

Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory

ARCG S264 ANTH S264



An Aztec representation of the sun as a bejeweled disk.
Stone of Tizoc (Late XVth century).

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Office hours: By appointment

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Five centuries ago, when Spanish invaders entered the valley of Mexico in 1519, they were struck by the sight of an impressive city—among the largest of its time in the world—built on an island in the middle of a lake. The valley was home to more than a million people, and its rulers extended their sway over much of modern Mexico. Yet their achievements were based on simple technologies. They used stone implements, and largely depended on manpower for transportation. To the invaders' horror, the stairways of their temple pyramids were stained with the blood of human victims, whose skulls were displayed in racks at the city's main ritual precinct.

Who were the Aztec? How did they relate with the great civilizations that preceded them? How do we explain their imperial expansion, within a century before the Spanish invasion? What do we know about the men and women—food producers, craftsmen, traders, and warriors—who sustained this extraordinary growth? What do we know about their worldview and religion? What was the true scale and meaning of Aztec human sacrifice? Why are the Aztecs relevant for modern Mexico?

We will address these questions from the perspectives of archaeology and history. Archaeological research reveals a wealth of material information about the Aztecs, while sixteenth-century texts in Nahuatl and Spanish form the richest records available for an indigenous New World civilization. By the end of the term, students will understand the ecological, cultural, and historical processes that influenced Aztec civilization, the scholarly approaches applied for their study, and the relevance of the Aztec in modern Mexican culture.

Course requirements

Reading queries: 30%

Short written assignment: 15%

Digital Florentine Codex: 10%

Participation in class: 20%

Final Essay: 25% (Bibliography 8%; Presentation 7%; Paper 10%)

Reading queries

Answer two questions, based on the primary readings for each week. These questions will be on Canvas, where you will also post your responses. Your answers should show that you read the assigned works, and they should incorporate your own reflections on their content. Estimated length: 150 words per question, 300 words total.

Short written assignment:

Using online museum catalogs, select five objects and create labels for a museum exhibition case. Choose one of the following topics: (a) Aztec daily life and subsistence; (b) Aztec warfare; (c) Religion of the Aztecs. Write a 400-word explanatory text for the case, and a 40-word label for each individual object or groups of objects, discussing how they relate to the overall exhibition design. Do not copy the descriptions from the online catalogs.

Estimated length: 600 words.

Digital Florentine Codex

The Florentine Codex is an encyclopedic sixteenth-century source for the study of the Aztec. Recently, the entire text and illustrations with translations to English and Spanish were made available (<https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/>). Taking advantage of this great resource, students will do a 15-minute class presentation based on a topic from the Florentine Codex. Please upload your presentation to Canvas the day before your presentation.

Final essay

Write an essay and prepare a class presentation based on bibliographic research about a topic related to the course. The instructor will provide a list of suggested topics, but students are encouraged to pursue their own interests. The topics should be discussed with the instructor in advance. Required length: 6000 words.

Attendance and participation in all class sessions is required. Appropriate justification must be submitted in case of absence.

Required Textbooks

Townsend, Richard F. (2009) *The Aztecs*. Third edition. Thames and Hudson, New York.

Berdan, Frances F. and Michael E. Smith (2021) *Everyday Life in the Aztec World*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Not required, useful and comprehensive manual on the Aztecs:

The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs

<https://doi-org.yale.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199341962.001.0001>

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a core institutional value at Yale. It means, among other things, truth in presentation, diligence and precision in citing works and ideas we have used, and acknowledging our collaborations with others. In view of our commitment to maintaining the highest standards of academic integrity, the **Yale College Programs of Study** specifically prohibit the following forms of behavior: cheating on examinations, problem sets and all other forms of assessment; falsification and/or fabrication of data; plagiarism, that is, the failure to acknowledge ideas, research, or language taken from others; and multiple submission of the same work without obtaining explicit written permission from both instructors before the material is submitted. See **Yale College Undergraduate Regulations:** <http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/regulations/academic-dishonesty/>

Artificial Intelligence: Before collaborating with an AI chatbot on your work for this course, please request permission by sending me a note that describes (a) how you intend to use the tool and (b) how using it will enhance your learning. Any use of AI to complete an assignment must be acknowledged in a citation that includes the prompt you submitted to the bot, the date of access, and the URL of the program.

Students found guilty of violations of academic integrity are subject to one or more of the following penalties: written reprimand, probation, suspension (noted on a student's transcript) or dismissal (noted on a student's transcript).

Class schedule

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| Session 1 | Encountering the Aztecs
Cortés, "Second Letter to the King of Spain" (excerpt) |
| Session 2 | Moteczuzoma and Tenochtitlan
Berdan and Smith Chapter 1
Townsend Chapter 1 |
| Session 3 | Mesoamerican civilizations
Townsend Chapter 2
Joyce, "Mesoamerica: A working model for archaeology" |
| Session 4 | Introducing the Florentine Codex
Terraciano, "Introduction: An Encyclopedica of Nahua Culture"
<i>Suggested: Terraciano, "Reading between the lines"</i> |
| Session 5 | Aztec History
Berdan and Smith Chapter 10
Townsend Chapter 3 |

- Session 6** **Archaeology at the Templo Mayor**
Townsend Chapters 4-5
Matos Moctezuma, "The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan"
- Session 7** **Human adaptations in the valley of Mexico**
Berdan and Smith Chapters 3 and 5
Córdova, "The Lakes of the Basin of Mexico"
Suggested: Carr, "The Beinecke Map"
- Session 8** **Women, family and daily life**
Berdan and Smith Chapters 6 and 7
Townsend Chapter 7
Suggested: Burkhart, "Mexica women"
- Session 9** **Craft, Trade, and Tribute**
Berdan and Smith Chapters 4 and 8
Townsend Chapter 8
Smith, "Life in the provinces of the Aztec empire"
- Session 10** **Writing and the calendar**
Townsend Chapter 6
Boone, "Aztec pictorial histories"
- Session 11** **Religion, ritual, and world view**
Berdan and Smith Chapters 2 and 9
Townsend Chapter 9
Suggested: MacCurdy, "An Aztec calendar stone"
- Session 12** **Aztec art, poetry, music**
Umberger, "Art and imperial strategy in Tenochtitlan"
- Session 13** **The Spanish conquest and its aftermath**
Townsend Chapters 10-11
Suggested: Kartunnen, "Rethinking Malinche"
- Session 14** **Student presentations**
- Session 15** **Student presentations**