

Aztec Violence and Warfare

A Review of Three Perspectives

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The fate of the Aztec Empire is often shrouded in mystery and it makes scholars wonder, how could such a powerful and wealthy empire be defeated and wiped off the map so swiftly after Spanish contact? The empire first rose up as a result of the alliance of three powerful city-states: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. This occurred approximately in the year AD 1430, and lasted for around 90 years before Cortes and his army arrived in AD 1519 and began their conquest. There are numerous factors that can be attributed to the success of the Spanish and the Aztec collapse, but the general explanations given involve Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel" ideas. These ideas explain how superior technology such as guns and steel weapons, along with disease brought over with the men and their animals, were the deciding factors. However, I have found three articles that have different ideas for why the mighty Aztec Empire may have struggled against such a small Spanish force. These articles show that it was the particular tactics used, and objectives for conflict by either polity that affected the outcome of the battles.

The first article, "'Flowery War' in Aztec History" written by Frederic Hicks, relays the ideas about the concept of "flowery war", which is believed to have been developed by leaders of the Aztec Empire. Hicks states that "The Aztec believed so fervently in the need to nourish their gods with the blood of human sacrifices that they developed an institution called "flowery war" for the express purpose of supplying this need." (Hicks, 1979) He goes further in explaining how two groups agreed to fight one another in order to satisfy this lust for human sacrifices, with the goal being solely to obtain prisoners from the opposition for sacrifice, while conquest and the actual killing of enemy troops in combat was not deemed necessary. He then claims that there really isn't much evidence in earlier times for the ideas of "flowery war", but similar practices

can be seen in various parts of the world, in which wars are waged for religious purposes rather than conquest, such as the medieval crusades and modern jihad practices. It can also be seen, that common reasons for participating in this "flowery war" can be for military training and practice, rather than decimation of enemy forces. An important insight into what may have been the origins of this idea of "flowery war" in Mesoamerica comes from Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin in 1376, as he writes ""the noble Mexica who captured Chalca let them go, and the noble Chalca who captured Mexica let them go, and only some of the commoners got killed."" (Hicks, 1979) He goes further in explaining how this type of conflict persisted for some time, until eventually they became angry with one another and "real" war began. It is clear that this idea of "flowery war" was prominent in the 14th century AD, but was it so prominent by the time the Aztec Empire gained power that it had a larger effect than previously thought? Hicks concludes that "flowery war was any war that was not aimed at conquest, and that the most common function of such wars as to provide practical military training and exercise." (Hicks 1979) It would appear based on evidence that flowery wars actually produced little to no human sacrifices, and the sacrifices that were actually obtained, were obtained through actual combat and not a ritualistic variation. Therefore, it can be argued that this idea of "flowery war" did not have as much of an impact on the Aztec downfall as some would hope.

The next article, "Aztec Warfare: Goals and Battlefield Comportment" written by Barry Isaac, goes into detail about the Aztec's goals and how they operated in battle. He begins his article in a similar fashion as Hicks did, explaining how ritualistic aspects of Aztec warfare are the most common topics when examining this empire. He goes further in explaining the common idea that the basis of Aztec warfare was capturing enemy troops and sacrificing them to their god

Huitzilopochtli, and that they had no intentions of conquering foreign polities and massacring their people. In this article Isaac is arguing against the common notions that "flowery wars" were entirely ritualistic and that the Aztec had no aims at the utter annihilation of enemy groups. He states that "the Aztec Empire was itself born of war in 1428-1430, when Tenochtitlan and Tetzaco overthrew the Tepaneca Empire which had dominated them for a century." (Isaac, 1983) As it can be seen, how could an empire take power with bloody conflict and then soon after turn to a type of warfare aimed at ritual rather than conquest? Isaac uses ethnographic data from sources such as the Codex Ramirez and from Durán for most of his article, while he examines the various periods leading up to Spanish contact. In these sources it can be seen that the Aztec were not so noble in their goals. These sources "repeatedly report looting and sacking as normal outcomes of Aztec victory", and "several sources report the seizing of farming lands, especially on behalf of Tenochtitlan, as a recurrent feature of the early wars of the Triple Alliance." (Isaac, 1983) It can be seen in these reports that heavy losses were in fact suffered on both sides in these conflicts, which defies the ideas about "flowery warfare" in which little to no combat fatalities is a key feature. He goes further in stating that

"Aztec "ordinary" wars had the typical features of state-level warfare elsewhere: heavy slaughter of the enemy on the battlefield, calculated slaughter of noncombatants to lower the enemy's capacity to resist further or rebel later, the brutalization of selected communities as object lessons, seizure of agricultural lands, the burning of temples and other elite structures, and the incorporation of the vanquished into the victor's polity as tributaries." (Isaac, 1983)

It is obvious at least from ethno historical sources that Aztec warfare was not as unique as once thought. The idea of ritualistic "flowery warfare" that fit the popular images of cannibalism among the Aztec so well, may not have actually been such a common phenomenon. Of course, if it were more common, it would give commoners a chance at nobility, as the capturing of

sacrifices was regarded as highly honorable. Unfortunately, based on the sources Isaac used in his article, it would appear that slaughter was the main objective, while the capture of sacrifices was a secondary or incidental byproduct.

The third article, "Tactical Factors in the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs" written by Douglas Daniel, goes into detail about the tactics used by the Spanish and the Aztec armies in combat. He believes that the tactics were a more deciding factor in these conflicts, rather than the vast difference in technology. His article "examines the Spanish Conquest in terms of its tactical background, applying a military-historical perspective to ethno historical sources" (Daniel, 1992) In his article he attempts to dispel the ideas about how the Aztec's concepts of war and their lack of modern weaponry and defenses were the main causes of their destruction. He also disagrees with the idea that their downfall was their supposed obsession with taking sacrifices. Daniel argues that superior infantry tactics, as well as horse cavalry at their disposal, were significant factors in the eventual defeat of the Aztec Empire. He states that two important facts gave them the upper hand: "the way in which the Spanish used their infantry formations gave them a decisive advantage over Aztec infantry formations," and "Spanish cavalry was capable of disrupting and routing large bodies of Aztec troops" (Daniel, 1992) He goes on to explain how the Spanish had more close-order formations while the Aztec lines were more widespread, as they commonly attempted to surround and attack enemies. Unfortunately for the Aztecs, the Spanish were able to survive the initial attack and punch through Aztec forces, scattering and confusing the men until they were forced to retreat. As he explains, "strategy and tactics are linked but functionally distinct aspects of any military campaign. For victory combatants must have success in both spheres." (Daniel, 1992) The Spanish had superior tactics and a

well-developed strategy, which gave them the success they needed for victory. They were able to gain allies among the native peoples, which aided them in their conquest by supplying intelligence on other native groups such as the Aztecs and by supplying troops, without which their conquest might have had a different outcome.

The debate may never come to an end on what truly caused the fall of such a mighty empire so quickly. There are numerous factors which must not be overlooked including: weaponry, tactics, concepts of warfare, religion, and disease. The article by Hicks was certainly interesting, in which he argued against the ideas of "flowery war" due to a lack of evidence for the Aztec Empire. I like that he explained what it actually was and then provided evidence for and against it. It can be seen that in "flowery war" the main objective is military training and the taking of prisoners for sacrifice while conquest is not on the agenda. However, as seen quite clearly in the article by Isaac, based on ethnographic data, the Aztec people were very much involved in the business of conquest and slaughter, contra "flowery war". His article had a lot of interesting quotes from ethno historic documents, so it was nice to see what other people from back in time had to say about the events of the Spanish Conquest. However, as with any form of writing, the information must be taken with a grain of salt and we must not invest all of our thoughts into what someone else wrote which may or may not be true or entirely truthful. As for the third article, I liked his fresh perspective on the events that occurred. It was nice to see someone thinking a little differently than most of the previous scholars in this area, as he examined the tactics used by both militaries, rather than the technology used or the various concepts of warfare. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what happened so long ago, but as for my own personal opinion, it seems like disease had much more of an effect on Aztec populations

than a lot of people would admit. It is easy to see how disastrous an epidemic can be, one need only look at the effects of the Black Death in Europe where over 30% of the continent's population was decimated. Regardless, it would seem that the Spanish had luck on their side, as they took on an empire after arriving with only about 508 soldiers, 100 sailors, and 16 horses; quite a feat indeed.

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