

CANNIBALISM AND AZTEC HUMAN SACRIFICE

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MAY, 2008

A SENIOR PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN- LA CROSSE

## **Abstract**

As the nature of Aztec cannibalism is poorly known, this paper examines the extent to which it was practiced and the motives behind it. Using the methodology of documentary research I have determined that the Aztecs did in fact engage in cannibalism, specifically ritual and gustatory cannibalism, however, the extent of it is indefinite. The analysis that I have conducted suggests that, while several hypotheses exist, there is only one that is backed by the evidence: Aztec cannibalism was practiced for religious reasons. In order to better understand this issue, other hypotheses must be examined.

## Introduction

Cannibalism is mostly considered a taboo in western culture, with the exception of sacraments in Christianity, which involve the symbolic eating of the body of Christ and the drinking of Christ's blood. The general public, in western societies, is disgusted by the thought of humans eating each other, and yet it still seems to fascinate them. Accounts of cannibalism can be found throughout the history of the world from the United States and the Amazon Basin to New Zealand and Indonesia. A few fairly well documented instances of cannibalism include the Aztecs; the Donner Party, a group of pioneers who were trapped while trying to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the winter of 1846-1847; the Uruguayan soccer team that crashed in Chile in 1972 in the Andes Mountains (Hefner, <http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/c/cannibalism.html>).

Much information is available for the Donner Party and the Uruguayan soccer team. Unfortunately, Aztec cannibalism remains, for the most part, shrouded in mystery. The Aztecs, together with the Maya and the people of Teotihuacán and a few others, make up a colorful and rather violent part of Mexico's history. The history of the Aztecs, which includes human sacrifice and cannibalism, needs to be preserved so that future generations of Mexico, and the world, can learn about it.

Three questions are addressed in this paper. The first concerns the extent to which the Aztecs practiced cannibalism. The second question concerns the motives behind Aztec cannibalism. The final question concerns who was cannibalized and who was not. I examine estimates for the extent of Aztec cannibalism to see which estimates are supported sufficient amounts of data. I also examine hypotheses regarding the motives behind this cannibalism. Each hypothesis is analyzed to verify its validity. Most of the research done previously on Aztec cannibalism has concentrated on the analysis of just one hypothesis by itself. Examples of this are the research done by Michael Harner in 1977 and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano in 1978. They both focused only on the hypothesis that nutrition was a motive for Aztec cannibalism. In my research I look at all of the hypotheses and analyze each one, and then I either approve it or reject it.

## **Methodology**

My methodology focused on the examination and analysis of historic sources, such as Spanish Conquistador accounts of the Aztec Empire, histories of Mexico, and Aztec codices. I am also using archaeological sources that deal with evidence of cannibalism found at Aztec temple sites. Finally, I am using anthropological sources that deal with cannibalism in general and also specifically with Aztec cannibalism. From those sources I have found that there are three basic types of cannibalism: emergency, ritual, and gustatory. Emergency cannibalism occurs when groups of people are caught in life or death situations where there is little or no food, and the only way to survive is either to kill someone and eat them or to eat someone who is already dead. Ritual cannibalism is practiced for religious reasons. Gustatory cannibalism is the rarest form of cannibalism, in which other people are eaten as a regular food source. The Aztecs engaged in ritual and gustatory cannibalism, but it is not really known whether or not they engaged in emergency cannibalism. Ritual cannibalism served as a way for the Aztecs to commune with their gods (Macdonald, 2001). Religion was the cornerstone of Aztec society; the same is true for many other cultures. Gustatory cannibalism was used to provide the Aztecs with essential amino acids that their diet may have lacked (Harner, 1977). It should be noted that while cannibalism is a part of Aztec human sacrifice not all human sacrifices ended with the victim being eaten.

## **Background**

### I. Aztec History

#### A. The origin and early years of the Aztecs

The Aztecs were originally a nomadic tribe known as the Nahuatl (Hogg, 1966:43). George C. Vaillant writes, "According to their own records, the Tenochcas, the Mexico City Aztecs, began wandering in A.D. 1168. They started out by living on an island in a lake in western Mexico and they would cross to the shore in boats (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:75)." Vaillant continues, "The Tenochcas would stay at one place for a year or more, while pioneers searched

around for another site and planted a crop there that could be harvested once the whole tribe arrived (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:76).” The Aztecs’ rise to power lasted from A.D. 1371 to A.D. 1428 (Davies, 1987:32).



This is a picture of a model of Tenochtitlan from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org>

The Aztecs founded the city of Tenochtitlan on an island near the center of Lake Texcoco in Mexico circa A.D. 1345 (Carrasco, 1982:155). Carrasco’s date of 1345 is confirmed by Nigel Davies (Davies, 1987:25). According to George C. Vaillant, Tenochtitlan was developed by A.D. 1325 (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:78). The Aztecs had a rough early history in the lake area. During that time they displayed special religious and political practices which alienated them from other people. Carrasco shows this by saying, “The Aztecs had a relationship with Culhuacan, which was one of the local seats of Toltec heritage. Aztec mercenaries were instrumental in helping Culhuacan conquer several other city-states. After winning a battle, the Culhuacan king requested evidence of their exploits and the Aztecs responded by cutting off the ears of all the dead enemies. The bloody ears were sent to the throne and the king banished the Aztecs in disgust.” Carrasco goes on to say that, “According to legend, the Aztecs, on another occasion, asked that the daughter of Culhuacan’s king be married to one of their young leaders. Instead, they sacrificed her to the gods. Then the Aztecs held a great religious festival and invited the king, who had no idea about what had been done with his daughter. In the middle of the festival, an Aztec priest paraded through the palace wearing the daughter’s skin. Enraged, the king had the Aztecs driven out (Carrasco, 1982:154).”

## B. The Middle Years

During the ninety years following the founding of Tenochtitlan in A.D. 1345, Aztec society went through radical social and symbolic changes which prepared the way for an empire (Carrasco, 1982:155). The Aztecs' rise to power lasted from A.D. 1371 to A.D. 1428 (Davies, 1987:32). The year 1428 was the start of the Aztec Empire (Davies, 1987:xiii). In A.D. 1440, Montezuma I came into power. From 1451-1456 there was a massive famine due to crops failing in Tenochtitlan. This famine forced Montezuma I to launch a War of Flowers, a ceremonial contest between warriors of two groups in order that prisoners might be taken for sacrifice without the economic stress of formal war (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:81, 82). The correct spelling of Montezuma is Motecuhzoma. The Spanish got the name wrong (Coe, 1994:69). In 1479, Tizoc became ruler of Tenochtitlan and he began the reconstruction of the great temple to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:84).

## C. The Later Years and the Conquest of Mexico

Ahuitzotl, Tizoc's brother, succeeded him in 1486. Ahuitzotl completed the great temple and the completion ended with the dedication, which required sacrificial victims. In a two-year long campaign, twenty thousand victims were gathered up. At the beginning of the dedication, the victims were lined up in two rows and Ahuitzotl and Nezhuallili, an ally, began tearing out the hearts of the victims. The sacrifices continued by a succession of rank until they were done (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:84, 85).

The next ruler of Tenochtitlan was Montezuma II. During his reign, at least twelve thousand captives were said to have been offered to Huitzilopochtli (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:85). In the year 1519, when Aztec civilization was at its height, Cortes and 400 men first landed and began the march to Mexico (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:84, 86). When the Spaniards arrived, the Aztecs thought that they were the god Quetzalcoatl, who had sailed off to the east but promised to return (Coe, 1994:69). Montezuma II was killed in the winter of 1519 by his own people. He was succeeded by Cuitlahuac, who died four months later. The next successor after him was Cuauhtémoc, who conducted the defense of Tenochtitlan during the siege with Cortes and his

men; however, he was hanged four years later on Cortes' march to Honduras (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:86).

At the time of the Spanish invasion, most of Central Mexico was included in the Aztec empire. The empire was governed by an alliance of three cities: Tenochtitlan (the largest and most important of the three), Texcoco, and Tlacopan. The empire was created primarily through military conquest. Conquered areas were required to pay tributes but remained somewhat autonomous. The rulers of the three allied cities shared equal control of the empire, but the ruler of Tenochtitlan functioned as the head of state (Couch, 1985:11).

In the early summer of the year 1520, Hernán Cortes and his men conquered Mexico and overthrew Aztec civilization (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:2). Within nine months of landing in Mexico, Cortes had made himself master of Montezuma's empire, in the name of Charles V (Pagden, 1986:xii). Cortes portrayed Montezuma, through his speeches and his actions, as a man who voluntarily recognized the sovereignty of Charles V, and voluntarily surrendered his empire into his hands (Pagden, 1986:xxvii). There was a report made by the Spaniards that when they finally overcame Aztec resistance, they found many uneaten corpses strewn about Tenochtitlan (Davies, 1987:221). The siege of Tenochtitlan lasted for many days and there were losses on both sides (Pagden, 1986:130-137). Whenever Cortes captured anyone from Tenochtitlan, he would send them back to "require and demand that they make peace (Pagden, 1986:192)." During the siege, Cortes and his men experienced set backs and had to retreat momentarily (Pagden, 1986:238-241). The siege of Tenochtitlan included seventy-five days of fighting. It started on May 13, 1521 and ended on August 13, 1521 (Pagden, 1986:265). The city of Tenochtitlan was virtually destroyed during the siege so Cortes and the Spaniards decided to rebuild the city and settle in it (Pagden, 1986:270). The numbers of dead for both sides are unknown.

Hernán Cortes told an Indian chieftain that "He did no harm to anyone and that his coming to these parts was not to annoy them, but, on the contrary, to instruct them in many things concerning both the security of their persons and belongings and the salvation of their souls (Pagden, 1986:351)." But really, Cortes wanted gold, land, and slaves. Cortes and his men took possessions from natives, burned homes, and killed natives (Pagden, 1986:135). Some Spaniards "had the diabolical notion and idea that if they carried on their conquest with fire and

blood, the Indians would serve them better and would always remain in subjection and fear (Foster, 1950[1973]:236).” Cortes says in his 5<sup>th</sup> letter that

“a Spaniard found an Indian of his company, a native of Mexico, eating a piece of flesh of the body of an Indian he had killed when entering that town, and this Spaniard came to tell me of it, and I had the Indian burnt in the presence of that lord, telling him that the reason for such a punishment, namely, that he had killed and eaten one of his fellow men, which was forbidden by your Majesty, and which I, in your Royal name, had required and commanded them not to do (Pagden, 1986:351).”

Montezuma treated Cortes and his men very well and gave Cortes gifts (Pagden, 1986:85). In his second letter, Cortes says that he “assured Your Highness that I would take him (meaning Montezuma) alive in chains or make him subject to Your Majesty’s Royal Crown (Pagden, 1986:50).” Cortes had Montezuma imprisoned, but he still retained all his freedom and Cortes said that he would not “impede the service and command of his (Montezuma) domains.” Montezuma was imprisoned because of claims that he had ordered the killing of Spaniards (Pagden, 1986:88-89). Cortes said that he started out on his journey to Tenochtitlan with fifteen horsemen and three hundred foot soldiers, “as well equipped for war as the conditions permitted me to make them.”

Montezuma said that he believed that the Lord and King that sent Cortes is the same one that the Aztecs had been waiting for. He says that the land belongs to this king (Charles V). According to legend, the Lord said that he would return or would send such forces as would compel the people to serve him. Montezuma asks the people to now obey the king as they have obeyed him. Shortly after getting the chiefs to submit to the king, Cortes tells Montezuma that the king needs gold for some works that he ordered (Pagden, 1986:98-99).

In his second letter, Cortes wrote, “I urged them not to sacrifice living creatures to the idols, ...for ...Your Sacred Majesty’s laws forbade it and ordered that he who kills shall be killed. And from then on they ceased to do it, and in all the time I stayed in that city I did not see a living creature killed or sacrificed (Pagden, 1986:107).” When reading Cortes’ letters, it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that he was writing them in a way that made himself and the other Spaniards seem like the good guys doing the right thing; he just wanted to make the Spanish crown look good.

The Spaniards destroyed and defaced Aztec symbols and images by breaking sacred stones, dismantling ceremonial shrines and ceremonial centers, and also by whitewashing religious idols and images (Carrasco, 1981). The Spaniards also collected, reproduced, and interpreted the iconographic tradition of the Aztecs to ensure that the Aztecs could be effectively converted now that they were a part of Spanish colonial society (Carrasco, 1981). The Spaniards had Aztec documents reproduced by Aztec painters so that they would be more readable for sixteenth-century European society (Carrasco, 1981). Don Antonio de Mendoza, the Viceroy of Mexico, was the greatest patron of native artists (Carrasco, 1981). Mendoza was responsible for the composition of “one of the most beautiful and revealing pictorial documents,” the Codex Mendoza, written from 1541 to 1545 (Carrasco, 1981).

#### D. Aztec Kings

The Aztecs had lived in Colhuacan for a while and had intermarried and had children and also grandchildren. So when the Aztecs were looking for a male to rule Tenochtitlan, they decided that “a son of their own people from this line, who had the finest blood of both the Aztecs and the Colhuas” was the best choice. They went with the son of a great Aztec lord who was with the Aztecs when they went to Colhuacan but stayed there when the Aztecs fled the area. His name was Opochtzin and he had married a Colhuacan woman of high social status. They had a son named Acamapichtli and the Aztecs chose him to “rule over Tenochtitlan and to be lord of this city (Duran, 1994:48).

Acamapichtli became the first king of Tenochtitlan. He married a Colhuacan noble woman named Ilancueitl. However, she was unable to have children and the lords were afraid that Tenochtitlan would be left without heirs, so they came together and held council. It was decided that each of the lords would give a daughter to Acamapichtli and they would be secondary wives that would produce heirs (Duran, 1994:51, 52). Acamapichtli had seven sons, and in order their names were Cuatlecoatl, Tlacahuepan, Tlatolzac, Huitzilihuitl, Epcoatl, Ihuitlemoc, and Tlacacochtoc (Duran, 1994:53). He ruled from 1376-1396 in peace and he built Tenochtitlan and organized its houses, canals, and streets (Duran, 1994:579). At the end of his reign, Acamapichtli grew ill and when he was on his death bed, he called all his nobles to him. He charged his nobles with caring for the affairs of the state and also for his wives and children.

Duran wrote that “He did not name any of these nobles as his successor but indicated that the state should elect someone from among them, or name one from outside, stating that he wished to give them liberty of choice (Duran, 1994:57).”

The next king was chosen by a council. They chose Acamapichtli’s fourth son, Huitzilihuitl as king. He reigned from 1396 to 1417 (Duran, 1994:59, 579). The third Aztec king was Chimalpopoca, who reigned from 1417 to 1427 (Duran, 1994:579). Chimalpopoca was the son of Huitzilihuitl (Duran, 1994:66). The fourth Aztec king was Itzcoatl, who reigned from 1427 to 1440 (Duran, 1994:579). The fifth Aztec king was Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina, the Elder (I), who reigned from 1440 to 1469 (Duran, 1994:579). The sixth Aztec king was Axayacatl, who reigned from 1469 to 1481 (Duran, 1994:579). The seventh Aztec king was Tizoc, who reigned from 1481 to 1486 (Duran, 1994:579). Tizoc’s full name was Tizocicatzin (Duran, 1994:291). The eighth Aztec king was Ahuitzotl, who was the younger brother of Tizoc and who reigned from 1486 to 1502 (Duran, 1994:309, 579). The ninth Aztec king was Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, the Younger (II), who reigned from 1502 to 1520. Motecuhzoma II was stoned to death, supposedly by his own people (Duran, 1994:545). The tenth Aztec king was Cuitlahuac, who reigned in 1520. The eleventh and final Aztec king was Cuauhtémoc, who reigned from 1520 to 1525 (Duran, 1994:579).

In a note about the second letter of Cortes, Anthony Pagden writes, “Motecuçoma II, surnamed Xocoyotzin, the Younger, the son of Axayacatl, was the ninth uei tlatoani, ruler, of the Mexica (Aztecs). He succeeded to the throne in 1503, and his brother Macuilmalinaltzin was chosen as his successor. He was a priest of Huitzilopochtli and greatly extended the Mexica Empire at the same time as he increased the power of the priesthood and brought about the rigid centralization of government (Pagden, 1986:460 n.3).”

## II. Aztec Daily Life

Aztec knowledge was recorded through pictures in painted books, or “codices.” Almost every aspect of Aztec culture was recorded in these painted books. The books told the story of the creation of the world, the origins of the Aztecs, and the deeds and conquests of their rulers (Boone, 2004:212). Religious books explained the nature of the sacred, how the gods should be

worshipped, and how feasts and religious rituals should be observed. The correct way for Aztecs to live was described in divinatory codices (Boone, 2004: 212).

Time was measured by the Aztecs using two interlocking calendrical systems. One calendar was called the xihuitl, the seasonal or solar calendar. It was a 365-day cycle made up of 18 months of 20 days each, followed by 5 extra days, considered to be useless and unlucky. The xihuitl controlled the monthly feasts for the gods and paralleled the agricultural cycles (Boone, 2004: 215). The tonalpohualli, the “count of the days,” was the more important calendar. It was the divinatory or ritual calendar that shaped human fates and actions (Boone, 2004:215).

Elizabeth Hill Boone says this about the tonalpohualli, it was “a 260-day cycle, comprised of 20 day signs linked with a number from 1-13. Each of the days was assigned one of the 20 symbols and a corresponding name, this followed in a set sequence which was then repeated. Each day was also given a number from 1-13, this also repeated. Four of the day signs (Reed, Flint, House, and Rabbit) linked with their thirteen coefficients also served as the names of years. This combination of four signs and thirteen numbers created a 52-year cycle, called a xiuhpohualli, this was equivalent to our century. All human and cultural happenings were governed by the divinatory calendar (Boone, 2004:215).”

The Aztecs did not invent their calendar, its divisions, deity patrons, or applications. They adopted its ancient structures and ancient gods when, after their long migration from the north, they arrived in the Basin of Mexico and settled among the more culturally advanced occupants of the area. The calendar helped to regulate the religious, social, and economic aspects of life, through the eighteen veintena ceremonies, which were public, and it also played a vital part in the private, everyday existence of the Aztecs (Keber, 1995:133).

Aztec life depended on agriculture and corn was the most important food plant (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:101). Besides corn, the Aztecs also ate beans, which have a high protein content, squash, gourds, chia, camotes, green and red peppers, avocados, and tomatoes (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:106).

The provinces of the Aztec empire were: Tlatelolco, Petlascalco, Acolhuacan, Quauhnahuac, Huaxtepec, Quauhtitlan, Axocopan, Atotonilco (de Pedraza), Hueypuchtla, Atotonilco (el Grande), Xilotepec, Quahuacan, Toluca, Ocuilan, Malinalco, Xocotitlan, Tlachco, Tepequacuilco, Cihuatlan, Tlapan, Tlalcoçauhtitlan, Quiauhteopan, Yoaltepec, Chalco, Tepeacac, Coayxtlahuacan, Coyolapan, Tlachquiavco, Tochtepec, Xoconochco, Quauhtochco,

Cuetlaxtlan, Tlapacoyan, Tlatlahuquitepec, Tuchpa, Atlan, Tzicoac, and Oxitipan. The Aztecs received tributes from all of these provinces (Anawalt and Berdan, 1992:69).

### III. Aztec Religion

#### A. Origin Myth

One version of the origin myth that the Aztecs believed in was the Myth of the Five Suns. This myth splits the history of the world into five separate eras, each with its own sun. The myth describes the creation and destruction of each era leading to the fifth. Each era began due to the actions of a significant deity that symbolized one of the four basic elements of nature. The task of creating the first sun fell on the god Tezcatlipoca, who was the ancestral deity of war, spiritual power of darkness, one of the symbols of the earth (Solis, 2004:84). The first era ended after Quetzalcoatl gave Tezcatlipoca a savage beating (Solis, 2004:86). Tezcatlipoca transformed himself into the sun at the end of the first era, while the men were eaten by jaguars and giants, who then populated the earth (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:139). Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent and adversary of Tezcatlipoca, was the creator of the second sun. The second era ended when the god of darkness gave a mighty kick to the plumed serpent (Solis, 2004:86). The second era ended with the world being destroyed by hurricanes and men being turned into monkeys (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:139). The creator of the third age was Tlaloc, the god of rain. This era was destroyed in a catastrophic rain of fire. The fourth age was created by Chalchiuhtlicue, “she of the jade skirts,” goddess of water, and companion of Tlaloc. The fourth era ended with a disastrous flood (Solis, 2004:86). At the end of the fourth era, men were transformed into fish. The 5<sup>th</sup> era, the current era, is ruled by Tonatiuh, the sun god. This era will be destroyed by earthquakes according to the Aztecs (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:139).

#### B. Aztec Gods

There were 128 major gods and goddesses in the Aztec Pantheon (Davies, 1987:246). The sky gods were very important in Aztec religion. They intervened in human affairs and were worshipped above all others. Some major Aztec sky gods are Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli,

Quetzalcoatl, and Tlaloc. Tezcatlipoca, which means “Smoking Mirror,” was widely worshipped in the Yucatán Peninsula (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:142). Tezcatlipoca was the patron god of Aztec kings. He created, inspired, and guided the kings and could also turn around and kill them if they governed badly (Carrasco, 1999:108). Tezcatlipoca was believed to be omnipresent (Carrasco, 1999:126).

Huitzilopochtli was the war god (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:143). Huitzilopochtli came to be identified with the sun and he needed a constant supply of human hearts to stay “healthy” (Hogg, 1966:43-44). Quetzalcoatl, which means “Feathered Serpent,” was the god of civilization and the planet Venus. Quetzalcoatl was widely worshipped but under different guises (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:143). Tlaloc was the rain god. He was an ancient god already at the time of the Aztecs, going back to at least Teotihuacan times. He has very distinct features (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:143). Vaillant writes that “These gods of the sky played an important role in the duality of the Aztec world in which an eternal war was fought symbolically between light and darkness, head and cold, north and south, rising and setting sun (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:144).”

Some other gods and goddesses that the Aztecs worshipped were Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of lakes and rivers, and Xipe, the “Flayed One,” who symbolized spring (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:145). Two other Aztec gods were Paynal, “He who hastens” and Mictlantecutli, “Lord of the place of the dead.” One important Aztec goddess was Teteo innan, “Mother of the gods,” who was also named Tlalli yiollo, “Heart of the Earth” and Toci, “our Grandmother (Sahagún, 1970:3, 15).” Fire gods held a very high position in the Aztec, and Mesoamerican, pantheons. The power of the fire god, who goes by many names, was changed into the sun (Carrasco, 1999:103, 104).” Aztec deities can be divided into three cult themes, each of which is subdivided into several complexes: 1) Celestial creativity, 2) Rain and moisture, 3) War-Sacrifice-Sanguinary nourishment of the sun and earth (Davies, 1987:246-247). David Carrasco writes that “Most Aztec gods had human impersonators, usually captive warriors or slaves, who were ritually costumed and walked in a procession through the streets, plazas, and temples during festivals (Carrasco, 1999:108).”

The Aztecs made figures of their gods. In his second letter, Cortes writes, “The figures of the idols in which these people believe are very much larger than the body of a big man. They are made of dough from all the seeds and vegetables which they eat, ground and mixed together, and bound with the blood of human hearts which those priests tear out while still beating. And

also after they are made they offer them more hearts and anoint their faces with the blood (Pagden, 1986:107).”

### C. Aztec Priests

Aztec priests had a very high status in Aztec society. According to David Carrasco, the reason for this is was that “within the ceremonial precincts and in all parts of the empire, Aztec priests choreographed and directed the complex and intertwined ritual system that served to ensure Aztec stability, expansion, and cosmic motion (Carrasco, 1982:172-173).” Priests of Xipe Totec would wear the skins of freshly flayed captives at ceremonies held in his honor (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:145). In Tenochtitlan there were two high priests and various priests of lower rank. There were also priestesses (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:152, 153). The gods had to be pacified and honored at the appropriate time by the priesthood (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:157). According to Cortes, Aztecs priests dressed in black and never combed their hair from the time they enter the priesthood until they left it (Pagden, 1986:105). The ruler of Tenochtitlan, known as tlatoani, and other high officials would function as priests in certain contexts, and presided over ceremonies in the temple precinct (Couch, 1985:11). Two high-level priests were chosen by the ruler of Tenochtitlan and other high officials. These two priests served in the Templo Mayor and were at the heart of the ceremonial precinct of Tenochtitlan. The priests and the children of the nobility were educated in the calmecac, priestly schools attached to certain temples (Couch, 1985:13).

### D. Rituals

The eighteen veintena ceremonies were the most important rites of the whole Aztec religious system. Most of these ceremonies were dedicated to fertility (agricultural fertility) gods and goddesses (Davies, 1987:222). The eighteen veintena ceremonies, which repeated in sequence each year, involve elaborate, communal, and visible rituals. Each of the eighteen veintena periods that made up the solar year featured elaborate public ceremonies that involved the participation of the community at large, including priests, nobles, commoners, women, and

children. Most of these rituals centered on ceremonies to assure basic subsistence in the form of adequate rainfall and successful harvests, especially of maize (Keber, 1995:133, 135).

One very important Aztec ritual was the New Fire Ceremony. The New Fire Ceremony renewed the entire Aztec society and the cosmos every fifty-two years (Carrasco, 1999:94). The first New Fire was the sun. Fear of an apocalypse was a constant concern in Aztec religion (Carrasco, 1999:111). A male war captive was used as a victim in the New Fire Ceremony. The captive was prepared as an *ixiptla*, or image of the god that he was being sacrificed to. The ceremony began with a procession of deity impersonators along a prescribed passageway that would end up at the Hill of the Star. The priests who performed the ceremony did not begin until the Pleiades constellation was at its zenith. At that moment, the captive's heart was cut out and the new fire was lit in the chest cavity. Groups of people were stationed on the mountains surrounding the Basin of Mexico who waited to see the new fire, which was a signal that the world would continue (Carrasco, 1999:101). The completion of a 52-year cycle was called the "binding of years." The Aztecs believed that the world would be destroyed by fire after this cycle. The *Toxiuhmolpilia*, or New Fire Ceremony, marked the passage from one 52-year cycle to the next. The New Fire Ceremony was probably the most magnificent and momentous celebration of the elaborate Aztec ritual schedule (Keber, 1995:134).

Another important Aztec ritual was the *Fiesta of Tlacaxipeualiztli*, the Feast of the Flaying of Men. During this ritual, men were flayed, first boys and then great men, and their flesh was eaten. It was held when the sun was at the equinox (Carrasco, 1999:112). During one Feast of the Flaying of Men, captives from Yancuitlan, more than a thousand, were sacrificed (Duran, 1994:429). The Feast of the Flaying of Men was held in honor of the god *Xipe Totec*, Our Lord the Flayed One. Before the ritual actually started the victims, war captives, were dressed as the *teotl ixiptla*, living images of *Xipe Totec*. The victims were either sacrificed at the top of *Xipe Totec's* temple or on the gladiatorial stone. After the victims were sacrificed they were flayed and men put on the skins and went through the neighborhoods of the city collecting gifts from citizens (Carrasco, 1995). These men begged from the citizens for twenty days, and they wore the skins the entire time. After the twenty days the skins were taken off and buried (Duran, 1994:173, 174). The victim's body was cut up and one of the thighs was given to the king and one piece was eaten by the captor's blood relatives; it was eaten in "a bowl of dried maize stew (Carrasco, 1995)." The captor kept the other thigh and the bone was saved as a

trophy that was put on a pole in the captor's house (Carrasco, 1995). Captives that were sacrificed through gladiatorial sacrifice for this ritual were tied to a large round stone by their ankle. The captive was given a wooden sword, which had feathers on it instead of blades, and a shield. The captive was also given four wooden balls to defend himself with and drank some "Divine Wine." The captive was then approached by an Aztec warrior and was forced to defend himself against the attacks with the useless weapons. Once the captive was wounded on any part of his body, he was laid on top of the stone that he was tied to and a priest took out his heart (Duran, 1994:171-172).

In one Aztec festival, the blood from sacrificed children was collected by a priest and kneaded into an image of Huitzilopochtli that was made of maize dough. The image's heart was ceremonially cut out and given to the reigning king to eat, the rest of the image was distributed among the nobles (Hogg, 1966:44). Many Aztec ceremonies involved making an image of a god with ground amaranth, or maize and amaranth, made into dough bound together with honey or blood. The image was then worshipped, broken up, and eaten by the worshippers (Coe, 1994:92). The greatest number of victims and the most important prisoners of war were killed at the festival of Xipe (Carrasco, 1999:113). On feast days for Huitzilopochtli captives were sacrificed and so were ceremonially bathed slaves, who were bathed by the merchants who owned them (Sahagún, 1970:1).

Festivals that took place in the *xiuhpohualli* cycle were major activities of public religious life in Aztec society. There were three types of festivals: those directed to water and mountain deities, to assure rain; those directed to fertility deities, to assure crop growth and successful harvest; and those directed to individual deities, usually patrons of communities or occupational groups (Couch, 1985:20). The basic elements of the festivals included public dances by various groups, the singing of sacred songs, processions, mock battles and other "entertainments," offerings of food or valuable items, the eating of special foods, animal or human sacrifices, the making or renovation of idols, and fasting and autosacrifice (Couch, 1985:20).

Toxcatl, which was regarded as the greatest festival of the Aztec year, was held on April 23 when the sun was at its zenith. The ceremony took a year of preparation. A war captive was chosen and set aside for purpose of being "groomed" for the Toxcatl festival. The captive was housed in the temple, was treated like something between a king and a god, and was under the

constant supervision of the priests (Hogg, 1996:46). On the day of the feast, the victim went to a special temple where the priests were waiting for him. As soon as his shadow crossed the temple's threshold, the priests grabbed the victim and the high priest took out the victim's heart (Hogg, 1996:47).

Women were also used as victims in Aztec rituals. One such ritual was the harvest festival, in which a woman was selected to represent the mother goddess. This woman was decapitated and flayed and her skin was worn by a young man who was temporarily identified with the goddess. The skin from one of the thighs was removed from the victim's skin and was worn as a mask by the high priest who served Centeotl, the maize goddess (Hogg, 1996:47). For the Feast of the goddess Toci, a woman was chosen. A priest held her by the arms on his back, carrying her face upward. Another priest took the woman by the hair and beheaded her, so that the priest that was holding her was drenched from head to foot in blood. Next she was skinned "from the middle of the thigh upward as far as the elbows (Duran, 1971:233)." Skins were left open in the back and the shoulders were also open so that they could be easily put on (Foster, 1950[1973]:64).

The festival of the god of fire was the climax of the entire Aztec year. Animals were used as victims in this festival every three out of four years. Humans, specifically newlywed couples, were used as victims for the fourth year. The victims wore ceremonial robes associated with the fire god. The couple was not sacrificed in the usual manner; instead they were thrown into the flames of the fire god's altar. Just before the victims were about to die in the flames, they were raked out of the fire by attendants of the high priest, and their hearts were torn out (Hogg, 1996:48).

There was a major festival in every month of the Aztec calendar. Children were drowned as an offering to the rain god in the first month. In the second month there was the feast of Xipe Totec, god of spring and the renewal of nature. Victims being sacrificed in the Xipe Totec ceremonies were first pelted with arrows so that their blood fell like rain. They were then flayed and their skins were dyed yellow. The priests would wear these skins as a symbol of the way in which the earth wears its new mantle of vegetation at the end of the rainy season (Tannahill, 1975:82).

Flowers were offered instead of humans in the third and fourth months. In the fifth month there was the feast of Tezcatlipoca. The handsomest and bravest prisoner of war was

chosen as victim for this feast; he was taught how to behave as a great ruler by the priests. He lived in high honor for a year before the feast. On the day of the feast he willingly walked up the stairs of the temple to be sacrificed. When he reached the platform, the priests stretched him out, face up, on the sacrificial stone. A sacrificial knife was plunged into the victim's chest below his breast bone and was brought down in a sweeping arc to the base of his stomach. His heart was torn out with a skillful twist and was offered to Tezcatlipoca (Tannahill, 1975:83).

Victims who personified the gods of rain and water were sacrificed in the sixth month. A woman representing the goddess of salt waters was sacrificed in the seventh month. A woman who personified Xilonen, the goddess of young maize was sacrificed in the eighth month. Flowers were offered instead of humans in the ninth month (Tannahill, 1975:83-84). Prisoners of war were sacrificed to the god of fire in the tenth month. A woman representing the mother of the gods was sacrificed in the eleventh month. Ceremonies were held for the fire god in the twelfth month. Sacrifices were made to the agricultural gods in the thirteenth month. Sacrifices were made to the god of hunting in the fourteenth month. Mock battles took place and sacrifices were made to the war god in the fifteenth month. The Aztecs fasted and offered food and drink to the rain gods in the sixteenth month. A woman was sacrificed to the goddess of corn and earth in the seventeenth month. Children were sacrificed to the god of fire in the eighteenth month (Tannahill, 1975:84).

#### IV. Aztec Human Sacrifice

The Aztecs adopted human sacrifice in the early fourteenth century. At first human sacrifices were rare but they became more frequent as the empire grew (Prescott 1843[2004]:28). Aztec human sacrifice was based on the belief that human blood and especially the human heart contained the vital energy that was essential to keeping the sun in motion through the sky and the subsequent renewal of time, crops, human life, and the divine forces of the cosmos. During these sacrifices, human hearts were offered to the sun and the blood was spread on the walls of the Templo Mayor in order to coat the temple with sacred energy. The Aztec rulers were in charge of this process and they also had the responsibility of obtaining victims through war (Carrasco, 1982:185). According to George C. Vaillant, the purpose of human sacrifice for the Aztecs was to “make them dreaded by other people throughout Mexico (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:78).”

The Aztecs sacrificed people daily to ensure that the sun kept rising and setting (Tannahill, 1975:82). Human sacrifice victims died divinely, like gods. This is because the creation myths of the Aztecs deal with gods sacrificing themselves. The victim dies so that the god to whom they were sacrificed can be regenerated (Carrasco, 1999:73, 200). Parts of the human body, such as the head, heart, and liver were believed to be gifts of the gods that could be returned to them through ritual sacrifice (Carrasco, 1999:73). Most human sacrifices ended with the victim being rolled down the temple steps (Carrasco, 1999:136). Victims who were of high honor were dressed as gods prior to being sacrificed (Carrasco, 1999:216). According to Nigel Davies, the purpose of sacrifice was not to eat the victims. Sacrifice and religion are inseparable. Sacrifice involved the killing of certain people on certain occasions (Davies, 1987:221). Sacrifices required a semblance of voluntary participation on the part of the victim (Davies, 1987:225). Those who were sacrificed to Tlaloc, the rain god, were left whole and buried; they were not eaten (Ortiz de Montellano, 1983).

The numbers of Aztec human sacrifice victims were continually mounting; first only one or perhaps ten victims were needed to achieve a certain end or to appease a particular god. Then it would rise to a thousand having to be killed for the same reason (Davies, 1987:219). Aztec sacrificial victims were treated with respect and offered hope of rewards in the next world (Davies, 1987:221). “The flesh of all those who died in sacrifice was held truly to be consecrated and blessed. It was eaten with reverence, ritual, and fastidiousness- as if it were something from heaven. Commoners never ate it; [it was reserved] for illustrious and noble people (Duran, 1971:191).”

#### A. Who was sacrificed?

Men (prisoners of war or captives), women, children, and slaves were all sacrificed by the Aztecs. Large-scale sacrifices of captives were carried out in order to maintain Aztec dominance in the face of social troubles and also natural troubles, such as rebellions and droughts (Carrasco, 1999:87). Women were sacrificed in one-third of the yearly festivals (Carrasco, 1999:188). Women were sacrificed to ensure plant regeneration and the regeneration of warfare (Carrasco, 1999:190). Children were sacrificed in the first quarter of the Aztec year (Carrasco, 1999:196). Children were purchased from their parents to be sacrificed (Couch,

1985:49). Cortes' men supposedly came across roasted babies which "the enemy carried as provisions and had abandoned when they saw the Spaniards (Pagden, 1986:245)."

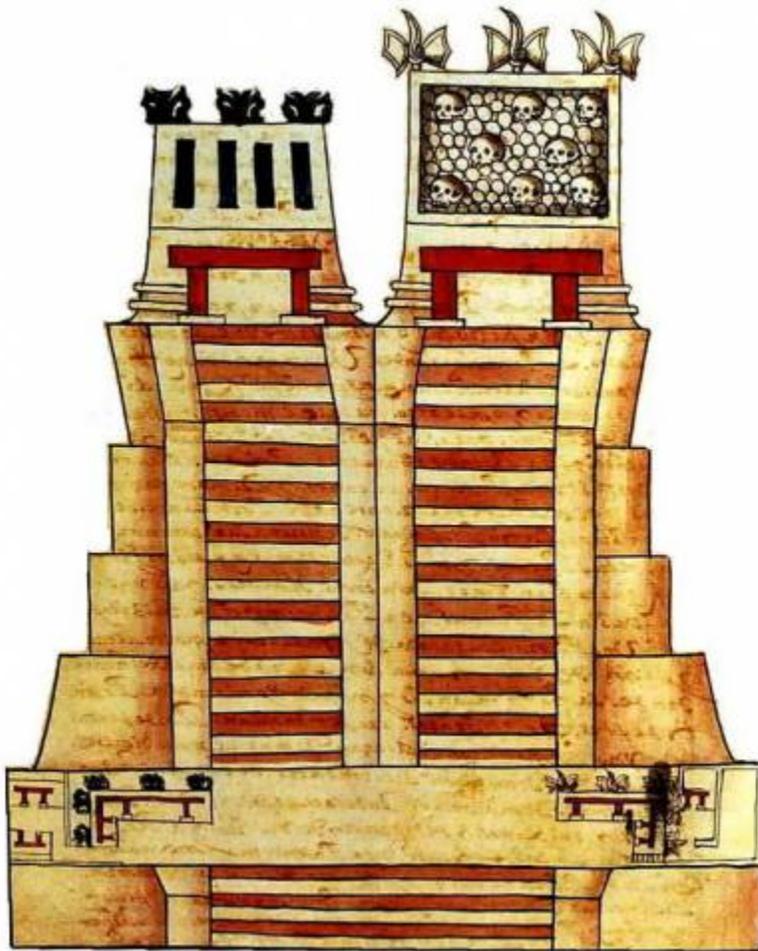
Most Aztec rituals required war captives for victims, so getting captives was very important. Warriors who acquire captives were rewarded with elevated status and honor. Those who did not get any captives were scorned. The majority of captives were probably rounded up after the battle as part of the Aztecs' victory spoils (Davies, 1987:218, 219). The Aztecs treated captives well, at least those who were going to be sacrificed. This fact makes the Spanish accounts of captives having been kept in wooden cages hard to accept (Davies, 1987:223). Captives were in part ritually eaten (Davies, 1987:224). The hearts of captives were called "precious eagle-cactus fruit (Carrasco, 1995)." The real focus of human sacrifice was on specially chosen captives or slaves who were dressed and revered as the major deities of various feasts that climaxed with their sacrifice (Couch, 1985:20).

Merchants brought slaves to be sacrificed. Slaves were also sacrificed to accompany a ruler on his journey to the next world. Sacrificed slaves were put onto the ruler's funeral pyre after their hearts were removed. Slaves were also buried (Davies, 1987:224). Only male slaves who had been through three successive masters were sacrificed. These unsatisfactory slaves could be bought by tradesmen or artisans (Tannahill, 1975:85). Slaves were ritually bathed and luxuriously dressed and adorned for their sacrifice (Tannahill, 1975:86). Cortes wrote that the Aztecs sacrificed Spaniards that they had captured during the siege of Tenochtitlan. Supposedly those Spaniards were both dead and alive and they were naked (Pagden, 1986:241). During the siege of Tenochtitlan, forty Spanish prisoners were stripped and were led up the steps of Templo Mayor in front of the entire Spanish army. Their hearts were torn out and offered to the gods and then their bodies were rolled down the temple steps (Duran, 1994:553-554).

## B. Aztec Temples

Templo Mayor was a twin temple; it had shrines to both Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. This temple was the stage for elaborate human sacrifices. These sacrifices increased dramatically during the last eighty years of Aztec rule, between 1440 and 1521 (Carrasco, 1982:185, 186). Cortes had the statues of important gods taken from their places and thrown down the steps of the Great Temple. He also had the walls of the temple cleaned, because they were covered in

blood (Pagden, 1986:106). Cortes burned the Great Temple during the siege of Tenochtitlan (Pagden, 1986:223). Cortes wrote that no woman was allowed to enter or be inside the temples of the Aztecs (Pagden, 1986:105). Every Aztec ruler made sure to expand and beautify the Templo Mayor during his reign (Berrelleza, 2004:146). The Templo Mayor Project confirmed that the temple had a quadrangular plan and that its façade faced west (Berrelleza, 2004:148). Templo Mayor had over 100 steps (Foster, 1950[1973]:87). The following is a 16-century drawing of the Templo Mayor from the Codex Ixtlilxochitl:



Templo Mayor was located in the spot where the original shrine had been constructed on the day that the Aztecs arrived in Tenochtitlan. The city lasted for two hundred years and during that time an elaborate ceremonial center flourished around Templo Mayor. This ceremonial center included such things as schools, a ball court, a skull rack, temples for major deities, and

administrative buildings; all of this was surrounded by a ten-foot high serpent wall. The area surrounding Templo Mayor became the sacred center for the empire as a whole as well as for the city of Tenochtitlan (Carrasco, 1981). The skull rack was a carved palisade in which poles were set in a row about six feet apart. Thin rods were strung between the poles through tiny holes in them. The heads of sacrificial victims were put on the rods through holes in the temples. The skin was removed from the head before being placed on the skull rack. Twenty heads could fit on each rod. The skulls were supposedly all that remained of sacrificial victims. The bones of the victim were placed in the courtyard of the captor's home on long sticks; they served as trophies of the captor's deeds (Duran, 1971:79, 80).

Templo Mayor was dedicated during the reign of King Ahuitzotl. Prisoners were lined up in four lines that extended for miles. Each of these lines led to a temple where the prisoners were sacrificed by one of four lords. The main line went to the altar of Huitzilopochtli at Templo Mayor where King Ahuitzotl was stationed. The lords were accompanied by priests who helped them with the sacrifices. The priests held the prisoners by the arms and legs while the lord, King Ahuitzotl in this case, cut open the victim's chest and extracted the heart and offered it to the sun. Priests took over when the lords grew tired. The sacrifices lasted for four days from sunrise to sunset. Supposedly eighty thousand four hundred prisoners were sacrificed during this ceremony (Duran, 1994:338, 339). The exact number of prisoners killed during this ceremony is a topic of debate among scholars.

In his second letter, Cortes wrote about the temples. He wrote that the temples were "all very beautiful buildings, and in the important ones there are priests of their sect who live there permanently (Pagden, 1986:105)." Then he goes on to describe the Great Temple. He wrote that the Great Temple was

"So large that within the precincts, which are surrounded by a very high wall, a town of some 500 inhabitants could easily be built. All round inside this wall there are very elegant quarters with very large rooms and corridors where their priests live. There are as many as 40 towers, all of which are so high that in the case of the largest there are 50 steps leading up to the main part of it. They are so well constructed in both their stone and woodwork that there can be none better in any place, for all the stonework inside the chapels where they keep their idols is in high relief, with figures and little houses, and the woodwork is likewise of relief and painted with monsters and other figures and designs. All these towers are burial places of chiefs, and the chapels therein are each dedicated to the idol which he venerated. There are three rooms within this great temple for the principal idols, which are of remarkable size and stature and decorated with

many designs and sculptures, both in stone and in wood. Within these rooms are other chapels, and the doors to them are very small. Inside there is no light whatsoever; there only some of the priests may enter, for inside are the sculptured figures of the idols (Pagden, 1986:105-106).”

### C. Tools of Aztec human sacrifice

Hearts were extracted during human sacrifices using sacrificial knives made of flint (Foster, 1950[1973]:63). After a sacrifice was performed the victim’s heart would usually be put into a Chac Mool of some kind. A Chac Mool was a messenger to the gods; the statue holds a bowl on its lap for the hearts (Carrasco, 1982:185). Chac Mools were not originally developed by the Aztecs; they were Toltec figures that the Aztecs adopted (Carrasco, 1999:73). Ritual demands necessitated stone boxes for burning and storing human hearts. These boxes were made from lava rock and decorated both inside and out with reliefs, referring symbolically to the gods for whom the sacrifice was made (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:116). The sacrificial stone was a huge vessel for burning human hearts (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:84). Victims were laid out on “the *techcatl*, an oblong block of stone about two and a half feet high by one and a half feet wide.” A wooden yoke was used to force back the victim’s head and to keep the victim from screaming (Pagden, 1986:457 n.37).

### D. Methods of Aztec sacrifice

The most frequently used method was the cutting open of the chest with a stone knife and ripping out the victim’s heart, which was offered to the sun and placed in a ceremonial vessel, called *cuauhxicalli* (Couch, 1985:20-21). In some cases, deity impersonators or captives were flayed, skinned, and their skins were then worn by priests or festival participants (Couch, 1985:21). Gladiatorial sacrifices were watched by leaders of city-states who were enemies of the Aztec alliance (Couch, 1985:41). Children were sacrificed by drowning for the rain god Tlaloc (Couch, 1985:57). Sacrifice by fire was another method (Couch, 1985:66). Sacrifice by fire started off with the victim being half-roasted, then pulled of the fire before death. The victim’s chest was cut open and the blood was gathered in a small tub. The fire was sprinkled with the blood (Duran, 1971:262). Victims were also shot full of arrows, clawed, slashed to death,

stoned, or crushed (Stevenson, 2005). Sacrificial victims were also thrown off cliffs (Duran, 1971:283).

#### E. Descriptions of sacrifices

Sacrifices were held in front of the temple altars (Foster, 1950[1975]:87). Victims dedicated to the gods were first purified with incense. Captives also went through this process. After they had taken part in certain temple rites, they received a formal address in which they were welcomed into the city where Huitzilopochtli reigned supreme; the captives were to be sacrificed for him. The captives were given a special draft of the sacred pulque, a type of liquor, and then they took part in further ceremonies, and were brought before the ruler, who commanded that they should be given fine clothing and good food. After that they were made to dance in the marketplace on a kind of raised platform decorated with flowers and feathers (Davies, 1987:223). After the captive's heart was removed, the body was pushed down the pyramid, where it was seized by old men who cut it up, dividing the limbs among the captors according to a standard formula. The captor took home the meat, had it stewed with maize, and sent it around to friends and relatives (Coe, 1994:98). When the victim was a slave, the body was carried down the temple steps, not rolled (Foster, 1950[1973]:63).

According to Motolinia's *History of the Indies of New Spain*, after the ritual the priest who cut out the victim's heart struck it against "the outer part of the threshold of the altar, leaving a bloodstain there." Then the heart fell to the ground and "lay there a while throbbing." It was later placed into a bowl in front of the altar. Other rituals ended with the heart being raised to the sun as an offering and the blood of the victim was used to anoint the lips of the idol of the god for whom the sacrifice had been performed. Sometimes the victim's heart was buried after the ritual (Foster, 1950[1973]:63).

Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano quotes Michael Harner's description of a sacrifice, "The corpse then was tumbled down the steps of the pyramid, where elderly attendants cut off the arms, legs and head. While the head went on the skull rack, at least three of his limbs were normally property of the captor... He then hosted a feast in his quarters, of which the central dish was a stew of tomatoes, peppers and the limbs of the victim (1977:120) (Ortiz de Montellano, 1983)." Following a sacrifice the human meat was put into large earthen cooking jars. The jars

were placed in front of a representation of Mictlantecutli, “Lord of the place of the dead.” The meat was distributed to the nobles and overseers and to the priests. These people distributed the meat among their families and friends. The Aztecs said that the human meat tasted like pork meat tastes today (Boone, 1983:213).

N.C. Christopher Couch gives a description of a human sacrifice. He writes that the bodies of war captives would possibly be returned to their captors, by means of the body being pushed down the temple steps, to be eaten in a ritual feast. The heads of the victims were cut off and placed on the skull rack, tzompantli, of the main temple. Victims offered to rain gods were buried (Couch, 1985:21). Couch describes another form of sacrifice, sacrifice by fire. He wrote that captives were bound and cast into a bed of ember and pulled out again before they died so that their heart could be torn out (Couch, 1985:66).

Gary Hogg also gives a description of a human sacrifice. He writes that any ornaments that the victim was wearing were removed. The victim was then laid on a curved sacrificial altar. Five priests took hold of the victim’s arms, legs, and head, and kept them rigid while the high priest cut open the victim’s chest with an obsidian knife. The high priest then tore out the victim’s heart, which was often still beating, and held it up as an offering to the sun (Hogg, 1996:45). The heart was put into a ceremonial basin that had been used to collect the victim’s blood. The blood was mixed with incense and the smell travelled up to the god for whom the sacrifice was just performed (Hogg, 1996:45). The body was thrown down the temple steps to where other priests were waiting. The victim’s skin was removed and was worn by the chief warrior involved in the capture of the victim. The victim’s flesh was cut up and eaten by the warriors. The flesh was eaten at a very solemn feast (Hogg, 1996:45-46).

The Aztecs also engaged in autosacrifice. N.C. Christopher Couch wrote this about autosacrifice, “Autosacrifice was a common part of everyday Aztec religious life, as well as of festival observances. Maguey thorns were used to draw blood from various parts of the body, especially the ear lobes. The thorns were then stuck in a ball of plaited grass, or the blood was spattered on offertory papers. A more extreme form of autosacrifice involved cutting a hole through a part of the body with a stone knife, and then passing a straw or cord through the opening. Although priests most often performed autosacrifice, this form of penitence was practiced by or on almost every member of Aztec society, from infants to the ruler himself (Couch, 1985:21).” Autosacrifice served various purposes: a way to do penance, to earn merit, a

way to feed the gods, or as a way to boost the fertility of the earth (Olivier, 2004:196). Obsidian knives were used to make holes in the ear or tongue. Then a reed, “as thick as one’s finger and as long as one’s arm,” was drawn through the hole. Straws, “as big as stalks of wheat,” and agave spines were also used. The blood from this was caught on pieces of paper, which were offered to the gods (Foster, 1950[1973]:73).

## **Results**

### Extent of Aztec cannibalism

Estimates for the number of Aztec human sacrifices range from 3-4,000 annually to 20,000, to 80,400 in some of the early accounts, to a contemporary estimate of 250,000 a year. The estimate of 20,000 is the most common but not all of the estimates are reliable (Harner, 1977). The exact extent of Aztec cannibalism is unknown and remains a topic of debate among scholars.

Michael Harner gives an example from one sixteenth century account which states that 20,000 humans were sacrificed in the Aztec capital city alone, another account states this as 20,000 infants, and a third account claims that the same number was sacrificed throughout the Aztec empire on a single day (Harner 1977). The numbers that Harner uses are much higher than any that have been previously published (Ortiz de Montellano, 1983).

Harner says that the most famous, or one could argue infamous, specific sacrifices took place in 1487 when the main pyramid in Tenochtitlan was dedicated. The figures for that vary as well: one source claims 20,000; another source claims 72,344; and several give the figure of 80,400 (Harner 1977). It is believed that these sacrifices were made over a period of four days. The real number of victims is not known. The Spanish chroniclers were told that at the dedication of Tenochtitlan in 1487 there were four lines of prisoners that stretched for two miles. The prisoners were sacrificed by a team of executioners who worked night and day for four days. Allotting two minutes per sacrifice, the demographer and historian Sherburne Cook estimated that the number of victims associated with that single event was 14,100 (Harris, 1978).

## The motives for Aztec cannibalism

According to Gary Hogg some forms of cannibalism are religious ceremonial, magical significance, revenge cannibalism, cannibalism to honor those who have recently died, cannibalism as punishment, and cannibalism resulting from a desire to eat human flesh (Hogg, 1966:17, 18). There are three main hypotheses regarding the motives behind Aztec cannibalism. They are religion, nutrition, and demography. Each hypothesis has a host of scholars backing it up. No hypothesis has been proven above any of the others. Naturally, some hypotheses are more accepted than others. I support the hypothesis that religion was the motive behind Aztec cannibalism, as do the majority of scholars.

George C. Vaillant says this about Aztec cannibalism, “ceremonial cannibalism was sometimes practiced, in the belief that the eater could absorb the virtues of the eaten (Vaillant, 1941[1962]:169).” For the Aztecs, eating a sacrificial victim was as much of a religious rite as the sacrifice itself (Tannahill, 1975:80). According to Gary Hogg some motives for cannibalism are famine, extreme hunger during war, shipwrecks, occasional dietary necessity (Hogg, 1966:15, 17). Hogg says that the most frequent motives for cannibalism are “dietetic, magical, and pietistic (Hogg, 1966:17). David Carrasco writes that Aztec human sacrifice, and as an extension, cannibalism, between 1440 and 1521 was used to “subdue the enemy and control the expanding periphery (Carrasco, 1999:74).

### A. Ritual/Religion

This hypothesis is supported by the majority of scholars. I also find this hypothesis to be the most believable. The Aztecs saw cannibalism as being a way to share a holy meal and link humanity and the gods (Macdonald, 2001:26). It was considered a holy meal because the victim was thought to be a representation of one of the gods and his or her flesh was believed to be sacred. In a sense, whoever was eating a victim of human sacrifice was eating one of the gods and that created a bond. Because the flesh of the victim was considered sacred, it was eaten with reverence. Therefore this hypothesis shows that cannibalism was not motivated by starvation. Instead it was motivated by a belief that it was a way to commune with the gods (Arnold, <http://www.plu.edu/~arnoldwp/>).

Religion also served as one of the driving forces behind Aztec human sacrifice. The Aztecs believed that the universe was run on an energy called tonalli or “animating spirit.” This energy nourished the gods and kept the sun moving. Aztec religion placed great emphasis on motion and that motion was driven by tonalli. It is located in the blood stream in humans. When a man is frightened, his tonalli concentrates in his heart (Pettifor, 1996). It is because of this fact that the gods were offered the victim’s heart. The Aztecs believed that if the gods were not supplied with offerings that the world would end.

The accounts of Aztec cannibalism agree that the act was a communion of sorts, unity with the god being achieved by sharing the god’s food and eating it with great reverence, as if it was something from heaven. Each person who took part in the meal only received a portion of flesh that was about half an ounce. Some refused the portion altogether (Coe, 1994:98).

Despite the fact that this hypothesis is widely accepted, there are still those who find faults in it. Michael Harner says that the religion hypothesis fails to suggest why this religion evolved when and where it did (Harner, 1977). According to Eric Pettifor, religious motivation is not sufficient enough to explain the extent to which human sacrifice was practiced. Aztec human sacrifice went beyond what was deemed necessary by religion (Pettifor, 1996). Regardless of this, the hypothesis that religion is a motive for Aztec cannibalism is the most reliable one.

## B. Nutrition (Protein deficiency)

There are some scholars who advocate for this hypothesis; the most prominent of these is Michael Harner. However, this hypothesis remains the most widely discarded. Harner proposed the hypothesis that large-scale cannibalism, which was disguised as sacrifice, was the consequence of certain ecological circumstances. One example is that at the time of the Spanish conquest wild game numbers were decreasing and another example is that the Aztecs did not have a suitable domesticable herbivore that could provide them with animal protein and fats (Harner, 1977). Harner’s claim, that game was almost completely extinct from overhunting in Central Mexico, is flatly contradicted by a description of a great hunt held by Viceroy Mendoza in 1540, which netted thousands of animals of all sorts. There were also many edible wild birds that the Aztecs had access to (Coe, 1994:99).

Commoners often did not have access to wild game and as a result had to survive mostly on domesticated plants such as maize and beans. In order to get the eight essential amino acids the commoners had to eat the maize and beans together. Unfortunately, crop failures and famines were common. The elite had access to imported wild game that was brought in from areas where the species had not been depleted. Only the elite participated in cannibalism and, conveniently for them, the gods demanded more human sacrifices during times of famine (Harner, 1977). Harner's reasoning enraged many Mesoamerican scholars, who were by implication, accused of withholding data on the subject of Aztec cannibalism (Davies, 1987:221). George Pierre Castile writes that Harner actually blamed the Mesoamerican scholars by writing this in 1977, "The evidence of Aztec cannibalism has largely been ignored and consciously or unconsciously covered up" (Castile, 1980).

Whitney Arnold is among those who argue against the nutrition theory. Arnold says that maize, beans, and squash eaten in combination and Aztec staple crops alone supply the essential amino acids that are needed in the human diet. Arnold goes on to say that another argument against the nutrition hypothesis is that only the limbs of the victim were eaten and only the elite, about 25 percent of the population, were allowed to engage in cannibalism. The entire population would have engaged in cannibalism if there really was a protein deficiency (Arnold, <http://www.plu.edu/~arnoldwp/>).

In the Florentine Codex, Sahagún says that wild game was plentiful in the region around the Aztec Empire. Another argument against the nutrition theory is the fact that the torsos of the victims were given to animals in the royal zoo. The ways in which Harner arrives at his conclusions in his hypothesis is very criticized (Arnold, <http://www.plu.edu/~arnoldwp/>).

According to Pettifor, in his hypothesis, Harner fails to consider all potential food sources and he has a disregard for conventional responses to resource stress (Pettifor, 1996). Bernard Ortiz de Montellano says that Harner's hypothesis fails because cannibalism occurred the most during harvest time, not times of scarcity (Ortiz de Montellano, 1978). There would have been ample amounts of food for both commoners and the elite during these times so the cannibalism was not an ecological necessity. The Aztecs also received large food tributes and had intensive agriculture (Ortiz de Montellano, 1978). The protein from human sacrifices would not have made that much of a contribution to the diet of the Aztecs (Ortiz de Montellano, 1978).

The fact that the nutritional requirements for various populations under various environmental conditions are unknown puts a large hole into Harner's hypothesis (Ortiz de Montellano, 1978). The Aztec diet consisted of a wide variety of tropical fruits; vegetables; 40 types of waterfowl; small mammals such as pocket gopher, weasels, mice, armadillo; deer; turkeys; dogs; fish and fish eggs; insects; worms; and reptiles such as rattlesnakes, iguanas, frogs, and aquatic salamanders. All of these species are good sources of animal protein and insects are very nutritious (Ortiz de Montellano, 1978).

Harner neglects the more realistic responses to famine. Examples are the intensifying of agriculture or conquering new land (Ortiz de Montellano, 1978). Usually, only the arms and thighs of the victims were eaten. The flesh was typically eaten in a kind of stew with tomatoes and chili pepper sauce. If the Aztecs really needed the protein then they would have eaten the torso as well as the limbs. There have been accounts that the torsos of Aztec sacrificial victims were given to animals in the royal zoo, but this is improbable, because the victim became the god at the moment of sacrifice and to give deified remains, which were the god's own flesh, to impure animals would have been sacrilege (Davies, 1987:221).

There is a common accusation that the Aztecs were cannibals on a scale never seen before or since. This idea was set forth by Michael Harner's 1977 thesis, which said that the Aztecs had depleted all their sources of protein and, lacking any large domesticated four-footed animals, the elite were forced to turn to eating the commoners to survive (Coe, 1994:97). One factor that influenced Michael Harner's nutrition thesis was that at the time he wrote it, 1977, great emphasis was being placed on getting as much protein as possible in the U.S. diet. Today, people in the U.S. realize that we can survive with a lot less animal protein. So the Aztecs probably had enough protein without having to resort to eating human flesh on a large scale. Another factor that influenced Harner was an unwary trust of the 16<sup>th</sup> century sources. Those accounts were written to show the natives in a bad light and to justify the Spaniards' war. They exaggerated the custom of cannibalism to get the church and the crown on their side (Coe, 1994:98).

George Pierre Castile wrote a comment on the hypotheses of Marvin Harris and Michael Harner. Castile writes that Harner's 1977 thesis about Aztec cannibalism essentially argues that contrary to what is usually reported, that the Aztecs only engaged in ritual cannibalism, human flesh was a necessity of elite class subsistence (Castile, 1980). Marvin Harris only endorsed

Harner's thesis, he did not really add anything to it. The title of Castile's article is a nod to the idea that only the Aztec nobles, those who wore purple, were allowed to engage in any significant degree of cannibalism (Castile, 1980).

Barbara J. Price wrote a comment on Michael Harner's hypothesis. She writes that "The protein deprivation hypothesis seems implicitly derived from Harner's extensive work with the Jivaro (1972), an essentially egalitarian group whose agricultural staple is a root crop (manioc) rather than a cereal (maize). To such groups indeed, the availability of wild game rather than the productivity of agriculture is the limiting factor (Price, 1978)." Price goes on to write that maize was, and still is, the carbohydrate staple in the Basin of Mexico. Maize was consistently eaten along with beans. Maize and beans are only occasionally supplemented with animal protein. Maize and beans are available year-long because they can be stored. If one of the crops fails then the result is famine, not protein deficiency (Price, 1978).

There are only two scholars, Michael Harner and Marvin Harris, who actually support this hypothesis. Technically, Harner does not really count because he is the one who developed the hypothesis. Based on the amount of evidence against the hypothesis that nutrition was a motive for Aztec cannibalism, I do not support it.

### C. Demography

This hypothesis states that cannibalism and human sacrifice were used by the Aztecs as a way to control the population. This hypothesis deals with the pressure that population exerts on resources. Some problems with this hypothesis are the Aztecs were continually expanding and acquiring more people and land (Arnold, <http://www.plu.edu/~arnoldwp/>). The Aztecs received more than enough food from tributes (Arnold, <http://www.plu.edu/~arnoldwp/>). The population of Tenochtitlan could not be supported by its agriculture alone (Pettifor, 1996). Too little has been said about this hypothesis for an informed decision to be made on it.

### Who was eaten and who was not

Only the sacrifices of war captives ended with cannibalism. The sacrifices of women and children never ended in cannibalism. Women were sacrificed to fertility gods and

goddesses, female goddesses, and the Mother goddess. During those sacrifices the women were beheaded and flayed, skinned. A priest then put on the skin and danced in it as part of the ritual. Children were sacrificed to rain gods. On the way to the temple whoever was leading the child would poke and prod them in order to make them cry. The tears symbolized rain and were an important part of the ritual. During these sacrifices the children's hearts were cut out and offered to the god for whom the ritual was being held. The bodies of the children were buried after the rituals.

When the Great Temple (Templo Mayor) was completed and dedicated during the reign of Ahuizotl, twenty thousand war captives were sacrificed. However, there is no mention of what was done with the bodies of these victims after. It is possible that the bodies of the victims were given back to the captors to be eaten. But twenty thousand captives would produce quite a bit of meat and it may not have been possible for the captors to eat it all. Since eating human flesh was only reserved for the nobility of Aztec society, most likely the common people would not have received any part of the captives. So maybe some of the meat was just left over.

### Archaeological Evidence

Templo Mayor, the Great Temple, was excavated from 1978-1982 (Carrasco, 1999:53). An offering cache was found at the Great Temple in Mexico City, it contained the skeletal remains of forty-two children who had been sacrificed as offerings to Tlaloc (Carrasco, 1999:2). Mark Stevenson writes this about Aztec archaeological evidence, "In recent years archaeologists have been uncovering mounting physical evidence that corroborates the Spanish accounts in substance, if not number. Using high-tech forensic tools, archaeologists are proving that pre-Hispanic sacrifices often involved children and a broad array of intentionally brutal killing methods (Stevenson, 2005).

On February 21, 1978, while working in downtown Mexico City, at the corner of calle de Guatemala and calle de Argentina, workers from the Light and Power Company discovered a relief-covered stone while doing installation work. The workers halted their job and notified the Archaeological Recovery Department of the National Institute of Anthropology and History the following day. The department immediately realized that the relief was important and started the recovery process. After two days, a face with adornments on the head could be seen. The work

continued for another four days and a huge monolith was eventually revealed. The monolith measures 3.25 meters in diameter and is decorated with a representation of a decapitated and dismembered nude female carved in relief. Felipe Solis visited the site and confirmed that the relief was of Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess (Moctezuma, 2004:132). The Temple Mayor Project began, following the discovery of the relief. From 1978 to 1983 an excavation was conducted in order to unearth Templo Mayor and nearby buildings to understand the stages of the temple's construction. A hundred offerings were discovered during the excavation (Moctezuma, 2004:132).

There have been other discoveries made at Templo Mayor prior to 1978. Two discoveries were made in 1790: on August 13<sup>th</sup> of that year the famous statue of Coatlicue, the mother goddess, was discovered, and the Calendar Stone was discovered on December 17, 1790 (Moctezuma, 2004:132). In 1825, the head of Coyolxauhqui sculpted out of diorite was found (Moctezuma, 2004:133). In 1897, some carved stone pieces were found. One of these sculptures measured 1.65 meters long, 1.22 meters wide, and 68 centimeters high, with armed warriors with serpents above their heads carved in relief. Another sculpture, measuring 60 centimeters in height, was carved with representations of the four suns (Moctezuma, 2004:135). The most important Templo Mayor discovery was made in 1913 when a building was demolished and the southwest corner of the temple was found (Moctezuma, 2004:135). In 1964, a decorated altar was excavated (Moctezuma, 2004:135). Some offerings burnt bones and sacrificial knives were found at the site (Moctezuma, 2004:138).

The majority of objects found at the Templo Mayor site are from offerings. Flint knives and the remains of human sacrifices were among the items deposited in the offerings. The offerings were placed in construction fill, in stone urns, in boxes made of slabs, under floors, in platforms, architectural bodies, stairways, and in temples. Some objects relating to human sacrifice rituals have been found in the offerings, including flint knives, face blades, and skull masks. Face blades are made out of flint, with applications of white flint, obsidian and turquoise to simulate a facial profile. These knives were only symbolic, they represented the sacrificial knife but they weren't used. Face Blades have been found in association with the skulls of decapitated victims. Skull masks are inlaid with shell and pyrite to simulate eyes. Flint blades are stuck in the mouth and nasal cavity. Skull masks are associated with human sacrifice. The

sacrificial stone on the south side of the temple was also found (Museo del Templo Mayor, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1997).



This is a picture of Face Blades and a sacrificial knife from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org>



This is a picture of a Skull Mask from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org>



This is a picture of the sacrificial stone dedicated to Huitzilopochtli from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org>

An Aztec-era community in Ecatepec, located just to the north of Mexico City, was excavated in December 2004. Mark Stevenson goes into more detail about the excavation, writing that, “archaeologist Nadia Velez Saldana described finding evidence of human sacrifice associated with the god of death. ‘The sacrifice involved burning or partially burning victims,’ Velez Saldana said. ‘We found a burial pit with the skeletal remains of four children who were partially burned, and the remains of four other children that were completely carbonized’ (Stevenson, 2005).”

These remains do not show any evidence of the victims being burned alive; however there are depictions of apparently living people being held down while being burned (Stevenson, 2005). Stevenson continues, writing that, “The dig turned up other clues to support descriptions of sacrifices in the Magliacacchi codex, a pictorial account painted between 1600 and 1650 that includes human body parts stuffed into cooking dishes, and people sitting around eating, as the god of death looks on. ‘We have found cooking dishes just like that,’ said archaeologist Luis Manuel Gamboa. ‘And, next to some full skeletons, we found some incomplete, segmented human bones’ (Stevenson, 2005).” Unfortunately, researchers do not know whether or not the remains have been cannibalized (Stevenson, 2005). There are still Spanish-era texts that have not yet been corroborated with physical remains. These texts have descriptions of children and adults being sacrificed by Aztec priests by sealing them in caves or by drowning them (Stevenson, 2005).

Skeletons from 550 Aztec sacrifice victims that were found at the Tecuaque site near Mexico City show that the victims' hearts were ripped out by Aztec priests as ritual offerings. Then the victims were dismembered or their bones were boiled or scraped clean, according to experts. Bones from this site have knife and even teeth marks, this shows which bones had meat stripped off of them to be eaten (Basque News and Information Channel, 2006).

## **Discussions**

During the course of researching the topic of Aztec human sacrifice and Aztec cannibalism I came across five problems/contradictions. The first problem/contradiction concerns the type of the stone used for sacrificial knives; some sources mentioned obsidian knives while other sources mentioned flint knives. The second problem/contradiction is two-fold, the first part concerns how the hearts of sacrificial victims were removed; according to some sources the hearts were ripped/torn out, but other sources claim that the hearts were cut out. The second part concerns the possibility of an Aztec priest actually being able to rip out a victim's heart. The third problem/contradiction concerns the interpretation of an image from the Codex Magliabecchiano as being a picture of Aztec cannibalism. The fourth problem/contradiction concerns the number of priests that were needed to perform sacrifices; some sources mention five priests and others mention six priests. The fifth problem/contradiction concerns the lack of archaeological evidence to support Aztec cannibalism. Rather than list what was written by all of the authors in my references section concerning the five problems/contradictions, I have selected five authors that mentioned the issues I have addressed. These five authors are Pagden, Foster, Prescott, Carrasco, and Duran.

### **A. Problem/Contradiction 1**

Pagden, Prescott, and Duran mention obsidian knives being used for sacrifices. Foster and Carrasco mention flint knives. In Foster's book, *Motolinia's History of the Indians of New Spain*, it says this about sacrificial knives, "Many people think that the sacrificial knives were the black stone knives (Foster, 1950[1973]:63)." However, the knives were actually made of flint. The fact that sacrificial knives were made from flint is evidences by the findings in the Templo

Mayor offerings, mentioned above. No archaeological evidence has been found to suggest that obsidian knives were also used. Therefore the authors that mention obsidian were either misinformed or were not familiar with the types of stone available to the Aztecs.

#### B. Problem/Contradiction 2

The authors that mention victim's hearts being cut out are Foster and Duran. Pagden, Prescott, and Carrasco mention victim's hearts being torn out. It is more than likely that none of these authors witnessed a human sacrifice first-hand. However, it is possible that different priests removed the hearts of victims in different ways. If a priest did not possess the skill or strength to rip out the heart with his bare hands then he would have to just cut it out. The Aztecs probably did not have any guidelines that the priests had to follow when removing hearts, so a priest could remove the heart in whichever way he pleased.

I have been unable to find an answer to the second part of this problem, concerning the possibility of a human heart being ripped out with bare hands. But in my opinion, it is possible to rip out a human heart with your bare hands. It could be done if one uses a twist and pull method. One would have to hold the heart and twist, which would put a strain on the aorta and the arteries, then start to pull on the heart while continuing to twist. A great deal of strength may be needed but I hold to my opinion that it is possible to rip out a human heart with your bare hands using the method that I have described.

#### C. Problem/Contradiction 3

This problem/contradiction concerns the following image from the Codex Magliabecchiano:



This image has been interpreted as depicting Aztec cannibalism. Upon first glance, this interpretation seems to be very true but I find this interpretation to be wrong. The people in this image are not eating human flesh, as one may be lead to think; they are in fact eating balls of dough. As I mentioned earlier, many Aztec ceremonies involved the making of an image of a god out of dough. This image was then broken up and eaten by worshippers (Coe, 1994:92). The pieces, or balls, of dough were eaten after a sacrifice. The pieces of dough represented the flesh and bones of the god to whom the sacrifice was made (Duran, 1971:94). In light of this information, the image above can be re-interpreted as depicting the ceremony of eating the “flesh and bones” of the god following a sacrifice. The limbs in the picture are being offered to the statue of the god.

#### D. Problem/Contradiction 4

The number of priests needed to perform a human sacrifice is either five or six. According to Foster, and other authors that I have mentioned above, five priests were needed. According to Pagden, Prescott, and Duran, six priests were needed. In the case of the five priests, two held the arms and two others held the legs while the fifth removed the victim’s heart. In the case of the six priests, two held the arms, two held the legs, the fifth forced the victim’s head back with a wooden yoke, and the sixth priest removed the victim’s heart. In my opinion, only five priests would be needed to perform a human sacrifice. The extra priest that holds back

the head is not really necessary. The yoke is used to keep the victim from screaming but it is not needed because in many of the rituals the victim was given “Divine Wine,” so they did not know what was going on and probably were not screaming all that much.

#### E. Problem/Contradiction 5

There is a serious lack of archaeology evidence for Aztec cannibalism. Some evidence does exist but it is not enough. The excavation of Templo Mayor was a major find for Aztec archaeology. During the excavation, many artifacts associated with human sacrifice were uncovered, but artifacts associated with Aztec cannibalism have not been found at Templo Mayor. Further archaeological investigations must be conducted around the remains of Templo Mayor and around the areas where other temples were located so that evidence for Aztec cannibalism can be possibly uncovered.

### **Conclusions**

The most common number of annual Aztec sacrificial victims is 20,000. There may have been some years when the number of victims was higher or lower but the estimate of 20,000 annually is reliable in my opinion. Religion is the most plausible motive for why the Aztecs engaged in cannibalism. The other hypotheses have too much information stacked against them to be plausible, or in the case of the hypothesis of demography, there is not enough information to support or reject it.

There is still not enough information about Aztec cannibalism. The information from the historical sources is all questionable, with the exception of anything said in the Aztec codices written by Aztecs themselves. Not a lot of archaeological evidence has been found to support Aztec cannibalism. Truthfully, what modern scholars have been saying about Aztec cannibalism is really just speculation, none of it is concrete. Something that would be good to research would be possible evidence of kuru; a fatal neurological disease afflicting some of the Fore people who have engaged in funeral cannibalism, or a similar disease having occurred among the Aztecs. More research, archaeological research, needs to be done.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the following people for pointing me in the right direction and for helping me find sources: Dr. Theler, Dr. Hippert, Dr. Arzigian, and Dr. Lloyd. I would like to extend further thanks to Dr. Lloyd for reading my paper.

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