The Aztecs: Should Historians Emphasize Agriculture or Human Sacrifice?

Overview: In the 1400s and early 1500s, the Aztecs dominated the region around modern-day Mexico City. At their peak, they controlled the lives of some ten to 20 million people. Not always well loved by other groups in the area, the Aztecs created a society that surprised and impressed the Spanish conquistadors who arrived in 1519. The purpose of this Mini-Q is to examine parts of Aztec society and decide what we should emphasize when telling the Aztec’s story.

The Documents:
- Document A: Growth of the Aztec Empire (map)
- Document B: Chinampas Agriculture
- Document C: Diego Rivera Mural
- Document D: The Scale of Sacrifice
- Document E: A Young Scribe’s Impression of Ritual Sacrifice
At the same time that the Renaissance was unfolding in Europe, the Aztecs were creating a remarkable world-class society in the Americas. The years were 1350 to 1519. The place was roughly the site of present-day Mexico City.

Frequently, we begin our study of the Aztecs in 1519 because that is the year Hernan Cortes and 500 Spanish conquistadors ("con-kees-ta-doors") first entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan ("ten-och-teet-lan"). However, we are interested in Aztec culture before the Spanish arrived. It is the pre-conquest Aztecs that will be the focus of this Mini-Q.

Understanding any civilization is challenging because civilizations are complex. We should not expect a smoothly ironed history. There will be wrinkles – some triumphs, some losses; some beauty, some ugliness. And historians will disagree about what to emphasize.

On the basic geography, there is no disagreement. The Aztecs lived in a geological basin in central Mexico that is about the size of Rhode Island. Surrounded by high mountain peaks, the basin extends 80 miles from north to south and 49 miles from east to west. In Aztec times, the basin collected water that formed five interconnected shallow lakes which provided splendid irrigation for farming. In the middle sat Tenochtitlan, an urban island built on landfill, and home to 300,000 people. Climate in this high region was unpredictable, with wet summers and dry, frost-filled winters. However, with the help of their calendars and their gods, the Aztecs managed to cope quite well.

The Aztecs first migrated to the shores of Lake Texcoco around 1100 CE. At the time they numbered about 10,000 people. When they arrived, there were already many groups of farmers living in the lake area of central Mexico. The Aztecs were distrusted and disliked because they tended to push others out of their way. Eventually, after centuries of aggression, they were totally in charge. By 1434, they were demanding tribute and military support from people throughout the region. They were also busy developing a remarkable agricultural system called chinampas ("chin-ahm-pahs"). Because of their strong military and agricultural success, Aztec leaders were able to rule some ten million people.

Religion gave the Aztecs direction and purpose. Their religion included at least 128 major deities, including gods of rain, fire, water, corn, the sky, and the sun. The gods were recognized by a cycle of festivals and ceremonies that involved feasting, dancing, and human sacrifice. The most important god, Huitzilopochtli ("weet-zee-lo-poch'-tlee"), was the Aztec sun god, who struggled to keep the night at bay and to bring warmth to the world. Huitzilopochtli needed strength in order to carry out his duties and the Aztecs believed that human blood and hearts provided the necessary nourishment. This led to some disturbing practices.

And so we come to our task. It is stated above that history has its wrinkles, its dark moments. Examine the five documents that follow and draw your own conclusions about the Aztecs. Then develop your answer to our question: The Aztecs: Should historians emphasize agriculture or human sacrifice?
Background Essay Questions

1. During what years was Aztec society at its height? In what year did the conquistadors arrive from Spain?

2. What does it mean that we should not expect a “smoothly ironed” Aztec history?

3. Why has Tenochtitlan been described as an “urban island”? What was its population?

4. About how many deities did the Aztecs worship?

5. Why do you think that the Aztecs worshipped Huitzilopochtli?

6. Define these terms:
   - conquistadors
   - pre-conquest
   - basin
   - tribute
   - chinampas
   - deities
   - Huitzilopochtli

Timeline

c. 1100 CE – Aztecs arrive on shores of Lake Texcoco.
1200-1300 – Aztecs use rubber to make balls for game.
  1325 – Aztecs found Tenochtitlan (modern-day Mexico City).
  1348 – Black Death ravages Europe and North Africa.
1400s – Aztec culture is at its height.
1492 – Christopher Columbus lands in the West Indies.
1519 – Spanish conquistador Heran Cortes enters Tenochtitlan.
Document A: Growth of the Aztec Empire (map)

Content Notes:

- This map shows the era of large-scale expansion of the Aztecs from the Basin of Mexico into the entire Mexican valley. Because so much new territory came under the control of Tenochtitlan ("ten-och-teet-lan"), the population of the Aztecs increased from about one million to about 10 million.

- Itzcoatl ("its-coat-el") was the leader who initiated this expansion; his primary advisor, Tlacae, pushed for the expansion and continued to influence other leaders after Itzcoatl's death. It was during this era that the Aztecs developed strong relationships with city-states outside of Tenochtitlan. The territories that Tenochtitlan controlled were divided into provinces that were obligated to pay tribute, accept political direction, and wage war for the Aztecs.
Territorial Acquisitions by Aztec Rulers

Note: Aztec warriors had the reputation of being fierce fighters, and most territories shown on the map were acquired by force. Independent territories on the map were sometimes the result of a deliberate policy that unoccupied lands remain available for future "flower wars" in order to provide an ongoing supply of "flowers" (captured sacrifice victims).

Document Analysis

1. According to the map, who was the first Aztec ruler to conquer lands in central Mexico?

2. How did the Aztecs acquire most new pieces of land?

3. The area of the state of Ohio is about 40,000 square miles. At its peak, how did the Aztec Empire compare? Give an area estimate.

4. Is there a connection between territorial expansion, a growing civilization, and agriculture? Explain.

5. Is there a connection between territorial expansion and human sacrifice? Explain.
Content Notes:

- *Chinampas* were unique to the Aztecs. These were essentially floating islands that greatly expanded agricultural output and enabled the Aztecs to feed what some historians have estimated to be about ten million people. Because Tenochtitlan was located on an island surrounded by shallow water, this prompted experimentation and eventually expertise with this sort of farming.

- The *chinampas* belonged to the whole community, or *calpulli*, not to individuals. Residents of a *calpulli* could increase the size of their *chinampas* plot if they owned extra land, and the government would confiscate *chinampas* that were not receiving proper care. The wealth and food production of the whole community was at stake.

- The document illustration shows the rows of *chinampas* and small and large canals that were used to transport workers and crops from the fields. The little boxes are houses and the faces are the owners of the individual *chinampas* plots. There are Aztec hieroglyphs with Spanish translations next to them. The individual plots were built on willow bedding and then piled with dirt, willows, more dirt and crops on the top. The Aztecs planted willow trees to provide shade and also to anchor the *chinampas*. Corn was the most common crop; often the Aztecs added flowers, which they loved.
Document B


In and around Lake Texcoco, the Aztecs developed an ingenious system for irrigating agriculture called *chimampas*. These were floating islands approximately seventeen feet long and one hundred to three hundred thirty feet wide that rested in reed frames that were anchored to the bottom of the lake. Willow trees were planted at intervals to provide shade. Approximately twenty thousand acres of *chimampas* were constructed [around Tenochtitlan] and the yield from them was high: four corn crops per year were possible.

Sources: Drawing at left from the Aztec manuscript *Matricula de Tributos*, circa 1542. Drawing below from David Carrasco and Scott Sessions: *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, 1998.

Document Analysis

1. An acre is about the size of a football field. How many acres of *chimampas* surrounded Tenochtitlan ("ten-och-teet-lan")?

2. What kept the soil of the *chimampas* from oozing into the network of canals? What anchored each *chimampas* plot to solid ground beneath the water level?

3. From the document, what inferences can you make about law and order in Aztec society?

4. How might you use this document to argue for the importance of agriculture in Aztec society?
Document C: Diego Rivera Mural

Content Notes:

• Diego Rivera was born in 1886 and died in 1957 at the age of 70. He was a Mexican nationalist and a member of the Mexican Communist Party. His art often had a political edge. He was influenced by the paintings of Picasso and is known for his vivid use of color.

• This mural is one of many that are painted in the National Palace in Mexico City. The Mexican government commissioned Rivera to paint this and other murals that depicted the noble heritage of the Mexican people. Rivera chose to emphasize the variety of agricultural practices and the production of food that accompanied it. Notice the Impersonator of a deity watching over the whole scene.

• Today Rivera's paintings are on display in more than 30 art museums around the world.
Document C


Document Analysis

1. Who is the artist and when was the mural painted?

2. What are the men and women doing in the mural?

3. Is there any evidence of spiritual belief in the painting?

4. Diego Rivera was a member of the Mexican Communist Party. He was concerned about worker rights and worker equality. Does that influence your thoughts about the value of this document? Explain.

5. How might you use the document to argue the importance of agriculture in Aztec society?

Note: The mural shows the Basin of Mexico during Aztec times. The men at the right plant and harvest the maize (corn) while the women on the left grind and roll it into tortillas. Behind them is a person dressed as a corn goddess. Rows of chinampas plots stretch across the lake as far as the eye can see. Two great volcanoes rise above the scene.
Step Four: Document Analysis (continued)

Document D: The Scale of Sacrifice

Content Notes:

- The *Codex Mendoza* was commissioned and compiled by Spanish authorities in 1541-1542. The artistic renderings were done by Aztec scribes and artists shortly after the conquest. The Codex was shipped to Spain, intercepted by French pirates, and eventually bought by an English collector. It currently rests in Oxford University’s Bodleian Library.

- The purpose of Document D is to show the scale of Aztec sacrifice. Though it has been suggested that the Spanish exaggerated the numbers, the evidence that large-scale sacrifice did take place is quite compelling. Another account, not reproduced here, states that some 30 years before the Spanish conquest, the Emperor Ahuitzotl dedicated the temple of Huitzilopochtli ("weet-zee-loh-och-talé"), the God of the Sun, and an estimated 20,000 prisoners of war were sacrificed, one at a time, over a period of four days.

- The Aztecs believed that the gods had sacrificed themselves for the well-being of human beings and that it was necessary to offer human sacrifice in return.

- What is difficult to understand is the response to the sacrifice. Accounts indicate that some victims went willingly to their deaths. Ritual death at the hands of priests was considered a noble death, even by some prisoners of war. Stories are told of victims who chose death over freedom, perhaps because of the promise of a rich afterlife.
Document D


Note: Diego Duran was a Spanish priest who lived in Mexico. His book is one of the earliest Western accounts of the history and culture of the Aztecs.

The prisoners taken at Teuclepec were brought out. Motecuhzoma and Chihuacoatl ["chi-wah-coat-el"] 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.

Source: *Codex Mendoza*, 1542. The Codex Mendoza was commissioned by the Spanish Viceroy of Mexico in 1541 to provide King Charles V of Spain a clearer idea about his new subjects. The illustrations in the Codex were drawn by Aztec artists. The text was written by Spanish priests.

Document Analysis

1. According to the passage from Friar Diego Duran, who are the people being sacrificed? How many are there?

2. Is there any evidence as to why the victims are being sacrificed?

3. Examine the illustration and the note above it. Consider the artists and authors. Do you think the illustration provides an accurate picture of what really happened? Explain your thinking.

4. How might you use this document to argue the importance of human sacrifice in Aztec society?
Step Four: Document Analysis (continued)

Document E: A Young Scribe’s Impression of Ritual Sacrifice

Content Notes:
• This document is important to help students gain a sense of perspective on the sacrifice ritual. Whereas the previous document supports the stereotypes of gore and blood, this document helps students see the ritual in a larger context. The excerpt is part of a much longer account of this young scribe’s explanation of the sacrifice to Tezcatlipoca, a major Aztec god of war.

• Historians and anthropologists have suggested a number of reasons for Aztec sacrifice. In addition to paying a debt to the gods for sacrifices they had previously made on behalf of humanity, possibilities include political control of neighbors through terrorism and population control in a crowded region.

• To discourage a rush to judgment in either direction, remind students that human sacrifice was a common practice in many traditions and cultures. It has been practiced in Hawaii, Japan, China, South America and North America. In China, in about 1500 BCE, an entire company of soldiers, charioteers, and horses was sacrificed and buried with the supreme ruler. Bushido warriors in Japan from the 17th century to the 18th century were required to give complete loyalty to their leaders, including committing seppuku, or ritual suicide, if it was demanded. Also, in the 1500s when Aztecs were practicing human sacrifice, Europeans were burning religious dissenters at the stake.
Document E

Source: Friar Bernardino de Sahagun, Florentine Codex, II, circa 1555.

Note: Bernardino de Sahagun was a Spanish priest who interviewed Aztecs about their lives and culture. This is a 17-year-old Aztec scribe's impression of ritual sacrifice, as told to the friar sometime 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 ["tehs-cah-tlee-poh-cah", the god of war], 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. He walks among us as a living god, and I was impressed and felt pride for my altepetl [village] when the younger people stopped their work or play and were mesmerized by him and his entourage of servants and guards as they strolled through the city or rode in the canoes along the canals.

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. Let me share with you my images and memories of what happened last year when I followed his every movement. It will help me prepare my paintings in the book of sacred history."

Document Analysis

1. Who is the source of this account?

2. What is the physical appearance of the enemy warrior?

3. How do villagers treat the warrior before he is sacrificed?

4. Why is the enemy warrior treated in this fashion?

5. How do the young women of the village feel when the warrior is taken to Chalco to be sacrificed?

6. Consider Documents D and E. What should historians emphasize about Aztec sacrifice?