

A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures

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Aztec City-States¹

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Central Mexico before the Spanish conquest was the setting for two extended cycles of sociopolitical evolution. These cycles, which lasted for several centuries, were characterized by population increase, the spread of complex urban society across the landscape, and the growth of powerful states. Only the second cycle, culminating in Aztec society as encountered by Hernando Cortés in 1519, was characterized by a city-state culture. The first cycle involved the growth of Classic-period Teotihuacan, a territorial state whose large urban capital ruled a small empire in central Mexico. The fall of Teotihuacan around AD 700 initiated some four centuries of political decentralization and ruralization of settlement.

By the twelfth century, central Mexico had become a rural backwater with few urban centers. Into this context arrived the Aztec peoples, migrating from a north Mexican homeland. The Aztecs settled throughout central Mexico and immediately initiated the process of establishing city-states. These small polities prospered for several centuries, maintaining their existence and importance even when conquered successively by the Aztec and Spanish empires. From the perspective of comparative city-state cultures, several features of the central Mexican case stand out as distinctive: (1) city-states developed not during the initial development of complex society but during a later, second cycle of development; (2) city-states maintained their integration and significance even under the rule of powerful and expanding empires; and (3) Aztec city-states were only one manifestation of a broad process of city-state development that occurred throughout the entire region of Mesoamerica in the Postclassic period.

Hansen's concept of "city-state culture" (*supra* 16-17) provides a fruitful approach to understanding the nature and significance of Aztec city-states. Since the landmark publication of Griffith & Thomas (1981), scholars have recognized that what is most distinctive and significant about city-states in comparative perspective is not their form or size, but rather the fact they occur in groups or systems of interacting units. Several theoretical frameworks developed in anthro-

pology in the 1970s and 1980s focused on the interactions among small political units as crucial elements in the overall dynamics of social change in agrarian societies (Adams [1975]; Price [1977]; Renfrew & Cherry [1986]). The concept of city-state culture builds on this earlier work and highlights the most interesting and dynamic aspects of city-states cross-culturally.

Approaches to city-states that focus on form alone, with insufficient consideration of processes of interaction or city-state culture, fall into the danger of including nearly all examples of ancient states. The recent book, *The Archaeology of City-States: Cross-Cultural Approaches* (Nichols & Charlton [1997]) exemplifies this problem. Chapters are included on ancient Egypt and coastal Peru, two areas that did not exhibit city-states, and in one article the huge territorial state of Teotihuacan is considered under the city-state label (Charlton & Nichols [1997]). This over-inclusiveness depletes the concept of its comparative utility and obscures the dynamics that make city-state systems distinctive. Although past comparative studies have emphasized the occurrence of city-states in interacting groups (Griffith & Thomas [1981]; Mann [1986]; Trigger [1993]), Hansen's model of city-state culture is the first general, comparative approach to place this crucial feature at the center of attention.

In this paper I review archaeological and historical evidence on Aztec city-states and city-state culture within the framework established by Hansen (*supra* 16-19). The Aztec data fit Hansen's criteria quite well, and the Aztec case shares many characteristics with other city-state cultures described in this volume. Before presenting the Aztec case in detail, I first review the nature of the evidence and the history of research on Aztec city-states.²

Research on Aztec City-States

Before proceeding I should make explicit my use of the term "Aztec". This word, which is a modern scholarly construct (based on a native term), was not

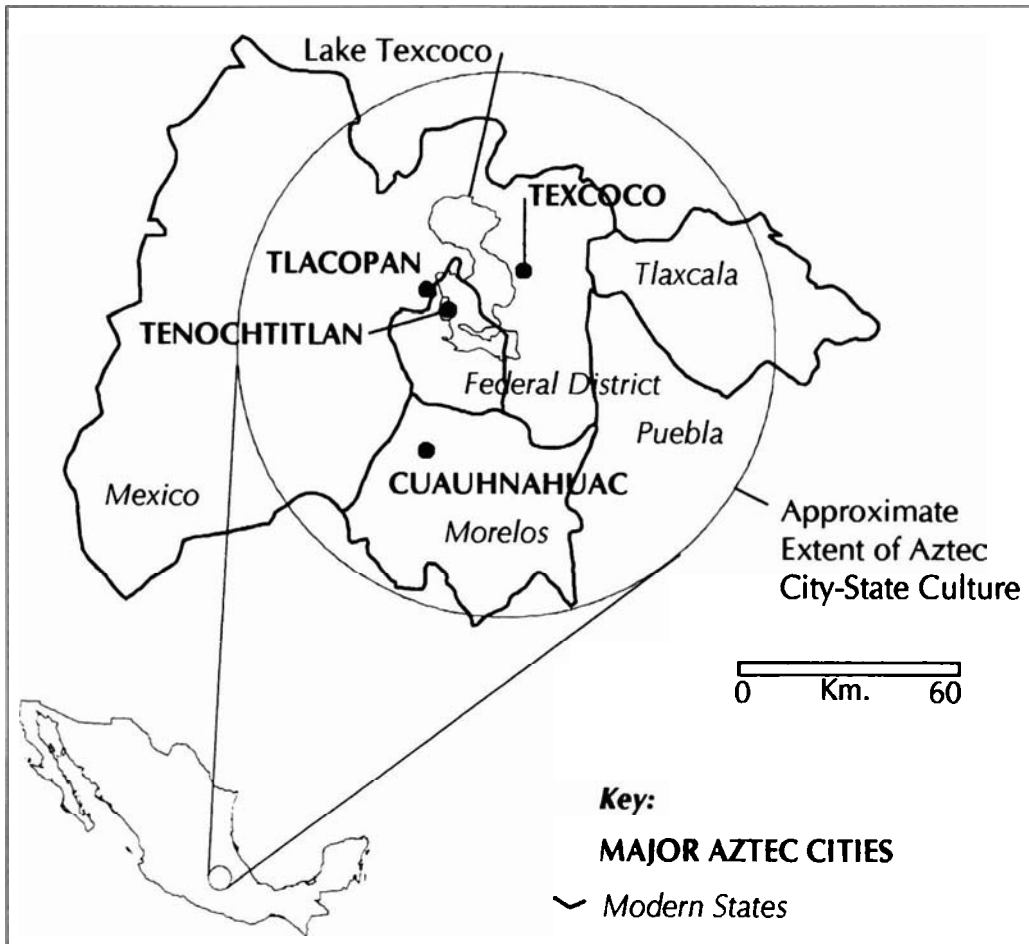


Fig. 1. Map of the extent of Aztec city-state culture in central Mexico.

used by any peoples to refer to themselves. The Nahuatl-speaking peoples of highland central Mexico were divided into a number of ethnic groups, of which the Mexica of Tenochtitlan are the best known. Some scholars use the term Aztecs to refer only to the Mexica ethnic group, and others limit their consideration to the one million inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico. I prefer to expand the concept to cover all of the Nahuatl speakers of central Mexico during the final four centuries before the Spanish conquest. These peoples shared a common culture, of which city-state organization was a significant component. In the first century after the Spanish conquest, many aspects of this shared culture continued to thrive, and James Lockhart (1992) uses the term “Nahuas” to refer to these peoples. My use of Aztecs parallels this usage, but for the pre-Spanish period.

The city-state concept applied to the Aztecs. Scholarship on Aztec political organization was long hindered by some serious errors made by two influential nineteenth-century scholars – Louis Henry Morgan

(1878) and Adolf Bernalier (1880). These scholars misclassified the Aztecs as an egalitarian tribal society similar to the Iroquois of North America. It was not until 1931 that Manuel Moreno proved them wrong by demonstrating the existence of state-level institutions in Aztec society (Moreno [1931]). Other scholars quickly accepted Moreno’s conclusions, and before long published evidence supporting the model of Aztec state-level institutions was extensive (e.g., Bernal [1962]; Vaillant [1941]).

When scholarship turned toward comparative issues in the 1970s, the concept of city-state was widely applied to the Aztec *altepetl* (e.g., Bray [1972]; Calnek [1978]; Licate [1980]). In recent years this usage has become standard among anthropologists (e.g., Berdan *et al.* [1996]; Charlton *et al.* [1991]; Hodge [1984], [1997]; Smith [1996]). Many historians, on the other hand, follow a tradition of highly empirical scholarship that focuses on native terms and concepts and eschews such cross-cultural labels (e.g., Gibson [1964]; Lockhart [1992]; López Austin [1974]; Schroeder [1991]). Although these scholars

do not employ the term city-state, their research provides some of the best evidence for the nature of Aztec city-states. The following discussion of the types of evidence available on Aztec city-states offers the opportunity to review briefly the history of research on the topic.

Clues from Aztec native history. The rulers of Aztec city-states were strongly concerned with the history of their dynasty, and they employed several forms of pictorial documents to record their past. Although very few of these documents, known as “codices”, survive from the pre-Spanish period, scribes continued to paint such histories in the ancient style after the Spanish conquest and many of these have survived. Three types of Aztec painted histories are known: cartographic histories that employ maps to describe events; event-oriented histories that depict important events; and continuous year-count annals that consist of an unbroken line of year symbols with images of important events connected by lines to their appropriate year (Boone [1994], [1999]). Early Spanish chroniclers such as the priests Sahagún and Durán consulted these painted documents and interviewed Aztec nobles and historians to produce narrative accounts of native history. Aztec dynastic history is concerned with the accession, deeds, and deaths of kings, and with information on wars of conquest, migrations, major rituals, and other topics.

Although all city-states maintained their own native historical accounts, the great majority of the surviving examples come from the Mexica dynasty of Tenochtitlan. These sources permit scholars to reconstruct the history of the Mexica (in their own biased words) from poor wandering group to rulers of an empire (e.g., Davies [1973]). Recent studies using native historical sources to analyze political events at Tenochtitlan include Carrasco (1996) and Graulich (1994). Although many of the events and processes in Tenochtitlan’s history were probably shared by other Aztec city-states, this polity was clearly the most unusual Aztec state, limiting the usefulness of most native historical accounts for a general understanding of Aztec city-states.

Spanish administrative documents. To avoid the biases of Mexica official history, scholars turned their attention to Spanish administrative documents from the early colonial period. Records of lawsuits, official inquiries, and other documents provide a wealth of information on city-states outside of Tenochtitlan. Two approaches may be identified within this body of

research. The first approach concentrates on a small number of city-states for which extensive early colonial documentary sources are available. Charles Gibson (1964) pioneered this approach, and the most extensive study is Mary Hodge’s *Aztec City-States* (1984), in which documents from five city-states (Amecameca, Cuauhtitlan, Xochimilco, Coyoacan, and Teotihuacan) are used to examine the internal political organization of each, their relationships with Tenochtitlan, and the nature of variation among the five examples. Among Hodge’s findings are a high degree of complexity in hierarchical relationships among and within city-states. Powerful city-states dominated their weaker neighbors without destroying their governments, and conquest by Tenochtitlan resulted in a variety of types of tributary and administrative organization. In later studies Hodge ([1994], [1997]) developed her analyses more fully, adding archaeological data from the surface reconnaissance projects of Sanders *et al.* (1979). Other studies in this tradition include Cline (1986) and Horn (1997).

A second approach to the analysis of administrative documents considers a limited range of widely-available documents to reconstruct political and territorial organization over large areas. Peter Gerhard’s (1972) massive survey, based on extensive archival research, is the most complete study of this type. He also published a methodological paper on the reconstruction of city-state territories in Morelos (Gerhard [1970]), a study that was later incorporated into my own analysis of Morelos city-states (Smith [1994]). Frances Berdan and I analyzed local territorial organization in the outer provinces of the Aztec empire using a range of published administrative documents (Berdan *et al.* [1996] Appendix 4). This study, discussed at greater length below, suggested that city-states were the norm not just in central Mexico but throughout the entire area of the Aztec empire.

The Aztec concept *Altepetl*. Another line of research, developed primarily by historian James Lockhart and his students (Haskett [1991]; Lockhart [1992]; Schroeder [1991]), involves the use of early Spanish-period administrative documents written in Nahuatl (the Aztec language). This extensive corpus reveals considerable detail about native concepts and views of Aztec city-states. *Altepetl*, defined by Lockhart ([1992] 14) as “an organization of people holding sway over a given territory”, is the Nahuatl term usually translated as “city-state”. These units continued to function in local administration well after the Spanish conquest, and Nahuatl-language documents

from the first century of Spanish rule provide a wealth of information on local social and economic life in the *altepetl*.

Lockhart develops a model of Nahuatl social organization that he calls “cellular or modular organization”, in which there is a “tendency to create larger wholes by the aggregation of parts that remain relatively separate and self-contained brought together by their common function and similarity” (Lockhart [1992] 436). In the case of the *altepetl*, the larger whole consists of an aggregation of smaller, internally-stratified social units known as *calpolli* that join together as equivalent components. Lockhart’s model has interesting implications for the head town of the *altepetl*. Instead of a hierarchical structure where a unit of one type – the capital – controls subordinate units of another type, the head town consists of the combined head settlements of the constituent *calpolli*. The ruler of the *altepetl*, known as a *tlatoani*, was the head of the most influential *calpolli*.³

Archaeological contributions. Recent archaeological fieldwork has illuminated several aspects of Aztec city-states and city-state culture. Mary Hodge ([1994], [1997]) combined archaeological survey results with documentary data to reconstruct the sizes and territorial organization of city-states in the Valley of Mexico. Timothy Hare (1998) is continuing this line of research, using more advanced spatial methods including Geographical Information Systems. The economic organization of city-states, although less heavily emphasized in the study of the *poleis* and other Old World city-states, occupies much of the attention of archaeologists working on Aztec polities. Intensive surface collections at Huexotla (Brumfiel [1980]; Brumfiel [1987a]) and Otumba (Charlton *et al.* [1991]) reveal differentiation in the extent of craft production and specialization in city-state centers in the Valley of Mexico. My own excavations of houses at Yautepec in Morelos reveal aspects of household organization, social class structure, urban economics, and ritual patterns at one city-state center (Smith [1996], [1997b]). Analyses of architecture and artifacts reveal the extent of cultural similarities and differences among Aztec city-states (Hodge [1998]).

Antecedents and Chronology

The first state-level society in central Mexico was based at the large urban center of Teotihuacan (Cowgill [1997]; Millon [1981]). This large metropolis (ca. 150,000 inhabitants) flourished during the Classic

period (ca. AD 100-700) as the center of a modest empire in central Mexico. The Classic period witnessed a major demographic peak in central Mexico as areas were drawn into the political and economic sphere of Teotihuacan. The economic and stylistic influence of this city extended far beyond central Mexico; obsidian tools produced at Teotihuacan have been found at sites throughout Mesoamerica and elements of Teotihuacan architectural style and iconography were adopted by many foreign peoples, particularly the lowland Maya (see Grube, *supra* 553-6).

The fall of Teotihuacan (several centuries before the fall of the Classic Maya city-states) led to the rise of a number of smaller and shorter-lived militaristic states ruled from impressive hilltop fortress-cities such as Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, and Teotenango. These polities in turn collapsed around AD 900, ushering in the Early Postclassic, or Toltec period. This was a period of population decline and ruralization of settlement in most areas, although large cities did flourish at Tula and Cholula. Tula was the home of the Toltec civilization, a culture that the Aztecs looked back to as revered ancestors. Aztec historical accounts contain mythological descriptions of the great achievements of the Toltecs, but these accounts are contradicted by the modest archaeological finds at Tula (Diehl [1983]; Healan [1989]).

Tula and Toltec culture collapsed toward the end of the twelfth century, at about the time that the Aztec peoples were moving into central Mexico from a northern homeland. These migrants arrived in central Mexico at a time of low population and abundant land, and people settled throughout the rich valleys of highland central Mexico, spreading the Nahuatl language. This influx of new population signaled the start of the Early Aztec period, AD 1150-1350 (Table 1). The leaders of the immigrant groups established dynasties whose legitimacy derived from their descent from the Toltec kings. A system of numerous small city-states developed, each with a hereditary king (called a *tlatoani*) who ruled from a town or small city, a hereditary nobility who aided the king, and a mass of commoners who lived scattered throughout the farmland that surrounded the capital. The archaeological chronology of the Aztec period is summarized in Table 1; see the papers in Fowler (1996) for recent research on the topic.

The Early Aztec peoples were divided into a number of different ethnic groups, each located in its own region of central Mexico. The Mexica of Tenochtitlan were the best-known of these groups, which also included the Acolhua of Texcoco, the

Table 1. Archaeological chronology for Aztec city-states.

Period	Dates	Conditions
Toltec	950-1150	Sparse rural settlement
Early Aztec	1150-1350	Growth of city-states
Late Aztec-A	1350-1430	Political consolidation
Late Aztec-B	1430-1520	Expansion of Aztec empire

Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco, and other groups such as the Chalca, Xochimilca, Tlahuica, and Tlaxcalteca. These ethnic groups all spoke Nahuatl, and they shared a common Aztec culture that was expressed in religious, economic, social, and political institutions and practices.

The start of the Late Aztec period (AD 1350-1520) was marked by a population explosion. The Aztec population grew from around 500,000 persons to over 3,000,000. The entire landscape of central Mexico was filled in by settlements, and agricultural practices were greatly intensified to feed the growing population. Competition among city-states escalated, and by 1400 many of them came under the control of small-scale empires centered at Azcapotzalco, Texcoco, Cuauhnahuac, and a few other cities. In a major war in 1428, Tenochtitlan overthrew Azcapotzalco and joined with Texcoco and Tlacopan to form the Triple Alliance or Aztec empire. The division of the Late Aztec period into two subphases, called A and B., coincides with this event. The empire immediately began a process of expansion by military conquest. By the time Cortés arrived in 1519, the Mexica had emerged as the dominant force behind the empire and vast quantities of tribute flowed into Tenochtitlan from all parts of northern and central Mesoamerica.

Because of the vast size and richness of the empire, descriptions of the Aztecs (from the time of the Spanish conquest to the present) stress the empire and imperial institutions in discussions of Aztec political organization. This can be misleading, however, for the city-state remained the primary unit of political organization even under the Aztec empire. The empire was of "hegemonic" form, employing indirect control of its provinces (Berdan *et al.* [1996]; Hassig [1985]), and local kings and institutions were generally left alone as long as they cooperated by sending tribute payments to Tenochtitlan. Within most of its territory, the Aztec empire can be viewed as an overlay upon a foundation of city-states who retained their self-government in the face of reduced external autonomy. The Mexica of Tenochtitlan gained considerable

Table 2. Mean Aztec city-state size.

Note: Area is given in km², density in persons per km².

Category	#cases	Population	Area	Density
<i>Valley of Mexico</i>				
Major polity	1	40,400	120	340
Regular city-state	10	13,500	90	150
<i>Morelos</i>				
Major polity	4	56,100	90	620
Regular city-state	11	7,200	70	100

Sources: Hodge (1997); Smith (1994)

power by the start of the sixteenth century, and under their final *tlatoani*, Motecuhzoma II, they were engaged in a program of political consolidation within the Valley of Mexico. The Mexica were trying to turn the Valley of Mexico into a more tightly integrated state with less power wielded by the local kings, but this process was only incipient (Berdan *et al.* [1996]; Graulich [1994]), and it only affected the Valley of Mexico. In sum, the city-state remained the dominant political form throughout the Aztec empire.

Description of Aztec City-States

There were about 50 city-states in the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest, and Morelos was the setting for another 60 city-states.

Size. The sizes of Aztec city-states varied with the political hierarchy and with location. Table 2 presents mean data on a sample of city-states whose sizes have been estimated from documentary and archaeological data. The highly atypical city-state of Tenochtitlan is not included in this table. Hodge's ([1997], [1994]) data are from the eastern Valley of Mexico; the major polity there is Texcoco (Fig. 2). My own research in Morelos is also represented (Smith [1994]; Gerhard [1970]); the major polities included here are Cuauhnahuac, Yautepec, Huaxtepec, and Yacapitzlan. The Morelos city-states are smaller in both area and population than their counterparts in the Valley of Mexico. The mean population of the major polities in Morelos are greater than Texcoco because they had much denser rural populations.

Urbanization, territory, and settlement patterns. Most Aztec cities today lie buried under modern towns of the same name. Because of the destruction of the Spanish conquest and later colonial and modern urban expansion, few are available for archaeological

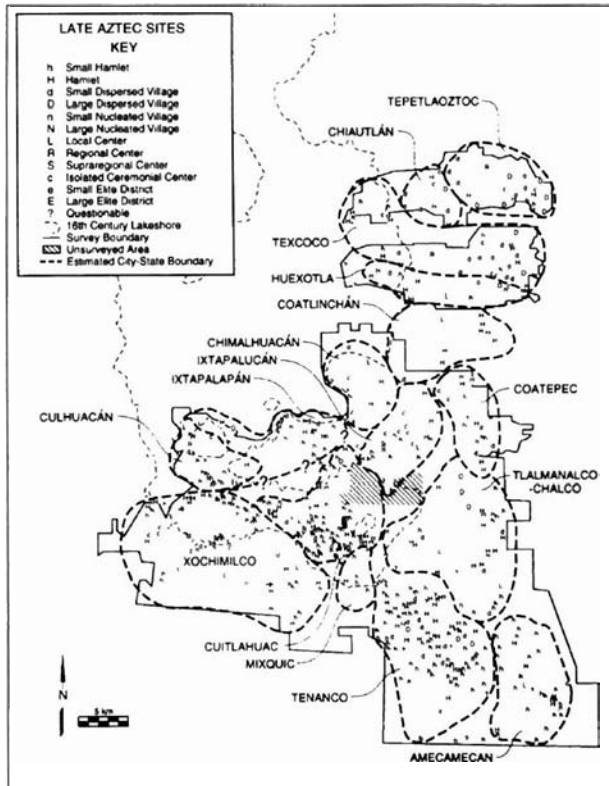


Fig. 2. Map of city-state territories in the southeast Basin of Mexico showing the locations of Late Aztec archaeological sites. From Mary G. Hodge, "When is a City-State? Archaeological Measures of Aztec City-States and Aztec City-State Systems" in *The Archaeology of City-States*, edited by Deborah L. Nichols and Thomas H. Charlton (1997); copyright © 1977 by the Smithsonian Institution Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

study today. The lower levels of modern urbanization and industrialization outside of the Valley of Mexico makes the situation better in areas like Morelos, Toluca and Puebla. There are extensive documentary descriptions of Tenochtitlan, but the imperial capital was highly atypical and this information is of little help in understanding the nature of smaller Aztec cities and towns. Nearly all Aztec cities were the capitals of city-states. There are few if any cases of a polity with more than one large urban settlement. The few cases of major cities that were not capitals were former city-state capitals whose kingship status had been eliminated by the Aztec empire.

Aztec cities exhibit an ancient Mesoamerican form of urban planning in which cities had a carefully planned urban core with large stone buildings, surrounded by an unplanned sprawling residential area (Smith [1997a]). The typical Aztec city was centered on a large, open public plaza. The temple-pyramid of

the city's patron deity was found on the east side of the plaza, with its stairway facing the plaza. The palace of the king, a ballcourt, and sometimes other civic structures occupied the other sides of the plaza. These impressive stone buildings shared a common orientation, often roughly aligned with the cardinal directions. Outside this urban core, houses and patio groups were scattered around, with open areas probably containing fields or gardens located between houses (Smith [1996] chapter 8). It is interesting to note that there is no Nahuatl term for "city". In the native view, it was the *altepetl* or city-state that loomed important in people's minds. The city was simply the place where the palace of the ruler happened to be located.

Tenochtitlan presents another story altogether. Located on an island in Lake Texcoco, the city probably started out much like other Aztec urban centers. Once the Aztec empire was founded, however, the Mexica kings deliberately set out to rebuild Tenochtitlan in the mold of Teotihuacan and Tula, the great ancient imperial capitals in central Mexico (as noted above, Tula was almost certainly *not* an imperial capital, although the Aztecs thought that it had been). They established a strict grid pattern of planning (these are the only three central Mexican cities with such grids) and took specific elements of the architecture and sculpture from these earlier capitals and incorporated them into the design of the center of Tenochtitlan (Umberger [1987], [1996]). In contrast to the traditional open plaza, the Mexica walled off a large sacred precinct with numerous temples, shrines, and other religious and imperial buildings, including the huge Templo Mayor; the royal palaces were then built outside of this sacred precinct. As a result of this imperial redesign and its huge size, Tenochtitlan was atypical of Aztec urban centers. More information may be found in Calnek ([1974], [1976]) and de Rojas (1986).

Table 3. Mean Aztec city size.

Note: Area is given in ha, density in persons per ha.

Category	#cases	Population	Area	Density
<i>Valley of Mexico</i>				
Tenochtitlan	1	212,500	1350	160
Texcoco	1	24,000	450	50
City-state centres	13	9,100	200	60
<i>Morelos</i>				
Major capitals	4	18,400	—	—
City-state centres	6	2,900	13	118

Source: Smith *et al.* (1994).

Like polity size, the size of Aztec cities varied with political hierarchy and location (Table 3). Cities were larger in the Valley of Mexico than in Morelos, and they contained a much higher proportion of the city-state's population as well; an average of 74% of the population lived in the capital in the former area, compared to only 40% in Morelos. Rural settlement varied more by environmental zone than by area. Settlement in highly productive irrigated farmland tended to be more nucleated (to preserve land for cultivation), whereas settlement in hilly terraced areas tended to be dispersed with individual households and household groups living among their terraces (Smith & Price [1994]).

One interesting feature of Aztec territorial organization is that the members of distinct city-states sometimes lived interspersed among one another (Gibson [1964] 44-7). This is illustrated by the city-states of Teotihuacan, Acolman, and Tepexpan in the Teotihuacan Valley of the Basin of Mexico (Fig. 3). This case shows that city-states did not consist of contiguous blocks of territory with firm borders, but rather were composed of people and settlements that were subject to the polity's king (Lockhart [1992]). This principle also worked on higher levels. For example, the Yautepec conquest-state, consisting of city-states subject to the king of Yautepec, included one polity – Huitzillan – that was separated from the rest of the area by an intervening city-state not subject to Yautepec (Smith [1994]). At the highest level, the towns and polities subject to the Aztec empire did not constitute a single contiguous territory; areas of control were separated from other such areas by enemy states, unconquered neutral areas, and sparsely inhabited remote areas. This situation closely resembles the "place-specific" system of the Classic Maya as discussed by Grube (*supra* 552); perhaps this is an ancient and basic pattern of territory in Mesoamerica.

Social classes. The structure and dynamics of Aztec city-states cannot be understood without reference to their class structure. The Aztec nobility was a hereditary group that owned the land and controlled city-state government. There was considerable variation in wealth and power within the Aztec nobility, based upon the political level of the city-state and the closeness of kinship ties to kings. The top nobility lived in large, sumptuous palaces with numerous servants and clients, whereas the lowest nobles probably lived a life little different from many commoners. The nobility was strictly endogamous, and marriages that crossed city-state lines were the norm (see the discus-

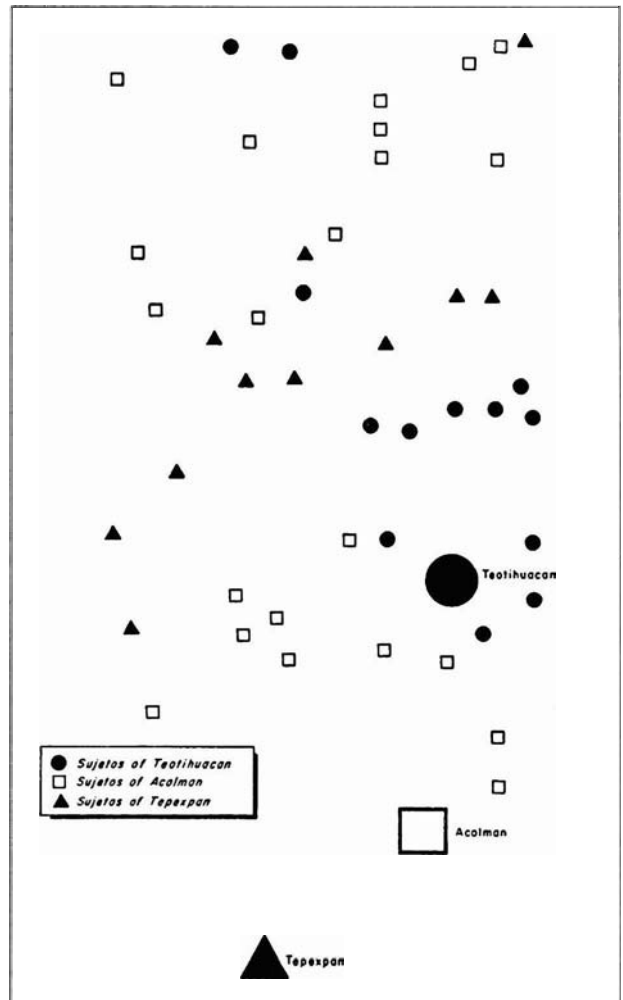


Fig. 3. Map of interspersed subject settlements of three Aztec city-states in the Teotihuacan Valley of the Basin of Mexico. From Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810*. Stanford University Press, Stanford (1964) p. 46. Used by permission of the publisher.

sion of city-state relations below). Nobles composed less than 5% of the population of most city-states. The class interests of the Aztec nobility transcended city-state and imperial organization, and nobles from independent polities (including polities at war) cooperated with one another to preserve and promote their power and privileges. I have argued (Smith [1986]) that the Mexica rulers promoted political distinctions among city-states in order to hide the extent of inter-polity interaction among the ruling class.

One feature in the definition of the extent of a city-state would be the lands controlled by nobles subject to the king. Our understanding of Aztec land tenure has changed significantly in the past two decades. Earlier scholars distinguished the lands of the nobility

from lands controlled by *calpolli*, an organization of commoners who allocated the use of common property. As a result of research on Nahuatl-language documents by Lockhart (1992), Carrasco (1976) and others, we now know that nobles also exerted some form of control over the land and labor of the *calpolli*, and they therefore played a highly influential, if not controlling, role in the allocation and use of all categories of land.

Everyone in Aztec society, except the Mexica emperor, paid tribute of some form. Tribute consisted of goods (agricultural and manufactured) and labor service. All commoners were subject to a noble, some to a local low-ranking noble and some directly to a powerful noble or king. There was a variety of social statuses among commoners, ranging from slaves (a minor category) to “serfs” (landless workers heavily dependent upon a noble) to *calpolli* members (relatively free commoners with access to their own fields by virtue of their membership in a *calpolli*). Lower-ranking nobles paid tribute to their king, and they relied upon the labor of their own commoner subjects to obtain or produce their tribute goods. Finally, kings paid tribute to other kings; in some cases they were subject to a more powerful polity, and in others to the Aztec empire.

Economy. As noted above, land and labor were for the most part controlled by the nobility. But alongside the tribute network existed a flourishing commercial economy based in the marketplaces. This sector of the economy was far more open and less subject to political control than were land and labor. Every Aztec settlement, from the largest city to the smallest village, had a marketplace. Low-order markets in small settlements met periodically (every 5 days in the Aztec calendar) and offered a small range of necessities. Markets in city-state centers met either periodically or daily, and the highest-order markets in large cities met daily. Tenochtitlan’s main market, located in its twin-city Tlatelolco, completely awed the early Spanish conquerors. Cortés wrote that 60,000 people attended this market every day, and his list of goods and services for sale goes on for several pages (for Aztec markets, see Berdan [1985]; Berdan [1988]; Smith [1996] chapter 5). Commercial purchases were facilitated by the use of several forms of money. Small cacao beans served for minor purchases, and cotton textiles of a standard size were used for larger purchases (these textiles were also the primary item of tribute at all levels). Several types of professional merchants worked out of the marketplaces, including the famous

pochteca. Merchants also ran the markets, serving as judges for disputes. The market system was one of the major institutions linking groups of nearby city-states into a common cultural and economic unit.

The role of craft production and specialization in Aztec city-states is a topic of current archaeological research. There appears to have been considerable variation, even within the city-states of the Valley of Mexico. Brumfiel ([1980], [1987b], [1991]) found rather low levels of utilitarian craft production at the city-state centers of Huexotla and Xaltocan, whereas Otumba was a craft production center on a major scale, with numerous workshops producing obsidian blades, bifaces, and jewelry; figurines and other ceramic items, grinding stones; and textiles of cotton and maguey (Charlton *et al.* [1991]). Brumfiel (1987b) has suggested that most utilitarian goods were produced by part-time rural artisans working for the market, whereas luxury goods (such as featherwork, stone sculpture, and gold jewelry) were produced by full-time artisans attached to noble households. With the possible exception of Otumba, this model fits the available data quite well.

Religion. With the exception of the deliberate manipulation of imperial religion by the Mexica in the Late Aztec-B period (see below), the basic patterns of cults and deities appear to have been similar in most city-states. Each city-state had one or more patron gods. The large temple-pyramids where these were worshipped differed little from one city to another. Rituals of human sacrifice were common at all of these temples, and other ritual activities, such as burning incense using long-handled censers, were also widely shared. Alongside the well-described public religion was an active program of domestic ritual using small ceramic figurines, incense burners, and other items; again, these artifacts are highly similar in all parts of Aztec central Mexico (although there are minor regional variations). Like marketplace trade, religion was an important force binding together the various polities that composed Aztec city-state culture.

In the Late Aztec-B period, the Mexica deliberately set out to transform Aztec religion into an imperial religion that glorified and justified their rule. For example, they attempted to raise their patron god Huitzilopochtli, originally a minor deity, into a high creator god by modifying myths and rituals. The Mexica reinforced the linkage between warfare, sacrifice, and personal glory among soldiers in order to co-opt the lower nobility of the Valley of Mexico into their political mission (Brumfiel [1998]). These trans-

formations had little effect on basic city-state religion outside of Tenochtitlan, however.

Government. City-states were ruled by a *tlatoani*, or king. Kings were chosen from among the male members of the royal dynasty by a council of high nobles. Succession was most commonly father-to-son, or brother-to-brother. Eligible nobles had to have distinguished themselves in warfare to be considered for kingship, and one component of the lengthy sequence of installation ceremonies was a special military expedition to gain captives for sacrifice. Kings were expected to lead their forces into battle. Kings were heavily concerned with their ancestry and legitimacy, and they kept painted histories that showed their predecessors. The Aztec kings modified the ancient traditional format of these histories to devise a new form, the continuous year-count annal (Boone [1994]) that effectively kept track of events and royal ancestors with respect to the year-count calendar.

Kings were assisted by high-ranking nobles who organized various aspects of city-state government. The titles of some of these positions have survived, but outside of the Mexica we have little concrete information on their precise duties. There were judges, tribute collectors, high-ranking military officers, and general royal advisors. One unusual aspect of city-state government was the existence of polities with more than one *tlatoani* operating at a single city; recorded cases have two or four kings (Hicks [1986]; van Zantwijk [1985]). Rather than viewing these as polities with multiple kings, it makes more sense to view them as separate polities (i.e., separate *altepetl*) that happen to share an urban center. The place-oriented, or center-oriented nature of Aztec city-states makes this situation understandable.

Citizenship and political identity. The concept of citizenship, derived from the Greek case, is not applicable to Aztec city-states. Membership in polities was defined in terms of relations of subordination to nobles. The population of a city-state consisted of all of the persons, commoners and nobles alike, who were subjects of the king. Nobles clearly had more personal rights and freedoms than commoners, but apart from the basic divisions of social class, all of the members of the *altepetl* can be considered as equivalent city-state members. Recent immigrants and resident foreigners were considered members of a local neighborhood. They paid tribute to their local lord and were therefore members of the city-state alongside the ancient members.

Aztec City-State Culture

The historical and archaeological data on Aztec city-states and their social and cultural context provide a good example of Hansen's model of city-state culture.

Common culture. Nahuatl was the dominant language for all of the Aztec city-states. Although there were minor dialectical differences within the region (Canger [1988]), speakers from one part of central Mexico had little or no difficulty understanding those from other areas. There was little linguistic distinction among the various Nahuatl ethnic groups. Other linguistic groups were present; some of these were remnants of the original populations before the arrival of the Nahuatl speakers (e.g., Otomi in the northern Valley of Mexico), and others were immigrants in the final centuries before the Spanish conquest (e.g., Mixtecs in Tenochtitlan). Nevertheless, Nahuatl was the "*lingua franca*" for diverse groups in both central Mexico and the outer imperial provinces.

Archaeology furnishes evidence of a number of elements of common culture and provides time depth to our understanding of regional cultural patterns. I have suggested the existence of a "Central Mexican Post-classic Ceramic Tradition" (Smith [n.d.a]), a distinctive association of ceramic forms and wares that characterizes sites in central Mexico in the Early and Late Aztec periods. Although ceramics were manufactured separately in each region of central Mexico and local wares are usually easily distinguishable, the various regions share a number of traits that indicate similar patterns of food preparation, serving of food and drink, and domestic ritual. There were also common patterns in the architecture of temples and elite residences across Aztec central Mexico.

Distinctive regional patterns of material culture existed within the larger framework of Aztec city-state culture. For example, I have identified two levels of material patterning in the distinctive polychrome painted ceramics of Aztec-period Morelos (Smith [n.d.a]). At the larger level, members of the Tlahuica ethnic group throughout the area of Morelos produced and used several kinds of ceramics decorated in the "Tlahuica polychrome style" that is easily differentiated from ceramic styles in the Valley of Mexico and other regions of central Mexico. This style cut across the various city-states and conquest-states of Morelos. On a smaller scale, regions within the Tlahuica area produced vessels with distinctive varieties of the Tlahuica polychrome style, and these were traded both within and between polities. One could view the Tlahuica area of Morelos as a small-scale city-state

culture within the larger Aztec city-state culture. The Tlahuica culture was integrated by common ethnicity, as expressed in the Tlahuica polychrome style, and by marketplace exchange of decorated ceramics and other goods.

Developmental context. State-level societies had been present in central Mexico for well over a millennium when the migrating Aztec peoples arrived in the Valley of Mexico. Nevertheless, the immediately preceding Toltec period was a time of low populations and few large urban centers. Archaeological surveys show that this was the most heavily ruralized time in the entire history of the Valley of Mexico (Sanders *et al.* [1979] 138). Unfortunately there is little concrete evidence for political organization at this time. Many scholars have accepted Aztec myths at face value to the effect that the Toltecs controlled a powerful empire. Yet when a set of objective material correlates of ancient empires is applied to the Toltec case, it becomes clear that there is no evidence for such an empire, unlike the cases of Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan where there is abundant material evidence for empires and imperialism (Smith & Montiel [n.d.]). The most likely scenario is that the Toltec polity was a localized small state, and that other parts of central Mexico were characterized by weak, decentralized polities. Aztec city-state culture was thus preceded not by the “pre-state” conditions of Hansen’s model (*supra* 17, 4a), but rather by conditions of low populations with weak polities and few cities.

The arrival of the Aztec migrants in the twelfth century was accompanied by the immediate establishment of city-states, and this began a four-century period of sustained economic prosperity in central Mexico. After a five-century period of arid conditions, rainfall increased after AD 1100 (Metcalf *et al.* [1989]; O’Hara *et al.* [1994]). This return to wetter conditions was accompanied by a major population surge throughout central Mexico (Smith [1996] 59-64), due partly to the Aztec migrations and partly to natural increase. Settlement expanded across the landscape along with intensified agricultural methods, including canal irrigation on riverplains, raised fields (*chinampas*) in swamps, and stone terracing on the innumerable hillsides.

Commerce expanded through the operation of several institutions, including periodic marketplaces, several types of professional merchants, and the use of currency. Archaeologists have documented extensive trade in ceramics, obsidian, textiles, salt, bronze, jade, and many other goods. These imported goods, in-

cluding many costly items, found their way to the houses of commoners as well as elites, and to rural as well as urban settlements. Elaborate painted ceramic serving ware was heavily traded in the markets, and virtually all domestic groups in my excavations had access to imported serving ware from several foreign areas. For example, the fanciest decorated ceramics in central Mexico were polychrome serving vessels from Cholula, which were the only vessels that the Mexica emperor Motecuhzoma would use for his meals. Yet sherds of this ceramic type turn up in even the smallest peasant house in Morelos. The overall impression from my excavations of Aztec houses in Morelos is one of economic prosperity (Smith [1997b]), and this judgment can probably be applied to other areas as well.

The Early Aztec period was a time of significant urbanization in central Mexico. There was a near-complete disjunction in settlement location between the Toltec and Early Aztec periods; in other words, most Toltec sites were abandoned, and the Aztec peoples established new settlements in other locations. Some Early Aztec city-state centers were probably relatively small towns with low-level urban functions, but others quickly grew into large cities with impressive public architecture (examples of large Early Aztec cities include Tenayuca and Teopanzolco). In short, this was a time of significant urbanization in central Mexico.

By the Late Aztec-B period, the period of prosperity was coming to a close. In many areas populations continued to grow beyond a safe level, and conditions of famine and malnutrition set in. Although scholars have debated the level of health, nutrition, and physical well-being of the Aztecs, it now appears that there were significant problems in the final century before the Spanish conquest. Famines were a regular occurrence, and a large portion of the commoner population was probably at risk during seasons of less than normal rainfall (Whitmore & Williams [1998]). This coincides with the attempts of the Mexica rulers to consolidate their control and strip nearby city-state kings in the Valley of Mexico of much of their power (Graulich [1994]), a process that was still only incipient when Cortés and his army arrived in 1519.

Relations among city-states. Nearby city-states engaged in several types of peaceful interactions. Individual city-states were not self-sufficient, and trade across polity borders was commonplace. It was probably not unusual for people to travel to a market in an adjacent city-state (see discussion of markets

above). City-state nobles engaged in a number of types of interaction with their counterparts in other polities. Marriages across city-state lines was common, and among royalty such marriages forged carefully-arranged alliances. A basic pattern was for a king to marry the daughter of a higher-ranking king (Carrasco [1984]). The rise to power of the Mexica can be traced by the nature of their royal marriages. Early in their history, before defeating the Tepanecs, the Mexica king Huitzilihuitl married daughters of virtually all of the powerful Aztec kings. After achieving imperial success, however, the situation was reversed and kings all over Mesoamerica wanted to marry the daughters of the Mexica rulers. Nobles also visited one another across city-state lines. State ceremonies such as coronations, royal funerals, and temple dedications were occasions for large gatherings of nobles from diverse city-states. These events included ceremonial gift-giving, banquets, theatrical presentations, speeches, and other customs of hospitality and friendship.

Not all relations among city-states were peaceful, however. Kings constantly led their armies to battle against their neighbors. The goal of these wars was to defeat another king and force him to pay tribute. Defeated kings were left in office and their governments were rarely interfered with – they merely had to pay a set amount of tribute, arranged at a ceremony after the battle. As in most city-state cultures, the Aztec political and military situation was quite dynamic and volatile. Alliances were formed and broken, subject polities turned the tables on their superiors, intrigue was endemic, and no political situation was stable for long. As time went on, however, higher levels of organization crystallized in many areas as groups of nearby city-states became linked together through alliances and/or conquests. Unfortunately our knowledge of these structures is minimal. Eventually the Aztec empire was formed out of the same dynamics, and its organization is much better known.

Hodge ([1984] 139-140, [1997]) has termed groups of related city-states in the Valley of Mexico “confederations”. She notes that “confederations, or leagues, had long-standing diplomatic interaction and were formed for mutual defense” (Hodge [1984] 139). The locations of those confederations correspond closely to the major Aztec ethnic groups in the Valley of Mexico (Hodge [1997] 213). In the Late Aztec-A period, two of these groups – the Acolhua based in Texcoco and the Tepaneca based in Azcapotzalco – conquered most of their neighbors to achieve the

status of small empires. This was the context of the Tepanec war in which the Mexica defeated the Tepaneca and established their empire. The traditional interpretation of the empire as a “triple alliance” of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, (another example of a super-city-state alliance structure) has recently been challenged by Susan Gillespie (1998), who sees it as a post-conquest invention that masks the dominant role played by Tenochtitlan all along. In Morelos, I have termed super-city-state groups *conquest-states*, since they seem to have arisen through military expansion. The major capitals, such as Cuauhnahuac and Yautepec, conquered nearby city-states and forced them to pay tribute while leaving their dynasties in place.

There appear to have been several forms of these hierarchical structures in existence, some formed by conquest and some through alliances. In all cases, the constituent city-states retained their internal government and local control so long as they paid tribute to the superordinate polity. This pattern is similar to that proposed by Grube (*supra* 549-50) for the Classic Maya. In comparing the Aztec and Maya cases, there may be an analogy between the Aztec institution of kingship, the *tlatoani*, and the Maya institution of the emblem glyph. Both cases fit Hansen’s general city-state model that stresses self-government but not independence as the essential characteristic of city-states and city-state cultures.

City-State, Empire, and World System

The wider context of Aztec city-states. As noted above, the expansion of the Aztec empire did not lead to the destruction of its subject city-states. In fact, Aztec imperialism may have strengthened city-state rule in the provinces. The methods of indirect control used by the empire are well known (Berdan *et al.* [1996]; Carrasco [1996]; Hassig [1985]; Hassig [1988]), and can be summarized by saying that conquered kings were left in power as long as they cooperated with the empire by paying their quota of tribute. In fact, conquered kings may have benefited from their participation in the empire (Smith [1986]). The empire seems to have supported its subject kings if their rule was threatened, and there are cases of local conquest-states continuing to expand by conquest even after incorporation into the empire. Imperial tribute demands were simply passed on to a king’s noble and commoner subjects. A king could raise his local tribute levies beyond imperial quotas while safe in the knowledge that the empire would help support

his reign against dissent. The political reforms of Motecuhzoma II that were designed to centralize rule at Tenochtitlan at the expense of Valley of Mexico city-states had only begun when Cortés arrived, and city-states remained strong.

The Aztec empire was not the only large-scale institution affecting city-states. Aztec central Mexico was an active participant in a larger Mesoamerican world system (Carmack [1996]; Smith [n.d.b]; Smith & Berdan [2000]). I should note here that I use Chase-Dunn & Hall's (1997) world systems approach for precapitalist societies (see also Abu-Lughod [1989]) rather than Wallerstein's (1974) original formulation which has questionable usefulness for the ancient world. The Postclassic Mesoamerican world system involved the extensive exchange of goods and ideas over long distances and across political borders. There was a higher volume of long-distance commerce in Postclassic times than in earlier periods, and distinctive polychrome painting styles and iconographic symbols spread over much of Mesoamerica. This economic and stylistic interaction had significant impacts on local societies throughout Mesoamerica.

The Basin of Mexico was one of several core zones within the Mesoamerican world system. Compared to peripheral regions, this zone had higher populations, more economic activity, more extensive urbanization, and larger, more powerful polities. One of the major effects of the growth of long-distance commerce in Postclassic Mesoamerica was to contribute to the general situation of economic prosperity by furthering local production and exchange. The conditions of prosperity described above for Aztec city-states both contributed to the operation of the larger world system and benefited from world system processes. In my own archaeological research on Aztec households in Morelos, I have identified the sudden appearance of exotic imports (bronze tools from west Mexico and jade jewelry from southern Mesoamerica) in the Late Aztec-A phase with the entry of this area into the Postclassic world system. This process had a greater effect on households than did conquest by the Aztec empire (in the Late Aztec-B period). The former process was part of a significant trend of prosperity and economic expansion involving new access to exotic luxury goods, greater quantities of intermediate-distance imports such as decorated pottery and obsidian, and increased production of cotton textiles and other goods. Conquest by the Aztec empire was marked by a decline in imported goods along with continued increases in textile production (at least partially in response to increased tribute demands),

but these changes were of lower magnitude than the earlier changes (Smith [n.d.b]).

The Postclassic world system also affected societies in other parts of Mesoamerica, and it may have contributed to the development of city-state cultures in many regions.

Other city-state cultures in postclassic Mesoamerica. The limited evidence available from other regions of Mesoamerica in Postclassic times suggests that city-states were the predominant political form in many or most areas. In our research for the book, *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (Berdan *et al.* [1996]), Frances Berdan and I examined published administrative documents for the entire territory of the Aztec empire. Although the evidence is thin for many areas, the *Relaciones Geográficas* (Acuña [1984-87]) are a standardized, informative source, and Gerhard (1972) has summarized many unpublished archival documents. Our goal was to reconstruct local territorial organization in each area, and then to examine the impact of Aztec imperialism. We found that small polities or city-states were the norm for almost the entire area of the Aztec empire. Most regions contained one or more major languages and a common regional culture, but were divided up into numerous small polities, each ruled by a king. Multiple-level hierarchies of city-states were not uncommon, with the regular pattern of subordinate polities retaining their kings while paying tribute to the dominant king. These regional units were probably city-state cultures. We identified and mapped over 500 individual city-states in the outer provinces of the Aztec empire.

The Mixtec of Oaxaca are the best-documented Postclassic city-state culture after the Aztecs (see Lind, *supra* 567-80). For other areas of Postclassic Mesoamerica outside of the Aztec empire the picture is less clear. Small Late Postclassic polities in northern Yucatan have received considerable attention from ethnohistorians. Roys (1972) identified several types of these polities varying in their degree of political complexity and cohesion. Labelled with the unfortunate term "provinces" in the literature (Marcus [1993]; Roys [1972]), these polities appear to resemble city-states in many ways. The expansionist Postclassic Maya polities of highland Guatemala were larger than most Postclassic city-states, and they tended to coincide with language groups (Carmack [1981]; Fox [1987]); for these reasons the city-state model may not apply here. With the exception of the Tarascan core zone around Lake Pátzcuaro in Michoacan, the political situation in Postclassic western

Mexico is poorly known. The Pátzcuaro Basin was divided into several competing polities that resemble city-states, but the expansion of the strongly-centralized Tarascan empire based in Tzintzuntzan appears to have destroyed the city-state system in this area (Pollard [1993]; Pollard [1997]).

In summary, city-state cultures characterized much, but not all, of Mesoamerica in Postclassic times. The widespread growth of exchange and interaction in the Postclassic world system was both a cause and a consequence of expanding prosperity in many areas, and this prosperity was one of the conditions that stimulated the development of city-states and city-state cultures.

The end of Aztec city-states. Aztec city-states did not come to an end with the Spanish conquest. The establishment of Spanish rule in Mesoamerica ended some of the practices and institutions of city-states, particularly in the realms of warfare and state religion. But many other features lived on. Control of many local affairs continued to reside in the *altepetl*, which survived as a dynamic if changed institution under Spanish rule (Lockhart [1992]). In drawing up political boundaries in the colony of New Spain (for *encomiendas*, towns, etc.) the Spaniards relied extensively on pre-existing territorial structures. This practice promoted the continued functioning of aspects of city-states, and it also helps scholars reconstruct city-state territories from early colonial documents. In many areas these territorial structures were quite long-lived (Hunt & Nash [1967]), and today many *municipio* (township) borders in central Mexico can be traced back to Aztec city-states. But while important aspects of Aztec city-states survived the Spanish conquest, Aztec city-state culture did not survive. Spanish New Spain was a colony of a western territorial empire, and those aspects of city-states that continued to function did so only within the confines of Spanish political control.

Notes

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and Susan Evans. I dedicate this paper to the memory of the late Mary G. Hodge, pioneer scholar of Aztec city-states.

2. Additional documentation of many of the points made in this paper may be found in Smith (1996) and Hodge (1984), (1997).
3. Among the many insights generated by Lockhart's research on Nahuatl-language documents is the correction of a long-standing fallacy that plagues many general accounts of Aztec society. When Spanish administrators and chroniclers asked the Aztec nobility about their duties and obligations in pre-conquest times, the nobles responded that they had been exempt from tribute. This lie has made its way into the historical literature on the Aztecs, where many recent works state that commoners paid tribute but nobles did not. Nahuatl-language documents studied by Lockhart, however, make it clear that Aztec nobles did indeed pay tribute in ancient times (Lockhart [1992] 106). Their descendants lied to the Spaniards for their own benefit, and the Spaniards went along, either through ignorance or because they needed the cooperation of the native nobility in order to govern their new colony effectively.

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