses at Tenochtitlan looked like.

I have already mentioned that some of the houses were so large that they could have been palaces. The language in the city’s laws suggests that the houses of the nobility had more than one floor and that they had gardens. This was the case with the homes of Motecuhzoma and of his father Axayacatl, where the Spaniards were housed during their first stay in Tenochtitlan. However, there are only a few descriptions of these buildings, and the excavations at Tenochtitlan have not revealed much. There are some descriptions of palaces outside Tenochtitlan (Evans 1981, 1991, 2004; Elson 1999; Smith 1998), and Smith (1993) has compared archaeological and ethnohistorical data on palaces. Smith (2008, 115–19) also discusses the form and meaning of Aztec palaces.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1975, 181) says that the palace of Axayacatl had a patio and many rooms, enough for everyone, with a “portable altar” and above all, a secret chamber where treasure was kept. The Spaniards ransacked the chambers before they left the city, which turned out to be the ruin of many of them. The loads the Spanish soldiers were carrying were so heavy that some of them fell into the canals and drowned.

The image in the Codex Mendoza has been used repeatedly to describe Motecuhzoma’s palace (Figure 5.8). However, the image doesn’t do it justice. The conquerors were very sparing in their descriptions,

and we must turn to López de Gómara to find something a little more detailed:

The one where he had his permanent residence was called Tecpan, that is to say, palace. It had twenty doors opening on the square and public streets, and three large courtyards, in one of which was a beautiful fountain. It had many halls and a hundred rooms 25 to 30 feet square, and a hundred baths. It was constructed without nails, but very solidly. The walls were of stone, marble, jasper, porphyry, black stone shot with veins of ruby red, white stone [alabaster]; the ceilings, of wood, well finished and carved to represent cedars, palms, cypresses, pines, and other trees. The chambers were painted; the floors, covered with mats; the drapes, of cotton, rabbit fur, and feathers; the beds, poor and uncomfortable, being merely blankets laid over mats of straw, or mats alone. (López de Gómara 1966, 148)

Cervantes de Salazar's text (1971, 1:316) offers basically the same description.

Moteczuhzoma's wives lived in this residence. Some argue that he had 5,000 wives; others say only 1,000. His children and servants also lived there. There were 600 knights on duty daily, each with his own servants, who numbered 3,000 (Torquemada 1975–83, 1:316). All ate in the palace and Cortés, after attending one of these meals, left us an account of the occasion, shown in Text Box 5.5. Such meals must have required a great number of cooks, suppliers, and servants.

The Palace as a Court

The palace served as more than just the royal house. It was also the court headquarters, and different rooms were dedicated to different tasks. Sahagún mentions eight functions: hearings, which were divided into criminal lawsuits, civil lawsuits, and hearings for nobles; the military council; storage; housing for stewards; housing for singers; and housing for captives (1577, Book 8, chap. 14; [1577] 1975, 465–68).

The hearings served as courts of justice. These hearings focused on the facts of the case and did not dwell on causes of criminal behavior. The plaintiffs would bring in paintings presenting the facts, the witnesses would be heard, and the sentence would be passed. The noble court was reserved for the elite, who were judged by their peers when

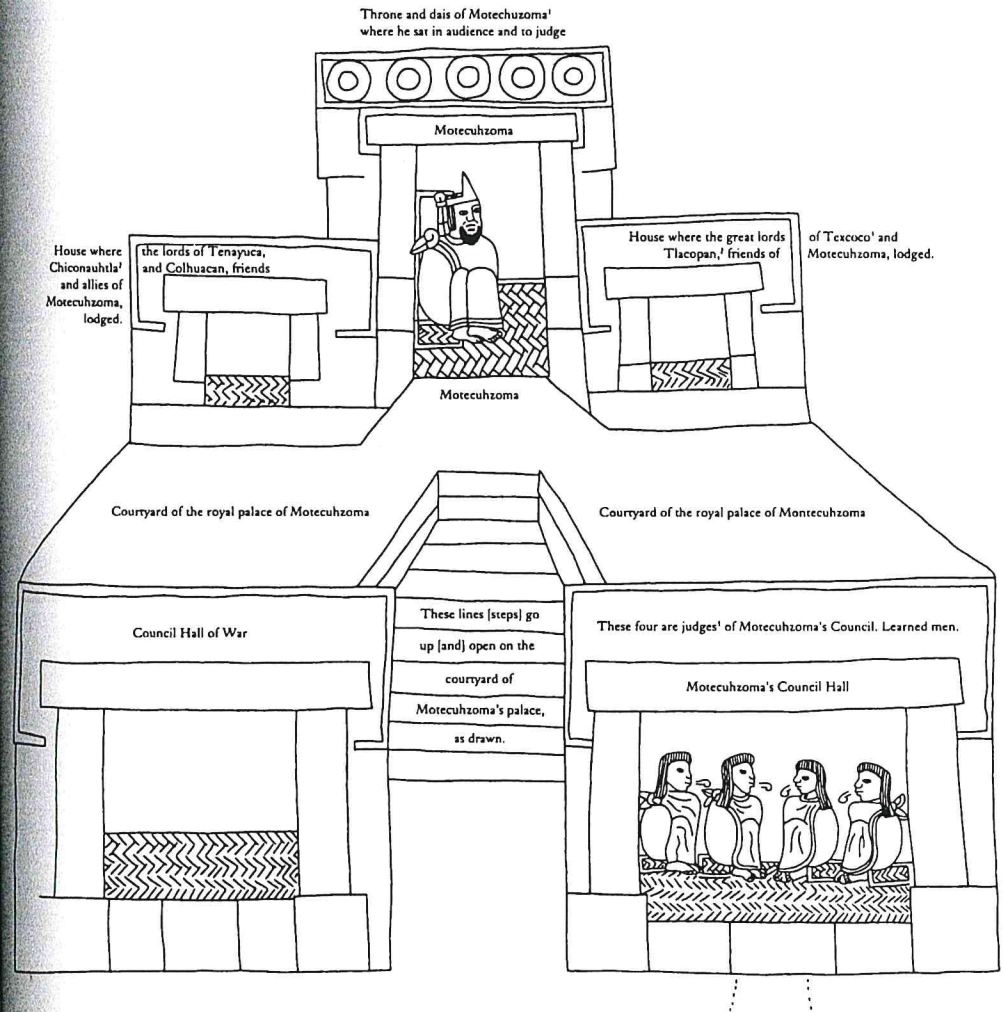


Fig. 5.8. The Palace of Moteczuhzoma, Codex Mendoza 69r. From Berdan and Anawalt (1992, IV: 143). Courtesy of Frances F. Berdan.

5.5. A Meal in the Moctezuma's Palace

Three or four hundred boys came bringing the dishes, which were without number, for each time he lunched or dined, he was brought every kind of food: meat, fish, fruit and vegetables. And because the climate is cold, beneath each plate and bowl they brought a brazier with hot coals so that the food should not go cold. They placed all these dishes together in a great room where he ate, which was almost always full. The floors were well covered and clean and he sat on a finely made, small leather cushion. While he ate, there were five or six old men, who sat apart from him; and to them he gave a portion of all he was eating. One of the servants set down and removed the plates of food and called to others who were farther away for all that was required.

Cortés, Second Letter ([1519–1526] 2001, 111).

they committed a crime or adultery. The sentence for the guilty tended to be death.

The military court occupied several rooms. Sahagún mentions the place where the *tlacochealcatl* and *tlacatecatl* captains, the highest military ranks, met; the room where the bailiffs carried out sentences; and a room called the *cuicacalli* (music conservatory) where the teachers of the young men met to wait for orders about what public works the students were needed for. Sahagún also tells us that “every day, until sunset, they were accustomed to go naked to this house of *cuicacalli* to sing and dance” (Sahagún 1577, Bk. 8, Ch. 14, [1577] 1975, 466). Somewhat later he clarifies that those who were going to dance were the young men, who were there until 11 p.m. and then went to sleep in the houses of the *telpochcalli*, not their own. Sahagún also mentions that the sentence for those caught cohabitating, committing adultery, or getting drunk was death.

Also in the palace were the storerooms where maize, kidney beans, salt, chili peppers, pumpkin seeds, and many other types of seeds were kept. Also, there was the *petlacalco*, where the steward (*calpixqui*) of the lord oversaw “those who had committed some crime, but did not deserve death” (Sahagún 1577, Book VIII, chap. XIV; [1577] 1975, 467).

The name coincides with that of one of the “provinces” in the Codex Mendoza. If we believe that the tribute cited in this and similar documents actually arrived in Tenochtitlan, the warehouses would have to be of considerable size (see Rojas in press a).

The next room, the house of the stewards, or *calpixcacalli*, was an important center for the economic organization of the empire. All of the stewards met there with the records of all the tributes under their control. The demands for integrity were very great, and the punishment for those who infringed upon the norms was very strict, generally capital punishment. Annexed to this room was the *coacalli*, where the foreign lords stayed when they visited the lord of Mexico.

Next was the house of songs, where the singers and musicians got together to await orders from the lord.

Finally, the *malcalli*, or the house of the prisoners, is mentioned. This is where the war captives were kept. Given the numbers of captives, these rooms must have been of considerable size.

Motecuhzoma's Zoo

Sahagún also describes the place where Motecuhzoma kept wild animals:

Totocalli: there majordomos kept all the various birds—eagles, red spoonbills, trupials, yellow parrots, parakeets, large parrots, pheasants. And there all the various artisans did their work: the gold and silversmiths, the copper-smiths, the feather-workers, painters, cutters of stones, workers in green stone, mosaic, carvers of wood. Caretakers of wild animals, majordomos, there guarded all the wild animals: ocelots, wolves, mountain lions, and mountain cats. (Sahagún 1577, Bk. 8, chap. 14; [1577] 1954, 45; 1975, 468)

Hernán Cortés's description of the zoo was much more extensive:

He also had another house, only a little less magnificent than this, where there was a very beautiful garden with balconies over it, and the facings and flagstones were all of jasper and very well made. In this house there were rooms enough for two great princes with their household. There were also the pools in which were kept all the many and varied kinds of water birds found in these parts, all

of them domesticated. For the sea birds there were pools of salt water, and for river fowl of fresh water, which was emptied from time to time for cleaning and filled again from the aqueducts. Each species of bird was fed with the food which it eats when wild, so that those which eat fish were given fish, and those which eat worms, worms, and those which eat maize or smaller grain were likewise given those things. And I assure Your Highness that the birds which eat only fish were given 250 pounds each day which were taken from the salt lake. There were three hundred men in charge of these birds who knew no other trade, as there were others who were skilled only in healing sick birds. Above these pools were corridors and balconies, all very finely made, where Moctezuma came to amuse himself by watching them. (Cortés, Second Letter, [1519–1526] 2001, 109–10)

He also describes a room in the same house where albino men, women, and children were kept, as well as “male and female monsters in which there were dwarves, hunchbacks, and others with other deformities” (Cortés, Second Letter, [1519–1526] 1979, 76). In addition to the albinos, Hernández (1946, 97) mentions hunchbacked, disabled, and epileptic individuals, as well as anyone who had a malformation or rare shape, adding the surprising affirmation that “many had not been born this way.” Cervantes de Salazar adds more details:

And yet they say that for this end they broke them and trained them from the time they were children when they were more malleable, saying that in the house of such a great king, by his very greatness, there must be things that were not found in the houses of the other princes. (Cervantes de Salazar 1971, 1:318, translated by Kristin Sullivan)

Incidentally, these ideas appear Gary Jennings’s novel *Azteca*, which features a “monsters’ house” and describes the intentional deformation of children, mainly the offspring of poor people. These children were then sold to the *tlahtoani* officers. The existence of these rooms also presupposes a network that enabled officers to take control of children with particular deformities or to replace the losses not met naturally by newborns.

Motecuhzoma’s zoo extended to other rooms, where a multitude of caretakers were in charge of a great quantity and diversity of animals:

In the lower rooms were many cages of stout timbers; in some, lions were kept; in others, tigers; in others, lynxes; in still others, wolves. In short, there was no kind of four-footed beast that was not represented, and all for the purpose of Moctezuma’s being able to boast that, however fierce they might be, he [dared] to keep them in his house. They were fed turkeys, deer, dogs, and game. In other rooms, in great earthenware jars, pots, and vessels of the kind, filled with water or earth, reptiles were kept, such as boa constrictors (*muslos*), vipers, crocodiles (which they call *caimanes*, that is to say water lizards), lizards of other kinds, and such-like vermin, as well as land and water snakes, fierce and poisonous, and ugly enough to frighten the beholder.

In another apartment and in the courtyard, in cages with round perches, were kept all manner of birds of prey, such as lanners, hawks, kites, vultures, goshawks, nine or ten varieties of falcons, and many kinds of eagles, among which were some fifty a great deal larger than our red-tails. At one feeding each of them would eat a turkey of the country, which is larger than our peacock. There were many birds of each kind, and each kind had its own cage. (López de Gómara 1966, 150–51)

We often reflect upon the impact European animals, particularly horses and dogs, had on native animals. Yet we almost never consider the effect in the opposite direction, especially concerning reptiles. In Europe there are very few kinds of serpents. There are only two or three poisonous species, and they are small and not really very dangerous. Thus, when the Spaniards encountered constrictors and a wide range of poisonous serpents in the tropics, some of which have very fast-acting effects, they must have been shocked. They likely saw them as diabolical monsters. It is against this background that we should consider the following passage by Lopez de Gómara, who, we should remember, never stepped foot in America:

The snakes and their mates were given the blood of men killed in sacrifice, to suck and lick, and some even say there were fed on the

flesh, which the lizards devoured with great gusto. The Spaniards did not witness this, but they did see the ground all encrusted with blood, as in a slaughterhouse, which stank horribly and quaked if a stick was thrust into it. (López de Gómara 1966, 151)

It is interesting to point out that Cervantes de Salazar, who so often follows Gómara, omits this passage. However, his description of the hubbub of people entering and leaving the palace to take care of the animals does agree with Gómara's account (see Cervantes de Salazar 1971, 319). Gómara noted that although the Spaniards enjoyed watching this commotion, they

did not enjoy [the animals'] frightful hissing, the hideous roaring of the lions, the howling of the wolves, the screams of the tigers and lynxes, and the yelps of the other animals, owing to hunger or perhaps to the thought that they were caged and could not give vent to their fury. (López de Gómara 1966, 151)

These sounds joined the murmur of water, the ringing of the drums that announced the hour, the flutes and trumpets of the schoolboys who did not leave until late at night (Escalante 2004a, 205–6), and the buzz of different languages that rose from the market and could be heard up to a league away. Escalante also speaks of the scents, which leads us to the market.

Markets

The classic descriptions, from Cortés and later from Bernal Díaz del Castillo, speak of the Tlatelolco market and its greatness, but it was not the only one in the city. It was possible to acquire necessary items in many districts, especially food (Conquistador Anónimo 1971, 394; Hernández 1946, 80). Cervantes de Salazar (1971, 1:329–30) said that prepared food was also sold on the streets. In this respect, colonial Mexico City was not very different from the modern one.

The most common description, which nearly everyone followed with some variation, is that of Cortés (Text Box 5.6). In it one can perceive how the market was organized and what products were sold. The other authors follow this description quite closely, although each one emphasizes his own field of interest, be it fruit, vegetables, the different

5.6. Hernán Cortés Describes the Tenochtitlan Market

There is also one square twice as big as that of Salamanca, with arcades all around, where more than sixty thousand people come each day to buy and sell, and where every kind of merchandise produced in these lands is found; provisions as well as ornaments of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, stones, shells, bones, and feathers. They also sell lime, hewn and unhewn stones, adobe bricks, tiles, and cut and uncut woods of various kinds. There is a street where they sell game and birds of every species found in this land: chickens, partridges and quails, wild ducks, flycatchers, widgeons, turtledoves, pigeons, cane birds, parrots, eagles and eagle owls, falcons, sparrow hawks and kestrels, and they sell the skins of some of these birds of prey with their feathers, heads and claws. They sell rabbits and hares, and stags and small gelded dogs which they breed for eating.

There are streets of herbalists where all the medicinal herbs and roots found in the land are sold. There are shops like apothecaries, where they sell ready-made medicines as well as liquid ointments and plasters. There are shops like barbers' where they have their hair washed and shaved, and shops where they sell food and drink. There are also men like porters to carry loads. There is so much firewood and charcoal, earthenware braziers and mats of various kinds like mattresses for beds, and other; finer ones, for seats and for covering rooms and hallways. There is every sort of vegetable, especially onions, leeks, garlic, common cress and watercress, borage, sorrel, teasels and artichokes; and there are many sorts of fruit, among which are cherries and plums like those in Spain.

They sell honey, wax, and a syrup made from maize canes, which is as sweet and syrupy as that made from sugar cane. They also make syrup from a plant in the islands is called maguey, which is much better than most syrups, and from this plant they also make sugar and wine, which they likewise sell. There are many sorts of spun cotton, in hanks of every color, and it seems like the silk market at Granada, except here there is much greater quantity. They sell as many colors for painters as may be found in Spain and all of excellent hues. They sell deerskins, with and without the hair, and some are dyed white or in various colors. They sell much earthenware, which for the most part is very good; there are both large and small pitchers, jugs, pots, tiles, and many other sorts of vessel, all of good clay and most of them glazed and painted. They sell maize both as grain and as bread and it is better both in appearance and in taste than any found in the islands

continued

Text box 5.6—continued

or on the mainland. They sell chicken and fish pies, and much fresh and salted fish, as well as raw and cooked fish. They sell hen and goose eggs, and eggs of all the other birds I have mentioned, in great numbers, and they sell tortillas made from eggs.

Finally, besides those things which I have already mentioned, they sell in the market everything else to be found in this land, but they are so many and so varied that because of their great number and because I cannot remember many of them nor do I know what they are called I shall not mention them. Each kind of merchandise is sold in its own street without any mixture whatever; they are very particular in this. Everything is sold by number and size, and until now I have seen nothing sold by weight. There is in this great square a very large building like a courthouse, where ten or twelve persons sit as judges. They preside over all that happens in the markets, and sentence criminals. There are in this square other persons who walk among the people to see what they are selling and the measures they are using; and they have been seen to break some that were false.

Cortés, Second Letter ([1519–1526] 2001, 103–5).

types of corn, or the number of judges that made up a “hearing.” Friar Bernardino de Sahagún adds the most information, mainly because he speaks of the salesmen and gives the names of the goods in Nahuatl (Sahagún [1577] 1965, Books 8 and 10; Sahagún [1577] 1961). His account mentions raw materials, manufactured objects, tools, jewelry, textiles, prepared and uncooked food, and what we might call “services” (see Text Box 6.1). The information provided in the various sources is summarized in Rojas (1986, 171–77).

Among the raw materials were gold, silver, precious stones, feathers, cotton, thread, paper, wax, dyes, different types of wood, firewood, coal, finished and unfinished stone, adobes and bricks, plaster, lime, saltpeter, and leather. The sections in the chronicles regarding tools list stone knives, copper and brass axes, hoes or wooden planters, oars, levers, ropes, awls and chisels, looms, spindle whorls, and tumplines used for carrying loads (see Text Box 5.6).

The sources also list containers of all types for domestic use, including griddles, mortars for making sauces, braziers, and objects made of

matting, such as rush mats, boxes, and baskets. Mirrors and brooms are also mentioned. The clothing he lists includes capes, ponchos, the loin-cloths worn by men (*maxtlatl*), women’s skirts, and women’s blouses, the famous *huipiles* (traditional embroidered blouses) that are still made today. The main footwear was sandals. Jewelry was made of gold, silver copper, tin, precious and nonprecious stones, bone, shell, and conch. There were also rich feathers. Other items of personal ornamentation were cosmetics, including *tzictli*, the Nahuatl word for chewing gum, although its use in ancient Mesoamerica was not the same as in modern times. Tobacco was used for both cosmetic and therapeutic purposes in the forms of “scent tubes” and “smoke tubes” and pipes.

But the most detailed section describes food, both prepared and uncooked, and live or dead animals. The lists are quite specific about which birds, mammals, and reptiles were sold, whereas for fish the list says only “fish.” Cortés gives the most information about live animals, particularly birds. He lists hens, ducklings, ducks, partridges, quails, turtledoves, doves, parrots, eagles, crows, hawks, sparrow hawks, and kestrels. He also noted the presence of deer, hares, rabbits, and dogs. Cervantes de Salazar (1971, 1:329) is the most explicit about dead animals, such as snakes, moles, dormice, mice, worms, toasted ants, ground squirrels, and serpents. Others add hens, birds, “fierce beasts,” and deer. Sahagún and some other documents mention the existence of butchers.

Many varieties of vegetables were sold. The list includes cacao, kidney beans, chía, different types of corn, chili peppers, amaranth seeds, tomatoes, roots, seeds, leaves, grass, vegetables, onions, leeks, pumpkins and squashes, garlic, watercress, borage, sweet potatoes, yam beans, and many fruits, including cherries, plums, avocado, sapodillas, pineapple, sapote, and guavas. The drinks included cacao and pulque (a fermented drink made from the sap of the maguey cactus). The presence of the latter is interesting because in spite of the existence of severe restrictions on the consumption of spirits, it was repeatedly mentioned as an item that was sold in the market. Finally, we cannot forget the sale of salt.

Prepared foods were also sold. The list begins with different types of honey and treats such as nut nougat, marshmallow, and chía nougat. Pumpkin seeds, cooked corn on the cob, *atole* (hot and cold drinks made from corn gruel), *pinole* (toasted, pulverized corn mixed with

cinnamon and sugar), and *chilmolli* (a tomato stew made with chili peppers) were also sold, as were different stews of roasted and cooked meat, bird pies, tamales (corn dumplings), corn tortillas, tacos (Sahagún says “tortillas with ground chili peppers or meat with *chilmolli*”), fish stew, and fish pies. Houses existed “where they provide[d] food and drink at a price.” Also found were *tecuilatli*, or cakes made from spirulina.

Services were provided by herbalists and druggists; barbers; stove makers; water bearers; craftsmen such as potters, carpenters, and wood cutters; and those who provided transportation services such as ship-pers and canoeists. Also present were slaves.

All this was complemented by a service related to hygiene that is mentioned only by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, whose testimony deserves to be mentioned in length:

I must apologize for adding, that boat loads of human ordure, were on the borders of the adjoining canals for the purpose of tanning leather, which they said could not be done without it. Some may laugh at this, but I assert the fact is as I here stated it, and moreover, upon all the public roads, places for passengers to resort to, were built of canes and thatched with straw or grafs in order to collect this material. (Díaz del Castillo 1800, 144)

It is interesting that this paragraph does not appear in other translations of Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s book. We have less information about how many salesmen were associated with each item in the market. However, Lopez de Gómara (1987, 186) says of the prepared food that “it is frightening to think where so much stewed food is ruined and wasted and how so much food was cooked.” The sources agree that those selling similar items were located in close proximity to each other, forming specialized streets of sorts. Everyone had their assigned place; for example, those who sold heavy items, such as beams, were located on the outskirts of the market. In addition to bartering, the Mexica used several types of currency, including cacao and blankets. However, few things were expensive enough to require the latter. The salesmen had to pay rent for their spots, and the judges and the bailiffs saw to it that law and order were enforced and no fraud was committed.

Knowledge of the diversity of products sold in the market is important in itself, but so too is the reason for such diversity. Cortés cites

60,000 as the number of people who went to the market each day, most of whom must have come to purchase goods. Most of the goods came from outside the city; thus, the market was an important part of the supply network that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 6. What Tenochtitlan offered was the transformation of raw materials into goods and services. The presence of craftsmen, raw materials, and tools in the market suggests it was a place where craftsmen could be supplied with raw materials and work and where they could obtain clients. The abundance of foodstuffs, textiles, and domestic objects tells us that the population of Tenochtitlan focused on other aspects of the economy and needed to buy what they did not produce. In most of the books on the Aztecs, the commoners are described as nearly self-sufficient cultivators and part-time craftsmen. However, this description does not apply to most of the inhabitants of the city. Most were occupied with a great number of other tasks and used the income they earned to buy what they needed in the market, as we will see in Chapter 7.

We don’t have descriptions for other markets in Mesoamerica, but we can imagine that the main market at Teotihuacan must have looked very similar, and this may be true for other markets in places such as Chichén Itza, Monte Albán, and Xochicalco.

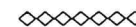
Means of Exchange

The presence of a means of exchange, what we typically refer to as currency, is key to the operation of a city of specialists, although some authors prefer to reserve the term “currency” for metal coins. However, in Mesoamerica, several items served as currency, among which cacao stands out because it constituted the smallest denomination. Cotton blankets were next; different values were assigned to them corresponding to the value of 65, 80, and 100 cacao beans. Gold-filled tubes for feathers are also mentioned, as are copper axes. But cacao and cotton cloth were the most commonly mentioned mediums of exchange. These also had an important presence during colonial times, and cacao largely coexisted with Spanish coins for quite some time (Rojas 1987c, 1998b). Although there is some mention of payment in spices, cotton cloth and cacao were typically used.

The descriptions offered by the chroniclers generally do not include most roads and canals, except for some brief notes by Cervantes de Salazar (1985). We can catch a glimpse in the accounts of the conquest,

but the chroniclers barely linger on the descriptions of such places and even less on the activities associated with them. Thus, our knowledge of the structure of the districts, the presence of temples, schools, patios, and streets populated with trees or other shade, and daily life in all corners of the city is quite limited. However, Chapter 8 will provide some information about these topics in the context of a discussion of the daily life of the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan.

6



Supply and Distribution

The city of Tenochtitlan was founded on a small island where resources were limited. Even though it was located in the center of a lake, the water was brackish, which made the provisioning of fresh water for human consumption difficult. As a result, the Chapultepec aqueduct was one of the first major construction projects for the Tenochca.

As the city grew so did the number of people that inhabited it. Demand also increased, and almost everything consumed in the city came from elsewhere. Food, building supplies, and raw materials for craft production were all imported into the city. One of the first requests the Tenochca made of the lord of Azcapotzalco, which was not very well received, was for wood and stone for building.

An intricate network of transportation, storage, and distribution was necessary for provisioning and distributing all products. In addition, it was necessary to control production at the place of origin to ensure the flow of goods, which made this system a political matter that was closely tied to the ability of the empire to expand.

This system required many people, both inside and outside the city. Such employment opportunities likely attracted immigrants, and these new residents enabled the city to grow. We now turn to how Tenochtitlan organized the provision and distribution of necessary goods.

Drinking Water

The Chapultepec aqueduct was the main source of potable water in the city. However, some texts mention the existence of water sources at certain points within Tenochtitlan, such as at the palace of Motecuhzoma.

We know that water was channeled to some palaces, but most of the people purchased potable water in the market, at the end of the