

# Late Postclassic Mesoamerican Trade Networks and Imperial Expansion

Frances Berdan

*A particularly significant development in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica (1350–1521 CE) was the expansion of the Aztec or Triple Alliance Empire. This hegemonic empire was built upon a foundation of existing city-states and multifaceted trade networks, political and economic realities that conditioned the Aztecs' imperial strategies. In this setting, several factors contributed to the nature and success of this imperial enterprise: aggressive militarism, diplomatic politics, energetic trading enterprises, strategic elite marriages, and unabashed exploitation. All of these interrelated factors generated networks that yielded a multidimensional expansionist system whereby a new level of borders was imposed on top of already existing city-state boundaries, and old and new trading networks were reinforced and intensified both within and beyond the imperial thrall. This paper examines the dynamic interplay among these several dimensions of commerce and imperial expansion, stressing the fluctuating boundaries and networks that resulted from those interactions.*

*...when the precious feathers came to appear, so it is told, it was later, in the time of the ruler Ahuitzotl [r. 1486–1502]  
(Florentine Codex: Sahagún 1950–82, Book 9: 90;  
Originally written 1575–1577 or 1578–1580)*

*[In Mesoamerica] long-distance trade was an institution apart: geographically it was trade beyond the borders... [and] ... should not be confused with any other form of exchange, such as the important local market complex...  
(Chapman 1957: 115)*

*Our god... will find a way, a marketplace where he will go with his army to buy victims... our marketplace... must be in these six cities: in Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula, Atlixco, Tliluhquitepec, and Tecuac... And this must not be a real war; we must not destroy these people (Durán 1994: 231–232; Originally written 1581)*

*...each province or town gave tribute according to its climate, people, and lands ... Each town or province paid tribute in the things that were grown there ... Thus the peasants worked the tribute fields and harvested and stored the crops; the artisans gave tribute from the things they made; and the merchants gave of their merchandise  
(Zorita 1994: 186–187; Originally written 1566–1570)*

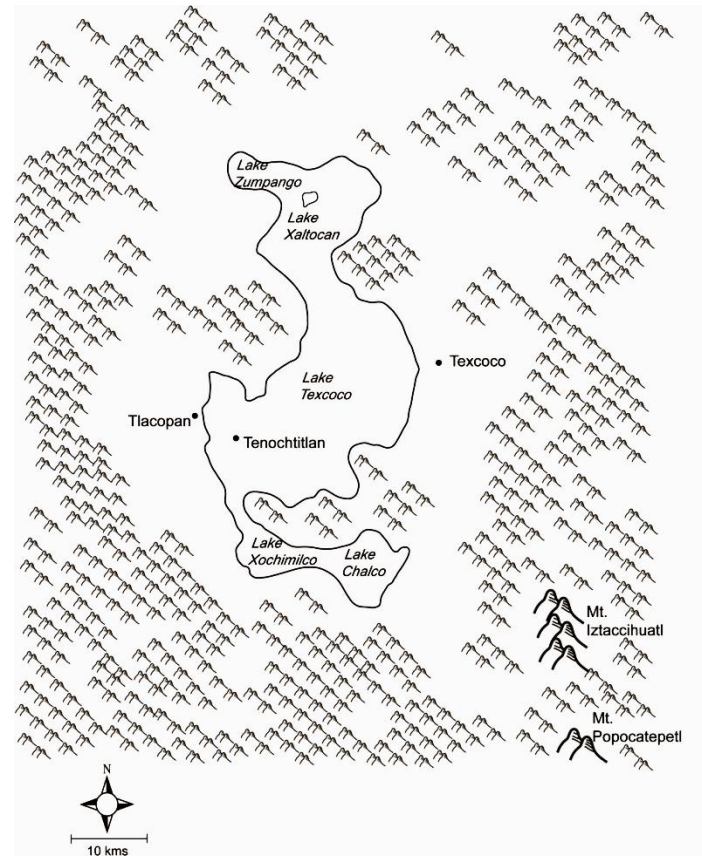
As it turns out, none of these statements is entirely true. Nor that simple. Some contain half-truths, some are ambiguous, all are open to interpretation. Still, each offers us an en-

trée into understanding the structure and dynamics of empire, in particular the economics of empire, and more specifically the economics of the Aztec empire.

A particularly significant development in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica (1350–1521 CE) was the expansion of the Aztec or Triple Alliance empire over much of central Mexico. This hegemonic empire was built upon a foundation of existing city-states and this imperial enterprise: persistent and aggressive multifaceted trade networks. These were political and economic realities that conditioned the Aztecs' imperial strategies. In this setting, several factors contributed to the texture and success of militarism, diplomatic politics, strategic elite marriages, energetic trading enterprises, changing patterns of consumption, and unabashed exploitation. Together, these factors generated relationships that yielded a complex and multidimensional expansionist system whereby new levels of boundaries were superimposed on already existing city-state borders, and old and new trading networks were re-channeled, reinforced and intensified both within and beyond the imperial thrall. The contours of empire shifted with each military conquest and each diplomatic alliance. This paper proceeds by examining the dynamic interplay among these several dimensions of commerce and imperial expansion, stressing the fluctuating boundaries and networks that resulted from these interactions. But first, a little back-ground.

### Setting the Stage

The term 'Aztec' usually embraces the great variety of Nahuatl-speaking ethnic and political groups of central Mexico in Late Postclassic times. One group of Aztecs, the Mexica, spearheaded the political and military expansion of the Aztec empire. The Mexica did not firmly establish themselves in the Basin of Mexico until 1325 CE, when they founded the island city of Tenochtitlan as their new homeland (Figure 1). Arriving so late, they did not invent markets. Nor long-distance trade. Nor warfare. Nor conquest and domination. By the Late Postclassic period, all of these were well-entrenched in the Mesoamerican way of life from central Mexico on through the Mayan realms. Although evidence for early markets is largely indirect, they have been posited as present in Oaxaca as early as 500–100 BCE (Blanton *et al.* 1999: 2, 100, 119; Blanton *et al.* 2005: 263–264). While no marketplace has been definitively located at Teotihuacan, high population densities, craft specializations, and a wide variety of available goods point to the operation of a market there (Carballo 2013: 118; Nichols 2016: 14). Cowgill (2015: 181) suggests that 'Marketplaces for local exchanges were probably common in Mesoamerica by this time [250–550 CE]'. The (albeit controversial) possibility exists that marketplaces may have operated in Classic Mayan settlements (Houston and Inomata 2009: 252). Long distance trade probably predated markets; the Olmec 'established an exchange network that eventually stretched 1,000 km from end to end...' (Pool 2007: 301), and trade was active as early as 1400–950 BCE in the Valley of Oaxaca, whose residents participated in 'an exchange network that stretched from Central Mexico and the Gulf Coast to Guatemala' (Pool 2007: 200). Trade was lively in the Mayan world during the Classic period, moving goods such as obsidian, jade, quetzal feathers, marine shells, igneous rock, and various craft manufactures from one end of the region to another, and beyond... along the coast and inland (Houston and Inomata 2009: 280, 282).



**Fig. 1.** The Basin of Mexico, dominated by Lake Texcoco and the three Triple Alliance capital cities. Drawing by Jennifer Berdan Lozano

As for the Basin of Mexico, our first quote above tells us that precious feathers did not appear there until the reign of the Mexica ruler Ahuitzotl (r. 1486–1502). But it is clear from sculptures and other art that luxurious tropical feathers and other precious goods had made their way from lowlands to highlands long before Aztec ascendancy. This can be seen at Teotihuacan during its height where precious feathers are frequently depicted, along with marine shells (Carballo 2013: 177). Trade was the most likely mechanism through which these sorts of riches moved... graphically depicted on a mural at the slightly later Cacaxtla. There, an aged god (probably the Mayan God L) stands ahead of his propped-up *cacaxtli*, or packframe, that is laden with exotic cargo including cloth, perhaps salt, perhaps cochineal dye, and definitely flowing green feathers (most surely quetzal) (Brittenham 2015: 149–164). All of this (and more), hundreds of years before the Aztecs migrated into central Mexico.

Warfare had been a fact of life throughout Mesoamerica ‘since time immemorial’. And while scholars disagree on the nature and extent of military and political domination in pre-Aztec times, there is no question that conquest states, the domination of one city-state over others, was a recurring reality in Mesoamerica at least by the Classic period.

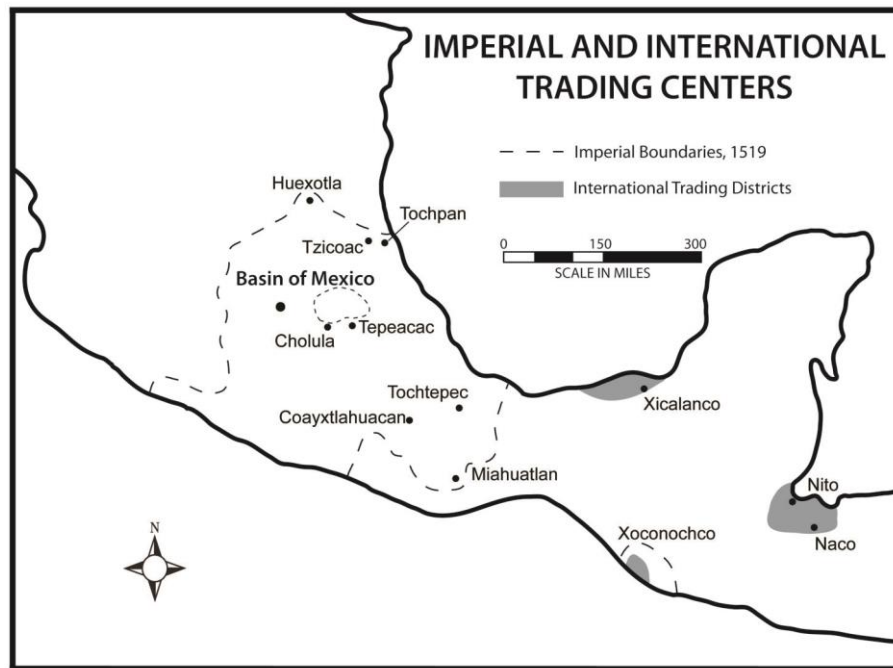
City-states, or *altepetl* in Nahuatl, were the essential political and territorial building blocks of central Mexican life (see Smith 2008). They exhibited ‘a legitimate ruling dynasty, a sense (if not the actuality) of political autonomy, control over local lands and labor, a well-established founding legend, often with mythological underpinnings, and a patron deity complete with temple’ (Berdan 2014: 135–136). Despite their decidedly sacred and sometimes ethnic and economically specialized character, *altepetl* were fundamentally political units, dotting the central Mexican landscape since at least 1200 CE (Hodge 1996: 31; Nichols 2004: 272). They varied greatly in size and importance, their fortunes waxing and waning; they were unstable and volatile vis-à-vis one another. These dynamics ‘featured competition and cooperation, warfare and alliance’ (Berdan 2014: 137). As the Mexica struggled to survive in the early fourteenth-century Basin of Mexico, they attached themselves to the dominant polity of the time, Azcapotzalco, gaining experience in garnering allies and winning wars. Beginning in 1430, the Mexica of Tenochtitlan applied these skills to gain control first of the Basin of Mexico, and later on, domination of vast stretches of central Mexico. They joined with the Acolhua of Texcoco and the Tepaneca of Tlacopan to create a formidable Triple Alliance, capable of massing enormous and motivated armies of conquest (see Fig. 1). City-state after city-state fell to their aggression in their 90-year romp through Mexico. While these conquests were most spectacularly military expeditions, they nonetheless embraced and built on the essential economic spheres of trade and markets.

### Trade and Markets in Aztec Times

One of the strongest integrative forces in Mesoamerica during the Late Postclassic was commerce. The idea, and the reality, of commercial integration is neither simple nor singular. Trade was enacted on local, regional, super-regional, and foreign levels. Merchants of many scales of enterprise trekked throughout the landscape, targeting marketplaces and palaces for business and commissions. Markets ranged from periodic small town affairs providing daily essentials, to city-state marketplaces serving diverse urban needs, to markets renowned for (or at least specializing in) products ranging from dogs to pottery to slaves. To these we may add the magnetic luxury and utilitarian ‘fairs’ held every 20 days, and most notably the mega-market at Tlatelolco, reportedly attracting 20,000–25,000 participants daily (Berdan 1985; Anonymous Conqueror 1963: 178–179). Each of these trading enterprises and market venues contributed to different levels of economic integration within the Aztec empire and beyond.

Professional long-distance merchants (*pochteca*) enjoyed the most expansive commercial range of all traders. They were profit-oriented economic entrepreneurs, stationed in the largest cities (at least in the Basin of Mexico), traveling great distances in impressive caravans. They radiated in all directions, although their travels to the east, south, and west are most thoroughly recorded. And while we have the most information on Basin of Mexico *pochteca*, similar merchants called other cities home (Cholula is especially notable). Of all merchants, *pochteca* traveled the longest distances and trafficked in the most expensive goods. They trekked beyond the imperial bounds to supply their noble highland consumers with exotic, status-laden luxuries. Depending on their itinerary, these included shimmering tropical feathers, precious jadeite, marine shells, tortoise shell cups, jaguar pelts, fine gourd bowls, cochineal, clothing, and gold (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 9: 17; 18–19; Durán 1994: 182). In these ‘foreign’ dealings, the

*pochteca* carried both their ruler's goods and their own to 'international trading centers' (Gasco and Berdan 2003), trading their ruler's goods diplomatically with local rulers, and exchanging their own property in local markets (Fig. 2). Their connections to their sovereign ruler extended to service as spies in outlying markets; markets were known hotbeds of local news and rumor and it behooved the imperial ruler to keep his finger on the pulse of his sometimes-unpredictable subjects.



**Fig. 2.** International Trading Centers in Aztec-period Mesoamerica.  
Drawing by Jennifer Berdan Lozano

The *pochteca* were not exclusively 'foreign' merchants, trading only outside the imperial borders as suggested by Anne Chapman, who asserts that 'trade preceded tribute' and that 'Once a territory was conquered and thereby subjected to tribute payments, the *pochteca* ceased to trade there' (Chapman 1957: 122). She presents a sequence whereby commerce and imperial administration were mutually exclusive. This simply was not the case. In fact, some *pochteca* traded *only* within the imperial domain. All of these merchants were active, even pivotal, participants in the metropolitan Tlatelolco marketplace where they offered the most expensive goods: fine decorated clothing, gold and stone ornaments, colorful tropical feathers... and slaves. They traded the same types of goods in outlying markets as well, for example in Coahuixtlahuacan, in Tochpan and, by royal edict, in the city-state of Tepeacac after its conquest by the Aztecs (see Fig. 2). In part, the Tepeacac order went like this: 'You are hereby ordered, since your city is situated in a place through which many pass... be especially careful to protect the merchants who trade with Xoconochco and Guatemala and all the land... The king also wishes that a great marketplace be built in Tepeaca so that all the merchants in the land may trade there... [for] rich cloth of all

kinds, precious stones and jewels, featherwork of different colors, gold, silver, and other metals, the skins of animals such as jaguars, ocelots, and pumas, cacao, fine breechcloths, and sandals' (Durán 1994: 158–159). Tepeacac lay on an imperial borderland, and its required market allowed a safe haven for merchants traveling from distant regions as well as an approved luxury trading venue for intra-empire professional merchants. It was a clever manipulation, guaranteeing a reliable market overflowing with concentrations of exotic, rich, and tropical goods, conveniently situated in the central highlands and attracting merchants from far and wide.

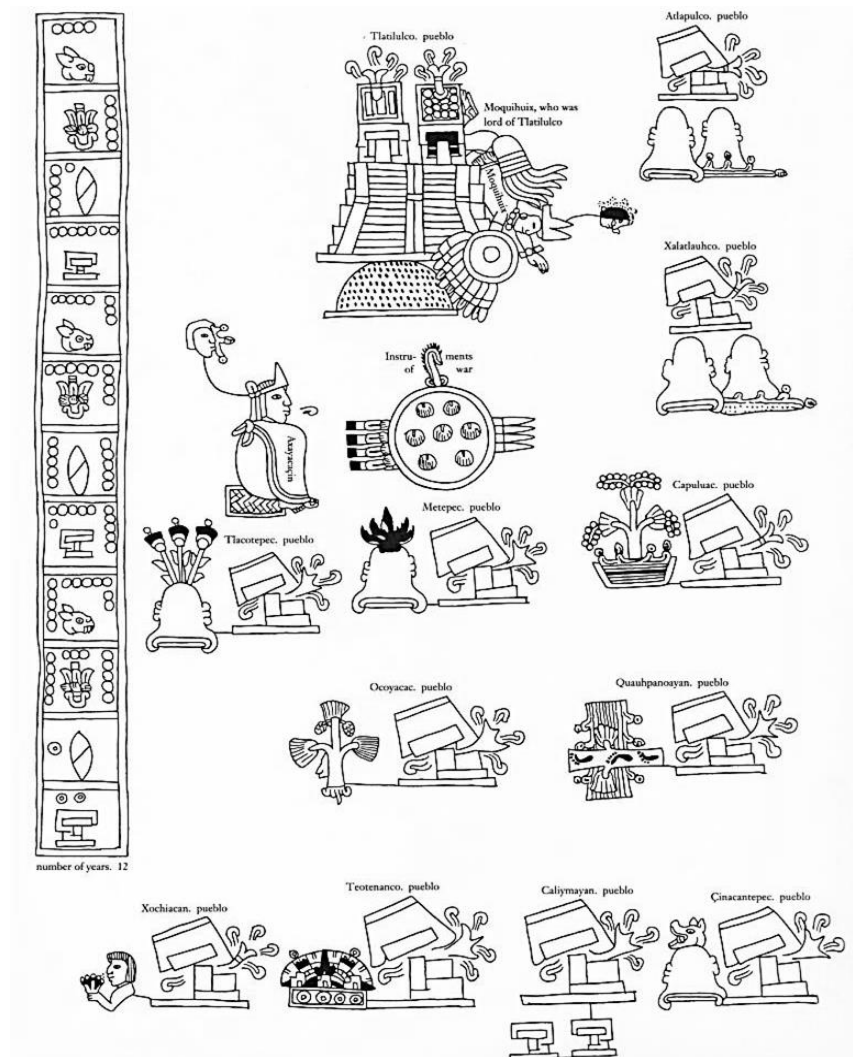
*Pochteca* goods were elite goods. These merchants served a small but wealthy (and eager) group of consumers; with goods, they tied together distant regions at a high social and political level. Other traders targeted other segments of the population. Regional merchants, at least some of them probably full-time traders, traveled outside their home city-states in search of transaction gains. They often carried bulk luxuries and staples across ecological regions. These goods included maize and other foods, sandals, painted gourd bowls, wood products, stone tools, cotton, salt, and cacao. All of these (and more) reached the grand Tlatelolco market, some in many regional varieties (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 10: 65–94). Some of these products, such as cotton, cacao, and salt, were ecologically localized and in limited supply – they were also in high demand, making them high-value goods and more than appropriate to command the attention of professional merchants. Furthermore, as commercial middlemen, these merchants made lowland goods such as cotton and cacao commonplace in highland communities; at the same time highland items such as obsidian, cochineal, and certain medicinal herbs entered lowland households (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 9: 18). Large quantities of marine shells from both coasts worked their way inland. Overall, the result was a widespread availability of products and objects and a certain measure of uniformity in material culture (including styles and symbol systems) across broad regions, penetrating even mutually hostile polities.

Still, the most prevalent traders were the multitudes of producer-sellers with small amounts of this and that to sell – a little extra from a kitchen garden, a well-woven cloth hot off a household loom, a basket full of warm, homemade tamales. They provided the backbone of this commercial economy, trading with each other, with the regional merchants, and perhaps occasionally with the luxury merchants (Smith [1997: 61] has found small quantities of pricey goods such as polychrome bowls and jadeite jewelry in humble households in Morelos). Exchanges of all of these goods, by all of these persons, took place in Mesoamerica's innumerable marketplaces. These trading venues, large and small, general and specialized, were essential to the integration of the Aztec domain. They allowed production specialization (full-time or part-time) to be a reliable strategy by providing predictable venues for the exchange of foods, raw materials, and finished goods from producers to consumers, at times with the intervention of professional middlemen. They provided settings for the relatively easy and successful transfer of goods (with all their symbolic and social baggage) from city-state to city-state, from region to region.

In the end, trade and markets were inseparable. In contrast to Anne Chapman's quote at the beginning of this article, trade could not be effectively undertaken apart from markets. It is important to treat them conceptually as intertwined and interdependent economic activities. Likewise, these behaviors were also linked to processes of imperial expansion and resultant tribute exactions.

### Aztec Imperial Strategies

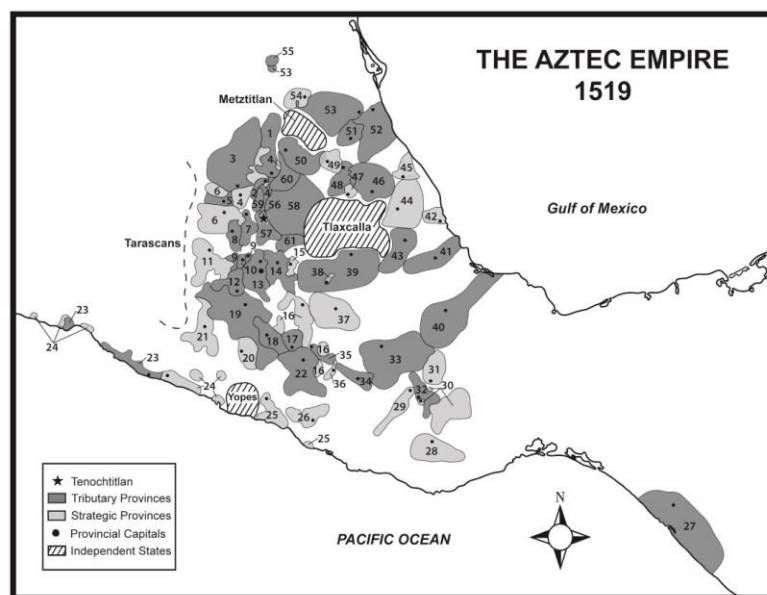
The Aztec empire was short-lived – only around 90 years – and encompassed the reigns of six Mexica rulers (1430–1521 CE). It grew somewhat erratically, at times by fits and starts, and its energy and trajectory were at least somewhat reflective of the priorities and inclinations of individual rulers. Itzcoatl (r. 1426–1440) and Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (r. 1440–1468) were aggressive expansionists, Axayacatl (r. 1468–1481) was a political strategist as well as a seasoned warrior (Fig. 3), Tizoc (r. 1481–1486) was militarily impotent, Ahuitzotl (r. 1486–1502) has been likened to Alexander the Great, and Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (r. 1502–1520) was an imperial consolidator. All of these rulers (with the unfortunate exception of Tizoc) used some blend of warfare and political strategies to achieve their imperialistic goals (see Berdan 2014: 142–143).



**Fig. 3.** The conquests of Axayacatl (r. 1468–1481) according to the *Codex Mendoza* (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 4, f. 10r)

Warfare was endemic in Mesoamerica, and the Mexica used it to great advantage. Establishing a Triple Alliance and drawing on conquered subjects, they were capable of assembling massive armies of conquest. Even so, warfare was not all one-sided, and the empire met strong resistance on several fronts, never able to conquer the Tarascans to the west, the Tlaxcallans and their allies to the east, and several pesky pockets to the south. Indeed, the Triple Alliance counted its share of losses, some of them devastating. Certain of these wars were described by the Mexica as 'flower wars', rather like practice battles where honor could be gained but conquest was not the goal. I believe these postures were essentially propaganda and excuses for losses, for despite the 'flowery' designation (as seen in the third quote above), Aztec wars were serious wars. They were aggressive acts with personal and collective glory as the motivation and reward, and power and tribute as the prizes.

The Mexica and their allies employed a variety of well-honed strategies in building their expansive and intimidating domain (see Berdan *et al.* 1996) (Fig. 4). Theirs was a loosely structured, hegemonic empire. Upon conquest, a vanquished ruler was usually allowed to continue his local rulership provided he not fail in his tribute obligations, not engage in rebellious behavior, and be responsive when requested to provide military or other services. Establishing political links at the highest social levels was a long-time strategy, and well-targeted marriages and extravagant feasting were the mechanisms. Elite marriages orchestrated between ruling families of different city-states cemented obligations between rulers and provided provincial heirs with imperial pedigrees. Polygyny facilitated this, with Triple Alliance rulers producing prodigious numbers of royal children. Hierarchical relationships among rulers of different political importance were also affirmed and reaffirmed through feasting events, normally concurrent with major ceremonial occasions. Notable among these was the dedication of Tenochtitlan's Great Temple in 1487, during which the Mexica ruler Ahuitzotl demonstrated to all of his guests, friends and foes alike, that 'the Aztecs were masters of the world' (Durán 1994: 336).



**Fig. 4.** The extent of the Aztec empire, 1519. Drawing by Jennifer Berdan Lozano



The Aztec Triple Alliance militarily vanquished over 300 city-states throughout central and into southern Mexico (Berdan 1996: 115). These conquests were assembled into tributary provinces, providing the bread and butter (so to speak) of imperial finance. People in tributary provinces yielded their stipulated goods at specified times or on special occasions, not only offering wealth but also openly expressing fealty and subjugation. Tribute goods ranged from staples such as maize and beans, to utilitarian goods such as reed mats and wood products, to precious raw materials including gold dust and shimmering feathers, to manufactured luxuries such as feathered warrior costumes and turquoise mosaics. The *Codex Mendoza* (Berdan and Anawalt 1992) lists goods such as these from 38 designated provinces; Durán's *Historia* (1994: 202–207) includes ‘all things created under the sky’, in the Aztec world as tribute. These demands supplied the imperial capitals with a great variety of utilitarian and status goods from all corners of the empire and, as we will see, from beyond.

This system was not infallible, as rebellions did occur with some frequency (Berdan 2011). These tended to crop up when subjects perceived some weakness in their overlords, especially during a rulership hiatus or a military defeat of Aztec forces (news traveled fast, even in this land of only foot and canoe transport). While rebellions were usually suppressed and punished with more onerous tribute demands, they nonetheless diverted quite a bit of imperial energy away from further military expansions.

Beyond military conquests, the Mexica established some client-like relationships throughout their imperial history. These were asymmetrical alliances forged with selected city-states of value to the imperial enterprise, but who were potentially too much trouble to conquer. Michael Smith and I have called this a ‘frontier strategy’ that resulted in ‘strategic provinces’ similar to the Roman Empire's client states (although we agree that ‘provinces’ is perhaps an ill-used term here). These strategic city-states typically lay across volatile borderlands, along critical routes of transportation and commerce, or near sites of crucial resources (Smith 1996). In many ways they appear to be protecting or insulating the tributary provinces and their predictable material deliveries to the imperial capitals. They did not suffer formal conquest by Aztec forces, but nonetheless gave ‘gifts’ to their overlords (also receiving some in return), or offered some service such as supplying an imposed Aztec garrison with its daily necessities. Nonetheless, they still recognized their subordinate relationship to the most powerful lords of the land. These ‘strategic’ relationships allowed the Aztecs to extend their imperial boundaries beyond their actual military conquests through a relatively inexpensive approach: political negotiations. Importantly, the empire gained cushy buffer zones against greater enemies as well as more secure commercial and transport arteries (Smith 1996).

## Boundaries and Networks

Conquests and empire-building created bounded territories, or *borders*<sup>1</sup>; trading and market activities created *networks*. How did shifting (and sometimes stalled) borders

<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the terms ‘boundary’ and ‘border’ interchangeably. However, some scholars, such as Richard Sennett (2008: 227–229), use the term ‘boundary’ to refer to an exclusionary line or edge (such as a tightly guarded territory) and ‘border’ to suggest an edge through which exchanges can and do take place (like a lake's shoreline). These are matters of degree, but if we were to follow Sennett, we would most commonly use the term ‘border’ with reference to the Aztecs, as their separate political territories were permeable to different degrees, even between deadly hostile neighbors.

and networks of different magnitudes enhance imperial strength (or not), and how did the increasingly commercialized economy contribute to these dynamics? We can approach these questions by looking at (1) the dynamics of imperial expansion and (2) the relationships among tribute, trade, and markets in and beyond the empire.

### *The Dynamics of Imperial Expansion*

Imperial conquests did not yield neatly contiguous subjected regions, or, necessarily, adjacent conquered city-states. The empire evolved as it expanded into diverse ecological zones and extracted resources that were available in outlying regions and siphoned to the imperial core cities. These conquests generally unfolded in leap-frog fashion, expanding outwardly into more and more distant regions. City-states within the Basin of Mexico were conquered first (and mostly consolidated and pre-empted into the Aztec imperial agenda, although Chalco was a tenacious hold-out). Amassing enormous armies from their Basin of Mexico subjects, the Triple Alliance powers spread their control outward in all directions. There was a qualitative ‘fall off’ between the Basin of Mexico conquests and those beyond the Basin: on the whole, the former became increasingly integrated into the imperial agenda, willingly participating in the empire's distant wars and reaping the benefits of conquests (such as loot and rewards in the form of status-linked clothing and devices for enemy captures). The latter bore the brunt of imperial conquests and subsequent exploitation – they paid tributes and received little in return.

As already noted, the Triple Alliance met serious resistance in the west (Tarascans), east (Tlaxcallans, Huexotzincos, and Cholulans), and here and there in the south (see Fig. 4). They occasionally needed to back up and reconquer a rebellious city-state, or put their expansion on hold and spend some time tussling with their arch-enemies to the east. This was not wasted time, since the Tlaxcallans, especially, were rather annoying to Aztec expansion as they made periodic efforts to foment rebellions in nearby conquered Aztec locales.

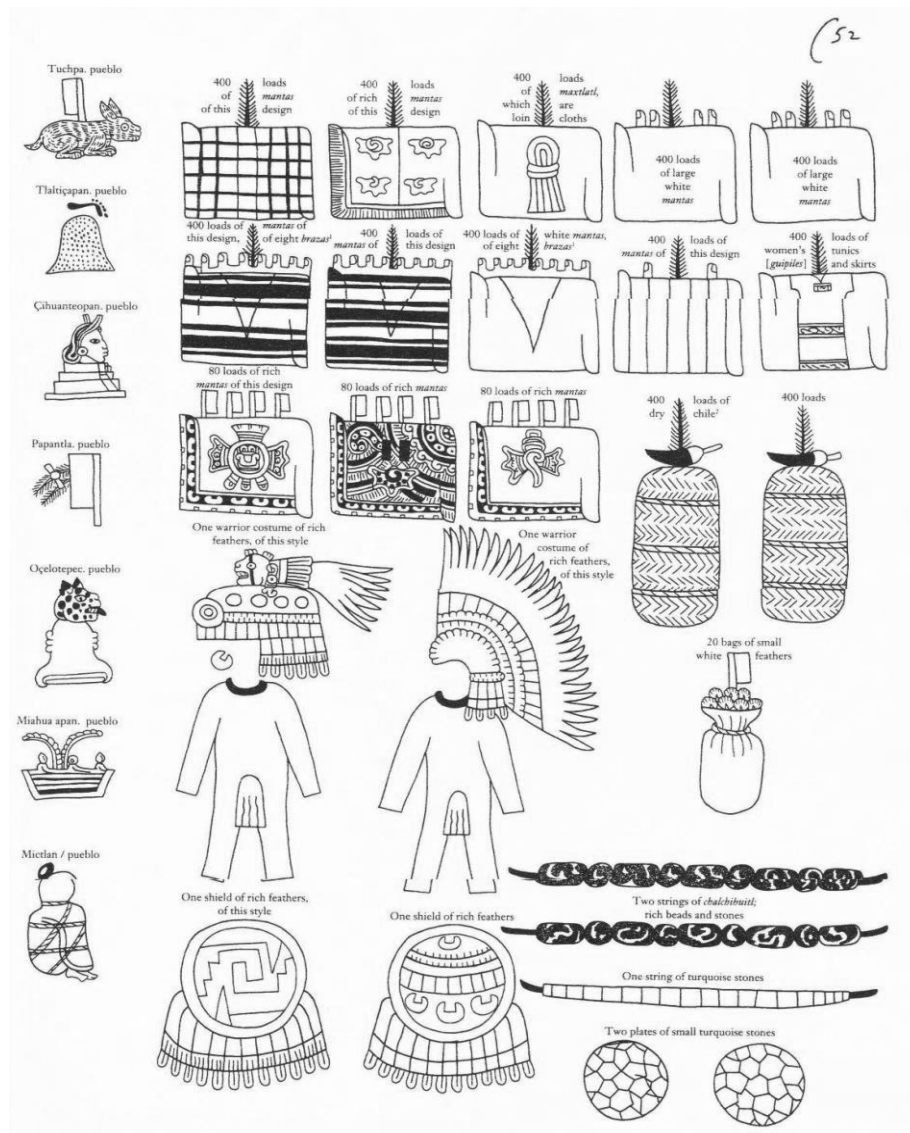
Imperial rulers differed in their approaches and agendas. Ahuitzotl (r. 1486–1502) was the great ‘expander’, while his successor, Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (r. 1502–1520) was more of a stabilizer and consolidator. The empire may have reached its greatest possible geographical extent (or close to it) by the time the Spaniards arrived, and Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin spent a great deal of his military energies on filling in the empire's spatial gaps. Consider the situation after the Mexica ruler Ahuitzotl conquered Tecuantepec on the Pacific coast: his men had made a supreme effort in achieving this distant conquest and were on the verge of looting their prize. Ahuitzotl faced a near-rebellion when he prohibited his warriors from ravaging the city (a rare unpopular move against this charismatic ruler). Consider further the aftermath of the even more distant conquest of Xoconochco: the local people assured Ahuitzotl that they would join him in conquering areas beyond their borders, in neighboring Guatemala. Ahuitzotl responded that ‘he did not wish to go farther, in part because those people had not offended him in any way and in part because his men were exhausted and their ranks depleted’ (Durán 1994: 380). He did, however, posture positively that ‘he had such faith in the strength of the Aztecs that in time they would conquer the entire world’ (Durán 1994: 380). (As an aside, little did he know how enormous that ‘entire world’ was.) Despite the big talk, it is likely that there were practical limits to Aztec military expansion. Economic expansion was another matter, and could penetrate lands much farther afield.

By the time of the Spanish arrival, many of the conquered city-states were grouped into ‘provinces’: conquered communities geographically near one another that paid imperial

tributes collectively. In the major imperial tribute documents (*Matrícula de Tributos* and *Codex Mendoza*), the recorded provinces contained from one to 26 city-states assembled under a 'head town'. These provinces evolved in response to local as well as imperial conditions: some reflected prior political entities, such as conquest states to the south of the Basin of Mexico and already existing *provincias* on the northern Gulf coast. Sometimes they were formed out of convenience; for instance, the late conquest of the city-state of Papantla was simply tagged on to the already-existing imperial province of Tochpan on the Gulf coast (Berdan 2014: 171–172). In short, there was not a rigid imperial administrative policy, but rather more flexible decisions based on local as well as larger conditions. In addition, the borders of the Aztec empire were in almost constant flux, responding to unrelenting military conquests, sporadic rebellions, timely negotiations, individual royal personalities and priorities, re-alignments among the Triple Alliance rulers, and changing material needs in the imperial core. All of these factors meant repeated adjustments not just administratively, but also commercially.

Of particular interest among these growth factors is the matter of changing patterns of material consumption. As the empire expanded, albeit over only a short 90-year span, so also did the population of the empire's core region, the Basin of Mexico. Larger overall numbers meant increasing needs in bulk goods and other products: staple foodstuffs, building materials, and general maintenance and production goods (such as cooking vessels, reed mats, obsidian blades, and agricultural and fishing tools). Some of these products and goods were homemade, all were available in the markets.

More tricky was the other demographic dynamic, a rapid, disproportionate increase in the Basin of Mexico nobility. The elite had additional, and quite extra-ordinary needs – showy, ostentatious adornments and paraphernalia that affirmed and re-affirmed their elevated status (prestige goods and bulk luxuries such as cotton and cacao). The raw materials for goods that signaled high status were available only in distant, mostly lowland tropical regions: colorful feathers, precious jadeite, fine cotton, tasty cacao, and more. As the elite grew in numbers, the empire expanded into more and more distant, and more and more tropical, areas, both militarily and commercially (Fig. 5). Concurrently, tribute exactions, as well as expanding trading and market networks, provided the Basin of Mexico nobles with essential status-linked goods in greater and greater quantities. Very convenient. Among notable examples: Gerardo Gutiérrez (2013: 164) sees large increases in tribute assessments (including gold and cotton cloth) in the southern province of Tlapa during its 36 years as an Aztec subject, and Coayxtlahuaca's tribute diversified from cloaks, cotton, chili, ocean salt, and dyes at the time of its conquest (the mid-fifteenth century) to decorated clothing, feathered warrior costumes with shields, quetzal feathers, strings of greenstones, gold dust, cochineal, and a rich feathered headpiece in the early sixteenth century (Smith and Berdan 1996: 282) ...from fairly everyday goods to elite luxuries. This shift (increasing demands overall, increasing diversity of goods, and increasing emphasis on luxuries) was embedded in the empire's geographic and temporal expansion trajectories, local ecologies, and changing consumption needs in the imperial core.



**Fig. 5.** Tribute of the imperial province of Tochpan, recorded in the *Codex Mendoza* (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 4, f. 52r)

### *Tribute, Trade, and Markets*

Whether subjects were overwhelmed by conquest or eased into the imperial thrall by negotiation, they became enmeshed in asymmetrical economic obligations. Simply put, these subservient persons needed to find ways to pay their overlords what they demanded... in goods, in labor, and in military support (whether in the imperial core or at its borderlands). The ways they found were creative and multifaceted.

One thing is clear: in contrast to the final quote at the beginning of this paper, *not* all goods paid to the imperial overlords were directly produced within each conquered realm.

Nothing as neat and tidy as that. Instead, in many cases subjects found it necessary to obtain many of their tributary and otherwise obligatory payments from outside their own domains. For instance, people in the province of Xoconochco on the southern Pacific coast were required to pay some of their tribute in greenstones, amber, and gold, all non-local resources and necessarily imported into the province (Gasco and Voorhies 1989). Tochpan on the northern Gulf Coast paid jadeite beads and turquoise ornaments, neither of which were mined locally (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. III: f. 52r) (Fig. 6). Tributary provinces throughout highland Mexico paid tribute in feathered warrior costumes, the innumerable elegant feathers themselves hailing from distant tropical regions. And highland provinces paid tribute in prodigious quantities of cotton clothing, although cotton itself could only be grown at lower elevations.

These are just a few examples demonstrating that although the Aztec imperial overlords were demanding goods that could be provided by their conquered provinces, some of the goods were necessarily imported into these provinces from sources beyond their borders. An important consequence of this arrangement was the economic expansion of the empire beyond its conquered borderlands: trading and marketing tentacles perforated imperial borders. These economic networks were certainly operational well before Aztec conquest, and the Aztecs took advantage of them as they continued after imperial conquest; to some degree, the tribute system depended on the continuation and even intensification of these commercial networks. Subjects went beyond their borders to seek non-local products and goods for their tribute payments (or merchants moved these commodities across the borders). The imposition of tribute therefore stimulated existing or new trade and market networks (and tribute demands also encouraged much provincial craft production, but that is another story [Berdan 2014: 164]). All types of merchants gravitated to centers of demand, and tribute impositions created such demand. In essence, through this arrangement, the empire managed to gain access to materials and objects produced and available beyond their conquered regions. Marketplaces provided the venues for these economic exchanges, and were magnets for merchants of all levels. The imposition of tribute demands, therefore, contributed to the viability of markets both within and beyond the imperial boundaries.

Still, boundaries did not mean the same thing to all traders and merchants. Regional and local traders, especially, could usually cross city-state borders with impunity and little political notice. Professional *pochteca*, on the other hand, were often associated with particular rulers and sometimes engaged in political missions, including spying. Understandably, they were suspicious characters in outlying markets, and often enough targeted for assault, robbery, and even assassination (such attacks were frequent motivations for military retribution and conquest). Crossing borders from friendly to hostile lands and back again was risky business for the *pochteca* (Berdan 2003). Simply put, trading networks were fairly open across political borders for low-level traders, but could be rather dicey and even obstructed for high-level professional merchants.

Some exchanges with merchants and in markets to obtain tribute goods may have been complex, variable, and flexible. Gerardo Gutiérrez (2013) suggests that specific goods demanded in tribute possibly could be exchanged for other goods of equal value, and these other goods supplied in tribute. This suggested scenario would stimulate market and trading activities and be ‘an enormous benefit for the market system of Mesoamerica’ (Gutiérrez 2013: 163).

## In Sum

The Aztec Empire was a complex and multidimensional expansionist system drawing on well-entrenched (but volatile) political entities and long-established commercial networks. There was nothing particularly neat about this system, but there were patterns. The empire, through conquests and negotiations, superimposed new administrative boundaries on existing city-state ones. Professional merchants, encouraged by political commissions and growing elite needs, trekked farther and farther afield in search of desirable luxuries and economic profits. Local producers in subjugated areas continued to rely on traditional markets, but even more so in cases where the empire demanded tribute in non-local goods. As the empire expanded, trading networks for all types of merchants and traders became intensified, reinforced, and re-channeled, both within and beyond the imperial domain. Progressively expanding (and unsettled) imperial borders and dynamic commercial networks continually fluctuated, primarily in the interests of the empire and its dominating elite.

## References

- Anonymous Conqueror. 1963.** The Chronicle of the Anonymous Conqueror. In de Fuentes, P. (ed.), *The Conquistadors* (pp. 165–181). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Berdan, F. F. 1985.** Markets in the Economy of Aztec Mexico. In Plattner, S. (ed.), *Markets and Marketing* (pp. 339–367). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Berdan, F. F. 1996.** The Tributary Provinces. In Berdan, F. F. *et al.* (eds.), *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (pp. 115–135). Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Berdan, F. F. 2003.** Borders in the Eastern Aztec Empire. In Smith, M. E., and Berdan, F. F. (eds.), *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World* (pp. 73–77). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Berdan, F. F. 2011.** Rebeliones contra Tenochtitlan. *Arqueología Mexicana* 19 (111): 32–36.
- Berdan, F. F. 2014.** *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berdan, F. F., and Anawalt P. R. 1992.** *The Codex Mendoza*. 4 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Berdan, F. F., Blanton, R. E., Boone, E. H., Hodge, M. G., Smith, M. E., and Umberger, E. 1996.** *Aztec Imperial Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Blanton, R. E., Fargher, L. F., and Verenice Y. Heredia Espinoza. 2005.** The Mesoamerican World of Goods and its Transformations. In Blanton, R. E. (ed.), *Settlement, Subsistence, and Social Complexity: Essays Honoring the Legacy of Jeffrey R. Parsons* (pp. 260–294). Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA.
- Blanton, R. E., Feinman, G. M., Kowalewski, S. A., and Nicholas, L. M. 1999.** *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Alban State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brittenham, C. 2015.** *The Murals of Cacaxtla: The Power of Painting in Ancient Central Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Carballo, D. M. 2013.** The Social Organization of Craft Production and Interregional Exchange at Teotihuacan. In Hirth, K. G., and Pillsbury, J. (eds.), *Merchants, Markets, and*

- Exchange in the Pre-Columbian World* (pp. 113–140). Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Chapman, A. 1957.** Port of Trade Enclaves in Aztec and Maya Civilization. In Polanyi, K., Arensberg, C. M., and Pearson, H. W. (eds.), *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (pp. 114–153). New York: Free Press.
- Cowgill, G. L. 2015.** *Ancient Teotihuacan: Early Urbanism in Central Mexico*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Durán, D. 1994.** *The History of the Indies of New Spain*. Transl. by D. Heyden. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Gasco, J., and Berdan, F. F. 2003.** International Trade Centers. In Smith, M. E., and Berdan, F. F. (eds.), *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World* (pp. 109–116). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Gasco, J., and Voorhies, B. 1989.** The Ultimate Tribute: The Role of the Soconusco as an Aztec Tributary. In Voorhies, B. (ed.), *Ancient Trade and Tribute: Economies of the Soconusco Region of Mesoamerica* (pp. 48–94). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Gutiérrez, G. 2013.** Negotiating Aztec Tributary Demands in the *Tribute Record of Tlapa*. In Hirth, K. G., and Pillsbury, J. (eds.), *Merchants, Markets, and Exchange in the Pre-Columbian World* (pp. 141–167). Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Hodge, M. G. 1996.** Political Organization of the Central Provinces. In Berdan F. F. *et al.* *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (pp. 17–45). Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Houston, S. D., and Inomata, T. 2009.** *The Classic Maya*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nichols, D. L. 2004.** The Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State. In Hendon, J. A., and Joyce, R. A. (eds.), *Mesoamerican Archaeology* (pp. 265–295). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nichols, D. L. 2016.** Teotihuacan. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 24: 1–74.
- Pool, C. A. 2007.** *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sahagún, B. de. 1950–1982.** In Anderson, A. J. O., and Dibble, Ch. E. (eds.), *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. 12 vols. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Sennett, R. 2008.** *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smith, M. E. 1996.** The Strategic Provinces. In Berdan, F. F. *et al.* (eds.), *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (pp. 137–150). Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Smith, M. E. 1997.** Life in the Provinces of the Aztec Empire. *Scientific American* 277 (3): 56–63.
- Smith, M. E. 2008.** *Aztec City-State Capitals*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Smith, M. E., and Berdan, F. F. 1996.** Province Descriptions. In Berdan, F. F. *et al.* (eds.), *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (pp. 264–293). Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Zorita, A. de. 1994.** *Life and Labor in Ancient Mexico: The Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain*. Transl. by B. Keen. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.