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The Aztec Empire and the Mesoamerican World system

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The Aztec empire and the Mesoamerican world system

Michael E. Smith

The Aztec empire expanded within the context of an already existing world system that linked independent city-states over most of Mesoamerica. The full development of the world system preceded the empire by only a century, and both took place within the archaeological period known as the Late Postclassic period (1350–1520 CE). Most archaeological chronologies have not been refined beyond this level, however, producing a conflation of world system and imperial dynamics. The analytical separation of the two macro-regional processes is further hindered by the fact that they shared many of the same institutions and processes (e.g., marketplace exchange, professional merchants, the use of currency, and various patterns of interaction among elites).

In this paper I attempt to disentangle the Aztec empire from the Mesoamerican world system by examining change in central Mexico using a refined chronological framework. In the Middle Postclassic period (MPC) the Aztec peoples arrived in central Mexico and established city-state dynasties and market systems (Table 5.1). The first half of the Late Postclassic period (LPC-A) saw a series of innovations that transformed a long-standing Mesoamerican world system into a heavily commercialized network of exchange with highland central Mexico as a major core zone. In the second half of the Late Postclassic period (LPC-B), the key core region contracted to the Basin of Mexico and the Aztec empire expanded to conquer large parts of northern Mesoamerica.

I begin with a consideration of the problems of studying empires and world systems with archaeological evidence. Next I review the chronological development of these processes within central Mexico. In the following section I focus on the strategies of Aztec imperialism to show how the empire both drew from and added to the larger Mesoamerican world system as it expanded. I then address the impact that these processes had on societies in the provincial area of Morelos, using data from my excavations in that area. In this paper I use the term “Aztecs” to designate the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of highland central Mexico, and the term “Aztec empire” to designate the empire headed by the Mexica polity of Tenochtitlan.

Table 5.1. *Chronology for Postclassic central Mexico*

Date (C.E)	Period	Political-economic system
1600	Spanish	Spanish colonial society
1500	Late Postclassic B	Aztec empire
1400	Late Postclassic A	Postclassic world system
1300	Middle Postclassic	Growth of Aztec city-states
1200		
1100	Early Postclassic	Toltec state
1000		

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF EMPIRES AND WORLD SYSTEMS

My approach to the analysis of ancient imperialism begins with an observation made by Michael Doyle (1986: 46) in his book, *Empires*:

Four intersecting sources account for the imperial relationship: the metropolitan regime, its capacities and interests; the peripheral political society, its interests and weakness; the transnational system and its needs; and the international context and the incentives it creates.

An adequate understanding of any ancient empire requires attention to all four factors, and one of the goals of this chapter is to present a holistic view of Aztec imperialism from the perspective of Doyle's four factors.

A material-culture model of imperialism

Before proceeding to the Aztec case, I first explore the use of Doyle's framework to construct a material-culture model of imperialism. Here I will briefly outline a series of material indicators of empires that permit the identification and analysis of ancient empires from archaeological remains alone. For many of the cases described in this volume, such a method is not necessary. Archaeologists do not need to ask whether the Romans, the Chinese, or the Achaemenids really had empires, since their historical records clearly document empires and imperialism. But in the New World, where powerful states and empires rose and fell before the advent of native writing or foreign descriptions, the existence of empires centered at cities such as Teotihuacan, Tula, or Wari (Schreiber, this volume) are important empirical issues. Even in the case of the Aztecs, a polity described by Spanish writers, some scholars have claimed that it was not really an empire (see Berdan *et al.* 1996: 6; for a comparative case, see Subramanyam, this volume), and thus a purely archaeological approach to the question can help illuminate the issue.¹

I have adapted three of Doyle's four factors to the task of documenting the

existence of an empire. This scheme, which is elaborated more fully in Smith and Montiel (n.d.), is outlined in Table 5.2. This admittedly simplistic formulation is designed to assess the likelihood that a given ancient polity was an empire. This is a polythetic classification scheme; not every historically known empire exhibited all of the traits listed in Table 5.2, and empires differed in the relative importance or expression of these traits.

1 The imperial capital (Doyle's "metropolitan regime")

Empires almost always have a large and complex urban center that serves as the imperial capital, although a few exceptions are known, such as the Carolingian empire (see Moreland, this volume). Nearly all known capital cities exhibit public proclamations of an imperial ideology. Although there is considerable cross-cultural variation in imperial ideology, two common themes often produced material traces recoverable by archaeologists: militarism (see Brumfiel and Schreiber, this volume) and the glorification of the king or the polity.

2 Domination of a territory (Doyle's "transnational system")

This factor can be divided into economic and political processes. All empires exhibit processes of economic exchange of goods between capital and provinces. Although these can take many forms, from tribute and taxes through open commercial exchange, the basic existence of some form of exchange is crucial for the identification of empires. Fortunately, trade goods are readily identifiable in most archaeological settings.

The political control of the provinces is at the heart of the imperial relationship (Doyle 1986), yet it can be one of the most difficult processes to document archaeologically. Variation within this process, as suggested by the five examples in Table 5.2, is a topic of active research by archaeologists working on ancient empires (e.g., Redmond 1983; Schreiber 1992; Sinopoli 1994a). Political control can be quite visible and obvious in territorial, or direct-control empires such as the Inka (D'Altroy, this volume), whereas it can be difficult to identify in hegemonic, or indirect-control empires such as the Aztec (see discussion below). Liverani (this volume) makes some excellent suggestions of possible archaeological measures of political control.

3 Projection of influence in a larger international context

The international context is important to Doyle for the large-scale political and economic dynamics that affect an empire, and I follow this approach below in my discussion of world systems. For my present purpose, however, the significance of the larger international context in the archaeological documentation of imperialism lies in an empire's projection of influence beyond its borders. Empires exert economic influence on other societies, and this expresses itself in archaeological evidence for trade across imperial frontiers. The projection of political influence can involve military activities along imperial borders, and the stimulation of political centralization or militarization among extra-imperial

Table 5.2. *Archaeological criteria for the identification of empires*

Features	Examples
<i>1 The imperial capital:</i>	
Large, complex urban center	
Proclamations of imperial ideology	1 Militarism 2 Glorification of king or of state
<i>2 Domination of a territory:</i>	
Economic exchange between capital and provinces	1 Provincial goods found at capital 2 Imperial goods found in provinces
Political control of provinces	1 Military conquest 2 Construction of imperial infrastructure 3 Imposition of tribute or taxes 4 Reorganization of settlement systems 5 Imperial coopting of local elites
<i>3 Projection of influence in a larger international context:</i>	
Economic influence	1 Trade with extra-imperial regions
Political influence	1 Military engagement and activities along enemy borders 2 Centralization or militarization of extra-imperial polities
Cultural influence	1 Adoption of imperial gods or rituals by distant peoples 2 Emulation of imperial styles and traits by distant peoples

polities in contact with the empire. Finally, empires exert cultural influence over areas beyond their borders that leads to the archaeologically visible spread of imperial gods, rituals, and styles. These processes of extra-imperial influence have been particularly well documented for the Roman empire in Europe (e.g., Whitaker 1994), but they are found in nearly all cases of ancient imperialism.

Doyle's second factor – the peripheral political society – is not included in this scheme because it is not strongly implicated in the archaeological identification of empires. Empires typically conquered all sorts of provincial polities, and their analysis is important for understanding any particular case of imperialism. Because of this variation, however, the nature of provincial polities is difficult to use as a material marker of the presence of an empire.

The majority of the ancient empires discussed in this volume exhibit most or all of the features listed in Table 5.2. The only prehistoric empire included – Wari – also conforms to these criteria, thus supporting Schreiber's identification of the Wari phenomenon as an empire. The application of this scheme to the pre-Aztec

politics of central Mexico suggests that Classic period Teotihuacan was the capital of a small empire within central Mexico, whereas Early Postclassic Tula did not rule an empire (in spite of many assertions to the contrary, e.g., Diehl 1983). These case studies are elaborated in Smith and Montiel (n.d.).

Ancient world systems

As pointed out by Doyle, empires do not exist in a vacuum. Events and processes outside of an empire can have profound effects on its expansion and organization. This "international context" is an area where the world systems concept can contribute to our understanding of imperial dynamics. Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) world systems theory exerted a strong influence on the anthropological analysis of modern peoples in the 1980s (e.g., Wolf 1982). Although some archaeologists experimented with a world systems approach at that time (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 1984; Kohl 1987), it was not until the 1990s that world systems theory began to exert a significant influence on archaeologists studying ancient state-level societies (Algaze 1993; Hall and Chase-Dunn 1993; Peregrine and Feinman 1996).

Some scholars object to the use of the world systems concept for ancient societies on the grounds that ancient systems differed greatly from the modern capitalist world system analyzed by Wallerstein (see Kohl 1987). Recent archaeological applications of the approach, however, have modified Wallerstein's model to better fit precapitalist conditions. Most archaeologists employ Jane Schneider's (1977) revision of Wallerstein's formulation to emphasize the importance of long-distance exchange in luxuries. A common trend in these studies is to relax the stipulations of Wallerstein's model of the capitalist world system to make it more applicable to ancient societies. For example, in place of the capitalist economic domination of peripheries by a core, ancient world systems had differentiated cores and peripheries without strong hierarchical relations; in place of a single core zone, ancient world systems had multiple core areas (Peregrine 1996). Nevertheless, two basic principles remain central to archaeological views of ancient world systems. First, world systems exhibited significant commercial exchange across political borders. Second, they contained a division of labor that far exceeded the territorial extent of any one polity (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997).

These two principles are crucial to the archaeological analysis of ancient world systems. For archaeologists, a better starting point than Wallerstein is Janet Abu-Lughod's (1989) study, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, AD 1250-1350*. Abu-Lughod provides an empirical study of a precapitalist world system that shows the value of the world systems concept without becoming mired in debates about the usefulness of Wallerstein's approach. The importance of the world systems concept is that it provides a framework for analyzing economic exchanges at a large scale. All types of human societies engage in some

form of long-distance exchange, but only among some state-level societies does this exchange become crucial to the basic structure and functioning of individual polities. When a large number of independent polities engage in high volumes of exchange, and when the processes and results of that exchange exert strong effects on the social and political organization of those polities, we can speak of the existence of a world system. Archaeological methods for the analysis of ancient world systems are still underdeveloped. Although it is often relatively easy to document the existence, and even the magnitude of ancient exchange systems, it is quite difficult to demonstrate the local social impact of that exchange. Recent treatments of this issue make some progress (e.g., Kepecs *et al.* 1994; Sherratt 1993), but the analysis of ancient world systems with archaeological data alone remains difficult.

ECONOMIC CHANGE IN AZTEC CENTRAL MEXICO

Pre-Aztec background

Blanton and Feinman (1984) suggest that the operation of a world system provided distinctiveness and cohesion to Mesoamerica as a cultural area back to the Middle Formative period (1200–400 BCE) at least. The Mesoamerican world system underwent a series of transformations with changing political and economic processes through the Classic and Early Postclassic periods. City-states and empires rose and fell, long-distance trade routes underwent various changes, and religious and ideological expression was transformed partly as a result of these changes. Some time between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries CE, the Mesoamerican world system underwent a fundamental qualitative and quantitative change, and by the time Cortés conquered the Aztecs, Mesoamerican economies and polities had been greatly transformed. A consideration of the Middle Postclassic period sets the scene for this transformation in central Mexico.

Early Aztec city-states (MPC)

The arrival of Nahuatl-speaking populations in central Mexico during the twelfth century CE, known as the Aztlan migrations, marked the beginning of Aztec culture (M. E. Smith 1996). The Toltec state centered at Tula had recently collapsed, leaving no large polities in central Mexico. The twelfth century also saw a shift from a five-century period of warm and dry climate to conditions of greater rainfall and cooler temperatures in this area (O'Hara *et al.* 1994). The result of these events was the inception of several centuries of significant population increase accompanied by a variety of major changes in Aztec society, including processes of political expansion, the growth of marketplace trade, and agricultural intensification. Although the Aztec peoples were not isolated from

developments in other parts of Mesoamerica, the lack of evidence for intensive economic and cultural interactions during this period suggests that they were not actively involved in the larger world system at this time.²

Aztec pictorial histories tell a story of fledgling city-states whose rulers proclaimed their legitimacy through real or putative genealogical links to the Toltec kings of the past. City-states expanded in size and scope and much of the native historical record is concerned with battles and dynastic intrigue (Davies 1980). When a city-state managed to conquer one of its neighbors, the loser was assessed for tribute in goods and services. The defeated ruler was left in power and his government remained intact so long as he agreed to the victor's terms and paid the tribute. As in other city-state systems, the political situation was highly volatile with constantly shifting alliances. No single city-state managed to conquer enough of its peers in the MPC period to be considered an empire. At the same time that city-state armies were fighting, however, their rulers were also cooperating with one another. Marriage alliances, visiting, and other forms of social interaction were the norm among both rival and friendly dynasties, and the various city-state elites soon forged a common social class or nobility that cut across political boundaries (Hodge 1997; M. E. Smith 1986).

Another form of friendly interaction among the Aztec city-states of the MPC period was commercial exchange. Archaeological research has documented patterns of exchange in ceramics and obsidian in MPC central Mexico consistent with the operation of markets and merchants (Minc *et al.* 1994; M. E. Smith n.d.).

The Aztecs of the MPC period were heavily involved in the production and exchange of two commodities that would later play important roles in the Mesoamerican world system and the Aztec empire: obsidian and textiles. Obsidian was the predominant cutting tool among the Aztecs, and all MPC Aztec households had ready access to this product. There are several geological sources of obsidian in central Mexico, and all were exploited at this time (Charlton and Spence 1982). Transport costs were high in the Aztec economy because of the absence of beasts of burden and the paucity of navigable waterways in central Mexico. As an exchange commodity, obsidian was particularly valuable because of the large number of tools that could be made from a given amount of raw material (Sanders and Santley 1983). Cloth served a variety of roles in Aztec society, including clothing, tribute goods, medium of exchange, royal gifts, and signals of social status (Berdan 1987a). Cotton thread was spun using small spindle whorls and miniature bowls, and maguey thread was drop-spun with larger whorls (Fauman-Fichman 1997; Smith and Hirth 1988). Textile production and exchange increased greatly throughout Mesoamerica in the Middle and Late Postclassic periods (Stark *et al.* 1998).

By the end of the MPC period in the fourteenth century, populations were growing, the economy was expanding (through agricultural intensification, craft production, and marketplace trade), the nobility was growing in numbers and power, and city-states were conquering their neighbors to extract tribute. When this dynamic region tapped into large-scale Mesoamerican patterns of commerce

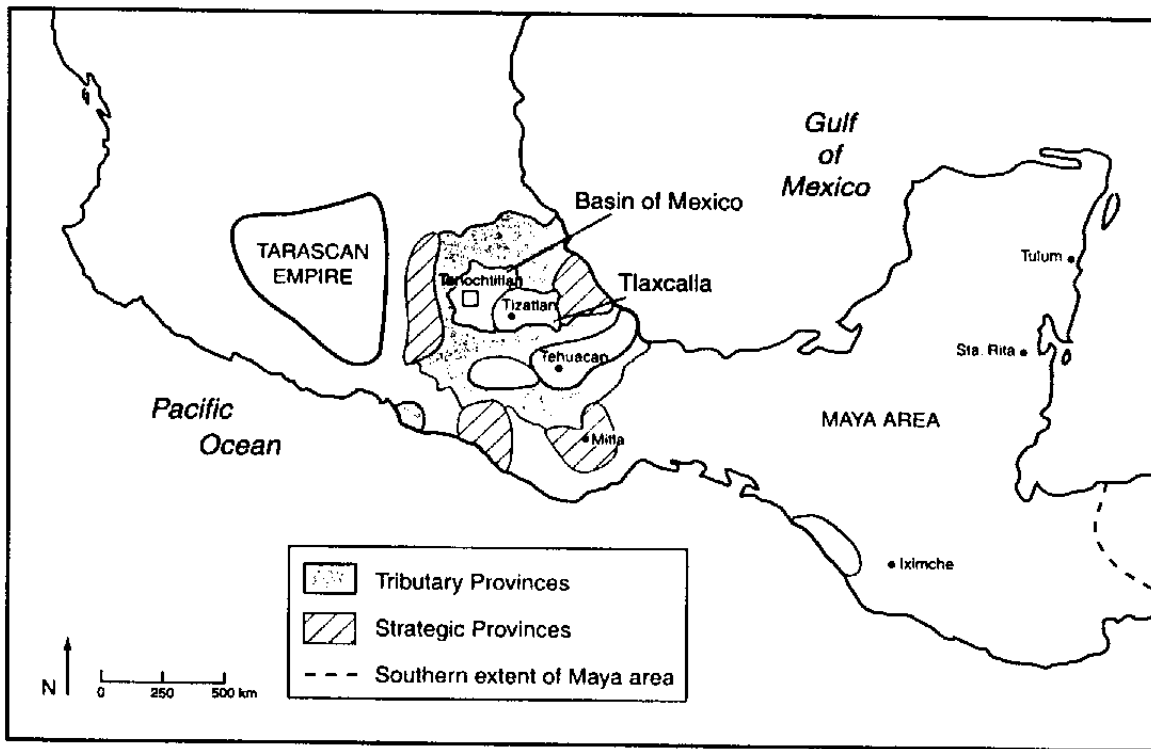
and stylistic communication in the LPC period, the Mesoamerican world system was transformed through the establishment of Aztec central Mexico as the major core area.

The Late Postclassic Mesoamerican world system (LPC-A)

Previous analyses of the Mesoamerican world system in the Late Postclassic period have relied upon documentary sources rather than archaeological data (Blanton and Feinman 1984; Blanton *et al.* 1992), and this has limited their value in two ways. First, these studies have dealt only with the LPC-B period immediately before the Spanish conquest (since that is the period described in most documentary sources). Second, these studies have confused the institutions of the Aztec empire (LPC-B) with the larger-scale and temporally earlier institutions of the Mesoamerican world system (LPC-A). For example, Aztec imperial tribute in luxury goods such as exotic feathers, gold, gems, and fancy textiles is viewed as an example of world system exchanges. Commerce in these items long preceded the expansion of the Aztec empire, however, and we must go back to the LPC-A period to examine the origin and operation of the Mesoamerican world system.

The development of city-states in Aztec central Mexico was not a unique occurrence. Throughout Mesoamerica, the large states of the Classic period gave way to more numerous independent small polities in Postclassic times (e.g., Blanton *et al.* 1993; Chase and Rice 1985). In the Late Postclassic period, city-states throughout Mesoamerica became linked together through the processes of commercial exchange and stylistic interaction. In almost every region, archaeological research has revealed a dramatic growth of long-distance exchange in the LPC period (Blanton *et al.* 1993: 210–17). Ethnohistoric sources describe marketplaces all over Mesoamerica linked by professional merchants, and archaeology reveals widespread trade in both utilitarian goods such as obsidian, domestic pottery, salt, and bronze tools, and luxury items such as gold, jade, bronze bells, and fancy textiles (Scholes and Roys 1968; Berdan 1988; M. E. Smith 1990; Andrews 1993; Hosler 1994).

Evidence for stylistic interaction is found in a style of mural painting that spread throughout Mesoamerica. During the MPC period, a distinctive polychrome painting style, the Mixteca-Puebla style, had developed at Cholula, an ancient religious center east of the Basin of Mexico. This style was first applied to painted manuscripts and polychrome ceramics, and Cholula polychromes became the fanciest and most highly esteemed ceramics in Postclassic Mesoamerica (the Spanish conqueror Bernal Díaz reported that the Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma would only eat from imported Cholula servingware). During the LPC period, the Aztecs adopted the Mixteca-Puebla style for their painted manuscripts and stone sculptures (Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994). Beyond central Mexico, peoples all over Mesoamerica adopted certain key elements of the Mixteca-Puebla style to create a single “International style”



5.1 *The Aztec empire and the Mesoamerican world system. The world system covered the Aztec and Tarascan empires and the Maya area, as noted by the occurrence of the murals painted in the "International style" (black circles).*

of mural painting (Robertson 1970; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980). The spatial distribution of this style maps the social and economic interactions that structured the Mesoamerican world system (Fig. 5.1).

LPC trade and stylistic interaction had a core-periphery structure characteristic of ancient world systems (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Peregrine 1996). In the LPC-A period a large part of the central Mexican highlands, from Cholula to the Basin of Mexico, constituted the major core zone. The Mixteca-Puebla style had developed in this area and then spread to the rest of Mesoamerica as the International style. Compared to the peripheral regions, central Mexico at this time had larger and more dynamic polities, higher population densities, and greater accumulations of economic surplus in the forms of growing cities and increasingly sumptuous palaces for kings and other nobles. Exotic, high-value goods such as jade, turquoise, and bronze tools and jewelry were imported into central Mexico, and the Aztecs of the Basin of Mexico exported large quantities of decorated ceramics (Aztec III black-on-orange and other types), obsidian, and salt (M. E. Smith 1990).

Central Mexico in the LPC-A period was the setting for a dynamic society typical of a world system core zone. Populations grew enormously from MPC times, and the entire landscape was transformed by intensive agriculture in the form of irrigation, terracing, and raised fields (M. E. Smith 1996: 69-84). Warfare among city-states escalated, and several polities succeeded in conquer-

ing numerous neighbors to become mini-empires; these included Azcapotzalco and Texcoco in the Basin of Mexico and Cuauhnahuac in Morelos. Cities grew and elites expanded in numbers and power. Regional marketplace trade expanded, as did long-distance commerce (see below).

The Mesoamerican world system of the Late Postclassic period differed from a number of other ancient world systems in that commerce in luxury goods was not part of a "prestige-goods system." In prestige-goods systems, elites control or manipulate the production, exchange, and consumption of luxury goods, and this control is a major source of their power (Blanton *et al.* 1996; Peregrine 1996). Luxury goods such as exotic feathers, jewelry, cacao, and fancy textiles certainly played important economic and social roles in Aztec society. They were widely exchanged through trade and tribute (Berdan 1987b), and they were used as part of the political processes of elites (Brumfiel 1987). Nevertheless, Aztec elites did not control the production, exchange, or consumption of luxury goods.

Many luxury goods were produced by attached specialists who worked for noble patrons. In addition to production for their patron, however, these artisans also produced goods that they sold in the markets. Aztec nobles did not at all monopolize trade in luxury goods. Most of the trade of the well-known Aztec *pochteca* merchants (professional merchants of the commoner class who were organized into guilds) was entrepreneurial in nature, with only a small portion carried out for royal patrons. Information about merchants from other areas of Mesoamerica suggests similar patterns of entrepreneurial trade (e.g., Scholes and Roys 1968). Although sumptuary rules did exist, most luxury goods, from stone sculptures and jade necklaces to cacao and featherwork, were sold in marketplaces to anyone who could pay the price. At the provincial Aztec sites I have excavated, exotic luxury goods are found equally at commoner and elite residences. Even Aztec peasants in provincial villages could obtain jade beads, bronze bells, and the same kinds of Cholula polychrome plates used to serve dinner to the emperor Motecuhzoma.

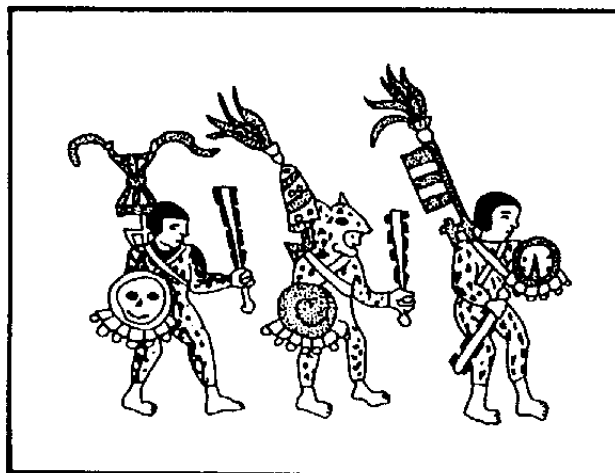
I think that scholars have been misled into giving luxury goods too much importance by the exaggerated claims of Aztec nobles (as described in the works of the Spanish chroniclers such as Sahagún and Durán), and by the spectacular offerings excavated at the central imperial temple, the Templo Mayor (López Luján 1994; Matos Moctezuma 1988). Commerce in luxury goods *was* important in the Aztec economy, as it was in all ancient world systems (Schneider 1977), but the prominence of merchants, markets, and money meant that the Aztec economy clearly was *not* a prestige-goods system.

Expansion of the Aztec empire (LPC-B)

The specific historical events surrounding the establishment and expansion of the Aztec empire are well known from the pictorial and narrative records of Aztec native history (see Davies 1973).³ The Mexica people had been the last of the

Aztlan immigrant groups to arrive in central Mexico. Their city-state Tenochtitlan became a subject of the ruler of the Tepanec polity Azcapotzalco, one of the Aztec mini-empires of the LPC-A period. The Mexica paid tribute in the form of military service, and by the 1420s the Mexica armies were among the most effective in central Mexico. Tenochtitlan developed into a busy commercial center at this time, and the Mexica dynasty established a series of advantageous marriage alliances with powerful city-states.

In 1428 the Mexica king Itzcoatl and several allied polities defeated Azcapotzalco. Although some sources talk of the formation of a “Triple Alliance” of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan that ruled the resulting empire, it is likely that the Mexica were in firm control from the start (see Gillespie 1998). The Mexica employed the traditional Aztec pattern of political expansion whereby conquered city-states were assessed for tribute in a variety of goods while local dynasties were left alone so long as they cooperated with the empire. Within a decade most of the Basin of Mexico had been subdued and the Mexica extended their conquests out of the Basin, starting with Cuauhnahuac and other polities in Morelos.



5.2 *Aztec soldiers weaving jaguar skin costumes and carrying obsidian edged swords.*

The empire expanded in two cycles or waves of conquest (Fig. 5.2). Itzcoatl's initial conquests started the first cycle, which was continued in a series of wide-ranging campaigns by his successor, Motecuhzoma I of Tenochtitlan, and by Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco. These two powerful kings brought a large territory under control, from Veracruz to Oaxaca. The next Mexica king, Axayacatl, devoted most of his energies to consolidating his predecessor's conquests through selective battles and the organization of an imperial tribute system. Axayacatl also attempted to extend the empire to the west at the expense of the Tarascan empire, where he incurred the most disastrous Aztec defeat prior to the arrival of the Spaniards.

In 1486 the Mexica king Ahuitzotl embarked upon another major cycle of expansion and extended the empire to the Pacific Ocean, to Oaxaca, and south

into Maya territory. Tropical lowland areas were conquered, and city-states in these areas paid tribute in lowland luxury goods including quetzal feathers, jade, cacao, and jaguar pelts. The next Mexica king, Motecuhzoma II, consolidated Ahuitzotl's gains in Oaxaca, Puebla, and Veracruz, and he made an unsuccessful effort to conquer Tlaxcalla, an independent Aztec state east of the Basin of Mexico. His reign was cut short in 1519 with the arrival of the armies of Hernando Cortés.

As the empire expanded, the Mexica nobility grew more powerful and wealthy, and Tenochtitlan was rebuilt in the form of the ancient imperial capitals Teotihuacan and Tula. The Mexica kings began a program of political consolidation within the Basin of Mexico, replacing the traditional Aztec patterns of indirect rule with more direct control over the subject polities in the Basin of Mexico core. In world systems terms, the central Mexican core zone took on a more complex structure, with several levels of hierarchy. Aztec central Mexico as a whole maintained its high degree of economic and political development relative to the outer parts of the empire, but the core zone of greatest control and influence contracted to the Basin of Mexico. For areas like Morelos in the larger central Mexican core but outside of the Basin, their privileged position in the world system was less advantageous, since they now paid tribute to the Basin of Mexico. This was not the only core zone in the Mesoamerica world system, however; several other areas exhibited patterns of accelerated political and economic growth beyond the rest of Mesoamerica (Carmack 1996).

Economic activity in central Mexico reached new heights in the LPC-B period. Population climbed to the highest levels of the entire Prehispanic epoch, with one million people living in the Basin of Mexico alone. Agricultural intensification also achieved its highest development, and almost the entire landscape of central Mexico was put under cultivation. Population was at the limits of the environment, and famines were a regular occurrence in the LPC-B period. The market system continued to expand, and the size of the central marketplace in Tenochtitlan's twin city, Tlatelolco, completely astounded the first Spaniards to see it. Several types of professional merchants traded throughout Mesoamerica, and a variety of forms of currency were used. The most popular forms were cacao beans for small purchases, and cotton textiles for most costly items. The imperial tribute system greatly enriched Tenochtitlan, with large quantities of both raw materials and manufactured goods arriving several times a year, and merchants brought even greater quantities of goods from distant areas (Berdan 1987b). Although one sometimes reads that the Aztec empire had begun to decline before the arrival of Cortés, there is no evidence to support such a notion.

AZTEC IMPERIAL STRATEGIES

Scholars have been slow to identify the strategies employed by the Aztec rulers in the expansion, operation, and organization of their empire. Contemporary descriptions of the specific motives or plans of ancient imperial rulers are few and

far between, even for heavily documented empires such as the Roman or Chinese. For the Aztecs, a bias against hegemonic empires has hindered the study of strategies; this is exemplified by statements that the Aztec polity was “not really an empire” (see discussion in Berdan *et al.* 1996: 6). One popular account of the Aztec empire (Conrad and Demarest 1984) has even asserted that the Mexica had no plans or strategies at all, and merely sent out armies of religious fanatics to conquer haphazardly in search of captives for rituals of human sacrifice.

The authors of a recent book, *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (Berdan *et al.* 1996), employed a “bottom-up” approach to reconstructing the territory and economics of the empire, resulting in a significant modification of Robert Barlow’s (1949) classic “top-down” approach. By reconstructing the empire from the ground up, the *Aztec Imperial Strategies* project was able to: (1) identify a variety of strategies or principles that guided imperial expansion and administration; (2) produce a new and more accurate map of the empire; and (3) identify a new principle of territorial organization that characterized many of the provincial towns not listed in the *Codex Mendoza* (see discussion of the frontier strategy below). The resulting principles and strategies can be organized under four labels: the economic, political, frontier, and elite strategies.

The economic strategy

The basic motives of Aztec imperial expansion were economic. Starting with the MPC Aztec city-states, the goal of conquest was to secure tribute payments from subordinate polities. As the empire expanded, the volume and geographical range of tribute payments expanded greatly and the Mexica put considerable effort into establishing and operating a system of regular imperial tribute payments. But the collection of imperial tribute was only one of three types of economic strategy employed by the Aztec rulers. A second economic strategy focused on the pre-existing commercial networks of the world system, and a third strategy involved stimulation and manipulation of the Basin of Mexico market system in ways that both benefited the economy and kept rival city-state rulers in check.

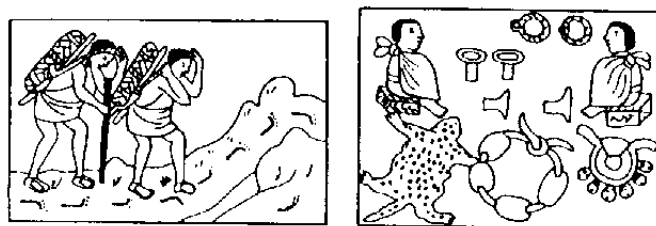
Imperial tribute

In Doyle’s terms, the Aztec tribute system was the major institution of the transnational system. Although we have considerable information about what kinds of goods were paid in what quantities from specific provinces (Berdan and Anawalt 1992), the organization of tribute collection in the outer provinces is poorly understood. Because provincial city-states each had their own internal tribute systems in effect long before they were conquered, it would have been easy for city-state rulers to pass on the imperial tribute quota to their subjects by simply raising taxes. A quantitative reconstruction of tribute in relation to demography in the Cuauhnahuac and Huastec provinces of Morelos shows

that imperial tribute was not a particularly heavy burden when spread among the commoner households of the provinces (M. E. Smith 1994).

Aztec imperial tribute included foodstuffs, raw materials, utilitarian goods, and luxuries. Some provinces were assessed for tribute in local specialties, while in other cases more generic goods were demanded from a province and the Mexica obtained local specialties through trade. Frances Berdan (Berdan *et al.* 1996: ch. 5) has remarked upon the very low quantities of tribute in war materiel, in spite of the fact that the Mexica sometimes provided polities on imperial frontiers with arms. The key raw material for Aztec swords and spears, obsidian, was not part of the imperial tribute system, probably because it was more efficiently obtained through preexisting commercial networks.

In many provinces, imperial tribute acted as an economic stimulus beyond simply requiring increased production for the tribute goods. Two of the main tribute items – warrior costumes and textiles – were manufactured goods whose raw materials were not widely available. Both required goods from the tropical lowlands (exotic bird feathers for the elaborate costumes, and cotton for textiles) and many city-states had to engage in commerce to obtain them. Although part of the motivation for requiring these goods was probably ideological (subordination to the empire was emphasized by the warrior costumes), I believe that this was part of a deliberate strategy for stimulating commerce in the outer provinces.



5.3 Aztec professional pochteca merchants: left: merchants on the road; right: merchants selling luxury goods at a market.

World system commercial networks

The commercial networks of the LPC world system long predated the formation of the Aztec empire (Fig. 5.3). Towns all over Mesoamerica had active marketplaces, and professional traders were based in many areas that came under imperial control as the empire expanded (Scholes and Roys 1968). The expansion of the empire acted to stimulate trade in the provinces in several ways. First, imperial conquest led to the reduction of regional warfare, and trade flourished in the *pax Azteca* that followed. Second, the Aztec *pochteca* merchants traveled and traded more easily within the empire than outside (although they were accomplished soldiers in their own right and served as spies outside of the empire). Third, the Mexica emperor on at least one occasion sponsored a commercial expedition to obtain lowland luxuries. Fourth, the Mexica sometimes required conquered city-states in key areas to hold markets (e.g., Tepeaca; Berdan *et al.* 1996: 133). Fifth, some key market towns were conquered in order to protect

them from nearby enemies (e.g., Huexotla on the Merztitlan border and Tetellan and Alahuistlan on the Tarascan border; Berdan *et al.* 1996: 149).

The Mexica were willing to put considerable effort into the promotion and protection of commerce in the outer provinces because of its direct benefits. This trade moved enormous quantities of obsidian to all parts of Aztec central Mexico, where it was needed for domestic tasks, craft production, and weapons. Commercial networks were also the major source of luxury goods for the Aztec nobility. Although many luxuries were included with imperial tribute, Berdan's calculations show that the volume of luxuries entering Tenochtitlan far exceeded the amount listed in the tribute rolls (Berdan *et al.* 1996: 126). Given the importance of commerce, it should be no surprise that Aztec merchants operated largely independently of the state (Berdan 1988), in the same manner as other LPC merchants in Mesoamerica (Scholes and Roys 1968). The Mexica participation in the world system commercial networks involved two of Doyle's factors, the transnational system and the international context.

The Basin of Mexico market system

Just as the imperial rulers encouraged commerce in the outer provinces, they also promoted marketplace trade at home. The Basin of Mexico market system expanded greatly in the LPC-B period, and by 1519 the central Tlatelolco marketplace was a very large and complex institution (Cortés reported that 60,000 buyers and sellers attended this market daily). A prosperous market system was a boon for the Mexica rulers, but it was also a potential source of power for their competitors in other city-states.

The Mexica employed several strategies to encourage marketing without allowing the benefits to accrue to rival polities. First, tribute collection centers were established in secondary market towns, both to encourage growth in these towns and to prevent additional growth in established primary market towns with entrenched local elites. Second, a number of local dynasties were physically disconnected from their market revenues. This was accomplished by various means, including the relocation or destruction of the market (Cuauhtitlan), relocation of the dynastic seat (Chalco), or strategic placement of transport routes (Azcapotlco, Culhuacan). Third, the Mexica encouraged specialization and the spatial fragmentation of economic activities to prevent their concentration in established centers controlled by potential rivals.

The growth of a prosperous market system in the LPC-B period not only benefited merchants and craft specialists, but also worked to the advantage of political elites, both imperial and non-imperial. Market taxes were a source of royal revenue, but perhaps more importantly the markets brought luxury goods needed by the elites. "Rulers took special pride in their markets if they offered a wide array of luxury goods which they needed both to adorn themselves and their surroundings and to participate in the high-level gift exchange that was so important" (Hicks 1987: 94). Attached specialists who produced luxury items, from stone sculptures to feather capes, depended upon local kings for patronage

and support, and they also depended upon markets as a source for raw materials, and as a place to sell surplus items not delivered directly to their patrons.

The political strategy

The phrase political strategy is used to refer to actions taken by the Triple Alliance rulers to consolidate their power and control in the imperial core area. The Mexica had achieved more power than any previous Aztec state and they liked to tell the Spanish chroniclers about their superiority and invincibility. Nevertheless, their control was still somewhat fragile, since rival dynasties remained in power in many city-states in the Basin of Mexico core area, and outside of the Basin major areas like Tlaxcalla remained unconquered.

Mary Hodge (1984; Berdan *et al.* 1996: ch. 2) identified the strategies used by the Mexica in pursuit of political consolidation within the Basin of Mexico. In the decades after the formation of the empire in 1428, the Mexica eliminated local administrative positions, usurped old kingship positions and created others anew, and created parallel special-purpose tributary and political control hierarchies. Tribute provinces in the Basin of Mexico were defined to cut across boundaries of local city-states. Tribute was collected directly by imperial officials, keeping it out of the hands of local rulers. As Hicks points out, this let the imperial kings deal with subject rulers as allies and colleagues, not tribute-payers, at the same time that they were demanding heavy tribute payments from their colleagues' commoner subjects (Hicks 1992).

After the initial conquest and imperial organization of city-states in the core area, the Triple Alliance rulers employed a second set of political strategies. Their encouragement of specific kinds of growth in the Basin of Mexico market system was one example of this process. Others included granting income-producing lands to noble families and pursuing actively the ancient practice of marriage alliances with less powerful dynasties. Brumfiel (this volume) shows the importance of imperial ideology within the political strategies of the Mexica.

The frontier strategy

The frontier strategy, an important component of Doyle's "international context," describes the actions taken when the empire came up against powerful enemy states that could not be conquered. City-states along these frontiers were not incorporated into the tributary provinces listed in the *Codex Mendoza*, but were treated as client states and granted a certain level of formal equality with the imperial rulers (in spite of very real differences in power). A number of local documents state that the client kings did not pay tribute to the Mexica ruler, but rather gave him gifts (Berdan *et al.* 1996: ch. 6). Their main contributions to the empire related to their border locations. They fought small-scale battles with the enemy states, often from locally constructed fortresses. There is little information about these facilities in the documentary record, and archaeologists have only begun to identify and study them (Hernández Rivero 1994). In a few cases,

the Mexica built fortresses (e.g., Oztuma), which nearby clients supplied with soldiers, weapons, and food (Hassig 1988). These border polities resembled in many ways the client kingdoms of the eastern Roman empire (Braund 1984; Sands 1908).

These client states, labeled “strategic provinces” by Berdan *et al.* (1996), represent an alternative form of provincial organization to the better-known tributary provinces of the *Codex Mendoza*. The recognition of greater variability in the control of the Aztec provinces parallels recent scholarship on other ancient empires such as the Inka (D’Altroy, this volume) and Vijayanagara (Morrison, this volume). The identification of this variability in the Aztec empire was delayed for many decades because of two factors. First, Robert Barlow’s influential top-down approach to the empire simply lumped the client states with their nearest tributary province (Barlow 1949). A second reason for the long delay in the recognition of the frontier strategy is the success of Mexica propaganda. In spite of their failure to conquer Tlaxcalla and the Tarascans, the Mexica produced a variety of types of propaganda proclaiming their greatness. Rulers commissioned huge carved stone monuments with imperial iconography (Berdan *et al.* 1996: ch. 4) and they constructed impressive state temples such as the Templo Mayor where elaborate sacrificial ceremonies were held. This propaganda was directed at the nobles of other city-states as part of the Mexica program of political consolidation (see Brumfiel, this volume). After 1519, the Spanish chroniclers recorded much of this propaganda verbatim from Mexica nobles.

According to the official imperial world-view, the empire had no need for special arrangements to contain enemy states. This was because the Mexica “were masters of the world, their empire so wide and abundant that they had conquered all the nations and that all were their vassals” (Durán 1993: 336). Surprisingly, many modern scholars have accepted this propaganda at face value, hindering scholarship on the organization of the empire. Another example of Mexica propaganda is the institution known as the “flowery war” (*xochiyaoyotl*). The Mexica told the Spaniards that these battles with Tlaxcalla were done for practice and training, and that the empire had no desire to conquer Tlaxcalla. When Spanish soldiers asked the Tlaxcallans about these wars, however, they were told that the Aztec empire was indeed trying hard to conquer their state. Tlaxcalla was surrounded and its outside trade in salt and luxuries had been cut off, but the empire was simply not strong enough to complete the conquest (see discussion in M. E. Smith 1996: 184ff). The Aztec empire clearly had achieved political and economic advantages over large parts of Mesoamerica by 1519, but its degree of domination was lower than that achieved in many ancient empires, and lower than the Mexica nobility would like to admit.

The elite strategy

The elite strategy, part of Doyle’s transnational system, describes the connections forged among politically separate elites in all parts of the empire. Processes of

elite interaction and class-formation had begun among the MPC Aztec city-states, and were then put to work by the imperial rulers. Specific activities of this strategy included marriage alliances, gift-giving, common participation in key ceremonies and events, and the use of particular styles and forms of art, iconography, and material culture. This strategy cuts across the three strategies listed above, and indeed elite interactions and manipulations were part of all three. Elite dynamics contributed to the growth of trade and markets, they were at the core of the political strategy of consolidation, and they were part of interaction with the strategic provinces. Elite interactions were also important in the tributary provinces (M. E. Smith 1986). Provincial rulers were co-opted by the Mexica, and their participation in the empire was rewarded by support and incentives from the capital (see Brumfiel, this volume).

The major reason for singling out the elite strategy is its pervasiveness and its cultural content, which may not be sufficiently emphasized in analyses of economic and political strategies (see also chapters by Kuhrt, Morrison, and Woolf, this volume). The Late Postclassic International style discussed above is an example of an art style that linked elites from distant areas who spoke different languages and were involved in very different local cultural and political contexts. The International style extended far beyond the confines of the Aztec empire to link all of Mesoamerica together. Within the empire itself, however, there were numerous cultural traits that distinguished elites from commoners in local regions, and linked distant elites together to forge a common, extensive elite class within the empire. Two particularly important artistic media that served this role were stone sculpture and manuscript painting (Berdan *et al.* 1996: chs. 4, 7, 8).

THE AZTEC EMPIRE IN MORELOS

How did processes of world system exchange and imperial expansion affect people in provincial areas? This question is difficult to address for two reasons: (1) there is little information, ethnohistoric or archaeological, on provincial societies; and (2) the problem of rough chronologies discussed in the introduction limits the usefulness of existing data for addressing fine-grained processes of change. Yet this is a crucial issue in the cross-cultural analysis of imperialism (see Deagan, this volume). My research in Morelos has generated archaeological data suitable for pursuing issues of world systems and imperialism in central Mexico outside of the Basin of Mexico. In this section I make comparisons among the three periods described in the introduction: Middle Postclassic (MPC), the period of city-state expansion; Late Postclassic-A (LPC-A), the period of central Mexico's entry into the Mesoamerican world system; and Late Postclassic-B (LPC-B), the period of Aztec imperialism (see Table 5.1).

I have identified the following patterns at Aztec-period sites in Morelos. First, commercial exchange was pervasive in Morelos during all three periods. Second, the LPC-A period, when this area entered the Mesoamerican world system, was

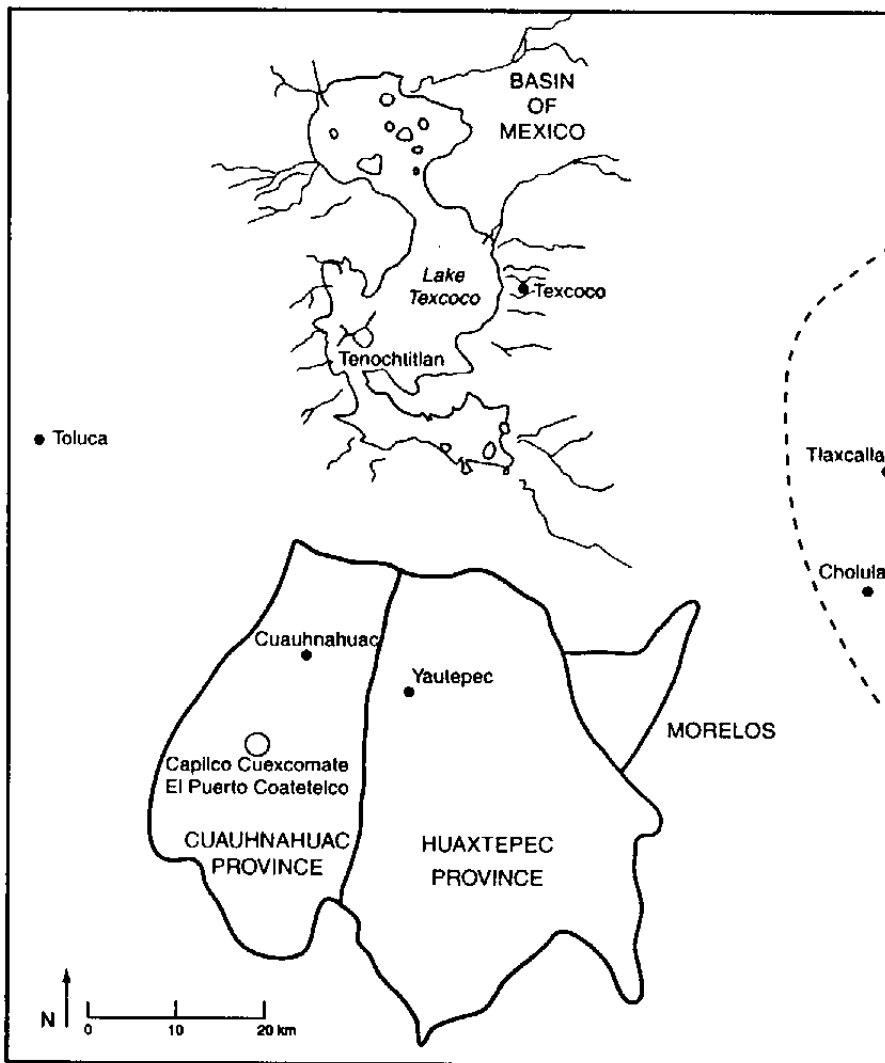
a time of economic expansion and prosperity. Third, the LPC-B period, when Morelos was part of the Aztec empire, was a time of economic decline and increasing regional and class inequalities. I examine these three issues with respect to three archaeological data sets: excavations of rural houses at Capilco and Cuexcomate; excavations of urban houses at Yau-tepec; and regional comparisons of ceramic inventories (Fig. 5.4).

Economic cycles in the countryside: excavations at Capilco and Cuexcomate

Cynthia Heath-Smith and I excavated over forty houses and other structures at the rural sites of Cuexcomate and Capilco in 1986 (Fig. 5.5). Chronological research allowed us to apply a refined chronology to these sites (Smith and Doershuk 1991). Capilco was a village that grew from a few houses in the MPC period to twenty houses in LPC-B times. Cuexcomate was founded as a town site in LPC-A with about 200 inhabitants. The settlement grew to over 800 inhabitants in LPC-B times, when a large elite compound was abandoned and a much smaller one built in its place. Excavations concentrated on residential structures and associated midden deposits, nearly all of which were phased to one of the three Aztec periods (M. E. Smith 1992). The following arguments are discussed at greater length elsewhere (Smith and Heath-Smith 1994).

Only two of the houses excavated at Capilco date to the MPC period, but their inhabitants were already well connected to central Mexican exchange networks. Imports included ceramics from Cuauhnahuac, the Basin of Mexico, and areas to the west; obsidian from central Mexican sources; and bronze tools from the Tarascan area of west Mexico (Hosler 1994). The LPC-A period saw an expansion of population in the region, accompanied by the construction of agricultural terraces near the sites. Poor soils and hilly terrain make this a marginal area for rainfall agriculture, but cotton can be cultivated in terraced and irrigated plots. Morelos is one of the few areas of highland central Mexico warm enough to grow cotton. Not surprisingly, all houses, elite and commoner, had spinning tools, and these increased greatly in frequency over the MPC period (Fig. 5.6). Cotton textiles, woven by women in domestic settings, were probably the major export from this area. They were the predominant type of tribute good demanded of commoner households at all levels of the tribute hierarchy, from the local noble to the city-state to the empire, and there was an active commerce in textiles. Women's labor produced the goods that linked Morelos households into the Mesoamerican world system, and later, the Aztec empire.

In this period, an elite group built an elaborate palace at Cuexcomate in a style similar to Aztec palaces in other areas. Elite middens can be distinguished from commoner middens by the quantities of various imported goods and decorated ceramics. There are no categories of goods that are found only in elite contexts, however. The most valuable items recovered in the excavations – bronze tools



5.4 The location of Morelos within central Mexico. Areas shaded dark gray indicate mountains, the dashed line indicates enemy territory.

and exotic stone jewelry – were found equally at commoner and elite houses. This pattern points strongly to the operation of commerce not controlled by the elite as the dominant mechanism of exchange at these sites. The LPC-A period was a time of economic prosperity, expansion of agriculture, and urbanization in western Morelos. Ceramics from western Mexico declined in frequency, while ceramics and obsidian from the Basin of Mexico increased greatly.

In the LPC-B period, after the Aztec conquest of Morelos, economic decline set in at Capilco and Cuexcomate. Regional population continued to grow and all available land was put into cultivation with terracing. The quantities of exotic goods, including ceramics, obsidian, and bronze, declined significantly for all



5.5 *Aztec peasant houses at Capilco, Morelos; this village was part of the Aztec tributary province of Cuauhmanhuac.*

three social sectors (villagers at Capilco, and commoners and elites at Cuexcomate). Imported ceramics at this time were almost exclusively from the Basin of Mexico, and the quantities of local decorated ceramics also declined.

I have measured standard of living with a wealth index calculated as the frequency of local decorated ceramics (expressed as percent of total ceramics) plus two times the frequency of imported ceramics (M. E. Smith 1987). This measure declined for all three social sectors. Wealth index values suggest a reduction in elite–commoner distinctions in the LPC-B period, a pattern also reflected in elite housing. The large elite compound of LPC-A was abandoned in favor of a smaller and less elaborate elite compound in LPC-B times. Regional population in the LPC-B period was probably at or over the capacity of the environment to sustain. The poorest households in particular expanded their production of cotton textiles, probably to make up for falling agricultural returns (the houses with the lowest wealth indices have the highest quantities of spinning tools).

The economic decline of the LPC-B period at Capilco and Cuexcomate was probably due to the combined effects of two processes, one local and one external (Smith and Heath-Smith 1994). The local process was a regional economic cycle common in preindustrial states with dense peasant populations. The cycle starts with population growth, colonization of new lands, the expansion of trade



5.6 Ceramic tools used to spin cotton. The whorls in the foreground were weights for wooden spindles, which were twirled in these small bowls.

and manufacturing, and the growth of towns (MPC and LPC-A). As growth continues beyond a threshold, however, the economy is transformed from a condition of excess land and a shortage of labor to one with surplus labor and a shortage of land. Arable land is filled in, productivity declines, prices rise, the countryside becomes impoverished, and peasant households take up cottage industries to supplement falling agricultural income (LPC-B). The situation in Morelos resembled historically documented economic cycles of this sort, including medieval England (Miller and Hatcher 1978) and early modern France (Le Roy Ladurie 1972).

The negative effects of local demographic and agricultural problems were intensified by an external process, Aztec imperialism. Aztec conquest of this area probably had few direct effects, and imperial tribute would have had only a very modest effect on households because of its low level in relation to regional population in Morelos (M. E. Smith 1994). The indirect effects of Aztec imperialism were significant, however. One such effect derived from the imperial support of loyal provincial rulers. The Cuauhnahuac dynasty had long-standing marriage ties with the Mexica dynasty (the mother of Motecuhzoma I was the daughter of a Cuauhnahuac king), and the Cuauhnahuac state continued to expand by conquering other city-states even after its incorporation into the empire (M. E. Smith 1986).

The region around Capileo and Cuexcomate became subject to Cuauhnahuac around the start of the LPC-B period, and the inhabitants of these sites paid tribute to both a local city-state king and the Cuauhnahuac state in addition to their imperial tribute. There is not sufficient information to calculate the magnitude of these sub-imperial tribute requirements, but they were probably much

heavier than the imperial tribute. The decline in wealth and living conditions of the Cuexcomate elite group suggests that the benefits the Cuauhnahuac nobility may have enjoyed from their cooperation with the Aztec empire were not shared by their rural cousins.

Economic change in the city: excavations at Yautepec

Yautepec was a political capital with several subject city-states in Aztec times. The site has one of the few surviving Aztec royal palaces, which has been excavated by Hortensia de Vega Nova (1996). In 1993 Heath-Smith and I excavated seven houses and a number of other domestic deposits at Yautepec, which lies under the modern town of the same name. One of the houses is a large elite residence, five are small commoner dwellings, and one is intermediate in size and of uncertain class affiliation (M. E. Smith *et al.* 1999; M. E. Smith *et al.* 1994). Timothy Hare and I have established a fine-grained chronology and we can now date deposits to the MPC, LPC-A, and LPC-B periods (Hare and Smith 1996). Studies of the excavated artifacts are still in progress by Jan Marie Olson, Ruth Fauman-Fichman, and others, and the analysis of sites from our full-coverage survey of the Yautepec valley (by Timothy Hare and Lisa Montiel) has only begun. The following interpretations are subject to change as our analyses proceed.

As at the rural sites, the inhabitants of Yautepec in the MPC period had ready access to obsidian from a variety of sources and ceramics from the Basin of Mexico and other parts of Morelos. Although they did have access to obsidian from Tarascan sources, neither Tarascan bronze nor exotic precious stones were present at this time.

In the LPC-A period, the city of Yautepec expanded greatly in size. In either this period or the next, much of the alluvial land around Yautepec was put into irrigated cultivation. The amounts and types of imported obsidian and ceramics changed very little from MPC times. Bronze sewing needles, awls, bells, and tweezers from the Tarascan region appear for the first time at Yautepec (Hosler and Macfarlane 1996), as does jewelry of jade, shell, and other exotic material. These exotics are found in both elite and commoner contexts, suggesting that Yautepec households entered the Mesoamerican world system at this time. Spindle whorls and spinning bowls show a dramatic increase in the LPC-A period, and technological analyses suggest a greater focus on the production of fine thread than in MPC times (Fauman-Fichman 1997). Again, cotton textiles provided the major link with the world system, and the increase in spinning was probably related to Yautepec's growing participation in world system exchanges.

In the LPC-B period imported ceramics and obsidian declined in frequency. The drop in obsidian was particularly dramatic (in comparison with sherd counts). Exotic bronze and jade continued at similar levels, and Tarascan obsidian increased. The quantities of spinning tools continued to grow, and the trend toward finer thread production continued in this phase as well. The aggregate

wealth levels for the site rose slightly in LPC-B times, owing to an increase in the amount of local polychrome ceramics. Although this observation is preliminary, it appears that elite/commoner distinctions increased at this time (excluding consideration of the royal palace), in contrast to Cuexcomate where the opposite change occurred.

Although Yautepec and the rural sites exhibit contrasting patterns of change, there are a number of similarities. In both cases imported goods are abundant in all periods, and ceramics from other parts of Morelos and the Basin of Mexico are common. In both cases, high-value goods, from imported polychrome bowls to bronze to jade jewelry, are found in both elite and commoner contexts. These patterns suggest strongly the operation of markets and commercial exchange, in agreement with ethnohistoric descriptions of marketplaces in all types of communities in Morelos, from cities to villages (M. E. Smith 1994). Both areas exhibit patterns of economic growth and expansion in the LPC-A period.

The role of Aztec imperialism in the LPC-B period at Yautepec is difficult to evaluate until our analyses at the household level proceed farther. Craft production occurred at a much higher level than at the rural sites (products included, in addition to textiles, obsidian blades and jewelry, ceramic figurines and censers, and bark paper), but we have not examined temporal trends yet. Yautepec's environmental and sociopolitical contexts were very different from the rural sites, however, and models of Postclassic change will probably vary accordingly. Yautepec was a powerful capital city subject only to the empire, and changes cannot be attributed to external intermediate elites as at the rural sites. As an urban center higher up in the political and economic hierarchies of Morelos, Yautepec had advantages over rural communities like Capilco and Cuexcomate, and this probably helps explain the overall rise in wealth levels under the Aztec empire. One feature worth noting is the presence of two Tarascan products – bronze and obsidian – during this time when the Aztec and Tarascan empires were at war. This suggests that Aztec imperialism did not diminish the commercial exchanges of the world system, which cut across even the most hostile border in Mesoamerica.

Regional patterns of change

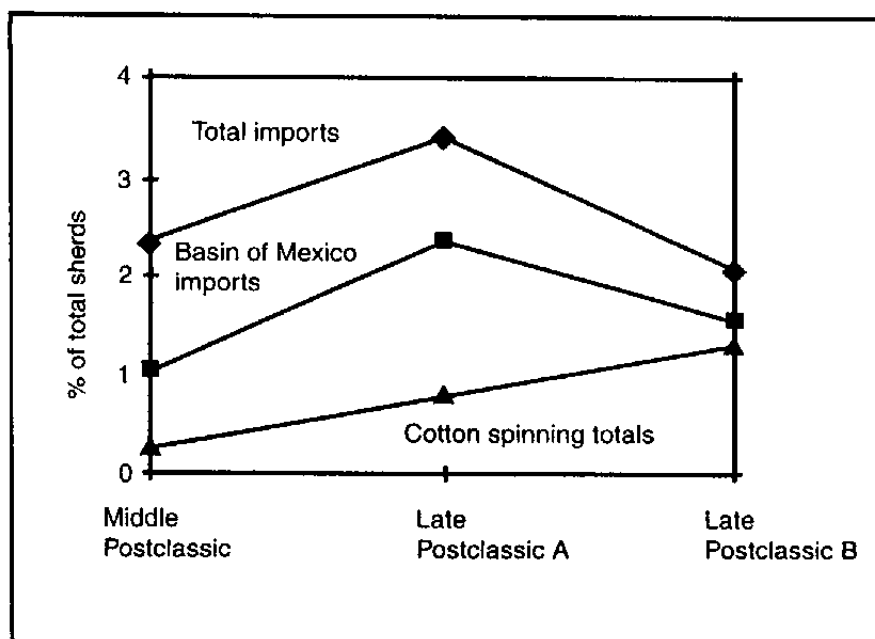
The above observations can be augmented by data on ceramic type frequencies at other Postclassic sites in Morelos. This section discusses seven sites whose ceramics are described in my monograph *Tlaluica Ceramics* (M. E. Smith n.d.). In addition to Capilco, Cuexcomate, and Yautepec, four sites have collections of Postclassic ceramics sufficiently well dated and large enough for socioeconomic inferences. *El Puerto* was a village on the edge of the abandoned ancient urban center of Xochicalco. Data are from test pits excavated by Kenneth Hirth. *Coatetelco* was a town with a pyramid and ballcourt excavated by Raúl Arana; data discussed here are from test pits. These sites are in western Morelos, not far

from Capilco and Cuexcomate. *Cuauhnahuac* was a powerful city that ruled many city-states in the western half of Morelos. Although a number of excavations have been done in Cuauhnahuac (modern Cuernavaca), the only quantified ceramic collections are from temples at Teopanzolco (MPC) and the palace of the king in the Palacio de Cortés site (LPC). Finally, *Tepozteco* was a hilltop temple precinct above the town of Tepoztlan, north of Yau-tepec; quantified collections are from residential quarters near the temple where priests may have lived.

Imported ceramics were quite abundant at every site, providing additional evidence for the operation of local and regional market systems in all periods (imports are identified primarily on typological grounds; petrographic and chemical analyses are now in progress). Imports comprise between 1 percent and 6 percent of total sherds, with period means all above 2 percent (Fig. 5.7). Since these are total sherd counts rather than vessel estimates, 2 percent is a large quantity (where vessel counts have been estimated, imports comprise closer to 10 percent of household ceramic inventories). In the MPC period, imports from the Basin of Mexico equal imports from other parts of Morelos, but in the two LPC periods the Basin of Mexico was the dominant place of origin for imported ceramics at all sites.

Every site had imports from the Basin and from other parts of Morelos, and many sites had imports from more distant areas (including Cholula, Toluca, Guerrero, and the Gulf Coast). The single most numerous imported category at most sites is the salt vessel ("Texcoco fabric-marked") used to transport salt from the Basin of Mexico. Most of the other imports are decorated bowls functionally equivalent to the locally manufactured polychrome serving ware that is very common at these sites. Most households obtained a variety of styles of decorated serving bowls from a number of distant regions, probably for reasons of status and display. Figure 5.7 also shows the frequencies of ceramic spindle whorls and spinning bowls; these figures increase consistently across the periods at all sites, suggesting that the patterns identified at Capilco, Cuexcomate, and Yau-tepec represent more general regional trends in Morelos.

The regional ceramic data suggest a declining level of wealth or standard of living at many of the sites after Aztec conquest. Although imported types first increase and then decline, frequencies of local decorated ceramics show a steady decline across all three time periods. In summary, the regional ceramic data suggest that the trends observed at Cuexcomate, Capilco, and Yau-tepec represent more widespread processes in Morelos. Trade with a variety of regions increased at almost every site studied in the LPC-A period, marking the penetration of the Mesoamerican world system into all regions and sectors of Morelos, rural as well as urban. After conquest by the Aztec empire in the LPC-B period, the quantities of both imports and local decorated ceramics declined as part of a general economic downturn. This decline was most pronounced at villages and towns, while important political capital cities like Cuauhnahuac and Yau-tepec fared better within the regional economy of the empire.



5.7 Mean ceramic frequencies through time. These data are means for the seven sites discussed in the text.

PROGRESS REPORT ON AZTEC IMPERIALISM

Were the changes documented above limited to Morelos, or do they represent wider trends in Postclassic Mesoamerica? At this point it is impossible to say for sure. The Mexica kings achieved a certain level of success in creating an empire within the context of the Mesoamerican world system. Unfortunately, modern scholars are having less success in creating a body of scholarship on Aztec imperialism within the context of ancient empires and world systems. When scholarship on the Aztecs is compared to that on other ancient empires (see studies in this volume), one is struck by how little we really know about the Aztec empire. Several years ago Frances Berdan and I attributed the lack of progress on the archaeology of Aztec imperialism to two factors: (1) the indirect nature of imperial control "did not lead to major Aztec investments in material remains in the provinces," and (2) "archaeologists have not carried out a sufficient number of problem-oriented projects addressing this issue to fully evaluate the effects of Aztec imperialism" (Smith and Berdan 1992: 353; see also Rojas 1994).

In looking back at the last few years of research, I see the first factor as less of an impediment than it once seemed. We now have better theories and models of ancient empires and world systems and more refined archaeological methods for their analysis (e.g., Sinopoli 1994a; Peregrine and Feinman 1996; Schreiber n.d.), and comparative endeavors such as this volume bode well for continued advancement in this area. The ethnohistoric analysis of the Aztec empire has advanced greatly in recent years, providing a better framework for archaeological analysis (Hassig 1988; Hodge and Smith 1994; Berdan *et al.* 1996; Carrasco

1996), and art historians are now making significant contributions to studies of the empire (Berdan *et al.* 1996: chs. 4, 7, 8).

This optimism must be tempered by the simple lack of research. There are still few examples of archaeological fieldwork outside the Basin of Mexico directed at the study of the Aztec empire. Most archaeological studies of the Late Postclassic period in provincial areas do not address issues of Aztec imperialism, and the few projects that do include such a focus are hindered by poor chronologies and limited data (e.g., Hernández Rivero 1994). The Aztec empire was a short-lived institution, and we need to refine archaeological chronologies in order to study its growth and effects. My work in Morelos illustrates some of the rewards that come from investing effort in chronology building.

A further obstacle to progress is methodological: we need better instruments to model key processes of world systems and empires. This is a particularly difficult problem for archaeologists, although similar difficulties plague the documentary analysis of ancient empires. Although it is relatively straightforward to identify the existence of an empire from archaeological data alone (see above), the identification and analysis of key institutions and processes can be quite difficult. How can one distinguish between the roles of market trade, state-sponsored redistribution, and elite gift-giving in providing exotic goods at provincial sites? How can variations in the degree and nature of political control be distinguished, using material and/or documentary evidence? The situation for precapitalist world systems is even more problematic, since their archaeological study is still in its infancy.

The biggest obstacles to the analysis of Aztec imperialism involve sampling. The sampling problem is common to most ancient empires and world systems: these were large, diverse entities, and archaeological fieldwork by nature only illuminates small local areas. We need a lot more fieldwork and artifact analyses if scholarship is to steer a course between blithe overgeneralization from one or two studies and despair at the size and complexity of the imperial beast.

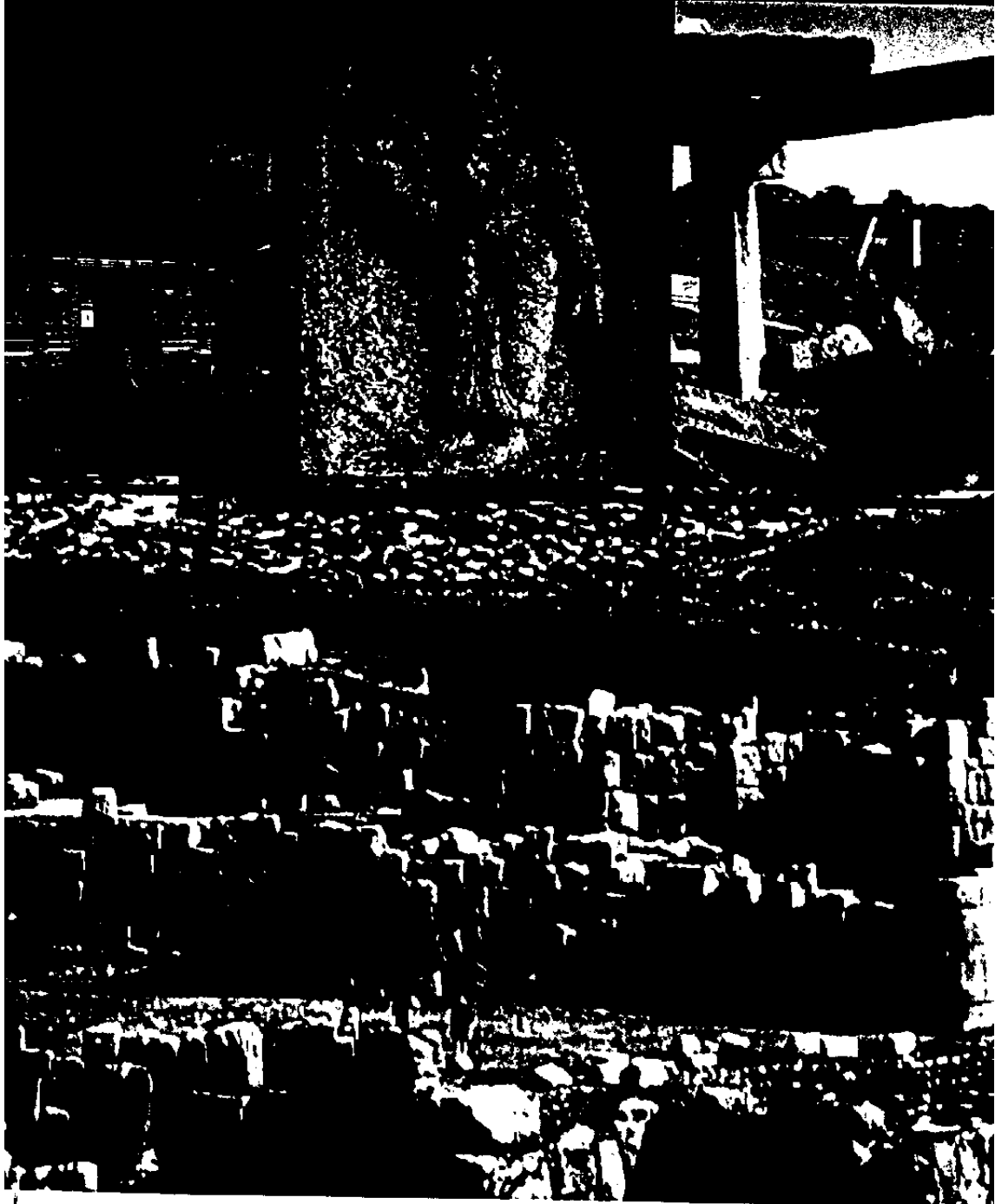
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EMPIRES

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