



David Carrasco

THE AZTECS

A Very Short Introduction

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The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction

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*To the archaeologists who excavate the Great Aztec
Temple and to Friedrich Katz, who first taught me
about Aztec civilization*

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Preface

Writing a Very Short Introduction to the Aztecs includes a long journey back through the more than two-thousand-year history of the rise of urban life that they inherited and reformulated between 1300 and 1521 CE. It involves adjustments in the use of the popular names “Aztec” and “Montezuma,” names that the population who lived in and in relation to the city of Tenochtitlan never used. “Aztec” is a Nahuatl-derived term meaning “people from Aztlan,” the revered place of origin of the various ethnic groups who eventually dominated central Mesoamerica in the century before the arrival of Europeans. The people we call Aztecs, however, identified themselves with such terms as “Mexica,” “Acolhua,” and “Tenochca.” It was through the immense popularity of William H. Prescott’s *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) that the name “Aztec” came to identify forever the various groups that made up the Mexica kingdom. In this book I use the terms “Mexica” and “Aztec” interchangeably because of the popularity of the latter and the accuracy of the former. The two Mexica rulers we call “Montezuma” were named Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina and Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin respectively. It was the latter who ruled between 1502 and 1520 and entered the popular imagination of the English-speaking world and the West as the king who ruled the “Halls of

Montezuma.” I use the Nahuatl version to link these personages again to their real names.

Many thanks to three scholars who assisted me in the writing of this book: Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Leonardo López Luján, and especially my collaborator of many years, Scott Sessions.

Chapter 1

The city of Tenochtitlan: center of the Aztec world

When Hernán Cortés led a Spanish army of five hundred soldiers, accompanied by several thousand skilled, allied native warriors, into the Aztec capital on November 8, 1519, the Europeans were filled with wonder by the enormous, splendid city in the middle of Lake Tezcoco. One of these soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, left this initial glimpse:

[W]hen we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level Causeway going towards Mexico, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadís, on account of the great towers and pyramids rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream... the appearance of the palaces in which they lodged us! How spacious and well built they were, of beautiful stone work and cedar wood, and the wood of other sweet scented trees, with great rooms and courts, wonderful to behold, covered with awnings of cotton cloth.

The size of the buildings and the great crowds who welcomed these strange-looking visitors left the Spaniards astonished. They saw huge palaces “coated with shiny cement and swept and garlanded... adjacent to great oratories for idols,” some of which were covered with blood. The Aztec island capital, Tenochtitlan,