

## THE AZTEC EMPIRE

Question: *What was the purpose and role of human sacrifice in Aztec Society?*



Source: Page 131 in the Codex Magliabechiano 16th Century

Historically human and animal sacrifice has been prevalent in most ancient cultures. Many cultures used human and animal sacrifice for different purposes such as: religious purposes, entertainment purposes (Ancient Rome), population control, political control, and punishment. Many Historians disagree with the purpose, role, and extent of Human sacrifice in Aztec society. Some people believe that human sacrifice is overemphasized and is exaggerated in in Aztec history, and/or the Spanish exaggerated human sacrifice as a justification for colonization, and/or some people disagree with why the Aztecs utilized human sacrifice.

There are many questions that arise from this unique feature of Aztec civilization, it will be your task to uncover some it's mysteries by utilizing evidence to support a historical claim.

## Establishing Context: Timeline

Note: Mexica and Aztecs are the same people

Approx 1200s CE	Mexica tribe travel to central Mexico.
1323/25 CE	According to Aztec legend the Mexica were shown a vision of an eagle perched on a cactus eating a snake at the center of Lake Texcoco, seen as a sign from the gods to settle there.
1323/25 CE	Mexica/ Aztecs became a tributary of the Azcapotzalco empire (Tepanec Empire) and was under its protection
1427 CE	Maxtla, son of the Azcapotzalco ruler assassinated Chimalpopoca (Mexica ruler). To try to kill Maxtla the next Mexica ruler Itzcoatl allied with the exile ruler of Texcoco to defeat Maxtla. Maxtla was killed.
1428 CE	Azcapotzalco was defeated and the Mexica took control of the valley of Mexico (Tenochtitlan)with two other neighbors, Texcoco and Tlacopan, this was known as the "Triple alliance." Itzcoatl ruled until his death in 1440 CE.
1440 CE	Moctezuma I rules for 29 years and under his leadership Tenochtitlan becomes the dominant partner in the triple alliance. Under his rule the Aztec and Texcoco construct a massive aqueduct supplying the city with fresh water. Moctezuma expand the Aztec territory conquering the Huastec and Totonac people.
Approx 1450's	First of a series of "Flower Wars"
1486 CE	Ahuitzotl becomes the eighth Aztec ruler and was a great military leader and conquered many surrounding peoples.
1493 CE	Columbus returns to Spain and reports on his mission to the Spanish King.
1502 CE	Moctezuma II takes power and conquered more territory.
1504 CE	Hernan Cortes leaves Spain and becomes a colonist in Hispaniola (Cuba). Cortez becomes a successful expedition leaders, carrying out multiple expeditions in search for gold and glory.
1519 CE	Hernan Cortes leads army of 600 soldiers to conquer Tenochtitlan and Montezuma II is killed.
1521 CE	Tenochtitlan is destroyed and the Spanish rename the city Mexico City.
1523 CE	Hernan Cortes writes about witnessing Aztec human sacrifice in his letters <i>Cartas de relación</i> addressed to the Spanish Emperor.

Note: You will learn more about the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the upcoming units.

# HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

Question: *What was the purpose and role of human sacrifice in Aztec Society?*

Directions: Answer the text dependent questions and Highlight evidence (quotes) that helps answer the question: What was the purpose and role of human sacrifice in Aztec Society?

## Source 1

Secondary Source: Independent empirical research  
Abstract to Quantitative Study

While human sacrifice has no significant correlations with measures of agricultural potential, protein, total food, food storage adequacy, and famine risk. There are significant positive correlations with population density, population pressure, and war for land and resources. Population pressure and war, for land, and resources have independently significant correlations with human sacrifice, and together account for 38 per cent of its variance (multiple  $R = .62$ ,  $p < .006$ ). A measure of low hierarchical focus of religion provides significant additional explanation of variance (multiple  $R = .72$ ,  $R^2 = .51$ ,  $p < .000$ ), suggesting human sacrifice may play a role in ideological integration.

Source: Winkelman, Michael. *Aztec Human Sacrifice: Cross-Cultural Assessments of ecological hypothesis*. *Ethnology*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Summer, 1998), pp. 285-298.

1. (Research) What does "Positive Correlations" mean? (Define the term)
2. (Research) What is a Quantitative Study?
3. In this study what factors did NOT significantly matter in whether or not a civilization engaged in the practice of human sacrifice?
4. In this study what were the main factors that explained why societies engage in human sacrifice?

## Source 2

Secondary Source: Historical research into motivations behind cannibalism and human sacrifice

“Cortes' statement was based purely on hearsay accounts from enemies of the Aztecs and filtered through two translations. It must be considered an attempt to manufacture a cause for War to justify to himself and to his king the conquest of the Aztecs, who had up until then made no hostile moves. In order for Cortes to justify massacres such as those in Cholula or Tenochtitlan (in each of which the conquerors killed several thousand defenseless people), it was necessary to dehumanize the Aztecs and allege great cruelties (13, book 12, p. 53; 47, p. 73). This psychological mechanism of dehumanizing enemies in order to justify any actions against them is of course not unique to Cortes, yet because of it we should not accept his information uncritically.

It is generally agreed that the Aztecs practiced ritual cannibalism but there is no agreement about the extent of this practice. Human sacrifices, cannibalism, and the behavior of Aztec warriors can all be attributed to and explained by motivational factors, such as religion and the desire to achieve status in society.”

Source: Ortiz de Montellano, B. “Aztec Cannibalism: An Ecological Necessity?” *Science* 200:611-17, 1990.

5. According to this article did Cortes exaggerate Aztec religious practices? What was the purpose of exaggerating this?

6. According to this source why did the Aztec engage in cannibalism and human sacrifice?

## Source 3

Secondary Source: Historical interpretation of use of Aztec Warfare

“Seen through the eyes and values of the conquering Spaniards, the Aztecs emerge as despotic rulers of a vast political empire, religious extremists driven by the insatiable demands of their gods for human sacrifice and participants in ritualized combat aimed at taking captives rather than conquest. This, Aztec warfare has typically been interpreted as particularly draconian, with religion and ritual as chief motivators...Spaniards perpetuated this dark picture of the Aztecs because it helped the conquistadors justify their own actions.

...a sense of history emerges that offers a better understanding of the Aztecs and their wars than that given by the conquistadors. Aztec warfare was a highly organized enterprise undertaken by the state that linked political, economic, social and religious purposes.”

Source: Hassig, Ross. "Aztec Warfare." *History Today*, vol. 40, no. 2, Feb 01 1990, pp. 17.

Continued from Source 3

7. What does Hassig claim is the primary reason why human sacrifice was performed?
  
8. Why do you think the Aztecs engaged in so many wars with neighboring civilizations?
  
9. Why did the Spanish “perpetuate” (or tell people) about how the Aztecs would sacrifice people?
  
10. What did the Spanish think the main reason why the Aztec sacrificed people?

**Source 4**

Your turn to find a Primary or Secondary source on the possible role and purpose of Aztec Sacrifice.  
(Write the quote and the source and explain why the Aztecs engaged in Human Sacrifice from your source)

Write quote here:

Write where you got the information here:

**Research Help:** Find the articles that were used in this DBQ and look at their citations.

Possible articles and look at the citations of the articles.

1. Berrelleza, Roman, and Alberto. Sacrificio de niños en el Templo Mayor. Mexico (In Spanish. 1990. Use google translate)
2. Cowgill, George. “Ritual Sacrifice and the Feathered Serpent Pyramid at Teotihuacán, México”. 1997.
3. Acosta, Valerie. "El sacrificio humano en Mesoamérica" 2003. (In Spanish. Use google Translate)

How does this quote answer the question: What was the purpose of human sacrifice in Aztec society?

---

---

---

---

