

HUMAN SACRIFICE AMONG THE AZTECS?

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An aura of lurid fascination surrounds our interest in the Aztecs, the people who, at the beginning of the 16th century, inhabited one of the largest cities of the world: Tenochtitlan. In 1521, this metropolis was erased from the face of the Earth by the Spanish conquerors under Hernando Cortes and his Indian allies. As a justification for their destructive acts, the conquistadors generated propaganda designed to offend the sensibilities of their Christian audience: They described the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. Later chronicles by Spanish writers, missionaries, and even Indian converts also told repeatedly of this cult. Even when scientists called these reports grossly exaggerated, the fact that the Aztecs sacrificed humans remained undisputed. Cutting out the victim's heart with an obsidian knife [fashioned from volcanic glass] was supposedly the most common method of sacrifice, although other forms were practiced as well. These included beheading, piercing with spears or arrows, and setting victims against each other in unequal duels. We are also told that some victims were literally skinned alive; a priest then donned this macabre "skin suit" to perform a ritual dance.

There has been no shortage of theories and explanations for what lay behind these archaic cults. Some researchers have deemed them religious rituals. Others have called them displays of repressed aggression and even a method of regulating population. Although human sacrifice has been the subject of much writing, there has been almost no critical examination of the sources of information about it. A critical review is urgently needed.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo is the classic source of information about mass sacrifice by the Aztecs. A literate soldier in Cortes' company, Diaz claimed to have witnessed such a ritual. "We looked over toward the Great Pyramids and watched as [the Aztecs] ... dragged [our comrades] up the steps and prepared to sacrifice them," he wrote in his *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva Espana* (The True History of the Conquest of New Spain), published posthumously in 1632. "After they danced, they placed our comrades face up atop square, narrow stones erected for the sacrifices. Then, with obsidian knives, they sawed their breasts open, pulled out their still-beating hearts, and offered these to their idols."

The scene of these sacrificial rituals was the main temple in the island-city of Tenochtitlan. The observers, however, were watching from their camp on the shore of a lake three or four miles away. From that point, Diaz could have neither seen nor heard anything. To follow the action at the foot of the pyramid, he would have to have been inside the temple grounds. But this would have been impossible: The Aztecs had just beaten back the Spanish and their allies, who had been besieging the city from all sides.

But Diaz is not the inventor of the legend of ritual murder. Cortes fathered the lie in 1522, when he wrote a shorter version of the tale to Emperor Charles V. He would have been confident that his reports would

find ready ears, for in the 15th and 16th centuries many lies were being spread in Spain about ritual murders carried out by the Jews, who were being expelled from the Iberian peninsula along with the Moors. Cortes' lies were a tremendous success: They have endured for almost 500 years without challenge. Along with the lies of the conquistadors, there also have been secondhand reports--what could be called "hearsay evidence"--in the writings of Spanish missionaries and their Indian converts, who, in their new-found zeal, scorned their old religion. The accounts are filled with vague and banal phrases such as, "And thus they sacrificed," which indicates that the writers cannot have witnessed a real human sacrifice.

The only concrete evidence comes to us not from the Aztecs but from the Mayan civilization of the Yucatan. These depictions are found in the records of trials conducted during the Inquisition, between 1561 and 1565. These supposed testimonies about human sacrifice, however, were coerced from the Indians under torture and have been judged worthless as ethnographic evidence.

Along with the written accounts, many archeological finds--sculptures, frescoes, wall paintings, and pictographs--have been declared by the Spanish, their Indian converts, and later anthropologists to be connected to human sacrifice. Yet these images are in no way proof that humans were in fact sacrificed.

Until now, scientists have started from a position of believing the lies and hearsay reports and interpreting the archeological evidence accordingly. The circularity of such reasoning is obvious. There are plenty of possible interpretations of the images of hearts and even killings in these artifacts. They could depict myths or legends. They could present narrative images--allegories, symbols, and metaphors. They could even be images of ordinary executions or murders. Human bones that appear to have been cut also do not serve as evidence of human sacrifice. In tantric Buddhism, skulls and leg bones are used to make musical instruments used in religious rituals; this is in no way connected to human sacrifice.

Leslie J. Furst, a student of symbols used by the Aztecs, has seen depictions of magic where others have seen tales of human sacrifice. For example, one image shows the incarnation of a female god "beheaded" in the same way that a plant's blossom is removed in the ritual connected to the making of pulque, an alcoholic drink. Why scholars have interpreted images of self-beheadings and other things that depart from physical reality as evidence of human sacrifice will puzzle future generations.

There is another important symbolic background for images of killing in Aztec artifacts: the initiation ceremony, whose central event is the mystical death. The candidate "dies" in order to be reborn. This "death" in imaginary or symbolic forms often takes on a dramatic shape in imagery--such as being chopped to pieces or swallowed by a monster. There has been no research into the symbolism of death in the high culture of the Indians of Mesoamerica, however, even though there were many reincarnation myths among these peoples.

The ritual of "human skinning" surely belongs in this same category. In our depictions, we see the skin removed quickly from the victim, with a single cut along the spine, and coming off the body in a single piece. This is scarcely practicable. This "human skin suit" may be nothing but a metaphorical-symbolic representation, as indeed is appropriate for the image-rich Aztec language. And all of the heart and blood symbolism may be just a metaphor for one of the Aztecs' favorite drinks, made from cacao.

The heart is a symbolically important organ in more than just European cultures. In the Indian languages, as well, it is a symbol of courage and the soul. And "cutting the soul from the body," after all, is not a surgical operation. This may explain why no massive catacombs with what would have been the bones of sacrifice victims have ever been found in Mesoamerica.

After careful and systematic study of the sources, I find no sign of evidence of institutionalized mass human sacrifice among the Aztecs. The phenomenon to be studied, therefore, may be not these supposed sacrifices but the deeply rooted belief that they occurred.

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