From this time on the Chichimec barbarians acquired a little culture and lived like rational people and covered themselves with clothing....They also made huts in which to live.... They began to have relations with the other people and to trade and bargain with them ... becoming related to them by marriage, beginning to have lords, recognizing the authority of some men over others.

Diego Durán 1994: 18; originally written 1581

The Aztecs were latecomers to Mesoamerica. As nomadic or seminomadic Chichimecs they migrated into Mesoamerica from the northern deserts, carrying some cultural features shared by other, similar migrants, along with other traits unique to themselves. Within a few generations after their arrival in the Basin of Mexico, they had incorporated much of the well-established Mesoamerican way of life into their own traditional cultural milieu. This chapter pursues the place of the Aztecs in Mesoamerica – just how typical, or how unique, were they?

Mesoamerica: A matter of perspective

As a culture area, Mesoamerica traditionally encompasses approximately the lower two-thirds of Mexico, all of Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and adjacent portions of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (Figure 2.1). In 1943 Paul Kirchhoff defined this cultural region by assembling a rather long list of diverse and very specific culture traits, such as agriculture based on maize, beans, and squash; chinampas (cultivated plots built up in shallow lake-beds); wooden swords studded with flint or obsidian; pyrite mirrors; stepped pyramids; ballcourts; eagle and jaguar military orders; merchants who occasionally served as spies; hieroglyphic writing; ritual use of paper and rubber; and two intertwined calendars yielding a fifty-two-year cycle (Kirchhoff 1943: 99–101). The idea was that although some of these traits were also found in other culture areas, their combination was distinctive to the geographical area.
defined as “Mesoamerica,” and hence signified a certain amount of historical and cultural unity among the peoples living in that region. These commonalities were considered to result from “a shared history of diffusion and migration linking Mesoamerican societies” (Schortman and Urban 2001: 365).

We have come a long way since Kirchhoff offered this conception of Mesoamerica, yet we still find value in the concept and recognize important commonalities within the region. These tend to be phrased more generally and revolve around such themes as agricultural intensification, specialization and trade, urban planning, legitimization of power, elite culture, knowledge systems, mythological and cosmological constructs, and stylistic regimes.

Recast, these commonalities are seen today in different, more dynamic terms. In particular, specific and general cultural developments are now viewed in terms of more complex processes and interactions. While individual researchers tend to prefer one approach over others, there is an increasing tendency to interweave local ecological adaptations, regional and macroregional interactions, the fluctuations of regional unity and diversity over time, and the role of ethnicity in efforts to strengthen our explanations of the dynamics and workings of Mesoamerican civilizations. These typically require interdisciplinary undertakings. Especially useful have been macroregional and world systems approaches that recognize regional variations and seek to understand multiple...
types of interaction among people of different societal levels and across different city-states and regions (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 1984; Feinman and Nicholas 2000; Smith and Berdan 2003b; Parkinson and Galaty 2007; Schortman and Urban 2001). For Aztec-period Mexico, a modified world systems perspective “is one of the few approaches capable of encompassing an area as large as Mesoamerica while accommodating a wide range of variation in the economic and political organization of the constituent societies” (Smith and Berdan 2003a: 12). As Mesoamericans, the Aztecs were participants, very significant participants, in this broader interacting world.

AZTEC PRECEDENTS

The focus of this book is on the Aztec Empire, the final act on the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican stage (see Table 2.1). However, the Aztecs (or, more specifically, Mexica) cannot be understood in a temporal vacuum. Civilizations stretched back to approximately 1200 BC in Mesoamerica, and in the Basin of Mexico and immediate environs, the basic tenets of Mesoamerican civilization were well established at least by the first century AD. These included a hierarchical social order; centralized power; urbanization; monumental public architecture; intensified economic production yielding substantial surpluses; specialization along economic, social, political, and religious lines; and a polytheistic religion.

As a secondary state, the Mexica were in the enviable position of being able to learn from their predecessors. Already systems of sophisticated knowledge had been established, techniques refined, and practical and spiritual problems tackled. Drawing on earlier models, the Mexica had the basics at their disposal as they established their city-state: they knew how to grow crops, build temples, lay out a city, select rulers, make war, fashion weapons and armor, weave cloth, make pulque, and act haughty or humble as the occasion required. They could build their cities and city-states rapidly and confidently, much of the trial and error and experimentation having been undertaken by others before them.

While secondary states in some vague sense owe organizational and thematic debts to all preceding ones in the broader region, in this case the debts most emphatically and directly derived from Teotihuacan and Tula. The Teotihuacanos created a huge and carefully planned early city with complex internal structures and external relations; the Toltecs of Tula expanded on these themes; and the Mexica further elaborated these patterns, reaping the benefits of the models these predecessors provided. Both Teotihuacan and Tula were considered “Toltecs” by the later Mexica: such revered legendary-mythical centers were considered forgers of civilization, creating law, government, fine arts, and virtually all that was grand and valued by high-minded Aztecs. To gain political legitimacy in their new setting, it was essential for the Aztecs to
Establish, demonstrate, and reaffirm direct links to the revered and semimythical world of Tollan (see Boone 2000b).

The Aztecs themselves never experienced either Teotihuacan or Tula as a living city. Both were in ruins by the time the Mexica entered the central Mexican plateau, although Teotihuacan in particular still had a substantial population residing in the proximity of the ancient city. Instead, these migrants encountered a profusion of city-states dotting an increasingly dense landscape. These polities of varying size and importance dominated the central Mexican landscape from at least the first century AD until the Spanish conquest. They provided the foundation for cycles of political consolidation and fragmentation throughout central Mexico (Marcus 1998). Teotihuacan’s dominance was followed by approximately two centuries of political fragmentation into numerous independent city-states. These relatively autonomous polities eventually yielded to Tula’s prominence, again followed by fragmentation after Tula’s collapse in the late twelfth century. The Mexica of Tenochtitlan were one of these small city-states before they eventually revived (and ended) this pre-Hispanic cycle with the development of their Triple Alliance and expansionist empire from 1428 to 1521.

In the words of Linda Manzanilla, “[I]t was Teotihuacan that inaugurated the era of large capitals in and around the Basin of Mexico” (2004: 117). This enormous urban center flourished from ca. 150 to 650/750 AD (roughly the Classic period) in the northeastern corner of the Basin of Mexico. It extended approximately 20 square kilometers, and its overall population may have reached a level of 100,000–200,000 residents. In many ways, Teotihuacan was unique among Mesoamerican cities: its grid layout defied the usual arrangements of major buildings around plazas, its formalized urban planning extended beyond the city center to encompass residential areas as well, it lacked the customary ballcourts, and it left no major monuments commemorating the deeds of exceptional rulers (Millon 1981; Pasztory 1997). Still, as an extensive urban center with monumental public architecture (and drawing on its own Mesoamerican predecessors), it had implemented solutions to problems of urban development and statecraft: the feeding and general provisioning of an extraordinarily large and dense population; the coordination of labor for massive public projects;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates (AD)</th>
<th>Central Mexico</th>
<th>Basin of Mexico</th>
<th>Prominent Polities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>950–1150</td>
<td>Early Postclassic</td>
<td>Early Postclassic</td>
<td>Tula and the Toltecs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1150–1350</td>
<td>Middle Postclassic</td>
<td>Early Aztec</td>
<td>Arrival of Mexica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1350–1521</td>
<td>Late Postclassic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1325–1430)</td>
<td>(Late Aztec A)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Prelude to Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1430–1521)</td>
<td>(Late Aztec B)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Aztec Empire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1. Chronology of Central Mexico and the Basin of Mexico
the use of specific material objects as political, status, and military symbols; the inclusion (or perhaps integration) of multiple ethnic groups within the city; the coordination of specialized occupations; and the idea of empire and the ability of the state to enthrall distant regions.

Impressive even in ruins, Teotihuacan was held in special awe by the Mexica newcomers (Figure 2.2). Through their legends, the Mexica revealed the paramount importance of Teotihuacan in their new life: they considered it to be the sacred setting for the creation of the current world (see Chapter 7) and the place where laws, rulers, and government were created (Boone 2000b: 375). Their familiarity with Teotihuacan derived from their proximity to the ruined site, from ceremonial pilgrimages made to the ancient city, and from actual artifacts uncovered there by unnamed Mexica (Boone 2000b: 387–388; López Luján et al. 2000: 219; Umberger 1987). Much has been written about the virtual appropriation of “things Teotihuacano” by the later Mexica. They carried away and reused actual Teotihuacan objects, sometimes modifying these antiques with their own significant inscriptions. Even more frequently, they copied and reproduced objects in this revered style (Umberger 1996). Some of these objects were exhibited; others were buried as offerings. No fewer than forty-one Teotihuacan or Teotihuacan-style objects (including three masks, various sculptures, and a remarkable vase reused as an Mexica noble’s burial urn) have been uncovered in offerings in Tenochtitlan’s ceremonial precinct (López Luján et al. 2000; López Luján 2005:104).

On two temples beside the Templo Mayor (the “red temples”), the Tenochtitlan Mexica brazenly copied Teotihuacan architectural (talud-tablero) and artistic styles, making an aggressive and visible statement of their perceived and claimed associations with this early venerable city. Equally obvious were similarities in urban layout: both cities were laid out on a grid anchored by major north–south and east–west avenues, the avenues met at a point of major
ceremonial significance, and the primary temple faced west. The residential areas surrounding both cities’ epicenters were also formally arranged, retaining a rather neat geometric grid plan (Umberger 1987: 84; 1996: 89–90; Smith 2008). Both cities were atypical in Mesoamerican urban planning designs, which usually consisted of urban epicenters with ceremonial structures laid out formally around a central plaza, with the remainder of the city more casually arranged.

Tula (ca. 950–1175 AD; Early Postclassic period), with an estimated population of around 50,000 inhabitants settled in a 13-square-kilometer area, was considerably smaller than earlier Teotihuacan (Diehl 2004: 124). Nonetheless, its influence on the later Mexica was easily as significant, in both practical and symbolic arenas. As with Teotihuacan, the Mexica associated Tula with origins, in this case the origins of fine arts and legitimate rulership. Mexica fine artisans were called tolteca, and the Mexica made concerted efforts to marry into legitimate Toltec lineages in their rise to power. Mexica links to Tula (some 80 kilometers north of Tenochtitlan) are ambiguous – Mexica legends depict Tula in fantastic and effusive terms, while the Early Postclassic site itself is humble by comparison. Aztec-period (Late Postclassic) remains, including ceramics, buried offerings, burials, and sculptures, have been found at Tula, and the area was occupied throughout Aztec times (Umberger 1987: 71–72; Smith 2008: 23–24). Yet it was the image of Tula in Mexica ideology that was most important – their reverence for that earlier civilization tangibly influenced their priorities, motivations, and behavior.

In spatial terms, Tenochtitlan’s central precinct layout is only roughly coincident with that of Tula (with its west-facing main temple, low-lying platform, skull rack, and ballcourt; Smith 2008). However, Tula–style relief-sculpture warriors march along banquettas in the Eagle Warriors’ chamber adjacent to Tenochtitlan’s Templo Mayor, ceramic vessels were fashioned in Toltec style, and sculptured chacmools hark back to those at Tula. Umberger (1987) has studied these and other objects with an art historian’s eye and concluded that most were probably copies of older Toltec forms, as they exhibit specific stylistic variations characteristic of imperial Mexica art. While only few Toltec antiques themselves were retained (or have yet been recovered), it is impressive that the Mexica made the effort to replicate the Toltec style, venerating it in their own creative endeavors.

The ceremonial use and display of legendary and foreign elements to bolster political legitimacy was not invented by the Mexica. However, they readily embraced the notion and were especially enthusiastic participants in this political strategy. Demonstrable connections with the revered past provided the Mexica with a solid symbolic basis for their political ambitions. Drawing on the glory and prestige of ancient Teotihuacan and Tula, the Mexica made an explicit statement linking themselves to the chain of venerated central Mexican civilizations. They did not, however, abandon their Chichimec heritage along the way.
Aztec culture was a hybrid culture, meshing nomadic Chichimec and settled Toltec attributes. The Mexica and several other groups undertook long migrations from the north into central Mexico, beginning their arrivals at least by the twelfth century AD. Collectively known as Chichimeca, they periodically joined and dispersed on their eventful journeys; the Mexica were the last to arrive in the Basin of Mexico. There they encountered numerous well-established sedentary peoples, some of them claiming Toltec affinities. Interacting with these groups, the Mexica and other migrants readily absorbed Mesoamerican traditions into their cultural repertoires.

As Chichimeca, these northern peoples brought a number of cultural attributes to the table. There was a fair amount of cultural diversity among them. There were Teochichimeca, or “true Chichimecs” (Figure 2.3), who were nomadic hunters and gatherers, wore animal skins, used peyote, depended heavily on the bow and arrow, but nonetheless produced fine goods of feathers and stone (Sahagún 1950–1982: book 10, 171–175). Whether the Mexica themselves were Teochichimeca at some point in their journey is a matter of conjecture. By the time the historical accounts catch up with them, they more closely resembled another type of Chichimeca, the Tamime, whose lifestyle was transitional between nomadic and settled. Sahagún (1950–1982: book 10, 171) suggests that such groups acquired the more “civilized” way of life by first honing language skills to learn from the settled peoples, thereby acquiring poor and tattered capes and cultivating small fields of maize. They apparently were successful at this transition, since they are also described as constructing great buildings (such as temples) and were well aware of prestigious luxuries such as rich capes, cacao, and precious greenstones (Durán 1994: 12, 19, 22). They had priests (suggesting a social hierarchy), coped with internal factions,
CASE 2.1 *The Aztec Migrations: Prelude to Tenochtitlan*

Several historical sources, pictorial and textual, record the early history of the Mexica and other Chichimeca as they traveled from their arid northern homelands to their new settlements in and around the Basin of Mexico. These travels required some two centuries, from the early twelfth century until 1325 AD (for the Mexica). This adventurous history focused on a series of dramatic events that set the stage for subsequent urban and imperial developments.

The earliest experiences, as recorded, display a mythic-historic quality, a style consistent with the Aztec worldview in which the line between the natural and supernatural worlds was thin and permeable. The more distant in time, the more mythical, so locations and itineraries from their beginnings at Aztlan to the curved hill of Culhuacan and the Seven Caves of Chicomoztoc remain vague. Also cast in mythical terms were internal conflicts along the way: in one quarrel the goddess Malinalxochitl split from her brother Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica patron god. On the ground, this resulted in the former faction settling at Malinalco, which the Mexica would later conquer. An even more dramatic conflict along the route took place at Coatepetl (Serpent Mountain). It pit Huitzilopochtli (as the sun) against his sister Coyolxauhqui (the moon) and her four hundred brothers (numerous stars), with Huitzilopochtli emerging victorious (as the sun conquers the forces of night each dawn). Events seem more “historical” as the Mexica passed through the ancient seat of power of Tula and entered the Basin of Mexico.

The Mexica arrival in the Basin had been preceded by the migrations of several other northern groups. Most notable were the Tepanec, who had settled to the west of Lake Texcoco, and the Acolhua, who had settled to the east. The west was already densely occupied with long-resident peoples, while the east was more sparsely inhabited. The Mexica stopped briefly at the Otomi center of Xaltocan, then journeyed along the western shore of the lake, passing through several well-established Tepanec city-states. They stopped at Chapultepec Hill, source of a desirable spring. There they were besieged by a coalition of established city-states. In dire straits, with their ruler captured by the Colhuacan king, the remaining Mexica fell into servitude to the Colhua ruler, Coxcoxtli. They then helped that ruler in his war against neighboring Xochimilco and appealed to him to provide them lands on which to settle. Coxcoxtli acquiesced but settled the Mexica at a place called Tizaapan, a locale inhabited only by poisonous snakes and other nasty vermin. Demonstrating extraordinary survival skills, the Mexica thrived there, earning the respect (or fear) of their Colhuacan overlords. The Mexica also revealed cunning diplomatic skills, arranging marriages with several Colhuacan persons, including a marriage between the ruler’s favorite daughter and the Mexica god Huitzilopochtli. This last ended in chaos, as the Colhuacan ruler was invited to the marriage ceremony, only to find his daughter sacrificed and her skin worn by a Mexica priest. Enraged, Colhuacan warriors chased the Mexica into the heart of Lake Texcoco. They finally stopped on a swampy island, where at last they saw an eagle perched atop a prickly pear cactus, the sacred symbol of their destiny. This was in the year Two House (1325), and it was there that they founded Tenochtitlan, their new seat of power.
These events reveal much about life in the Basin of Mexico during the Early Aztec period (1150–1350), prior to Aztec imperial domination. First, there were full-blown cities and city-states in the Basin at this time, and the landscape was already becoming rather crowded. Second, the relations among these city-states were highly volatile. Third, their strategies for survival included wars, alliances, elite intermarriage, and the use of mercenaries. And fourth, some city-states were more prestigious than others, being derivative seats of the revered ancestral Toltec heritage.

Furthermore, events described in the Mexica’s early history, whether mythical or historical, carried relevance in their later history. Their Huey Teocalli (Templo Mayor, Great Temple) in Tenochtitlan was also called Coatepec, commemorating the location of their patron god’s victory over his sister Coyolxauhqui. An enormous carved monument of this defeated goddess (discovered in 1978) sat at the base of the Templo Mayor. On a more general level, the Mexica’s early history demonstrates how they took advantage of local conflicts, bought into existing political strategies, and were willing to serve as subservient mercenaries while always having their eye on the ultimate prize of domination of their known world. These stories also highlight the Mexica view of themselves as tenacious, clever, and driven by a sacred destiny.

The Chichimec world technically lay outside the more fertile Mesoamerican realm. It was, however, not isolated from that realm. Relations between centers in central Mexico and Paquimé (Casas Grandes) in the northern Chihuahua desert were active in Toltec times and later, as were relations with groups along the Pacific coast (see Foster and Gorenstein 2000; Fields and Zamudio-Taylor 2001). Turquoise traveled south from the U.S. Southwest, while scarlet macaws and their precious feathers, copper bells, shells, and even chocolate traveled north, presumably following mutually advantageous trade networks (Lekson and Peregrine 2004; Weigand and García de Weigand 2001; Pohl 2001; Crown and Hurst 2009). Chichimec familiarity with such materials (and whatever associated ideas traveled with them) should come as no surprise.

Settling in the Basin of Mexico, the Mexica recognized the value of establishing connections with the glorified, generalized Toltec world. The overt strategies they employed to integrate themselves into that world, and ultimately dominate it, attest to this (see Case 2.2). On a practical level they orchestrated alliances and elite marriages, built a city following ancient central Mexican formats, trained their artists to copy Teotihuacan and Tula styles and objects (Figure 2.4), and built

played the ritual ballgame, and were polytheistic. In other words, before they arrived in the Basin of Mexico, the Mexica and their fellow travelers had already acquired the basics of Mesoamerican “civilized” life. Their adjustment to permanent settled life in the Mesoamerican style would have been neither shocking nor traumatic (although it was eventful; see Case 2.1).
expansive and expensive palaces and public buildings. They waged wars and made conquests. They gained wealth through tribute and commerce, thereby obtaining prestigious objects for display. They clearly recognized the power of symbols to link them to a “civilized” past. But while they acquired titles and deities reminiscent of the Toltec past, they also retained and honored their Chichimec titles (especially in warrior contexts) and gave pride of place to their own patron god, Huitzilopochtli.

CASE 2.2 Mexica Development Strategies: Prelude to Empire

The history leading to Aztec imperial dominance was grounded in a series of pivotal events and assertive political-economic strategies. The dated events include the following:

1325 Founding of Tenochtitlan
1337 Founding of Tlatelolco on the northern part of the island by a dissident group of Mexica
1372 Establishment of Acamapichtli as tlatoani of Tenochtitlan
1427 Death of Tezozomoc, powerful ruler of Azcapotzalco
1428–1430 Battle for regional domination between an Azcapotzalco contender (Maxtla) and combined forces from Tenochtitlan and Texcoco
1430 Ascendency of Nezahualcoyotl to the throne of Texcoco
1430 Establishment of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan

In 1325, when they established their new homeland at Tenochtitlan, the Mexica were in a weak position within the shifting geopolitics of the Basin of Mexico.
Yet they were far from helpless, and according to their own histories, they never lost sight of their destiny to eventually rule the world around them. Their shaky migratory history within the Basin had already taught them the basic strategies of survival, and they built on these strategies as they spent the next century striving for political dominance.

The first strategy was directed toward the Mexica’s need to provision their island settlement in a manner appropriate to their (and their patron god’s) aspirations. The island was poor in building materials but rich in aquatic life and in potential agricultural development. They immediately set about trading lake resources (such as fish, frogs, larvae, and migratory birds) for stone and wood for their godly temple, all on a rather humble scale. Their setting was advantageous for canoe transport and communication, and they established a popular market. They also industriously began building chinampas, expanding their island settlement well into the shallow lakebed itself and providing necessary food resources for the growing city.

A second strategy involved subservience and alliance. Settling at Tenochtitlan (and intending to stay there), they found themselves at the intersection of the three most powerful city-states in the Basin of Mexico: Azcapotzalco to the west, Texcoco to the east, and Colhuacan to the south. Apparently, they physically occupied land belonging to Azcapotzalco. They acknowledged the Azcapotzalco overlordship, paying tributes in aquatic resources and military service. As warriors, they energetically aided that city-state in its aggressive regional wars of conquest. The Mexica reaped the benefits of this mercenary activity, as their nobles were granted lands in some of the conquered areas. These lands provided an important economic base for an expanding elite, and eventually the Mexica’s status changed from that of vassals to that of allies.

A third strategy involved the establishment of political legitimacy through elite marriages. The Mexica already enjoyed a history of marrying into the Colhuacan nobility, and pursued marriages into noble families of Azcapotzalco and Texcoco. The royal house of Colhuacan carried the prestigious Toltec ancestry, and a child (Acamapichtli) born of a Mexica leader and a Colhuacan princess was installed as Tenochtitlan tlatoani in 1372; this event conferred Toltec genealogical claims on the Mexica. Their subsequent rulers henceforth descended from this Mexica–Toltec lineage. From that time it was customary and expected for Mexica rulers and other nobles to intermarry with high-ranking lineages throughout the Basin of Mexico and beyond.

A fourth strategy concerned urban development. The Mexica established their ceremonial precinct at the core of the infant city; they divided the surrounding area into quarters, and the quarters into smaller residential neighborhoods (calpulli, tlaxilacalli). Their productive base was expanded through chinampas. The Mexica encouraged others to settle in Tenochtitlan, and since the city grew rapidly, they were apparently successful in this. The city exhibited increasing wealth: nobles began to openly enjoy fancy and expensive lifestyles, and religious ceremonies became more and more flamboyant. A vibrant, energetic, wealthy, and growing city was essential as a symbol of power in the Mexica’s pursuit of imperial dominance.
The Mexica and other newly arrived Chichimeca did not simply adopt elements of the Mesoamerican world wholesale. More commonly, they recast and reinterpreted these objects and ideas to mesh with those in their own cultural milieu. For instance, according to Umberger (1987: 98), “the Mexica usually changed the identity of figures in their imitations of ancient forms.... Sometimes they used the same form for different deities ... and sometimes different forms for the same deity.” As a case in point, Tenochtitlan’s association of its own chacmools with the god Tlaloc “is probably a Mexica invention, not a survival from the deep past” (Umberger 1987: 77).

By the time the Mexica and their allies were forging their empire, they had effectively blended general Toltec imperatives with their Chichimec heritage. The process involved a relatively short time span, surely expedited by the Chichimecs’ earlier exposure to Mesoamerican cultural features. On their journeys southward, they had already built temples, but now in central Mexico they built enormous ones. Their Chichimec temples were dedicated to their patron god, but now their supernatural pantheon expanded and required a multitude of temples and priestly attendants. As Chichimeca they were already hierarchical, but now they became more and more caste-like. As Chichimeca they had leaders, but now their leaders were personally powerful rulers supported by a massive bureaucracy; their statecraft strategies and external relations were complex and sophisticated. As Chichimeca they had a few specialists, but now they developed well-defined, even hereditary specialist groups. And as Chichimeca they already wore cloth capes, but now fancy ones replaced the tattered rags of earlier times and were accompanied by expensive and exquisite ornaments. In other words, by the time the Aztec Empire had reached its pinnacle as a dominant force in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, these latecomers had enthusiastically acquired a Mesoamerican way of life, coming to define that way of life itself.

CHALLENGES, INNOVATIONS, AND MEXICA RESPONSES

While the Aztecs were recipients of much from their dual heritage, they also became innovators and a dominant force in their Mesoamerican setting. They faced particular challenges requiring inventive and proactive institutional and behavioral responses. These challenges and responses largely involved matters of scale, intensity, and complexity.

The Late Postclassic period in central Mexico (1350–1521 AD) experienced a major population surge, especially in the Basin of Mexico (Sanders et al. 1979: 183–184; Sanders 1981: 193). This demographic explosion resulted in a population of some 1 million people in the Basin in the early sixteenth century. At the most basic level, how was this unprecedented number of people fed? This challenge was met by intensified food production systems such as terracing, irrigation, and chinampas as marginal lands were made productive and lakebeds
were transformed into cultivated plots. While these strategies increased production substantially, the reliance of a large population on high-intensity and sometimes marginal agricultural systems also magnified the impact of famines and the potential for malnutrition.

A second major challenge was political (see Brumiñel 1983). The Basin of Mexico was composed of a profusion of city-states that weathered internal dynastic struggles and competed with one another for resources, prestige, and prominence. This unstable situation resulted in the occasional yet short-lived preeminence of one city-state in the region, only to be replaced by that of another. The formation of the Triple Alliance in 1428–1430 set in motion the overwhelmingly dominant Aztec Empire. With their imperial strategies, the Mexica and their allies forged a relatively stable political environment in much of central Mexico. In that setting, commerce and marketplaces thrived: an increased variety and volume of local and imported goods became available to people across diverse regions and up and down the social hierarchy. As city-states were conquered by this aggressive and expanding empire, tributes flowed into the largest city ever seen in Mesoamerica, channeling more and more resources from outlying regions into the Basin of Mexico. These tributes helped support the city’s residents, supplied its artisans, funded its bureaucracy and wars, and provided the visible luxuries that symbolized the power and elevated status of rulers and other elites. These symbols were used to enhance Aztec power over wide regions, as they were shared and understood widely throughout Mesoamerica in Late Postclassic times.

How, then, did the Aztec world differ from its predecessors? In general, innovations in the Late Postclassic Aztec world largely involved intensifying existing Mesoamerican cultural and institutional features. Earlier civilizations had developed sophisticated agricultural techniques; the Aztecs expanded on known technologies, creating, for example, a vast network of chinampas around lacustrine shorelines. The Mexica capital city of Tenochtitlan was the largest in Mesoamerican prehistory, and its size and full-scale urban planning were rivaled only by that of earlier Teotihuacan. Its primary temples were not the largest ever built in Mesoamerica, but they presented a novel plan of crowding numerous temples and other structures within a well-defined ceremonial compound (see Smith 2008: 68, 146). Radiating out from this and neighboring cities, Aztec military forces forged the most extensive empire in Mesoamerican prehistory, enthralling distant regions by means of tribute obligations, elite marriages, threats of reprisals, promises of protection, client relations, and the stimulation of craft production and commerce (see Chapters 4 and 5). Controlling that empire (although sometimes tenuously; see Chapter 5), Aztec imperial rulers and their elite cadres acquired unsurpassed political power. Like their predecessors and royal contemporaries, they brashly exhibited their power and elevated status. However, Aztec rulers and other elites could do so with unprecedented extravagance, so that Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (r. 1502–1520)
was said to have been served, at a minimum, more than thirty dishes at a single meal (Díaz del Castillo 1963: 225). 10

In short, the Aztecs augmented an expanding Mesoamerican world already in motion, through conquest, commerce, and diplomacy. They spearheaded imperial policies and state-making strategies that interwove, to various degrees, broad regions and diverse peoples into a dynamic, interacting Mesoamerican world system.

THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY

While the concept of Mesoamerica is based on commonalities, it is important to stress the considerable cultural and linguistic diversity within that culture area. Especially significant is the fact that central Mexican peoples, organized into numerous city-states in Aztec times, considered themselves separate and distinct from others around them. To what extent were these distinctions based on ethnicity? How did these people define ethnicity, and how meaningful were ethnic identities in directing or constraining their lives?

On the surface, distinctions along ethnic lines were visibly expressed in language, clothing, bodily adornments, hair styles, food preferences, and attributed “character” (Figure 2.5) (Berdan 2008: 116–127). Stereotypes of ethnic groups clearly existed, placing some judgmental and moral distance between these identifiable groups (as, for instance, when badly behaving Mexica children were chastised by being described as “Otomí blockheads”). Yet while these distinctions were recognized and verbalized, and even exaggerated during certain ceremonies, they were infrequently mobilized as a primary motivator in people’s lives and therefore had few serious consequences.

Nonetheless, at a somewhat deeper level, ethnicity in the Aztec world differentiated groups of people on the basis of shared places of origin or residence and common histories. It was a cultural concept and did not have its basis in biological distinctions. Beyond common residence and common history, ethnic criteria included a shared destiny, common enemies, and common interest.

Common residence was preeminent: ethnic groups tended to cluster in city-states (altepetl) and especially in their component districts (calpolli) (see Chapter 5). However, it was common for altepetl to be multiethnic and for residence in any city or community to be somewhat fluid in the face of considerable population movements and displacements in Aztec times. In other words, there was typically no one-to-one relationship between city-state and ethnic group, although usually a given city-state was dominated politically by one ethnic group. Shared histories were associated with common residence: “These historical and mythical links typically took the form of an origin story, adventurous peregrination, and founding legend, and often focused on a legendary leader and/or legitimized dynastic rulership” (Berdan 2008: 109). Such histories often justified the occupation or appropriation of a certain
territory, so common residence and shared history became intertwined over time. Extending these ideas into the future, some ethnic groups emphasized the sharing of a common destiny; the Mexica’s drive to dominate their known world is a premier example of this.

Ethnic groups also rallied around common enemies. To the extent that ethnic identities coincided with city-states, they provided common ground for the region’s ever-present wars. While one’s ethnicity may have provided an added dimension to loyalties in these situations, one’s city-state membership still predominated. Wars seem not to have been instigated against groups because of their differing ethnicity. On the contrary, the bitterest wars were waged by the Triple Alliance against polities in the nearby Valley of Puebla. These were not exotic groups; they were familiar Nahuatl speakers.

Common interest provided a certain amount of adhesion within ethnic groups. Sentiments of attachment to one’s ethnicity were evident and reinforced in recurring public ceremonies; at the very least, an ethnic group’s commitment to its patron deity usually overrode obligations to other deities in the pantheon. Rituals surrounding such patron deities provided ethnic groups with a sense of exclusivity (see Chapter 7).

The earlier discussion of the dual nature of Mexica culture, blending Chichimec and Toltec features, exemplifies the situational, protean, and subjective nature of ethnicity: “This malleability means that members can base their ethnicity on descent from common ancestors at one period and at another time shift to ethnicity based on location with only vague reference to common descent” (Sandstrom and Berdan 2008: 205). This underscores the need for understanding the changing contexts in which ethnicity appeared.

In the Aztec world, an individual’s role in society was defined along multiple dimensions, notably residence, social class, occupation, and ethnic identity. Among these, ethnicity appears to have been the least significant, and ethnic groups seem to have been integrated into and even subsumed within the more basic residential units and social institutions. But ethnicity was not irrelevant, as “ethnic opinions and stereotypes were certainly easily established and could have encouraged, discouraged, or textured interaction” within and between territorial and social groups (Berdan 2008: 127).
The Aztec world was a mosaic of cultures, languages, and self-interested pol-
ities forged through intricate and complex histories. Any single self-identified
group, at any single point in time, might give priority to city-state member-
ship, cultural affinities, linguistic commonalities, or even some special eco-
nomic distinction in securing its place in this dynamic world. These priorities
were adjusted and readjusted to meet sometimes dramatically changing cir-
cumstances in each group’s broader social, political, and economic universe.

These affinities were not neat and clean. That is, they overlapped and cross-
cut one another, and there were few situations where all of these dimen-
sions neatly coincided. City-states were often multiethnic and multilingual.
Chichimecs lived side by side with Toltec descendants. Groups of craft special-
ists moved from their native communities to larger cities. Refugees relocated.
“Foreign” military posts were installed in equally “foreign” locales. The com-
plexity of this situation is, at first blush, perhaps bewildering. But it does not
defy understanding. Certainly the Aztecs themselves managed quite well to
wield their individual ways through this apparent maze. The remaining chap-
ters in this book consider how they did this, by examining their economic, poli-
tical, social, religious, and cultural milieu.