



**Anthropology 3812, Section 10 – Spring 2012**  
**Power and Violence in New World Societies:**  
**The Aztecs of Mexico**



**Time and Place:** Tuesday and Thursday, 3:45-5:00, Rome 351  
**Instructor:** Dr. Jeffrey Blomster **E-mail:** blomster@gwu.edu  
**Office:** 301 HAH (2110 G St.), 4-4880  
**Office Hours:** Thursday, 10:00-12:00, or by appointment.

Both vilified as savage cannibals through the self-interested accounts of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish invaders and utilized as a tool in the national identity of contemporary Mexico, the Aztecs present a fascinating series of contrasts and contradictions. Too often known solely for warfare and human sacrifice, the Aztecs produced some of the most naturalistic art and reflective poetry that have survived the Spanish Conquest. Utilizing an anthropological approach, we will focus throughout the semester on the importance of violence in Aztec society and how its normalization created a form of social cohesion central to the state. To address this theme, we explore a variety of topics related to the Aztecs: their origins; family and class structure; gender relations; land tenure; concepts of the body and medicine; and the role and organization of such societal institutions as the school and market. We will focus on Aztec political organization and its close links to religion and cosmology.

Different types of sources exist on the Aztecs, including traditional anthropological and archaeological materials as well as colonial-era ethnohistoric documents. Whenever possible, surviving documents from the Aztecs themselves will be combined and contrasted with recent archaeological research to present a comprehensive and holistic perspective.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- introduce the student to the unique Aztec achievement and legacy;
- understand the sophisticated and complex nature of Aztec ideology and philosophy;
- be able to read and understand indigenous texts and art;
- contrast attitudes about warfare, sacrifice and violence, and see how violence was used to integrate Aztec society;
- study the Aztec approach to urbanism;
- compare concepts of gender roles and relations;
- show how different types of evidence, in this case ethnohistorical and archaeological, can both complement and challenge each other;
- encourage critical thinking about major issues regarding the Aztec, from the scope and nature of sacrifice to the integration of diverse populations into a multi-ethnic empire

**Graduate Students:**

Graduate students are welcome in this class, but will have extra readings. Please see me for additional information.

**Textbooks:**

There are five textbooks required for this class, available at the bookstore and on reserve at Gelman:

Smith, Michael. *The Aztecs*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2012. Blackwell Publishers.

Carrasco, David. *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization*. 1999. Beacon Press.

Díaz del Castillo, Bernal. *The History of the Conquest of New Spain* (edited by D. Carrasco). 2008. University of New Mexico Press.

Leon-Portilla, Miguel. *The Broken Spears*. Expanded edition, 2006. Beacon Press.  
Townsend, Richard. *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlán*. 1979. Dumbarton Oaks.

**Lecture/Discussion Schedule:**

Note: last name refers to textbook author; all other readings are on Blackboard.

- | <b>Date</b> | <b>Topics, Readings and Assignments</b>  |
|-------------|--|
| 01/17       | The Aztecs <i>in Mexico</i> : An Introduction to pre-Aztec Mesoamerica<br>Leon-Portilla, Introduction.<br>Díaz del Castillo, Introduction, + pp.389-398.   |
| 01/19       | Power, Violence and the Aztecs: Themes, Sources, and the Nahuatl Language<br>Smith, Chap. 1.<br>Carrasco, Introduction.<br>Díaz del Castillo, pp. 156-183.   |
| 01/24       | The Search for Aztec Origins.<br>Smith, pp. 30-46.<br><b>Discussion: Migration Narratives: History? Ritual Performance?</b><br>Smith, Michael. The Aztlan Migrations of the Nahuatl Chronicles: Myth or History? <i>Ethnohistory</i> 1984, 31(3):153-186.<br>Boone, Elizabeth. Migration Histories as Ritual Performance. In <i>Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes</i> , edited by D. Carrasco, 1991. University Press of Colorado. |
| 01/26       | The Aztecs Ascendant: Creation and Spread of the Aztec Empire.<br>Smith, pp. 46-59.<br><b>Discussion: The City-State (<i>altepetl</i>) in Central Mexico.</b><br>Hodge, Mary. When is a City-State? In <i>The Archaeology of City-States: Cross-Cultural Approaches</i> , edited by Nichols and Charlton, 1997. Smithsonian.   |
| 01/31       | Becoming Aztec, from Birth to Death: Family, Enculturation and Gender Roles.<br><b>Discussion: Aztec gender concepts; the roles, and sacrifice, of women.</b><br>Clendinnen, Inga. Wives. In <i>Aztecs: An Interpretation</i> , 1991. Cambridge.<br>Carrasco, Chap. 7.   |
| 02/02       | Aztec Social Organization and Society: Calpolli, Class and Education.<br>Smith, Chap. 6.<br><b>Discussion: Class and Power in the Aztec State.</b><br>Rounds, J. Lineage, Class and Power in the Aztec State. <i>American Ethnologist</i> 1979, 6(1):73-86.  |
| 02/07       | Tribute and the Structure of the Triple Alliance.<br>Smith, Chap. 7.<br><b>Discussion: The Economy of Empire and the Importance of Tributary Provinces.</b><br>Berdan, Frances. The Tributary Provinces. In <i>Aztec Imperial Strategies</i> , edited by Berdan et al., 1996. Dumbarton Oaks.  |
| 02/09       | The Aztec Economy: Agriculture, Diet, and Industry.<br>Smith, Chaps. 3 & 4.<br><b>Discussion: Relationship between the Earth and Humans.</b><br>Arnold, Philip. Eating Landscape: Human Sacrifice and Sustenance in Aztec Mexico. In <i>Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes</i> , edited by D. Carrasco, 1991. University Press of Colorado.   |

- 02/14 The Commercial Economy: Markets, Trade and the Pochteca.  
Smith, Chap. 5.  
**Discussion: Understanding Aztec markets and trade.**  
Hodge, Mary. Aztec Market Systems. *National Geographic Research and Exploration*, 1992, 8(4):428-445.
- 02/16 Aztec Urbanism and Political Organization at Tenochtitlán.  
Smith, Chap. 8.  
**Discussion: City as Symbol.**  
Carrasco, Chap. 1.
- 02/21 Aztec Imperialism I: Codex Mendoza. **Student Presentations.**  
Díaz del Castillo, pp. 1-39.  
**Discussion: Imperial Landscapes beyond the Valley of Mexico.**  
Garraty, Christopher and Michael Ohnerson. Negotiating the Imperial Landscape. In *The Archaeology of Meaningful Places*, edited by B. Bowser and M. Nieves Zedeño, 2009. University of Utah Press.
- 02/23 Codex Mendoza: **Student Presentations.**  
Díaz del Castillo, pp. 40-89.  
**Codex Mendoza Essay Due!**
- 02/28 Aztec Warfare and Conflict.  
**Discussion: Warriors, Charisma, and Flowery Wars.**  
Carrasco, Chap. 5.  
Hicks, Frederic. Flowery War in Aztec History. *American Ethnologist* 1979, 6(1):87-92.
- 03/01 **Exam 1.**
- 03/06 Aztec Cosmology and Cosmogony: The Creation of the Universe.  
Smith, Chap. 9.  
**Discussion: Aztec Cannibalism – ecological necessity or cosmic jaws?**  
Harner, Michael. The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice. *Human Ecology* 1977, 4(1):117-135.  
Carrasco, Chap. 6.
- 03/08 *The 5 Suns: A Sacred History of Ancient Mexico.* (Film)  
Díaz del Castillo, pp. 90-130.  
**Research Paper Topics Due!**
- 03/12- Spring Recess.  
03/17
- 03/20 Aztec Religion: The Ritual Calendar and the Priesthood.  
Read: Smith, Chaps. 10 & 11.  
**Discussion: The “fearful symmetry” of Aztec Ritual.**  
Carrasco, Chap. 3.
- 03/22 The Supernatural and Aztec Deities.  
**Discussion: the nature of Aztec gods; was there an Aztec “pantheon?”**  
Nicholson, H.B. Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico. In *Handbook of Middle American Indians, Vol. 10: Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, edited by Wauchope et al., 1971. University of Texas Press.

- 03/27 Aztec Human Sacrifice: Power, Performance and Violence in Tenochtitlán.  
Díaz del Castillo, pp. 439-447.  
**Discussion: To Change Place—Toxcatl and the Sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca.**  
Carrasco, Chap. 4.  
**Discussion: The evidence for Aztec sacrifice.**  
Mendoza, Rubén. Aztec Militarism and Blood Sacrifice. In *Latin American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence*, edited by Chacon and Mendoza, 2007. University of Arizona Press.
- 03/29 Legitimacy and Power in Aztec Art.  
Smith, pp. 263-271.  
**Discussion: State and Cosmos in Aztec Art.**  
Townsend, pp. 23-70.
- 04/03 Ceremonial Landscapes: the Templo Mayor and the Sacred Mountain.  
Smith, pp. 220-229.  
**Discussion: Templo Mayor/City of Sacrifice.**  
Carrasco, Chap. 2.
- 04/05 The Balanced and Moral Aztec: Philosophy, Music and Poetry.  
Smith, pp. 271-277  
**Discussion: Morality and Sexuality.**  
Burkhart, Louise. Abstinence and Excess. In *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, 1989. University of Arizona Press.
- 04/10 Aztec Concepts of the Body, Sickness and Medicine.  
**Discussion: Sickness and Morality?**  
Burkhart, Louise. Health and Sickness. In *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, 1989. University of Arizona Press.
- 04/12 Toltec Envy and the Aztecs in a Postclassic Mesoamerican System.  
**Discussion: Aztec Archaizing?**  
Umberger, Emily. Antiques, Revivals, and References to the Past in Aztec Art. *Res*, 1987, 13:62-105.  
**Discussion: Postclassic Shared Intellectual Culture?**  
Boone, Elizabeth. A Web of Understanding: Pictorial Codices and the Shared Intellectual Culture of Late Postclassic Mesoamerica. In *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, edited by Smith and Berdan, 2003. University of Utah Press.
- 04/17 Arrival of the Strangers I: Spanish Perspectives.  
Díaz del Castillo, pp. 131-155, 184-262.  
**Discussion: Colonial Gender Roles and Understanding Malinche.**  
Kellogg, Susan. From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal. In *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, edited by S. Kellogg, 1997. University of Oklahoma Press.  
Díaz del Castillo, pp. 418-438.
- 04/19 **Exam 2!**
- 04/24 The Arrival of the Strangers II: Aztec Perspectives and the end of Tenochtitlán.  
**Discussion: Contrasting attitudes and narratives of the Spanish and Aztec**  
Leon-Portilla, pp. 3-144.  
Díaz del Castillo, pp. 263-310.
- 04/26 The Aztec Heritage: Colonial Interactions and Beyond.

Smith, Chap. 12.  
Carrasco, Chap. 8.  
Leon-Portilla, pp. 145-173.

**Discussion: Chronological Pollution in Pre- and Post-Conquest Mexico.**

Hamann, Byron. Chronological Pollution: Potsherds, Mosques, and Broken Gods before and after the Conquest of Mexico. *Current Anthropology* 2008, 49(5):803-824.

05/01 **Final papers due in Anthropology Department by 4:30 pm!**

