

**Source: Dr. Michael E. Smith, "Aztec Culture and Society," Arizona State University, 2006**

The basic Aztec political unit was the city-state, or **altepetl**, ruled by a king, or **tlatoani**. These kings were selected by a high council of nobles who chose from the male members of the city-state's royal family. Only proven military leaders were considered for kingship, and newly-selected kings had to undertake a successful campaign of conquest before they were fully invested in the office...Even when conquered by the Mexica [Aztec] Empire, city-states remained important local political units. Local kings were generally left in power, and the local government continued without much interruption...The Mexica empire conquered over 500 city-states in northern and central Mesoamerica and forced their subjects to pay tribute in textiles, foodstuffs, and many other goods.

...The Mexica followed a policy of **indirect rule** of their provinces. So long as conquered kings acknowledged the superiority of the Mexica emperor and paid their tribute quotas, they were left in power. In fact, the Mexica even supported local kings who cooperated with the empire. The basic goals of Aztec imperialism were economic: the generation of tribute payments and the encouragement of commerce.

**Source: Historian Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, Oxford University Press, 2019**

It has traditionally been said that the Aztecs believed they had to conquer (and sacrifice) others in order to obtain the requisite number of victims to keep the gods happy, or at least they claimed this was necessary to maintain control...The Aztecs' own histories, however, indicate that they understood clearly that political life revolved not around the gods or claims about the gods but around the realities of **shifting power imbalances**. In a world in which chiefs had many wives, a leader could father literally dozens of sons, and factions developed among them based on who the boys' mothers were. A weaker faction might eventually ally with a losing band of brothers, and together, they might suddenly topple dominant family lines and change the political map of a region.

Marriage alliances became central to this system. Succession was negotiated rather than automatic, with councils choosing from eligible royal males. Well-placed unions could tip the balance of legitimacy, and rival factions often accepted a ruler in exchange for governorships, priestly offices, or other privileges...

Aztec sources explained almost all their wars in terms of this form of gendered realpolitik [politics based on practicality instead of morals]. The prisoners of war who ended up facing sacrifice were usually collateral damage in these genuine struggles. Only toward the end, when Aztec power had grown exponentially, did a situation arise in which dozens of victims were brutally murdered on a regular basis in order to make a terrifying public statement...The Aztec royal family was related to nearly every ruling family in the land. Some people hated them, but others aspired to be them...Some conquered city-states could continue in power unmolested as long as they gave tribute. Others that had been more 'difficult'—perhaps had fought very hard or had killed emissaries—were destroyed.