

Bálint Kulifay: The Government of the Aztec Empire

1. Introduction

History is a near-bottomless well of secrets, from which knowledge is constantly brought to the surface by the tireless efforts of historians and archaeologists. Yet, while certain facets of history are very well-understood, others are obscured behind the trappings of conflicting accounts, the scarceness of primary sources, the rarity of archaeological evidence and the sheer passage of time.

Despite having existed in the fairly recent past – as far as the depth of human historical record is concerned –, the polity now known as the Aztec Empire is relatively ill-understood in the popular consciousness, something further compounded by its rapid and virtually fullscale destruction, along with a general lack of surviving written records; immediately after the conquest, the Spanish clergy ordered most of the Aztec codices incinerated.[1]

The following study is an attempt to present what we know on how the state of the Mexica people was organised, particularly the government of its central city-state and the outlying territories it came to administer.

1. Historical Background

Conventionally speaking, an empire is generally understood as a centralised and often militarised polity led by a single monarch that governs a significant number of distinct ethnic groups that often speak many different languages, be it a territorially contiguous state or a thalassocratic maritime empire.

Therefore, the *Aztec Empire* is a bit of a misnomer – and for two reasons.

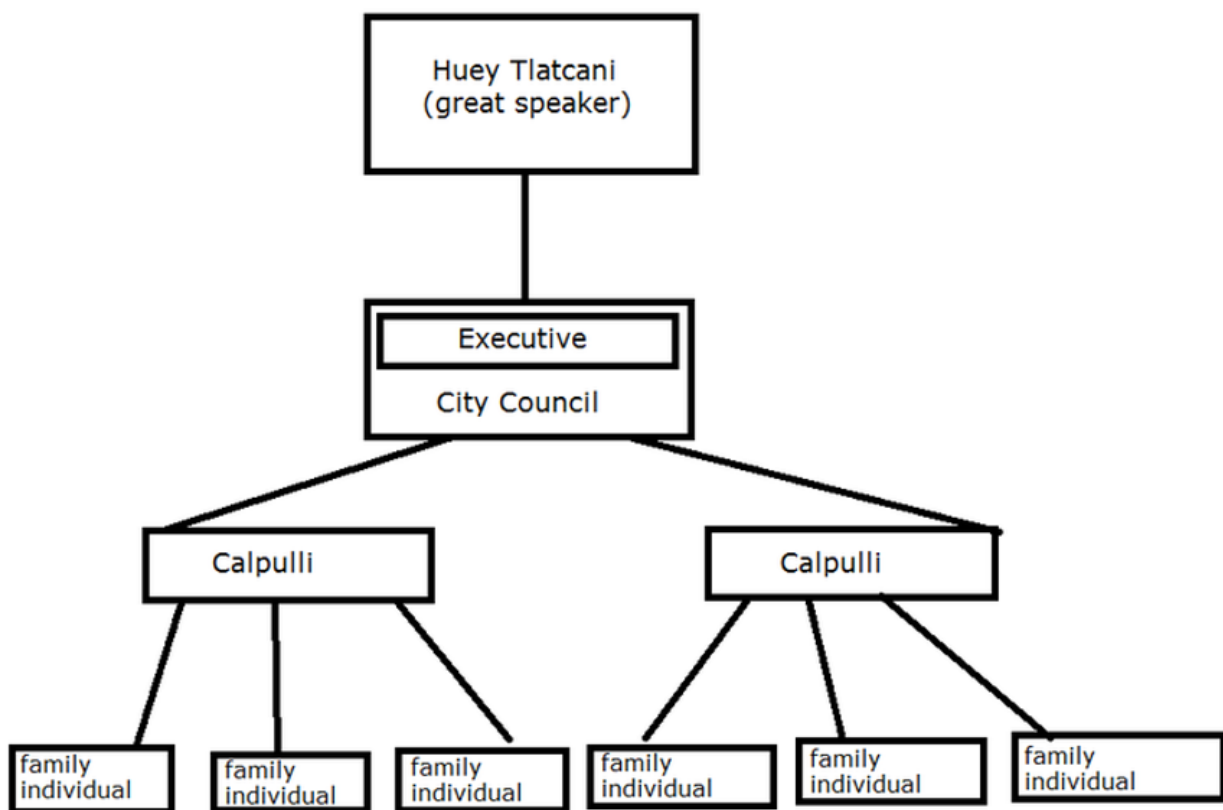
The Aztec Empire – which was referred to as the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan – was no empire at all; at least not in the traditional, European sense of the word, its decentralised and tributary structure was more resemblant of a less-than-voluntary confederation, or tribal alliance.

Secondly, the term “Aztec” was never used by the people of the empire to identify themselves. Instead, it was a word from the Mexica ethnogenesis, a reference to their mythical, ancient homeland of Aztlán they left behind.[2] It later came to be applied to a multitude of different ethnic groups that constituted the pre-Columbian Mexican civilisation.

By all accounts, the Nahua peoples – to which the Aztecs belonged – were the descendants of the Chichimec people that arrived to Central Mexico at the beginning of the thirteenth century, from a northerly direction.[3] The last of the Nahua peoples, the Mexica ended up founding their capital city, Tenochtitlan, on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, from which they began their military expansion in all directions.

Neither the city nor the lake exist today; their location is now the historical centre of Mexico City.

III. Government



Source: sosyalforum.org

III.1. The Cities

The *altepetl* - the Meso-American city-state - was the main building block of the Aztec Empire, and it was within the confines of these cities that the vast majority of social organisation took place.

At the very bottom of the Aztec social hierarchy lay the family, which consisted of one man, one woman and their unmarried children. The next level was an alliance of families called the *calpulli*. The *calpulli* was a clan formed by a group of families often related by blood that owned communal lands, possessing a form of micro-government of their own. This social unit also assisted in tax collection[4] and the creation of militarised public schools, which entailed no reading or writing, and were separated by gender. In the cities, this social unit would sometimes transcend blood ties and instead involve families that had an occupational or political connection to the *calpulli*'s other members, functioning almost akin to a contemporary trade guild on the other side of the Atlantic.[5]

Each urban *calpulli* had a leader, and out of these leaders, a city council[6] was formed. The council's tasks were largely administrative in nature, and it was headed by the following four officials:

- the *tlacochcalcatl*
- the *tlaccatecatl*
- the *ezhuahuacatl*
- the *tlillanacalqui*

The first two of these titles - the *tlacochcalcatl* and the *tlaccatecatl* - were above the rest in status and prestige, hailing from a long-standing military order each. Nevertheless, each of the four executive advisors possessed the power of veto, forcing them to act in tandem and placing a systems of checks on their power. In addition to being the executive body of the city council, they also served as the electors and advisors of the city-state's singular ruler. All of them were accomplished warriors and generals in their own right, and their advisory function played a key role in the competent management of the emperor's wars.[7]

Some of the military societies that constituted a warrior aristocracy in Tenochtitlan were as follows:

- the *Cuachicqueh*, or Shorn Ones
- the *Cuauhtli*, or Eagle Knights

- the *Ocelomeh*, or Jaguar Warriors
- the *Otontin*, or Otomies

An Aztec city-state was led by a *tlatoani*, meaning speaker, but the capital city of Tenochtitlan was headed by the *huey tlatoani*, or great speaker. These two terms can also be functionally translated as king and emperor, respectively. They were singular leaders with the power of an absolute monarch at their disposal, being the ultimate owner of all the land belonging to their city-state, aided by an extensive array of councillors, clergy, judges and a nascent form of bureaucracy.

The creation of new rulers in the Aztec world was a peculiar process. The prospective emperor had to be a man from a noble bloodline. He had to be at least thirty years of age and well-educated in military affairs and personal combat in one of the elite schools named *calmecac*. Yet, succession was not an automatic and hereditary process, like in so many of the European monarchies that adhered to the principles of seniority or primogeniture. Instead, upon the death of the previous *huey tlatoani*, the four-member executive council that advised him saw about electing the new emperor; someone who fulfilled the above criteria, and was also usually a close family member of the deceased. This system ensured both legitimacy and royal continuity, but it did so while providing for a means to prevent the ascension of potential heirs that might have been incompetent, weak, unjust or uninterested in the affairs of the state.[8]

While the *tlatoani* of a regular city-state was usually a hereditary post, they could also be freely replaced by the emperor; a regular occurrence after a fresh conquest.

Finally, the office of the *cihuacoatl* bears mention: while the *tlatoani* or *huey tlatoani* chiefly concerned himself with external affairs, such as war and diplomacy, the *cihuacoatl* was, in effect, the supreme judge and administrator of the city-state, an aristocratic second-in-command who handled the multi-layered courts and the financial affairs of the *altepetl*.

III.2. The Provinces

It bears reiterating that the Aztec Empire was not a traditional empire with its direct control being exercised over contiguous territories. Instead, it was a loose confederation of city-states, each with its limited control over the surrounding farmlands and wilderness, held together by the emperor of Tenochtitlan and the Triple Alliance of the Mexica people.

When new territories were conquered, their main expectations were to submit to the authority of Tenochtitlan and to pay recurring tribute. To this end, the rulers of these city-states were either replaced by a new *tlatoni* – selected from the local royal bloodline –, or supplanted by an Aztec steward called a *calpixqui*. These governors would make sure the new city-state stayed in line and provided the expected taxation to a fault. If this proved to be a particularly difficult task, owing to the proclivity of the fresh conquest for revolt, a military governor called a *cuauhtlatoni* took the *calpixqui*'s place, alongside a military garrison.[9]

Much like in the better part of Europe at the time, the nobility and the clergy were exempt from taxation; only the commoners paid tribute. As previously mentioned, this tribute was gathered and paid by each *calpulli* family alliance, which in the smaller cities and rural areas were far closer-knit and usually involved a degree of blood relation, akin to a clan.

At the height of the empire[10], the Triple Alliance counted a total of sixty provinces under its dominion, each of which corresponded to a single city-state and its zone of influence, spanning over an area of 220,000 km².

Of these, thirty-eight were tributary provinces, meaning they were conquered territories obligated to pay tribute. The other twenty-two were strategic provinces, which willingly entered into a treaty with the Triple Alliance, effectively becoming the client states of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan.[11]

1. Summary

In conclusion, the Aztec Empire was administered with a sophistication that most certainly surprised the first Europeans that came in contact with it; and in certain ways, surpassed them. During its century of existence, it managed to reach such complexities of state organisation that were virtually unrivalled in the Western Hemisphere – perhaps with the notable exceptions of the Maya and Inca civilisations –, and proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that a decentralised and confederated empire is entirely within the realm of legitimately viable possibilities, provided that both the material means and the political will to enforce central authority and its legislation are present.

Current-day supranational entities such as the European Union typically enjoy the former – the economic, administrative and military ability to enforce their law –, but not so much the

latter, the political consensus and the sheer will to use decisive or even violent means, if necessary, which makes issues like external border control particularly difficult. The Aztecs and their European contemporaries held significantly fewer reservations, both legally, politically and militarily speaking.

The system for the selection of their leadership also markedly differed from that of current-day European states in that the chief executive was only electable by a council of military veterans. According to Aztec state theory, only people of noble birth who were well-schooled from early childhood and then distinguished themselves under the duress of countless battles had the necessary wisdom and strength of character to decide who would best guide the empire through the calamities of a world of perpetual conflict; armed or otherwise. This middle road between hereditary absolute monarchy and the universal suffrage of a mass-democracy provided them with a century of stable, competent and legitimate leadership.

[1] Manuel Aguilar-Moreno: *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, pp. 265–266.

[2] Michael E. Smith: The Aztlan Migrations of the Nahuatl Chronicles: Myth or History? *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 153-186.

[3] Nigel Davies: *The Aztecs: A History*, pp. 3-22.

[4] Taxes were paid after each *calpulli*, rather than by each citizen individually.

[5] Rudolph van Zantwijk: *The Aztec Arrangement: The Social History of Pre-Spanish Mexico*.

[6] Comparable, in its overall socio-political function, to the Senate of Imperial Rome.

[7] Richard F. Townsend: *The Aztecs. Revised Ed*, p. 204.

[8] <https://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/aztec-and-maya-law/aztec-political-structure>

[9] Edward E. Calnek: *Patterns of Empire Formation in the Valley of Mexico, in The Inca and*

Aztec States: 1400-1800, pp. 56-59.

[10] Which can arguably be dated just before the arrival of the Spanish; the Aztec Empire has not even been a century old at that time and was very much on an ascent of power, already being the preeminent military and economic polity of Central America.

[11] Susan T. Evans: *Ancient Mexico and Central America: Archaeology and Culture History*, 2nd edition, pp. 470-471.