Document A: Aztec Sacrifice


Document Note: The Codex Mendoza was commissioned by the Spanish Viceroy of Mexico in 1541 to provide King Charles V a clearer idea of his new subjects. The artwork in the Codex was drawn by Aztec artists accompanied by text written by Spanish priests.


Title: A Seventeen-Year Old Aztec Scribe’s Impressions of Sacrifice Ritual (as told to Friar Bernardino de Sahagun several years after 1529)

“When I saw this ceremony last year as a member of the priestly school, I was amazed by the physical beauty of the enemy warrior who was killed at the end of the festival. This seasoned warrior, whom we change from a human into the god Tezcatlipoca, can have no blemish upon his body, and he is treated like our most royal family member during the long year leading up to his sacrifice. During that time he is given all the finest luxuries from the nobles’ storehouses, including foods, clothes, teachers, women, and instruction...

Many of us become attached to this living god, and a terrible sadness comes over some of the women when, at the end of the year, he is taken to Chalco and dismembered in public view.”


The prisoners taken at Teuclepec were brought out. Motecuhzoma and Chihuacoatl began to sacrifice them, slicing open their chests and extracting their hearts. First, they raised the hearts to the sun, then they threw them into the shrine before the gods. This sacrifice began at midday and ended at nightfall.

Two thousand three hundred men were killed and their blood bathed the entire temple and stairway. Each time the priest cut out a heart, they rolled the body down the stairs.
How have historians tried to explain or understand Aztec human sacrifice? Some defenders of Aztec culture have seen it as a limited phenomenon, greatly exaggerated by the Spanish for political purposes. Many scholars have seen it as a religious act central to the Aztec’s belief that humans must sacrifice that which was most precious to them-life— to receive the sun, the rain, and other blessings of the gods that made life possible.

Others have viewed the Aztec practice as the intentional manipulation and expansion of a widespread phenomenon that had long existed among many American peoples. In other words, the Aztec rulers, priests, and nobility used the cult of war and large-scale human sacrifice for political purposes to terrorize their neighbors and subdue the lower classes. Another possible explanation is demographic. If central Mexico was as densely populated as we believe, then the sacrifices may have been a kind of population control.

Other interpretations have been even more startling. Anthropologist Marvin Harris has suggested that Aztec sacrifice, accompanied by ritual cannibalism, was a response to a lack of protein. He argued that in the Old World, human sacrifice was replaced by animal sacrifice, but in Mesoamerica, which lacked cattle and sheep, that transformation never took place... Other scholars have strongly objected to Harris’s interpretation of the evidence, which gave little attention to the ritual aspects of these acts. Still, human sacrifice shades all assessments of Aztec civilization.