

# Aztec Human Sacrifice:

a ritual for dietary  
necessity or

a ritual to  
demonstrate  
hierarchy  
power?



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**Introduction:** The exact answers to why the Aztecs performed human sacrifices are still debatable today. Archaeologists continue to do research and test hypotheses to better understand the reason(s) behind the ritual. Our group has split our speculations into two arguments.

**Argument 1:** Human sacrifice was utilized to fulfill the need for nutrition. Whether it be because of scarceness of food availability or because of a dietary choice, the Aztec culture practiced this ritual to satisfy cannibalistic habits.

**Argument 2:** Human sacrifice was used by Aztec hierarchies, such as chiefs and priests, to set an example to the people of their empire. Whether it be sacrificing a captive enemy or sacrificing a citizen to appease the gods, the people in power demonstrated how much authority they possessed through practicing this ritual.

**Brief Aztec History:** Strong and terrifying, the Aztec empire set down its central roots in Mesoamerica; present day known as Mexico City or the center of Mexico. In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Aztec capital city was built upon “small islands and marsh lands” surrounded by a lake; this place was named Tenochtitlán (Aguilar-Moreno 2007) (Figure 1).

“At the time of the Spanish conquest in 1521, the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán was among the largest cities in the world, with perhaps as many as 200,000 inhabitants. In less than 200 years, it evolved from a small settlement on an island in the western swamps of Lake Texcoco into the powerful political, economic, and religious center of the greatest empire of Precolumbian Mexico” (King 2000).

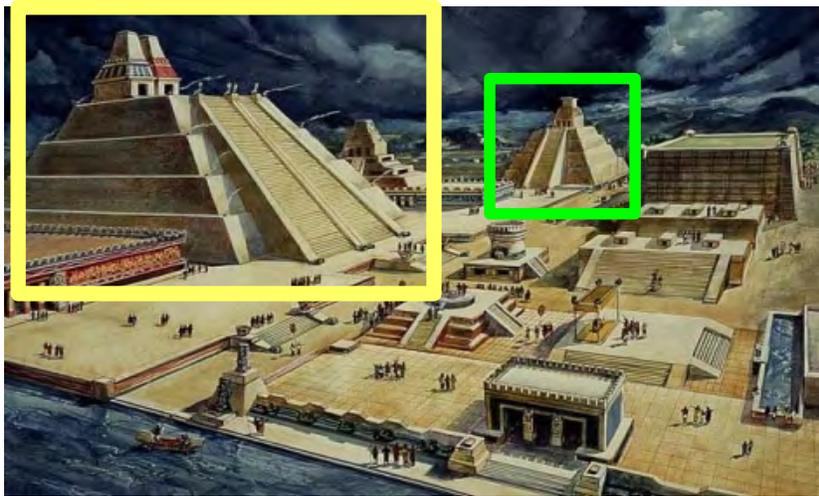
Precolumbian meaning the Aztec empire was established before the arrival of Columbus in America.



Figure 1: An artist's rendition of Lake Texcoco and the capital city of the Aztec empire. The “Map of Tenochtitlan”, a mural painting from the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Painted in 1930.

**Sacrificial Architecture:** Monumental pyramids were built throughout the Aztec empire. These structures stood roughly 100-300ft tall and were built upon other existing pyramids. There are three major types of Aztec pyramids:

- “Twin stair pyramids, such as Temple Mayor, have two temples on the top, each dedicated to its own deity, and a double staircase. These pyramids feature a square base shape” (Figure 2) (Harms 2012) .
- “Round pyramids, which were dedicated to Quetzalcoatl (Figure 4), the god of wind, were less common” (Figure 2) (Harms 2012).
- “Finally, smaller cities built later in the Aztec history had pyramids with just one temple and one set of stairs. Like the twin stair pyramids, the single stair pyramids also have a square base” (Figure 3) (Harms 2012).



(Left) Figure 2: The yellow box encompasses the “double staircase” pyramid “Temple Mayor” while the green box encompasses an example of a “single stair” pyramid.

(Below) Figure 3: An example of a round pyramid. “The Temple of Quetzalcoatl in Calixtlahuaca (Mexico). Aztec Civilization, 14th Century AD. / De Agostini Picture Library / G. Dagli Orti / The Bridgeman Art Library”.



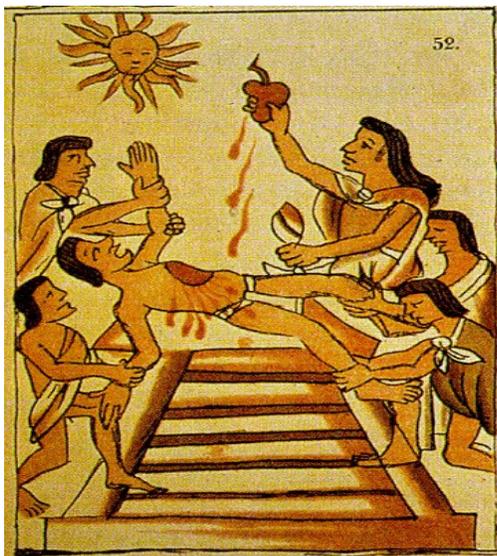
(Above) Figure 4: Quetzalcoatl. The “ feathered Serpent”.

With these great pyramids came temples. Temples that were positioned at the tops of these great monuments and represented a theatrical stage of sorts. When it came down to where the sacrificing took place, there would be a stone slab positioned for the viewing of spectators below. Almost like a table of sorts, these stone slabs awaited its next sacrifice. Some carvings/cuts/indentations in some of the stone slabs suggest that blood was suppose to cascade down these sacrificial tables further backing the representation of the temple, and pyramid itself, being a theatrical stage (Figure 5).



Figure 5: A sacrificial stone. The black box represents a possible drainage slit for blood to cascade. “Keystone-Mast Collection, UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California at Riverside. “

**Practices of Human Sacrifice:** Artistic renderings of human sacrifice depict a single person laid across a stone slab and held down by priests (Figure 6). When the ritual starts, the head priest, or maybe even a chief, would have cut through the sacrifices chest to reveal the still beating heart (Figure 7). With much enthusiasm, the heart would have been ripped out of the chest and hoisted up in the air for spectacle (Figure 6).



(Left) Figure 6: An artistic depiction of Aztec human sacrifice.

(Bottom) Figure 7: A graphic illustration of a possible Aztec method of abstracting a human heart with a knife made out of flint.



But this was not the only form of human sacrifice, the sport known as the “Mesoamerican Ballgame” was also a used (Aguilar-Moreno 2007). This formal version of this ritual ballgame was the best kind of entertainment. The formal version being not recreation and an actual schedule game. The players of the game kept one thing in mind, winner takes it all. Because losing meant facing the possibility of being sacrificed based on certain factors. Whether it be to entertain a crowd of spectators or to appease the gods. Players couldn't take any chances and they had to play the game with the best of their skills (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Mesoamerica Ballgame rendition.

**Aztec Ritual View Today:** This empire supposedly ruled with an iron fist and its ritual tactics were revered throughout the region. As such, these people are known today to have been vicious in their practices of human sacrifice. Proof of this belief can be seen in Hollywood motion pictures and present day “scholarly literature” (Smith 556). But, even today, with extensive archaeological research, many people still speculate the reasons behind the Aztec practice of human sacrifice.

**A Ritual for Dietary Necessity:** The possibility that the Aztec people sacrificed humans to fill dietary needs, is not far fetched.

“Evidence of Aztec cannibalism has been largely ignored or consciously or unconsciously covered up. For example, the major twentieth-century books on the Aztecs barely mention it; others bypass the subject completely. Probably some modern Mexicans and anthropologists have been embarrassed by the topic: the former partly for nationalistic reasons; the latter partly out of a desire to portray native peoples in the best possible light. Ironically, both these attitudes may represent European ethnocentrism regarding cannibalism -- a viewpoint to be expected from a culture that has had relatively abundant livestock for meat and milk” (Harner 1977)

Evidence of war related human sacrifice can also be seen through the practices of offerings and feasts at the end of ceremonies.

“According to these early accounts, some sacrificial victims were not eaten, such as children offered by drowning to the rain god, Tlaloc, or persons suffering skin diseases. But the overwhelming majority of the sacrificed captives apparently were consumed. A principal -- and sometimes only -- objective of Aztec war expeditions was to capture prisoners for sacrifice. While some might be sacrificed and eaten on the field of battle, most were taken to home communities or to the capital, where they were kept in wooden cages to be fattened until sacrificed by the priests

at the temple-pyramids. Most of the sacrifices involved tearing out the heart, offering it to the sun and, with some blood, also to the idols (Figure 9). The corpse was then tumbled down the steps of the pyramid and carried off to be butchered. The head went on the local skull rack, displayed in central plazas alongside the temple-pyramids. At least three of the limbs were the property of the captor if he had seized the prisoner without assistance in battle. Later, at a feast given at the captor's quarters, the central dish was a stew of tomatoes, peppers, and the limbs of his victim. The remaining torso, in Tenochtitlán at least, went to the royal zoo where it was used to feed carnivorous mammals, birds, and snakes" (Harner 1977).

Cannibalism was used to solve lacking dietary needs.

"Through cannibalism, the Aztecs appear to have been attempting to reduce very particular nutritional deficiencies. Under the conditions of high population pressure and class stratification that characterized the Aztec state, commoners or lower-class persons rarely had the opportunity to eat any game, even the domesticated turkey, except on great occasions. They often had to content themselves with such creatures as worms and snakes and an edible lake-surface scum called "stone dung," which may have been algae fostered by pollution from Tenochtitlán. Preliminary research seems to indicate that although fish and waterfowl were taken from the lakes, most of the Aztec poor did not have significant access to this protein source and were forced to be near-vegetarians, subsisting mainly on domesticated plant foods such a maize and beans" (Harner 1977).



Figure 9: A depiction of a gruesome human sacrificial ritual.

**A Ritual to Demonstrate Hierarchy Power:** It's hard to believe that an organized and powerful culture could run out of food, but it's not impossible to believe in the practice of cannibalism. Since the Aztec priests, or chiefs, sacrificed humans to obtain bodily organs. They had nothing else to do with the body. Most of the times, after a sacrifice, the left over body would have been thrown down the steps and left to whom ever wanted it. But, since our argument is about hierarchy power, we believe that cannibalism could have been utilized by priests, or chiefs, to make a statement to the Aztec people. One of the ultimate ways of showing power, eat something that is believed to be good enough for the gods.

“The greatest amount of cannibalism, however, coincided with times of harvest, not with periods of scarcity, and is better explained as a thanksgiving. Tenochtitlan received large quantities of food tribute and engaged in intensive (chinampa) agriculture. These two sources alone would have provided enough to feed practically the entire population of the city. The Aztecs also consumed various animals and insects that were good protein sources. The amount of protein available from human sacrifice would not have made a significant contribution to the diet. Cannibalism was not motivated by starvation but by a belief that this was a way to commune with the gods” (Ortiz de Montellano 1978).

A “chinampa” is a raised garden where agriculture is grown near, or within, a water source, such as a lake (Figure 10).



Figure 10: An artistic depiction of Aztec agriculture using the form of raised beds of soil, a “chinampa”, within Lake Texcoco.

“If the meat was really needed for dietary reasons, the other 75 percent of the population was in even greater need since its diet was sparser than that of the nobility” (Ortiz de Montellano 1978).

With priests and/or chiefs conducting the practice of human sacrifice, the people down at

ground level would have had to look up these huge pyramids to witness this spectacle. It has been believed that these pyramids were built so high to be closer to the gods. And since the belief in deities was such a prominent part of Aztec culture, the Aztec people possibly could have believe anything a priest/chief told them.

“Key concepts include the sacredness of human blood, the idea that people owe a debt to the gods that must be repaid with blood and human lives, and the notion of a close relationship between life and death” (Smith 2011).

This could have been a way to control masses of people, by telling them that their crops, their health, or possibly the end of the world could occur if the gods were not pleased. And it comes easy to understand why masses of people may have respected single individuals put upon such high pedestals. At such great heights, and so close to the gods, people couldn't help but revere the power of the priest/chief.

With such power, priests and/or chiefs made the Aztec empire thrive. They expanded their lands by conquering neighboring cultures and, at the same time, were able to keep control over their own citizens.

With a thriving agricultural system and surrounding jungle full of wild game, the idea of cannibalism solely for dietary subsidence is unlikely. The Aztec leaders used human sacrifice to completely control the stability of hierarchy. They also used it to present a power over the masses by over-dramatizing vengeful and spiteful deities that would be angry if not pleased.

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