

HUMAN SACRIFICE AMONG THE AZTECS 1590

— José de Acosta —

When the Spanish first came to Mexico in the early 1500s, the Aztecs were the dominant civilization in the region. Religion was an important aspect of the Aztec culture. The Aztec worshipped numerous gods and according to ritual, offered human sacrifices to their gods. In the following account, a 16th-century Jesuit missionary describes the Aztec ritual of human sacrifice.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

Based on this account, what is your impression of the Aztec religion?

In truth the Mexicans did not sacrifice any to their Idols, but Captives, and the ordinary warres they made, was onely to have Captives for their Sacrifices: and therefore when they did fight, they laboured to take their enemies alive, and not to kill them, to enjoy their Sacrifices . . . The manner they used in these Sacrifices, was, they assembled within the Palissadoe¹ of dead mens Sculles such as should be sacrificed, using a certayne Ceremony at the foot of the Palissadoe, placing a great guard about them. Presently there stept forth a Priest, attyred with a short Surplice full of tassels beneath, who came from the top of the Temple with an Idoll made of Paste of Wheate and Mays mingled with Honey, which had the eyes made of the graines of greene glasse, and the teeth of the graines of Mays, he descended the steps of the Temple with all the speed he could, and mounted on a great stone planted upon a high Terrasse in the midst of the Court. This stone was called Quauxicalli, which is to say, the stone of Eagle, whereon he mounted by a little Ladder, which was in the fore-part of the Terrasse, and descended by another staire on the other side, still imbracing his Idoll. Then did he mount to the place where those were that should be sacrificed, shewing this Idoll to every one in particular, saying unto them; this is your God. And having ended his shew, he descended by the other side of the staires, and all such as should dye, went in procession unto the place where they should bee sacrificed, where they found the Ministers ready for that Office. The ordinary manner of sacrificing was, to open the stomake of him that was sacrificed, and having pulled out his heart halfe alive, they tumbled the man downe the staires of the Temple, which were all imbrewed and defiled with blood: And to make it the more plaine, sixe Sacrificers being appointed to this dignitie, came into the place of Sacrifice, foure to hold the hands and feet of him that should be sacrificed, the fift to hold his head, and the sixt to

1. Palissadoe: an enclosure

open his stomake, and to pull out the heart of the sacrificed. They called them Chachalmua, which in our Tongue is as much, as the Ministers of holy things. It was a high dignitie and much esteemed amongst them, wherein they did inherit and succeed as in a Fee-simple. The Minister who had the Office to kill, which was the sixt amongst them, was esteemed and honoured as the Sovereigne Priest and Bishop, whose name was different, according to the difference of times and Solemnities. Their habits were likewise divers when they came forth to the Sacrifice, according to the diversitie of times. The name of their chiefe dignitie was Papa and Topilzin, their Habite and Robe was a red Curtayne after the Dalmatike fashion,² with tassels below, a Crowne of rich Feathers, greene, white, and yellow upon his head, and at his eares like pendants of Gold, wherein were set greene stones, and under the lip upon the middest of the beard he had a Pece like unto a small Canon of an azured stone. These Sacrificers came with their faces and hands coloured with a shining blacke. The other five had their haire much curled, and tyed up with Laces of Leather, bound about the middest of the head: upon their forehead they carried small Roundelets of Paper painted with divers colours, and they were attyred in a Dalmatike Robe of white, wrought with blacke. With this attyre they represented the very figure of the Devill, so as it did strike feare and terrour into all the people, to see them come forth with so horrible a representation. The Sovereigne Pricst carried a great Knife in his hand, of a large and sharpe flint: another Priest carried a collar of wood wrought in forme of a Snake: All six put themselves in order, joyning to this Pyramidall stone, whereof I have spoken, being directly against the doore of the Chappell of their Idoll. This stone was so pointed, as the man which was to be sacrificed, being laid thereon, upon his backe, did bend in such sort, as letting the Knife but fall upon his stomack it opened very easily in the middest. When the Sacrificers were thus in order, they drew forth such as had beene taken in warre, which were to bee sacrificed at that Feast, and being accompanied with a guard of men all naked, they caused them to mount up these large staires in ranke, to the place where the Ministers were prepared: and as every one of them came in their order, the six Sacrificers tooke the Prisoner, one by one foote, another by the other, and one by one hand, another by the other, casting on his backe upon this pointed stone, where the fift of these Ministers put the collar of wood about his necke, and the High Priest opened his stomack with the Knife, with a strange dexteritie and nimblenesse, pulling out his heart with his hands, the which hee shewed smoking unto the Sunne, to whom hee did offer this heate and fume of the heart, and presently he turned towards the Idoll and did cast the heart at the face, then did they cast away the body of the sacrificed, tumbling it downe the staires of the Temple, the stone being set so neere the staires, as there were not two foote space betwixt the stone and the first step, so as with one spurne with their foote, they cast the bodie from the top to the botome. In this sort one after one they did sacrifice all those that were appointed. Being thus slaine, and their bodies cast downe, their Masters, or such as had taken

2. Dalmatike fashion: in the style of garments worn by some European priests

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them, went to take them up, carried them away; then having divided them amongst them, they did eate them, celebrating their Feast and Solemnitie. There were ever fortie or fiftie at the least thus sacrificed, for that they had men very expert in taking them. The neighbour Nations did the like, imitating the Mexicans in the Customes and Ceremonies of the Service of their Gods.

Source: Excerpt from *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* by José de Acosta, 1590, translated in *Purchas His Pilgrimes* by Samuel Purchas, 1625 (Glasgow: J. MacLehose and Sons, 1905).

Columbus' Journal

Sunday, 23 September 1492

"I sailed NW and sometimes NW by north, and sometimes on my original westerly course, making about 66 miles. I saw a dove, a tern, another small river bird, and some white birds. There is a lot of weed and I have seen more crabs in it. The crew is still grumbling about the wind. When I get a wind from the SW or west it is inconstant, and that, along with a flat sea, has led the men to believe that we will never get back home."

Monday, 24 September 1492

". . . I am having serious trouble with the crew, despite the signs of land that we have seen and those given to us by Almighty God. In fact, the more God shows the men manifest signs that we are near land, the more their impatience and inconstancy increases, and the more indignant they become against me. All day long and all night long those who are awake and able to get together never cease to talk to each other in circles, complaining that they will never be able to return home. They have said that it is insanity and suicidal on their part to risk their lives following the madness of a foreigner. They have said that not only am I willing to risk my life just to become a great Lord, but that I have deceived them to further my ambition. They have also said that because my proposition has been contradicted by so many wise and lettered men who considered it vain and foolish, they may be excused for whatever might be done in the matter. Some feel that they have already arrived where men have never dared to sail and that they are not obliged to go to the end of the world, especially if they are delayed anymore and will not have sufficient provisions to return. I am told by a few trusted men (and these are few in number!) that if I persist in going onward, the best course of action will be to throw me into the sea some night. They will then affirm that I fell overboard while taking the position of the North Star with my quadrant. Since I am a foreigner, little or no account will be asked of the matter, but rather, there will be a great many who will swear that God had given me my just desserts on account of my rashness. . . . I am . . . confident that if I lose command, the fleet will never reach the Indies and will probably never get back to Spain. With God's help I shall persevere."