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Dodds Pennock, Caroline

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Mass Murder or Religious Homicide? Rethinking Human Sacrifice and Interpersonal Violence in Aztec Society

Caroline Dodds Pennock*

Abstract: »Massenmord oder religiöse Tötung? Menschenopfer und interpersonale Gewalt in Aztekischer Gesellschaft überdenken«. The Aztec practice of human sacrifice is one of the most sensationalized and bloody cases of mass killing in history, raising essential questions about cultural definitions, personal perceptions and the interrelationship of different forms of violence. Produced as part of a project on the long-term history of interpersonal and mass violence in Latin America, this article assesses the available sources for human sacrifice rates in pre-colonial Tenochtitlan, and lays the groundwork for a comparative analysis of homicide rates, by estimating the number of victims of human sacrifice. Offering an analysis which addresses key themes and structures in the history of violence, this study attempting to reconcile the frequency of 'official' violence with the apparent unacceptability of interpersonal aggression, and interrogates the sensationalism and cultural sensitivities which have often hindered impartial and empathetic studies of the human sacrifice in Aztec society.

Keywords: Aztec, Mexica, Mexico, human sacrifice, violence, religion, homicide, ritual.

The Aztec practice of human sacrifice is one of the most sensationalized and bloody cases of mass killing in history, but perhaps one of the least understood.¹ Although the Aztecs were highly sophisticated and expressive creators

* Address all communications to: Caroline Dodds Pennock, Department of History, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S3 7RA, United Kingdom; email: c.pennock@sheffield.ac.uk. I am grateful to Michael E. Smith for his enormously helpful comments on this chapter and also to Eric A. Johnson and Pieter Spierenburg, especially for their guidance in navigating the unfamiliar world of homicide statistics.

¹ The people referred to here as the 'Aztecs' might more accurately be called the 'Mexica' or 'Tenochca'. 'Aztec' was for many years the accepted term for the pre-conquest peoples of Central Mexico and remains a ubiquitous element of Mesoamerican studies, but it has been justifiably criticized at times as it was not used by the people themselves and for its lack of accuracy. Regardless of its difficulties 'Aztec' is an enduringly relevant term which has a constant historical presence. I acknowledge the difficulties and anachronisms of the term, but I will use it in this article (with the definition above) because it is by far the most easily recognizable term for a non-specialist audience and, in order to address the preconceptions usually associated with the 'Aztecs', it is necessary to use the familiar form. For more on terminology, see Miguel León-Portilla, 'Los aztecas: Disquisiciones sobre un gentilico', *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 31 (2000), pp. 307-13.

of great architecture, poetry and art, the most enduring image of their society is the brutal ritual of human sacrifice which was the focus of their religion. Although they were not the first or only people to offer humans to the gods, the Aztecs practised ritual bloodshed more widely than any other indigenous American society and are the culture most associated with human sacrifice in the popular imagination.²

Having migrated from the north, the Aztecs settled in the Valley of Mexico at the turn of the fourteenth century and quickly created a broad network of influence, which provided them with ample opportunity to secure victims for sacrifice until their dramatic destruction at the hands of the Spanish conquistadors in the 1520s.³ Their power stretched far beyond their capital city of Tenochtitlan (on the site of modern-day down-town Mexico City) and, as religious and political imperatives combined to drive their culture increasingly toward warfare and sacred violence, the Aztecs pursued a policy of human sacrifice which brought about the deaths of thousands of individuals, both natives of Tenochtitlan and strangers captured in war.⁴ The deaths of these sacrificial victims occurred in the same period that the Iberian church and state were executing heretics and opponents in bloody displays of ritualized violence, but it is the ceremonies of the Aztec people which have preoccupied the modern mind and created the perception of a brutal and heartless people, standing outside of the norms of human behaviour. In a typical depiction, Lévi-Strauss attributed to the Aztecs 'a maniacal obsession with blood and torture'.⁵ The reality of the Aztec world was far more complex than this vicious stereotype however, and its people were far from alien, living expressive, human and very familiar lives.⁶ But although the sensationalization of sacrificial bloodshed has led to a distorted view of Aztec society, it is undeniable that violence formed a regular and a ritualized part of life in Tenochtitlan. The question of ceremonial homicide therefore deserves close consideration in order to dispel myths and to

² For more on Aztec culture and the practice of human sacrifice see, for example, David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston, 1999); John Ingham, 'Human Sacrifice at Tenochtitlan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26.3 (1984), pp. 379-400; and Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (Basingstoke, 2008).

³ I will use the term 'Spanish' as shorthand for the culturally diverse group of Iberians and other Europeans who invaded Central American in the sixteenth century. There are many different accounts of the discovery and conquest of Mexico. Two particularly worth consideration, the former concise and the latter comprehensive, are Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*; and Hugh Thomas, *The Conquest of Mexico* (London, 1993).

⁴ For synopses of the rise of the Aztecs and their network of influence see Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 173-85; and Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* (London, 2000), pp. 94-114.

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York, 1964), p. 388.

⁶ For more on the expressive and emotional life of the Aztecs see Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1993); and Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*.

help us comprehend the Aztec world, placing them more clearly in both their own and in comparative context. Popularly pictured as brutal and bloody, the Aztecs are an exemplar of a society centred on violence, and their capital Tenochtitlan, on which this study is focused, provides an instructive and unusual model through which to explore some of the key themes and problems in the study of historical violence. Aztec sacrifice is often treated as a unique case and rarely placed within the broader context of histories of homicide and murder. This article aims: to evaluate the statistical and quantitative evidence which will allow Aztec society to be placed into a comparative understanding of homicide; to consider how we should categorize this violence; and to analyse the rhetoric of 'civilization' which has influenced, and at times obscured, its understanding.

Violence is central to Aztec history and historiography, just as it was central to Aztec society. As the great temples dominate Mexico's archaeological landscape, so the spectacular sacrificial rituals which occurred on their summits still loom large in modern understandings of their culture. But how to categorize and understand this violence presents significant problems. The Aztecs should clearly form part of any comprehensive historical assessment of homicide, but their society resists easy categorization and presents real challenges to established historiographies and methodologies of murder. In other fields, much of the recent debate over trends of violence has been concerned with homicide figures, how they should be measured and assessed and what the statistics reveal. In order to make a comparative assessment of Aztec society and locate them in the wider historiography of violence, a statistical appraisal of the victims of human sacrifice would be invaluable, but unfortunately, it is almost impossible to assess Tenochtitlan by these standards. We simply lack the sources which would permit us to enter the statistical debate with any confidence. Despite this, in order to place the Aztecs within the broader context of violence in Latin America, it is important to try and give an indication of the likely figures, although the speculative nature of such calculations means that any accurate or comparative assessment is almost impossible.

For years, historians have confidently asserted the extreme violence of the Aztecs without ever being able to quantify the relative level of their aggression. Archaeological work has confirmed that the Aztecs and their contemporaries in Central Mexico participated in human sacrificial rituals, but there is insufficient material to allow us to draw broad conclusions regarding overall mortality rates from archaeology.⁷ The only sustained attempt that I am aware of to calculate

⁷ For archaeological evidence of human sacrifice see: Leonardo López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Niwot, 1994); Rubén G. Mendoza, 'Aztec Militarism and Blood Sacrifice: The Archaeology and Ideology of Ritual Violence', in Richard J. Chacon and Rubén G. Mendoza (eds.), *Latin American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence* (Tucson,

the statistical significance of human sacrifice in pre-colonial Mexico was made in 1946 by the demographer and historian Sherburne Cook who arrived at an estimate of 15,000 victims annually from a Central Mexican population of 2,000,000.⁸ Cook's work drew on material from throughout the Aztec confederation and its neighbours, giving him a rather larger base of information (albeit at times a problematic one), but even by encompassing such a broad field the body of sources remains slight. No judicial, criminal or legal records have survived, and so we are principally reliant on general assertions from early colonial texts about the nature of society and the annual ritual calendar.⁹ These sources give us figures which can only ever be highly speculative and estimates of the annual number of sacrificial victims have accordingly varied wildly. 20,000 people a year is the estimate which is frequently mentioned, but the origins of this figure are somewhat vague and its accuracy unclear. It may have originated with the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga, who apparently alleged in a letter written a few years after the defeat of the Aztecs that 20,000 children were sacrificed each year, an assertion which was recorded by the missionary chronicler Juan de Torquemada in his *Monarquía Indiana* of 1615.¹⁰ This figure was regularly echoed in the early years by writers such as José de Acosta and Francisco López de Gómara, who also said that 'depending on the account', it the number could have been as high as 50,000.¹¹ The distin-

2007), pp. 34-54; Carmen Ma. Pijoan Aguadé and Josefina Mansilla Lory, 'Evidence for Human Sacrifice, Bone Modification and Cannibalism in Ancient México', in Debra L. Martin and David W. Frayer (eds.), *Troubled Times: Violence and Warfare in the Past* (Amsterdam, 1997), pp. 217-39; and 'Estudian material orgánico humano de época prehispánica', *INAH Noticias* (2 May 2012), <<http://www.inah.gob.mx/index.php/boletines/8-investigaciones-y-estudios-historicos/5851-estudian-material-organico-de-epoca-prehispanica>> [accessed 25 May 2012].

⁸ Sherburne Cook, 'Human sacrifice and warfare as factors in the demography of pre-colonial Mexico', *Human Biology*, 18.2 (1946), pp. 81-102.

⁹ There is a considerable body of qualitative evidence regarding human sacrifice, as well as evidence regarding numbers of victims at individual ceremonies, but this article will focus on material which may shed light on quantitative issues.

¹⁰ Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana* (Mexico, 1943), Vol. II, p. 120. Prescott claims that Zumarraga 'states that 20,000 victims were yearly slaughtered in the capital. Torquemada turns this into 20,000 infants' (William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru* [New York, 1936], pp. 48-9, n. 28). Historians have frequently followed this assertion, but I have been unable to trace a source to substantiate his account of Zumarraga's original claim.

¹¹ José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Jane E. Mangan (Durham, 2002), p. 297; Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de la conquista de México* (Caracas, 2007), pp. 91, 444. Acosta states that 'there were occasions when the number of victims was more than five thousand, and there was even a day when in different places more than twenty thousand men were sacrificed in this way'. The famous 'Defender of the Indians' Bartolomé de Las Casas (notorious for his unreliable statistics) also repeated the figure of 20,000 as the 'most common opinion', but himself believed this was nothing more than 'the testimony of brigands' who lied to justify their 'infamous conduct'. He himself believed

guished indigenous writer Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl amplified the horror still further, claiming that one in every five children of Aztec tributaries was killed each year.¹² In so far as we can credit them at all, these figures appear to have related to the broader area of Central Mexico. Attempting to understand the practice of human sacrifice at Tenochtitlan specifically is even more problematic, reducing the source base considerably and raising difficulties of distinction where early Spanish authors frequently saw none.

The sometimes hysterical and largely unsubstantiated claims of early chroniclers are a poor basis from which to draw statistical data, but there is some evidence to support the claim that large numbers of victims were sacrificed on exceptional occasions. The dedication of the Templo Mayor (as the Great Temple at the heart of Tenochtitlan has come to be known) in 1487 has become infamous for the scale of its sacrificial ceremonies and often provides a focal point for early accounts. According to two sources from the 1570s, the *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* and the writings of the Dominican friar Diego Durán, 80,400 men were sacrificed during the four days of the celebrations, a number which is mirrored in other contemporaneous accounts and frequently repeated by modern historians.¹³ The extraordinary logistical problems which would be faced by four men attempting to conduct more than 80,000 sacrifices and dispose of so many corpses in such a short period of time makes so great a number unlikely; allowing two minutes per sacrifice, Sherburne Cook calculated that the number of victims associated with the event could only have reached around 14,100.¹⁴ The *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, written in the mid-sixteenth century claims that a rather more credible, although still extraordinary, 20,000 people were sacrificed on this single occasion.¹⁵ Torquemada, several decades later, reports two different values (probably reflecting his notorious plagiarism of multiple sources), the very precise death toll of 72,344 and the rather vaguer

that the number of sacrifices had never risen above fifty: Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Oeuvres de Don Barthélemy de Las Casas* (Paris, 1822), Volume 1, pp. 365, 386.

¹² Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras Históricas*, ed. Alfredo Chavero (Mexico City, 1891-2), Vol. I, p. 321.

¹³ *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, trans. J. Bierhorst (Tucson, 1992), p. 118; Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar*, ed. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman, 1971), p. 339. Ixtlilxochitl and Mendieta both agree with Durán's figure: Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras Históricas*, Vol. II, p. 274; Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana* (Mexico City, 1870), p.175. Cook claims that Tezozomoc also estimates 80,400 in his *Crónica Mexicana*, but I have been unable to verify this (Cook, 'Human sacrifice and warfare as factors in the demography of pre-colonial Mexico', p. 90).

¹⁴ Sherburne Cook, 'Human sacrifice and warfare as factors in the demography of pre-colonial Mexico', *Human Biology*, 18.2 (May 1946), p. 91.

¹⁵ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 39r. The gloss states that 4,000 prisoners were sacrificed, but the author has apparently misread the number glyphs, which in fact indicate a total of 20,000. *Codex Telleriano-Remensis: Ritual, Divination and History in a Pictorial Aztec Manuscript*, ed. Eloise Quiñones Keber (Austin, 1995), p. 225.

60,000.¹⁶ But regardless of the exact figure, the ceremony certainly seems to have seen the sacrifice of an unusually large number of victims for even the Aztecs regarded the Templo Mayor dedication as extraordinary. According to one chronicler, the smell of blood apparently became so strong in the city as to become ‘unendurable to the people’.¹⁷ Ross Hassig plausibly, but rather vaguely, estimated that ‘between 10,000 and 80,400 persons’ were probably sacrificed at the dedication.¹⁸

The cluster of accounts concerning this exceptional event make it possible for us to begin to make some assessment, however tentative, of the magnitude of Aztec sacrifice, but to get a sense of the annual rates of human sacrifice is much trickier than finding isolated claims. The sacrifice of several thousand victims during a single ceremony seems to have been the exception rather than the rule, and a figure of 20,000 victims annually for Tenochtitlan seems excessive except in occasional years, following a military campaign perhaps or during some exceptional festivity such as the temple dedication. Both Aztecs and Spaniards had an interest in exaggerating the figures, but even Cortés wrote only that ‘not one year has passed ... in which three or four thousand souls have not been sacrificed in this manner’.¹⁹

Uncertainties about the size of the Central Mexican population have further muddied the waters of this debate as scholars have attempted to calculate realistic death tolls. In an unpublished piece of work, Sherburne Cook (in collaboration with Woodrow Borah), radically revised his initial estimate for the Central Mexican population of 2,000,000 upwards to 25,000,000, a shift which Borah believed carried potentially major implications for Cook’s 1946 total of 15,000 victims annually. Calculating from the revised figures, Borah apparently claimed that approximately 250,000 persons per year were sacrificed in fifteenth-century Mexico, equivalent in his calculations to one percent of the total population.²⁰ This statistic is for the entire expanse of Central Mexico and is not confined to the Aztec capital, but it remains a remarkably high figure, especially in view of the well-known challenges to Cook and Borah’s population estimates, which are regarded by many as perhaps double the genuine figure.²¹ In addition, to project such a figure based on population seems highly

¹⁶ Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, Vol. I, p. 186, Vol. II, p. 168.

¹⁷ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 340.

¹⁸ Ross Hassig, ‘El sacrificio y las guerras floridas’, *Arqueología mexicana*, XI (2003), p. 47.

¹⁹ Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, ed. and trans. Anthony Pagden (New Haven, 1986), p. 36.

²⁰ Woodrow Borah, unpublished work, cited in Michael Harner, ‘The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice’, *American Ethnologist*, 4.1 (1977), p. 119.

²¹ See, for example, David Henige, *Numbers from Nowhere: The American Indian Contact Population Debate* (Norman, 1998); William T. Sanders, ‘The Population of the Central Mexican Symbiotic Region, the Basin of Mexico, and the Teotihuacán Valley in the Sixteenth Century’, in William M. Denevan (ed.), *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison, 1992), pp. 85-151; and Rudolph A. Zambardino, ‘Mexico’s Population in

problematic. For Cook, concerned with the possibilities of human sacrifice and warfare as methods for ‘population limitation’, a direct link between population and numbers of victims was essential, but in view of the lack of sources and the uneven geographical distribution of sacrificial practice I would contest the validity of this method. As Borah’s revised work remains unpublished to my knowledge however, it is impossible fully to assess the methodology on which this statistic is based. We certainly cannot extrapolate directly from these figures to Tenochtitlan, but other considerations and calculations support the possibility that sacrificial victims may have counted for around one percent of the city’s population annually, a figure in the low thousands. The population of Tenochtitlan itself is almost as disputed as the total Central Mexican population, but reasonable estimates have around a quarter of a million people crowded into the 13.5 square kilometres of the city.²²

Based on the regular sacrificial calendar, it is possible to make some tentative estimates of the annual number of victims in the Aztec capital. An analysis of the sixteenth-century *Florentine Codex* suggests an annual total of approximately 500 victims in the ritual calendar.²³ In a single round of festivals, 87 separate instances of human sacrifice occurred, with victims ranging from one to a helpfully indeterminate number.²⁴ In most cases where we know the figure, the numbers were at the lower end of the scale, usually between one and five victims. It is possible that on some of these occasions, such as the festival of Tlacaxipeualiztli when an unspecified number of warrior captives were sacri-

the Sixteenth Century: Demographic Anomaly or Mathematical Illusion?’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11.1 (1980), pp. 1-27.

²² Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* (Harlow, 1994), p. 84; Michael E. Smith, ‘Hernán Cortés on the Size of Aztec Cities: Comment on Dobyns’, *Latin American Population History Bulletin*, 25 (1994), pp. 25-7; Michael E. Smith, ‘City Size in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica’, *Journal of Urban History*, 31.4 (2005), pp. 403-34.

²³ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex, General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. and eds. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, 12 books in 13 vols, 2nd ed. (Santa Fe, 1950-82). To prevent confusion between different editions and enable cross-referencing to alternative versions, references are given in the form of book: chapter: page number. (Page references are to the revised edition where applicable.) This is not the place to rehearse the arguments concerning the reliability of the *Florentine Codex*, which have been the subject of considerable study. For my own approach to Sahagún’s work see Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*. For other perspectives see: Munro S. Edmonson (ed.), *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún* (Albuquerque, 1974); Luis Nicolau d’Olivera, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590)* (Salt Lake City, 1987); and Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún: First Anthropologist* (Norman, 2002).

²⁴ Statistics are derived from data collected from *Florentine Codex*, Book 2, *The Ceremonies*, (Santa Fe, 1981) and refer to both fixed and movable feasts and ceremonies. Rather than simply counting the festivals within which various types of sacrifice occurred, any instance of sacrifice was deemed to be a single ritual. As many festivals and ceremonies lasted several days or even weeks and often had multiple elements and import, it is hoped that this will provide a more detailed picture of the various patterns and models than would otherwise be possible.

ficed, large groups may have been killed, but these were exceptional events.²⁵ A figure of around 500 victims in the 'regular' cycle seems likely, plus a smaller or larger number of additional victims sacrificed during extraordinary festivities and the variable parts of the ceremonies depending on the year. It is also possible that some of the sacrificial rituals may have been conducted independently in each of the *calpulli* districts of the city, which would mean that the estimate of 300-600 victims might be multiplied by twenty.²⁶ Some of the festivals were clearly city-wide events focused on the Templo Mayor, and lesser temples had smaller locally-based rituals, so to extrapolate directly is probably inappropriate, but some multiplication to allow for local events does seem reasonable. Allowing for such variations, the usual average at around the time of the Spanish invasion seems likely to have been in the low thousands. It is impossible even to estimate numbers of sacrificial victims prior to this period with any accuracy, but the later fifteenth century, when the borders of Aztec influence were expanding, seems to have been the peak of sacrificial practice in Tenochtitlan with an annual number of victims of perhaps between 1,000 and 20,000.

Another piece of evidence which is commonly employed to try and establish the death toll from human sacrifice is the infamous skull 'counts' of the conquistadors. Bernal Díaz's famous claim that he estimated the piles of skulls he saw at more than a hundred thousand relates to the city of Xocotlan and is therefore inappropriate for our purposes, although it is frequently and incorrectly cited in reference to the Aztec capital.²⁷ The other extant estimate²⁸ comes from the conquistador Andrés de Tapia who described a *tzompantli*, or skull rack, near the Templo Mayor:

At a crossbow's throw from this tower, and facing it, were sixty or seventy very tall beams set on a platform made of stone and mortar. Lining the platform steps were many skulls set in mortar, with their teeth bared. At each end of the row of beams was a tower made of mortar and skulls with bared teeth, apparently built without any other stones. The beams were a little less than a measuring rod apart, and from top and bottom as many poles as there were room for had been fitted across, each pole holding five skulls pierced through the temples. The one who writes this, together with Gonzalo de Umbria,

²⁵ For one description of Tlacaxipeualiztli see *Florentine Codex*, 2: 21: 53-4.

²⁶ Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (Stanford, 1970), p. 7.

²⁷ Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London, 1963), p. 138.

²⁸ Diego Durán, although he makes no estimate of numbers, gives a detailed description of the skull rack in the precinct of the main Temple of Huitzilopochtli: Durán, *Book of the Gods*, pp. 78-9. Extrapolating from the size of the precinct, it has been estimated that this skull rack could realistically have supported a maximum of 60,000 skulls: Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, 'Counting Skulls: Comment on the Aztec Cannibalism Theory of Harner-Harris', *American Anthropologist*, 85.2 (1983), p. 404.

counted the poles and multiplied them by the five skulls hung between beams, and found there were 136,000 skulls, not counting the ones on the towers.²⁹

Such descriptions have traditionally been regarded with scepticism, although Cook can see no reason not to accept the figures of Tapia and Díaz at face value, on the basis that 'they both state emphatically that they actually counted the skulls in question and as accurately as they were able. They had no motive for falsification and both were reliable, competent soldiers'.³⁰ Whilst I am rather more sceptical of the conquistadors' potential motives in writing than Cook, the annual number of sacrifices which he extrapolates from Tapia's figures is not incompatible with our other calculations. Presuming that the *tzompantli* began being used at the same time as the temple in 1487, thirty-two years before Tapia's account, Cook calculates an average of 4,250 sacrifices per year, or 3,630 if we deduct 20,000 deaths for the dedication itself. As the 1487 ceremony only marked the inauguration of the latest stage in the construction of the Templo Mayor, there is no reason to presume that the *tzompantli* which Tapia saw was contemporaneous with the temple and so it is entirely possible that the *tzompantli* had been in use for years beforehand, a circumstance which would significantly reduce the yearly average. Certainly an annual number of victims of 1,000-20,000 remains in line with the limited evidence which accounts of the *tzompantli* provide suggesting a possible figure of 400-8,000 sacrifices per 100,000 population per year.³¹

Unfortunately for any comparative consideration, these ambiguous figures suggest either that the Aztecs were a society in which homicide rates were extremely high, or not particularly high at all! Ritual violence in Aztec culture clearly cannot be adequately assessed by statistical measures and there is a significant question as to whether Aztec practices should be considered as part of the history of murder and homicide at all. Human sacrifice certainly constituted homicide in the technical sense, but not in a legal sense. Interpersonal

²⁹ Andrés de Tapia 'Relation of some of the things that happened to the Very Illustrious Don Hernando Cortés...', in Patricia de Fuentes (ed.), *The Conquistadors: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (London, 1993), pp. 41-2.

³⁰ Sherburne Cook, 'Human sacrifice and warfare as factors in the demography of pre-colonial Mexico', p. 89.

³¹ Added to the evidential difficulties of considering sacrificial statistics as a proportion of population in Tenochtitlan is the fact that a significant proportion of these victims will have been warriors captured in war and therefore not derived from within the city's population itself, a consideration which does not apply to wider Mexican estimates. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine with any reasonable degree of accuracy the percentages of sacrifices which incorporated different types of victim such as warriors and other captives of war, children, and slaves. For more on *tzompantli* see: Ruben G. Mendoza, 'The Divine Gourd Tree: Tzompantli Skull Racks, Decapitations Rituals, and Human Trophies in Ancient Mesoamerica', in Richard J. Chacon and David H. Dye, *The Taking and Displaying of Human Body Parts as Trophies by Amerindians* (New York, 2007), pp. 400-43; and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, 'El Tzompantli en Mesoamérica', in *Religion en Mesoamerica: XII Mesa Redonda* (Mexico City, 1972), pp. 109-16.

violence, including murder, was a criminal offence in Aztec culture, but human sacrifice clearly did not fall into that category. As priests and as warriors, the Aztecs perpetrated mass homicide, killing vast numbers of men, women and children to honour and nourish their gods, but did this ritual slaughter constitute mass murder?

Figure 1: Skulls Carved on the Base of a Ritual Platform at the Templo Mayor Project, Mexico City



Some scholars have certainly viewed the Aztecs in this light. They have often been condemned as evil, bloodthirsty, and hopelessly misguided, dominated by an elite which cynically imposed human sacrifice upon the afflicted mass of the ordinary people. Davis Hanson, in an otherwise comparatively nuanced analysis of the battle between the Aztecs and Spanish asserts, with regard to the 1487 Templo Mayor dedication, that the 'killing rate of fourteen victims a minute over the ninety-six hour bloodbath far exceeded the daily murder record at either Auschwitz or Dachau'.³² This highly inappropriate analogy exposes the difficulty of placing the Aztecs in any comparative analysis. The scale of their killing tempts us to rank them alongside modern genocidal and terrorist states, but the state-sponsored violence of the Aztecs was rooted in religious

³² Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York, 2001), p. 195.

ideals of celebration, expiation and debt, not targeted ideologies of hatred. Victims were honoured in life and glorified in death and, significantly, human sacrifice was not limited to strangers from foreign lands. Aztecs too became victims, both at the hands of their own priests and as captives in the many other cities which shared their religious ideology.³³

As critical links in the chain which bound the earthly and divine realms, sacrificial victims were part of a cycle of sustenance which nourished the gods and ensured the continued existence of the world, and the rewards of sacrifice were honour and immortality, not only for the Aztecs but also for their enemies. Mythical histories told how the creator gods let blood from themselves to bring life to the latest generation of humans in this, the fifth, age of the world. This established the reciprocal 'blood debt' which obliged the Aztecs to feed their deities with blood in return for the blood which was let by the gods to bring about humanity's birth.³⁴ Such religious motivations lay behind the Aztec glorification of victims and their acceptance of the necessity of human sacrifice.³⁵ Victims were glorified both before and after their death and, although some died honoured only collectively as the anonymous captives of hostile campaigns, others were accorded a unique status and lived a luxurious existence in their final months.³⁶ Glory could be gained by facing death bravely, and a privileged afterlife was offered to victims.³⁷ Whilst one would not want to overstate the case, it would not be inappropriate to parallel a victim of human sacrifice with a Christian martyr – both were believed to have laid down their lives for the gods and found paradise as a result.

³³ There is substantial supporting evidence for the existence of a shared tradition of human sacrifice amongst the cities of the Valley of Mexico. See, for example, Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 92. Variations between accounts of rituals reflect the differences in local practice, but 'their many similarities just as clearly mirror the widespread sharing of basic religious ideological concepts and ceremonial performance throughout the region' (H. B. Nicholson 'Representing the Veintena Ceremonies in the Primeros Memoriales', in Eloise Quiñones Keber [ed.], *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún* [Boulder, 2002], p. 99).

³⁴ *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, pp. 145-6.

³⁵ The exact meaning of ritual activity may not of course have been the same for every participant. The study by American anthropologist James W. Fernandez of the African Fang cult revealed a fascinating 'ideological variability accompanying ritual behaviour' (James W. Fernandez, 'Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformatory Cult', *American Anthropologist*, 67.4 [1965], p. 907). The comprehensive Aztec educational system expended significant effort in ensuring widespread comprehension of religious activity, however.

³⁶ See, for example, Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 126; *Florentine Codex*, 2: 24: 69-70; and Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, paleography and trans. Thelma D. Sullivan, completed and revised with additions H. B. Nicholson, Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, Eloise Quiñones Keber and Wayne Ruwet (Norman, 1997), p. 67.

³⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 3: Appendix: 41-6; and Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Doris Heyden (Norman, 1994), p. 157.

The Aztecs were ardently religious and deeply superstitious, but scholars seem to have found it difficult to accept that religious motivations alone can explain the public acceptance of mass human sacrifice; Cook claimed that it 'seems inescapable' religious motivations were 'merely the rationalization of a far deeper tendency or drive'.³⁸ Such scepticism has resulted in some quite extraordinary interpretations, as scholars have sought a functional explanation for mass religious homicide. Cook himself speculated that warfare and sacrifice were developed as social responses to overpopulation, a systematic exercise in population limitation. The surprisingly durable Harner-Harris theory casts Aztec priests as the cannibal butchers of their culture, compensating for a lack of animal protein by supplying human meat.³⁹ Many ethnologists, myself included, have found the blind refusal to acknowledge indigenous people's views of their own motivations somewhat offensive.⁴⁰ Although the brutality of Aztec rituals provides a difficult juxtaposition to their 'civilised' social, legal and political structures, this is no reason to dismiss the participants' own understandings of their religion, rather we must look harder and challenge our own preconceptions of 'civilisation'. Nancy Jay got to the heart of the issue when she wrote:

The moment we say [as Girard did] 'The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act' ..., we have lost any possibility of gaining any understanding beyond the one we already had and brought along with us.⁴¹

The Aztecs are hardly the only people to have perpetuated merciless violence in the name of religion and, although neither their motivations nor their actions are comparable, the actions of so-called Jihadi terrorists in recent years have made clear the violent extremes of devotion. Violence can be understood only within its own cultural context and, in the case of Aztec society, it is important to recognise that death on the sacrificial stone was not only honoured, but also idealized, as a privileged destiny leading to a desirable afterlife.⁴²

³⁸ Sherburne Cook, 'Human sacrifice and warfare as factors in the demography of pre-colonial Mexico', p. 84.

³⁹ Michael Harner, 'The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice', pp. 117-35; and Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures* (New York, 1977).

⁴⁰ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago, 1992), p. 155, n. 5. Challenges to the Harner-Harris model include: Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, 'Aztec Cannibalism: An Ecological Necessity?', *Science*, 200.4342 (1978), pp. 611-17; Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, 'Counting Skulls: Comment on the Aztec Cannibalism Theory of Harner-Harris', *American Anthropologist*, 85.2 (1983), pp. 403-6; and George Pierre Castile, 'Purple People Eaters? A Comment on Aztec Elite Class Cannibalism à la Harris-Harner', *American Anthropologist*, 82.2 (1980), pp. 389-91.

⁴¹ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago, 1992), p. xxv, quoting René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, 1977), p. 7.

⁴² Durán, *History of the Indies*, p. 157; *Florentine Codex*, 3: Appendix: 41-6, 6: 31: 172.

Religious ideology and social practices combined in Tenochtitlan to create a powerful cultural conditioning which inculcated an understanding of sacrifice as the perfect means of death; unfortunately the colonial sources make it very difficult to understand the reality of victims' experience and emotions. We are not only dealing with a total absence of personal testimony, but are also reliant entirely on Spanish chroniclers from after the conquest, very few of whom can claim to be direct eyewitnesses. Nonetheless, the question of consent is central in any attempt to understand and categorize Aztec violence, and the sparse sources occasionally open a small window onto the world of victims. Whether these figures were honoured or murdered clearly depends on your perspective, and the reality seems likely to have fallen somewhere in the middle; despite an unwavering idealization of the sacrificial fate, descriptions of ritual immolation reveal a wide range of responses on the part of victims.

And when some captive lost his strength, fainted, only went continually throwing himself on the ground, they just dragged him. But when one made an effort...he went strong of heart, he went shouting. He did not go downcast, he did not go spiritless; he went extolling, he went exalting his city.⁴³

As they mounted the pyramid, captives saw their colleagues brutally despatched, their hearts torn from their chests and offered to the gods. The lifeless, bloodied, corpses rolled past them down the pyramid steps as they climbed toward their fate, and even the most devout must have been daunted. Even those that reached the summit with fortitude must have been awed by the prospect of their imminent violent death, and the Dominican friar Francisco de Aguilar, who claimed to have witnessed sacrifice as one of the conquistadors on Cortés' Mexican expedition, recalled that that the 'men and women who were to be sacrificed to their gods were thrown on their backs and of their own accord remained perfectly still'.⁴⁴ Whether this immobility indicates terror, intoxication, resignation or consent, it is clearly impossible to cram these very different experiences into a single category. Some people despaired at the sight of the stone and fainted or threw themselves to the ground and were dragged mercilessly to their deaths; others mounted the pyramid exulting in the glorious certainty of their immortality.⁴⁵ But in the case of these 'captive', usually warrior, victims who died en masse on the pyramid, the question of consent was somewhat moot; their choice was never explicit. If we turn to the cases of the *ixiptla*, the 'impersonators' of the gods during important festivals, there are

⁴³ Florentine Codex, 2: 21: 48.

⁴⁴ Francisco de Aguilar, 'The Chronicle of Fray Francisco de Aguilar', in Patricia de Fuentes (ed.), *The Conquistadors: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (London, 1993), p. 163.

⁴⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 21: 48; Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 234.

recorded instances of sacrifice where victims appear to have gone ‘willingly’ to their deaths.⁴⁶

In preparation for the festival of Toxcatl, which took place in spring at the end of the dry season, an *ixiptlatl* (impersonator) of the god Tezcatlipoca roamed freely throughout the city for a year before his death. No one could refuse the *ixiptlatl*'s requests and he lived richly and was attended by servants and multiple wives. On the day of his death, the impersonator of Tezcatlipoca himself ascended the temple and chose the very moment when he was to die.⁴⁷ His choice seems clear. The question of consent remains a little ambiguous, however, and we will never know if genuine belief, fear, coercion or a desire for glory motivated the impersonator. The *mestizo* great-grandson of the ruler Nezahualcoyotl wrote:

it was never found out, whether anyone of those that were chosen for this had fled, for to flee seemed a thing unworthy of men that represented such great majesty as this idol, so as not to be held as cowardly and fearful with perpetual infamy, not only in this land, but also in his own, and so they wished first to die to earn eternal fame, because they held [this] to be glory and a happy end.⁴⁸

Whether a brutal death on the sacrificial stone was truly a ‘glorious and happy end’ is difficult for us to determine, but the possibility of an element of consent, as well as the wider religious context, casts doubt on whether victims of human sacrifice should be included in any comparative analysis of murder and criminal homicide. If we hope to consider Aztec society on its own terms, to label its priests as murderers is not only potentially condescending, but also anachronistic. It seems reasonable to assess human sacrifice as part of the overall level of violence within a society however, and it is certain that Tenochtitlan was a city in which violence was highly visible. The great temple could be seen from throughout the inner city, parading the horror of the victims’ sacrificial death on its elevated summit before the eyes of the local populace. The annual round of sacrificial festivals, an average of one every four days, normalized such violent practices and assimilated them into everyday life. Ordinary men and women not only witnessed but also participated in the rituals, piercing their

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2: 21: 48. Constraints of space prevent a full consideration of the issue of consent and the possible use of drugs for the purpose of captive compulsion. Despite claims that coercive chemicals were extensively used in Aztec culture, they are very rarely mentioned in accounts of sacrificial ceremonies. Studies of the ritual use of drugs include: Mercedes de la Garza Gerardo, *Sueño y alucinación en el mundo náhuatl y maya* (Mexico City, 1990); G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *The Shaman and the Jaguar: a study of narcotic drugs among the Indians of Columbia* (Philadelphia, 1975); and Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofmann, *Plants of the Gods: Origins of Hallucinogenic Use* (New York, 1979).

⁴⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 24: 66-71.

⁴⁸ Juan Bautista de Pomar, ‘Relacion de Tezcoco’, in *Nueva Coleccion de Documentos para la Historia de Mexico*, Volume III, *Pomar y Zurita* (Mexico City, 1891), p. 21.

ears, tongues and genitals to let blood to nourish the gods.⁴⁹ The violence of the warrior lifestyle was pervasive for, with the exception of priests, who of course possessed their own violent vocation, all men were warriors, trained for battle and subject to military service.⁵⁰ Warriors acknowledged death as an inevitable part of their existence – they took captives to feed the gods and were themselves prepared to die, either on the battlefield or on the sacrificial stone.⁵¹ Violence was also common in the legal service of the state. Many crimes, including adultery, theft, murder and the infringement of status laws were punishable by death, and executions were public and often bloody.⁵²

But although Aztec men and women were conditioned from birth to accept and understand the realities of violent and highly visible homicide for religious, military and legal purposes, other forms of aggression were tightly controlled and interpersonal violence and illegal killings seem to have been relatively uncommon. Unfortunately, demonstrating this conclusively is once again problematic. By comparison with the evidence for interpersonal violence and criminal homicide rates, the data for human sacrifice seems positively plentiful. We have some details about the legal system, but sadly no trial records have survived, so again we are dealing very much with generalisations and isolated examples.

The difficulty with assessing levels of informal or interpersonal violence is that many of our sources, Spanish as well as Nahuatl, describe the ideal rather than the reality. Descriptions of the city certainly *suggest* a relatively low crime rate, however. This may be related to the unswerving severity of criminal punishment, but it also appears to be linked to a very genuine sense of community cooperation and responsibility. Aztec society and political structures rested on complex networks of obligation and collaboration, which were expressed in a highly developed set of social behaviours and expectations. Every individual had a responsibility to the community, and social harmony was seen as vital to collective prosperity. Land was farmed in usufruct, crops stored for the nation, and shared work projects undertaken. Institutions were structured to emphasize communal responsibility, and the careful control of aggression was a vital social expectation. To infringe social harmony or responsibility was a serious

⁴⁹ Toribio Motolinía, *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*, ed. Edmundo O’Gorman (Mexico City, 1990), pp. 40-1.

⁵⁰ Whilst they may have also pursued other professions, all male citizens (with the exception of priests) were subject to military service. For more on Aztec warfare see Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, 1988).

⁵¹ Inga Clendinnen, ‘The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society’, *Past & Present*, 107 (1985), pp. 44-89.

⁵² For one account of these laws see Durán, *History of the Indies*, pp. 208-11.

crime and a structured and comprehensive education system ensured that every Aztec was fully versed in the principles which underlay their obligations.⁵³

Every child, boy or girl, received an institutional education, which focused on an intriguing combination of strict discipline and courteous refinement.⁵⁴ The great Franciscan chronicler, and author of the *Florentine Codex*, Bernardino de Sahagún, described the Spanish admiration for the inclusive educational system as well as the effective authority it ensured. He wrote: ‘boys and girls were raised very strictly until they were adults ... they were taught how they should honour their gods and how they were to comply with and to obey the republic and its rulers.’⁵⁵ Industry, frugality, discipline and deprivation were all emphasized as values essential for a ‘good’ Aztec, and they slept little and worked hard. A high value was also placed on civility and refinement, as children were polished to take their places in society. They were taught to be courteous, to sing and dance, and to speak in the elegant fashion of the *huehuetlah-tolli*, or ‘ancient words’.⁵⁶ Studied obedience, deference, and politeness were expected of every Aztec. Moctezuma’s famous speech to Cortés in which he reportedly ‘surrendered’ his realm to Charles V is the archetypal example of this deferential and highly rhetorical manner of speaking.⁵⁷ Social exchanges were elaborately controlled and confrontation was carefully ritualized. To suggest that all Aztecs were courteous all the time is plainly ridiculous, but they were certainly operating in an environment which encouraged them to exhibit reticence and act politely, even during a disagreement. Importantly, in sustaining such a highly ordered social system, an aggrieved person (man or

⁵³ Further detail on my understanding of this cooperative social structure may be found in Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*; and Caroline Dodds Pennock, “‘A Remarkably Patterned Life’: Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City”, *Gender & History*, 23.3 (2011), pp. 528-46.

⁵⁴ For the education system see, for example: Edward Calnek, ‘The Calmecac and Telpochcalli in Pre-Conquest Tenochtitlan’, in J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson and Eloise Quiñones Keber, *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico* (Austin, 1988), pp. 169-78; and Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, pp. 167-73.

⁵⁵ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España: Primera versión íntegra del texto castellano del manuscrito conocido como Códice Florentino*, eds. Alfredo López Austin and Josefina García Quintana (Madrid, 1988), vol. 2, p. 627.

⁵⁶ Miguel León-Portilla and Librado Silva Galeana, *Huehuetlah-tolli: Testimonios de la Antigua Palabra* (Mexico City, 1991), pp. 7-45; and Birgitta Leander, ‘La educación de los jóvenes en la sociedad Azteca, según los huehuetlatolli – “Pláticas de los viejos”’, in José Alcina Franch (ed.), *Azteca Mexica: Las culturas del México antiguo* (Madrid, 1992), pp. 265-9.

⁵⁷ Francis J. Brooks, ‘Motecuzoma Xocoyotl, Hernán Cortés, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo: The Construction of an Arrest’, *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 75.2 (1995), pp. 149-83.

woman) also had easy recourse to an efficient legal system, which may have removed some of the temptation to resort to impulsive violence.⁵⁸

Cases of murder clearly occurred, for those described as ‘murderers’ by their contemporaries were condemned as ‘rash, brutal, disorderly’.⁵⁹ Another individual who committed illegal homicides was the ‘highwayman’ who ‘kills one by treachery, ambushes one, tricks to destruction’.⁶⁰ Significantly, it is the hasty, unofficial and dishonest nature of these homicides which drew particular condemnation. Although violence was an everyday reality, the unsanctioned use of lethal force was clearly unacceptable. When confined and controlled within the exacting rituals of warfare or religion, homicide was legitimate and permissible; ‘murder’ for the Aztecs was a disorderly act which inappropriately disrupted the cooperation and cohesion on which their society was dependent. The perceived damage to the community resulting from murder is clear in the nature of the punishment imposed on the perpetrator. Although the death penalty was common for many offences, murder was not always treated in this fashion, and one sixteenth-century source claims:

Homicide was strictly prohibited, but it was not punished by physical death. It was paid for with a civil death. The murderer was turned over to the widow or to the relatives of the deceased, [to be] forever a slave. He was to serve them and to earn a living for the children of the deceased.⁶¹

The desire to ‘re-order’ society is explicit in this punishment, as the murderer becomes a substitute provider for the family of the victim. As Brian K. Smith suggests in a fascinating article comparing human sacrifice and capital punishment, ‘The (“illegitimate”) violence exercised by the criminal usurps the state’s monopoly on (“legitimate”) violence’. Whilst I do not necessarily concur with all of his conclusions, his assertion that the ritualization of killing is intended to create a ‘perfect’ and orderly contrast to illegitimate violence intriguingly contrasts the methodical ceremony of human sacrifice (or modern-day legal execution) with the impulsive act of murder.⁶²

Justice was taken very seriously in Tenochtitlan. Great emphasis was placed on the accountability and impartiality of judges, who could themselves be sentenced to death for failure to discharge their duties correctly. Crimes were certainly dealt with stringently, but a complex legal system protected the rights of the individual, allowing for appeals or for referral to a higher court if neces-

⁵⁸ Francisco Avalos, ‘An Overview of the Legal System of the Aztec Empire’, *Law Library Journal*, 86.2 (1994), pp. 259-76.

⁵⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 10: 11: 38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10: 11: 39.

⁶¹ Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 96.

⁶² Brian K. Smith, ‘Capital Punishment and Human Sacrifice’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68.1 (2000), pp. 3-25.

sary.⁶³ Not only judges, but also marketplace overseers, priests and other officials suffered the death penalty for neglecting their duties or abusing their position. Adultery, that most divisive of crimes, was punishable by death, a sentence which was applied strictly.⁶⁴ We know this was no empty threat, because there are famous accounts of the children of rulers being executed, despite their parents' desire to pardon them.⁶⁵ Tenochtitlan therefore appears to be an example of a society in which high levels of state-sanctioned public violence contrasted with the unacceptability of aggression in informal arenas. Public execution, warfare and human sacrifice were common, but 'unofficial' and interpersonal violence appears to have been relatively rare, and was certainly socially unacceptable.

This interesting juxtaposition of attitudes was thrown into sharp relief by the Spanish invasion in the early sixteenth century and the Aztec/Spanish encounter addresses many of the issues of cultural definition and personal perception which have challenged historians of homicide. Despite their abhorrence of the 'horrid and abominable custom' of human sacrifice, there was much for the Spanish to marvel at in the Aztec capital.⁶⁶ Bernal Díaz's famous account makes clear the awe and wonder which accompanied their arrival:

When we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded... These great towns and *cues* (pyramids) and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision... Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream. ...It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen or dreamed of before.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Florentine Codex*, 8: 14: 41-3, 8: 17: 54-5. Frances Berdan, 'Living on the edge in an ancient imperial world: Aztec crime and deviance', *Global Crime*, 9.1 (2008), pp. 20-34; Frances F. Berdan, 'Crime and Control in Aztec Society', in K. Hopwood (ed.), *Organized Crime in Antiquity* (London, 1999), pp. 255-69; and Jerome A. Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁶⁴ Durán, *History of the Indies*, p. 210; Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 96; *Florentine Codex*, 4: 27: 93; 'Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas', in J. García Icazbalceta (ed.), *Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de México* (Mexico City, 1891), vol. 3, p. 262; Toribio Motolinía, *Memoriales e historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* (Madrid, 1970), p. 142; Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologetica Historia Sumaria, quanto a las qualidades, dipusición, descripción, cielo y suelo destas tierras, y condiciones naturales, policías, repúblicas, manera de vivir e costumbres de las gentes destas Indias occidentales y meridionales cuyo imperio soberano pertenece a los reyes de Castilla*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (México, 1967) vol. 2, pp. 388, 400; and *The Codex Mendoza*, ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt (Berkeley, 1992), fol. 71r.

⁶⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 8: 14: 42; Alonso de Zorita, *The Lords of New Spain: The Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain*, trans. and ed. B. Keen (London, 1965), pp. 130-1.

⁶⁶ Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, p. 35.

⁶⁷ Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London, 1963), p. 214.

Díaz's amazement at the Aztec capital is hardly surprising. With conservative estimates placing the population of Tenochtitlan at more than 200,000 people, the Aztec city dwarfed its European counterparts; two of the largest cities in Europe, Seville and London, had only around 50,000 inhabitants in the early sixteenth century.⁶⁸ Tenochtitlan was almost certainly the largest and most-organized city that any of the conquistadors had ever seen and they openly admired the stylish architecture, the huge marketplace, the clean streets, and the government's evidently effective authority.⁶⁹ Many of the conquistadors originated from the former Moorish regions of southern Spain and they viewed these now famously characterful cities through much less rose-tinted spectacles. Even more than two centuries later in the 1780s, the commentator Antonio Ponz said of Seville that the crooked streets 'kept the mean, confused character imprinted on them by the boorishness or superstition of the Moors'.⁷⁰ By contrast, the clean, symmetrical streets of Tenochtitlan must have appeared as a model of urban perfection, and this great city of canals was regularly evoked as the Venice of the Americas, an idealized waterborne world.⁷¹

The Aztecs presented the conquistadors with a striking intellectual problem by both challenging and confirming their ideals of civilization. As naked cannibals and primitive idolaters, they were the antithesis of European 'civilization', but as a sophisticated urban culture with highly developed political and social structures, they also displayed a disturbing correspondence with Spanish ideals of civility. The Spanish found themselves in a quandary. They were faced with men who were patently civilized by any political or social measure, yet who practised a religion which was apparently barbarous in the extreme. This fascinating contrast has proved equally problematic to scholars, and Aztec culture provides an illuminating challenge to the 'civilizing process', corresponding with some dimensions of Elias's theory and contradicting others. Elias asserted that the greater the state's monopolization of violence, the less people's inclination to interpersonal violence, a pattern which seemed to prevail in Tenochtitlan. But Elias also held that 'religion is always exactly as "civilized" as the society or class which upholds it'.⁷² Where does this leave

⁶⁸ W. George Lovell, "'Not a City but a World": Seville and the Indies', *Geographical Review*, 91.1/2 (2001), p. 246; Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 4.

⁶⁹ Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 18, 305 n. 9.

⁷⁰ Quoted in James Casey, *Early Modern Spain: A social history* (London, 1999), p. 113.

⁷¹ See, for example, Liz Horodowich, 'Armchair Travelers and the Venetian Discovery of the New World', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 36.4 (2005), pp. 1039-62.

⁷² Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford, 2000), p. 169. Elizabeth Graham has argued that ritual immolation was justified by the Aztecs as part of the practice of war, rather than being seen as a separate act (Elizabeth Graham, 'There is no such thing as "human sacrifice"', *Mexicolore* <<http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/index.php?one=azt&two=aaa&id=413&typ=reg>> [accessed 25 May 2012]). If true, this fascinating idea would have significant implications for this

societies such as the Aztecs whose belief systems require violent rituals? Can a society be civilized whilst at the same time being responsible for state-sponsored homicides on a scale which is disturbing to modern sensibilities?

It is perhaps worth remembering at this point that, at the same moment the Spanish were judging the barbarism of the Aztecs' sacrificial rites, their own Inquisition was practising the horrific rituals of the *autos-da-fé*, ritual executions which sent their victims not to a privileged afterlife but to an eternal damnation. Michel de Montaigne was unusual in identifying this shared brutality; as he wrote in a famous passage, quoted here from the earliest English edition:

I am not sorry that we note the barbarous horror of such an action, but grieved, that prying so narrowly into their faults, we are so blinded in ours. I think there is more barbarism in eating men alive, than to feed upon them being dead; to mangle by tortures and torments a body full of lively sense, to roast him in pieces, to make dogs and swine to gnaw and tear him in mammocks (as we have not only read, but seen very lately, yea, and in our own memorie, not amongst ancient enemies, but our neighbours and fellow-citizens; and, which is worse, under pretence of piety and religion) than to roast and teare him after he is dead.⁷³

Montaigne recognised the moral inconsistency of his contemporaries but, whilst historians have had no difficulty in reconciling a Golden Age of Spain with the Inquisition's religious atrocities, Aztec history has been overshadowed by the spectre of human sacrifice. A polarisation has emerged in the field, with many studies either sensationalizing human sacrifice or playing it down in an attempt to direct attention onto other areas. In a move comparable to William Arens' famous 'Man-Eating Myth',⁷⁴ some scholars have even attempted to deny that human sacrifice was practised (despite the increasing preponderance of archaeological evidence to supplement the ethnohistoric material).⁷⁵

The debate around sacrifice has also become highly politicized. Academics who study ritual violence and warfare in Amerindian societies have frequently found themselves the subject of vocal attacks by 'Neo-Mexica' groups seeking

analysis, and I look forward to the results of her ongoing research on this subject. (See 'The Myth of Human Sacrifice: The anthropology of war' *UCL Institute of Archaeology*, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/directory/sacrifice_graham> [accessed 25 May 2012].

⁷³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes or Moral, Politike and Millitarie Discourses of Lo: Michael de Montaigne...* (London, 1603), p. 104.

⁷⁴ Arens argued that the lack of eyewitness testimony, and reliance on tainted colonial sources, fundamentally undermined the idea that ritual cannibalism was ever practised. W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (Oxford, 1979).

⁷⁵ The most notable challenges to the existence of human sacrifice are: P. Hassler, *Menschenopfer bei den Azteken? Eine quellen- und ideologiekritische Studie* (Berne, 1992); and P. Hassler 'Human Sacrifice among the Aztecs?' (Reprinted from *Die Zeit*, Hamburg, December 1992), <<http://www.elcamino.edu/faculty/jsuarez/1cour/h19/WpSacrifice1.htm>> [accessed 23 May 2012].

to 'reclaim' the indigenous past.⁷⁶ These organisations contend that histories of violent practices are colonial inventions (or at worst exaggerations) intended to justify conquest.⁷⁷ The irony of this revisionist discourse is that it embraces unquestioningly the imperialist attitudes it claims to deny, accepting the underlying assumption that ritual violence can only be practised by an irretrievably cruel and barbaric culture. Mel Gibson's 2006 blockbuster film about the Maya, *Apocalypto*, provoked a storm of criticism from indigenous groups and scholars who claimed that it conveyed 'one-sided and clearly exploitative messages about the indigenous peoples of the New World'.⁷⁸ Such criticisms are clearly justified, as are those based on the film's inaccuracies and implicit agendas; the graphic reconstructions of human sacrifice in *Apocalypto* bore far closer resemblance to Aztec practices than those of the Maya, for example. But the difficulty with such assessments is that they approach the film from a preconceived understanding of 'civilisation', implicitly adopting an established intellectual hegemony which asserts that somehow sacrificial bloodshed necessarily dehumanizes and devalues a culture. The Mexica Movement, a group dedicated to 'liberation ... from Hispanic-Latino European colonialism', denounced *Apocalypto* vociferously, claiming that it showed indigenous people as 'the worst of people committing human sacrifice, a people worthy of being destroyed by Europeans'.⁷⁹ However defensible might be their criticisms of the film's content and its political, religious and racial agendas, this statement fails to recognize that the practice of human sacrifice does not necessarily provide a justification for conquest. Groups such as the Mexica Movement have been unable to accept that human sacrifice could be practised by a sophisticated and in many ways extremely familiar society. They believe that only by denying human sacrifice can they reclaim and celebrate their cultural heritage, and this abhorrence of sacrifice has permeated both academic and popular dialogue. Recently, in response to a chapter which I contributed to a collection of essays on violence, the editor commented in the introduction that 'the unique cruelty of Aztec ritual practices places their society at the extreme end of the spec-

⁷⁶ A recent collection attempted to consider critically some of the challenges faced by scholars working on topics of sensitivity to indigenous American groups: Richard J. Chacon and Rubén G. Mendoza (eds.), *The Ethics of Anthropology and Amerindian Research: Reporting on Environmental Degradation and Warfare* (New York, 2012).

⁷⁷ Probably the most prominent exponent of this tradition is K. Tlapoyawa. See his 'Did "Mexika Human Sacrifice" <Exist?, eaglefeather.org/series/Native American Series/Did Mexika Human Sacrifice Exist.pdf> [accessed 23 May 2012]; and his *We Will Rise: Rebuilding the Mexikah Nation* (Victoria, 2000).

⁷⁸ Traci Arden, 'Is "Apocalypto" Pornography?', *Archaeology* (5 December 2006), <<http://www.archaeology.org/online/reviews/apocalypto.html>> [accessed 23 March 2012].

⁷⁹ 'Mexica Movement: Not Hispanic! Not Latino!', <<http://www.mexica-movement.org/>> [accessed 23 May 2012]; 'Apocalypto: Mel Gibson's Show of White Supremacy: The New Genocide', <<http://www.mexica-movement.org/APOCALYPTO.htm>> [accessed 23 May 2012].

trum'.⁸⁰ This perception that Aztec society was, in some sense, at the beginning of a linear 'civilizing process' leading to modern 'civilized' attitudes to society and sociability is at the root of many of the controversies relating to Amerindian violence.

Colonial justifications of conquest were frequently rooted in the opposition of ideas of civilization and barbarism, setting European Judaeo-Christian values against the savage paganism of the newly discovered peoples.⁸¹ The revisionist refusal to accept the reality of human sacrifice is, in part, a perfectly legitimate refusal to accept the validity of such discourses, but its effect has been to muddy the waters of historical research and to accept an underlying premise which demonizes the practitioners of human sacrifice and relegates them to the realm of the 'uncivilized'. It is this association between violence and savagery which we must labour to break in order better to understand Aztec society and place it more clearly within the debate over issues of violence.

The unusual scale and visibility of the Aztecs' ritual bloodshed has often led to their dehumanization.⁸² Unable to grasp the motivations for their spectacularly violent religion, historians have often reconciled the Aztecs' sophistication and brutality by simply saying 'they're not like us' and placing them outside the expectations of 'normal' human society. But although it is difficult for a modern observer to empathise with their motivations and to appreciate the violent drama of their rituals, the Aztecs were a deeply human, compassionate, refined, and sophisticated society. They may not have conformed to our expectations of civilization, but it is hard to argue that they were 'uncivilized', despite the bloody rituals which shaped their lives and have dominated their history.

⁸⁰ Stuart Carroll (ed.), *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 37.

⁸¹ See, for example, F. Lestringant, *Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne* (Cambridge, 1997); Wyatt MacGaffey, 'Dialogues of the deaf: Europeans on the Atlantic coast of Africa', in Stuart B. Schwartz (ed.), *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 249-67.

⁸² One notable exception to the tendency to mark the Aztecs out as an exceptionally bloody society is Nigel Davies, *Human Sacrifice in History and Today* (London, 1981). In his broad survey of the practice of 'human sacrifice', Davies identifies ritualised violence in many different societies, rightly pointing out that 'the worldwide aspects of Aztec practices are as evident as any unique quality they may have possessed' (p. 198).

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