
MODERN WARS IN PERSPECTIVE

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Mexico and the Spanish Conquest

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When the Spaniards first reached the Yucatan Peninsula in 1517, Mesoamerica had enjoyed almost three thousand years of high civilization, sophisticated cultural achievements, and a long history that had seen the successive rise and fall of many states and empires. Mesoamerica, the area of high indigenous civilization in Mexico and Central America, is enormously varied, bounded by the desert roughly 170 kilometres (100 miles) north of current-day Mexico City, and encompassing Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize and much of Mexico and Honduras. United by its sophisticated indigenous culture, this area encompassed everything from tropical lowlands to mountainous heights exceeding 5,000 metres (18,000 feet), giving rise to many different societies.

Agriculture served as the economic basis for the rise of civilization in Mesoamerica. Emerging slowly over thousands of years, the development of the basic complex of maize, beans and squash provided a more reliable and bountiful food supply than hunting and gathering, permitting more people to live together for longer periods. Thus, agriculture enabled the early Mesoamericans to shift from small nomadic hunting and gathering bands to larger sedentary agricultural villages by 1500 BC. Everywhere throughout Mesoamerica, societies were becoming more complex, but the first truly sophisticated culture was that of the Olmecs, who emerged on the Veracruz Gulf coast around 1200 BC.¹

Their rise was greatly aided by the movement of maize from the Mesoamerican highlands down into the tropical lowlands where the greater rainfall and fertile soils permitted at least two crops a year. This agricultural surplus fuelled the development of a complex society, which included sophisticated gods and religious innovations, important ceremonial centres, a great art style, the emergence of classes and the rise of kings.

¹ For a fuller discussion of the role of warfare in the development of Mesoamerica as a culture area, see Hassig (1988; 1992), on which this account is based.

By the sixteenth century, Mesoamerica was a single culture area united by its major shared, albeit varied, traditions. But at the beginning of the Olmec period, it was not. There was little interplay between various groups and local traditions remained quite diverse. The emergence of the Olmecs, and their subsequent expansion, signalled the beginning of the regional connections that would ultimately mark Mesoamerica as an area of common traditions.

The Olmecs were the first Mesoamerican military power, with the first professional soldiers, the first weapons designed specifically for warfare (notably clubs, maces and slings) rather than hunting tools turned to military purposes, and the first kings whose power depended on military success. But the Olmec expansion beyond the Gulf coast lowlands was not, in all likelihood, military. There were simply too few soldiers to dominate vast areas by force of arms. But even more telling, it was simply too far for the Olmecs to be able to send and sustain enough troops to control distant areas.

Except in toys, the wheel was never used in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, perhaps because of the mountainous terrain and the lack of draught animals; even by the time of the Spanish conquest, the only domesticated animals in Mexico were turkeys, dogs and bees. There was also a notable lack of year-round navigable rivers, which restricted the use of canoes and rafts primarily to coasts and lakes. Except for largely ceremonial *palanquins* or sedan chairs for the nobility, everyone travelled by foot and all trade goods went by human porters (*tlamemes*). Each porter carried an average load of 23 kilograms (50 pounds) for 21–28 kilometres (13–18 miles) per day.² Compared to the considerably more efficient wagons of the Old World, Mesoamerican transport was seriously constrained in long distance and loads, so the cost of moving goods was significantly higher.

This transport constraint was to have a pronounced effect on patterns of warfare in Mesoamerica. Each adult male soldier in Mesoamerica consumed, on average, 0.95 kilograms (2 pounds) of maize and half a gallon of water per day. Although this is not much individually, for an entire army, the logistical difficulties are apparent. Food either had to be carried by the soldiers themselves, which only added to the burden of their arms and could not have amounted to much, or specialized porters had to accompany the army. At the most favourable ratio (which is recorded much later for the Aztecs) of one porter for every two soldiers, an army could

² For a discussion of *tlamemes*, see Hassig 1985:32 and *passim*.

travel only for eight days on its own supplies since each porter carried only twenty-four man/days of food.

The time limit that logistics placed on marches meant that armies simply could not go very far. Moreover, armies do not march as fast as individuals because of the dynamics of mass movements, and there is little reason to believe that any Mesoamerican army marched faster than its preindustrial peers elsewhere, or 8-32 kilometres (5-20 miles) a day, a march rate that accords well with modern practice of 4 kilometres (2.5 miles) per hour on roads and 2.4 kilometres (1.5 miles) off. Mesoamerican societies did not build formal roads between cities, except for the Late Classic Maya in Yucatan. Instead, they used the dirt roads that sprang up between centres, so the march rate of their armies doubtless tended toward the lower figure - 19 kilometres (12 miles) per day. Coupled with their logistical constraints, an Olmec army could thus be expected to have a combat radius of no more than 58 kilometres (36 miles) - three days there, one of combat, another for recuperation, and three days return.

Despite the far-flung areas of Olmec influence, it is highly unlikely that their expansion was achieved militarily. Man-for-man, the Olmecs were doubtless the best soldiers of their day, but they could not project their force over such vast distances. Instead, the Olmecs tied together much of Mesoamerica in a trading network, spreading new religious ideas, new intellectual triumphs such as writing, mathematics and a calendar system, and new forms of social organization that began linking the vast area into a common cultural region. By 400 BC, however, their time had passed. The Olmecs withdrew back into the lowlands but, as with their expansion, there is little evidence that this was militarily inspired. Rather, as irrigation agriculture developed in the highlands, newly emergent local elites could now successfully compete with the Olmecs for valuable trade goods and they could do so without the tremendous burden of transporting them to the distant Gulf coast. Without their competitive advantage, the Olmecs lost their dominance and reverted to being one among many of the emerging local state systems.

After the Olmec decline, no single society dominated Mesoamerica for hundreds of years, but warfare increased among the newly emergent states. New arms and armour were developed, including large rectangular shields, whose added protection hastened the decline of clubs and maces, and the thrusting spear emerged as Mesoamerica's dominant weapon. This period was one of political

instability. As a result, warfare by professionally armed soldiers was rife and the construction of the earliest permanent Mesoamerican fortifications was prevalent.

Following this period of regional balkanization and conflict, the city of Teotihuacan, in the northeastern Valley of Mexico, gradually emerged as the capital of Mesoamerica's first major empire. Teotihuacan marshalled large numbers of professional soldiers armed with either thrusting spears and bucklers or spearthrowers (*atlatls*), darts and rectangular shields, a standardization that indicates state control of the armory. Thus equipped, Teotihuacan's armies could pour dart fire into their enemies' ranks and disrupt them before the two sides closed for hand-to-hand combat. This proved a devastating tactic when backed by the large body of soldiers that Teotihuacan could muster from its huge population.

Teotihuacan was a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic city, attracting and assimilating foreign peoples. This enabled Teotihuacan to become the largest city in Mesoamerica with 60,000 inhabitants as early as AD 100 and reaching a peak population of some 200,000 in AD 500. Teotihuacan was apparently a theocracy and the city's religious significance is signalled by its enormous temple-pyramids. But the city owed much of its importance to its obsidian industry. Obsidian was the basic material for most tools and weapons in Mesoamerica, playing a role similar to that of iron in Europe, and Teotihuacan controlled the main deposits in central Mexico and engaged in large-scale manufacturing of obsidian products. This industry underlay much of Teotihuacan's expansion as it sought foreign markets for its wares and exotic goods for its own consumption.

Within the first three centuries AD, Teotihuacan had expanded over much of central Mexico, created mineral-producing settlements north well beyond the boundaries of civilization, penetrated the Maya lowlands of Guatemala, and established colonies as far south as the highland Maya city of Kaminaljuyu on the site of modern-day Guatemala City. Elite Teotihuacan goods were in high demand in many places throughout Mesoamerica, but the creation of settlements and colonies, as well as the protection of incessant merchant expeditions, demanded an active military. This Teotihuacan could easily provide: its army was the largest in Mesoamerica, was well trained and equipped, and, by AD 400, its soldiers were armoured as quilted cotton jerkins were adopted.

Teotihuacan's military-backed expansion was the second major wave integrating the various areas of Mesoamerica, and with

expansion came the spread of many ideas, technologies and patterns of organization. But its dominance was not to last. Teotihuacan could maintain its far-flung operations only with difficulty. Even as an urban giant, it could not muster enough troops to provide garrisons everywhere and, even if it could marshal enough soldiers, the logistical constraints on doing so were enormous. At the same time that Teotihuacan grappled with the limits of its military power, the mere presence of its merchants, colonists and other functionaries stimulated local social development. With sustained contact, colonized and contacted groups grew more sophisticated and eventually became competitors themselves. No city or group of cities actually rivalled Teotihuacan or directly confronted it. But at the great distances involved and the cost of dispatching and maintaining even small forces, even modest cities with their emergent elites increasingly seeking the very wares that Teotihuacan itself sought could compete with the great city.

With the increased competition borne of its own expansion, Teotihuacan could no longer maintain its far-flung holdings and began withdrawing from its most distant enclaves shortly after AD 500. This contraction alleviated the colonial problems, but the city's internal development was based on the existence of colonial markets. Now without them, Teotihuacan was vastly overproducing: workers were dislocated, the wealth of the city declined, and by AD 750, Teotihuacan's ritual centre was burned and the city was largely abandoned.

Teotihuacan had not controlled and integrated all of Mesoamerica: many places were too undeveloped to merit attention and others were too far away. Instead, it dominated many, though not all, major urban areas, largely ignoring relatively unimportant intervening areas. Teotihuacan's legacy was an increased interdependence that was regional, though spotty, and a further cultural homogenization of the areas in contact. But with the city's demise, Mesoamerica again broke into a vast number of local cities and states. Some cities, such as El Tajin, Xochicalco and Cacaxtla, rose to local prominence. However, no city exercised control over a significant area until the rise of the Toltecs.

The end of the first millennium AD was a period of reintegration of much of Mesoamerica. The Toltecs emerged as the rulers of a mercantile empire, strongly supported by military innovation and might, that pushed out competing trader groups that had established themselves during the fragmentation of central Mexico after the demise of Teotihuacan. However, they did not

dominate Mesoamerica in the same fashion or as extensively as had Teotihuacan and regionally competing polities emerged elsewhere. The capital of the Toltec empire was Tollan, which reached its height from AD 950 to 1150 with a resident population of 60,000, many of whom were craftsmen, and an equal number of farmers in its immediate hinterland. But it was an important obsidian source near Tollan that Teotihuacan had exploited earlier that was probably the reason that the Toltec capital was situated where it was.

A major portion of Tollan's multi-ethnic population was composed of Mesoamericans imbued with the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of the region. But the majority were relative newcomers, migrants from the north who had recently moved south into the sphere of civilization, and it was the merging of these two traditions that gave rise to Tollan. Though Tollan was, in many ways, a continuation of Teotihuacan traditions – the Toltecs were not major cultural innovators – it nevertheless signalled a major political shift. Rather than a theocracy, Tollan was ruled by more secular rulers. But like Teotihuacan, Tollan owed its dominance to its obsidian industry and commerce.

There is, however, ample evidence of warfare in Tollan, and conquest doubtless played a major role in the city's rise. Although not as populous as its predecessor imperial capital, Tollan was larger than any other city of its day and enjoyed the advantage of new military technology and organization. Its primary innovation was a sword 50 centimetres (20 inch) in length, a curved wooden handle with obsidian blades along each edge. This short sword provided a much larger cutting surface than previous weapons and it did so with very little extra weight. Most previous weapons used entire stones fashioned into points and were essentially crushers, but the short sword substituted small blades that could be glued into light wooden handles, relying on slashing for its effect.

Because of their lightness, short swords did not have to be chosen in lieu of other arms, but could be carried with *atlatis*, allowing each soldier to function in a dual role. Arming Toltec soldiers with both projectiles and slashers effectively doubled their strength compared with traditional Mesoamerican soldiers. Toltec soldiers could now provide their own covering fire with *atlatis* while they advanced and still engage in hand-to-hand combat with short swords once they closed with the enemy. As at Teotihuacan, Toltec arms and armour included standardized weapons indicative of state ownership and control, a large army, and complementary weapons and units.

Both the nature and size of Tollan's empire is debated, but Toltec trade clearly extended throughout most of Mesoamerica and beyond, linking Tollan to Chiapas, Guatemala, and Central America, central Veracruz, the Huastec area, north and west Mexico, and perhaps even the American Southwest. However, this expansion was intermittent and apparently avoided strong competing sites. Instead of an area of uniform control, the Toltec empire was probably a series of ill-defined and rapidly changing relationships with other centres, some subordinate in varying degrees and others virtual partners.

The Toltecs established a trading empire that operated through merchant enclaves and settlements rather than by militarily colonizing outlying areas. Military power was important in protecting merchants in hostile areas, but the Toltecs lacked the manpower and logistical capacity to create and maintain a major empire. The general increase in population throughout Mesoamerica by Toltec times made distant logistical support increasingly feasible but the Toltecs lacked a tributary network capable of providing support. Instead, they created colonial enclaves throughout much of Mesoamerica during a period in which there was no large competitor, and linked the region through their own people sent abroad to trade, produce, and colonize.

As with Teotihuacan, Tollan owed its economic position to a far-flung trade network that supplied the city's craftsmen with needed raw materials and sold the goods they produced. If control of this trade were left in the hands of others, Tollan would have been vulnerable; it therefore seized direct control of the trade. In spite of its military advantages, however, the Toltec empire ended around AD 1179 when Tollan met a violent end as the result of famine, rebellion and barbarian invasions. Much of this can be attributed to long-term desiccation of the areas to the north that forced many groups to abandon their homes and migrate south into Mesoamerica, disrupting Tollan's control of its trade routes. A break up into city-states and regional powers again overtook Mesoamerica in the wake of Tollan's abandonment and new groups migrated into central Mexico from the north, taking over existing cities and establishing others of their own. A few city-states became the centres of small empires, such as the Tepanec empire that dominated the Valley of Mexico. But no city controlled vast areas until the emergence of the Aztecs following their overthrow of the Tepanecs in 1428.

The Aztecs migrated into the Valley of Mexico at the end of the

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twelfth century AD and settled at Tenochtitlan in 1345. As outsiders and relative barbarians, they needed allies to achieve political legitimacy among the other cities. They thus selected Acamapichtli, a noble from the city of Colhuacan, as their first king and he exercised control over external matters, such as war. However, internal matters, such as land ownership and tribute collection, remained largely in the hands of the traditional Aztec leaders – the *capollis* heads – who controlled the flow of tribute from the commoners, and on whom the king was dependent. In traditional Mesoamerican fashion, Acamapichtli consolidated his position through marriage with the daughters of these leaders. The offspring united Acamapichtli's noble heritage with the *de facto* authority of nobility, paving the way for the eventual consolidation of Aztec internal and external power in the hands of the king.

Being new and relatively few, the Aztecs became tributaries of the Tepanec empire in the western Valley of Mexico. The power of the Aztec kings grew very slowly until the assassination of Chimalpopoca, Acamapichtli's grandson and the third Aztec king, which precipitated a major change in the Aztec system of selecting kings. Previously, sons had succeeded fathers, but since the king enjoyed little more than titular powers, exactly who ruled was not a crucial matter. However, Chimalpopoca died without a suitable heir so Itzcoatl, a skilled soldier, was elected king by the other nobles. With this election, political legitimacy within a larger pool of nobles no longer depended on strict hereditary succession but on ability, and having a skilful ruler became increasingly important as the kings' power grew.

Itzcoatl, the fourth Aztec ruler, became king during an especially turbulent period in the Valley of Mexico. King Tetcozomoc, the founder of the Tepanec empire, had died and the son he had chosen as his successor was assassinated by another of his sons, Maxtla; Tepanec cities which were ruled by Tetcozomoc's other sons, who had equal claims to the imperial throne, leaving Maxtla in control of little more than the capital city.

Seizing this opportunity, Itzcoatl allied with other rulers who were equally dissatisfied with the Tepanecs. Principal among these were the king of Tetzcoco, a long-time enemy of the Tepanecs, and the king of Tlaxcopan, one of Maxtla's disgruntled brothers and himself a pretender to the Tepanec throne. With their assistance, Itzcoatl struck, defeating the badly divided Tepanecs, and this

Aztec-led Triple Alliance became the dominant power in the Valley of Mexico.

The overthrow of the Tepanec empire freed Tenochtitlan from external domination: Itzcoatl now received tributary goods and lands from the defeated cities, providing income that did not depend on his own people. The king was now notably less dependent on the commoners for either goods or political support, which significantly lessened the political importance of the ward leaders. Some support for war may have been ideological since religion played a role in it, as it did for many wars worldwide. But religious beliefs encouraging warfare, such as having to nourish the gods with human blood, were common throughout central Mexico and do not explain Aztec expansion in particular. Rather, the commoners generally supported war because this was one of the few avenues of social advancement open to them. Whatever their personal beliefs about its religious purposes, excelling in combat offered commoners the possibility of rising to elite status and receiving material rewards.

The Aztec rise provided more economic stability to the nobility in the form of greater tributary wealth, but this also led to increased political instability because of the way the Aztecs organized their empire. The Aztecs were faced with two alternative ways to structure their expanding empire. One alternative was to conquer new areas and consolidate their hold by replacing local leaders and armies with Aztec governors and garrisons. This would allow the Aztecs to extract large quantities of goods in tribute, but at a high administrative cost in replacing local rulers and maintaining troops to enforce their mandates. If they chose the second alternative, the Aztecs could leave the conquered government intact. This would limit the amount they could extract as tribute since it relied on some degree of voluntary compliance, but it would also reduce the empire's political and administrative costs. The first approach – a territorial empire – provides greater political control and more tribute but it also limits expansion because exercising direct control quickly absorbs the available manpower in garrison duty. The second approach – a hegemonic empire – collects less tribute because it exerts less control, but it also frees more men for further expansion. Faced with this choice, the Aztecs adopted the second alternative.²²

There are both advantages and disadvantages to the hegemonic system, which had ramifications for Aztec expansion. The more a hegemonic empire relies on power (the perception that one can enforce one's desired goals) rather than force (direct physical action

to compel one's goals), the more efficient it is because the subordinates police themselves. But the costs of compliance must not be perceived as outweighing the benefits: the more exploitative a political system is perceived to be, the more it must rely on force rather than on power, and the less efficient it becomes. The hegemonic system had a major weak point, however: it required a strong king. Because the Aztecs imposed few or no institutional changes in tributary areas, the empire was vulnerable to collapse if their king was perceived as weak or indecisive. The king's military prowess was not simply a matter of ideology or honour, but was an essential element in sustaining the empire and his death could disrupt the system if his successor did not guarantee continuity in policy or ability. Thus, for the Aztecs, military prowess was a major concern in selecting a king.

Much of the Aztecs' own support for the empire grew from their ability to amass ever more tribute which required continued imperial expansion and a militarily successful king. Sustained military failure could incite rebellion, shrink the empire, and reduce tribute goods and lands. Failure struck hardest at the interests of the nobles and if the king lost their support, his safety could be imperilled. For example, Tizoc, the seventh Aztec king, was assassinated after five years of weak rule. Consequently, both wealth and self-preservation compelled the king to succeed militarily. Yet despite this impetus, the Aztecs were not continuously at war. Mustering troops, negotiating mass movements and supplying logistical support were patterned by the May-to-September rainy season, which determined when troops could be successfully mobilized and where they could march.

The commoners who made up most of the army were also farmers and were occupied during the summer and early autumn. But even if they had been available year-round, food was not. Needed supplies were most readily available just after harvest. Autumn also marked the beginning of the dry season when troop movements were significantly easier: dirt roads dried out, permitting passage of large groups that would turn wet roads into muddy quagmires, and swollen rivers shrank to fordable streams. As a result of all these factors, Aztec warfare was concentrated in a campaign season running from early December to late April.

Whatever the Aztecs' battle skills, combat effectiveness was only one aspect of warfare: the ability to carry the fight to distant enemies meant that the Aztecs had to muster troops, gather supplies and coordinate mass movements; all of which required considerable

advance planning. In this, the king exercised overall authority, determining the army's route, the number of days it would march, and the battle plan once the target was reached.

Simply moving large numbers of men posed enormous problems since there were no wheeled vehicles or draught animals in Mesoamerica. Like preindustrial armies elsewhere, the Aztec army moved slowly (no more than 2.4 kilometres or 1.5 miles per hour). But the rate of march was less important than the army's configuration. Since the Aztecs did not build roads for military purposes, they relied on roads that served local trade which restricted the army to double files. This stretched out the standard Aztec command of 8,000 men (a *xiquipilli*) over a distance of 12 kilometres (7.5 miles), without considering the accordion effect that further lengthens the line. This meant that the last men would not begin marching until five hours after the first men had started: in order to complete its march by nightfall, each *xiquipilli* marched one day apart - a necessary expedient, but one that greatly increased the time needed to assemble the entire force for the attack.

The Aztecs could have increased the number of files per column by going cross-country, but marching off roads is slower and, despite its directness, seldom offers significant time savings. However, Aztec armies frequently did march along several alternative routes simultaneously, shortening the time required for everyone to reach the battle site and preventing the defenders from bottling up the Aztecs in a vulnerable pass.

Food was another limiting factor in warfare. Speeding the army was crucial to Aztec success because of the enormous logistical difficulties in Mesoamerica: any delay helped the defenders. Although individual soldiers took some supplies, most food was brought by accompanying porters, although this still limited a self-sufficient army to a total of eight days in the field. With the great population growth in Mesoamerica since Teotihuacan times, the Aztecs were able to extend their range by adapting the tribute system to their imperial aims and demanding food supplies from subordinate towns en route. Messengers were sent along the designated route two days before the march to alert all major tributary towns, each of which then gathered foodstuffs from its surrounding dependencies and supplied them to the passing Aztecs. To do otherwise meant rebellion at a time when Aztec troops were already en route and when the tributary town was not prepared for war and did not have enough time to ready itself.

The slow rate of march, the time needed to assemble the entire

army in camp, and the clouds of dust kicked up by tens of thousands of feet on dirt roads stripped the Aztecs of tactical surprise, as did spies, foreign merchants and even the advance warnings the Aztecs sent to their tributaries to ensure adequate supplies. But there was little that a target city-state could do to take advantage of this warning as its occupants could not flee without leaving their city, homes, goods and fields to the mercy of the Aztecs. Instead, most cities either surrendered or fought, but they were usually outnumbered by the Aztecs and certainly outperformed. Aztec battlefield assaults involved an orderly sequence of weapons use and tactics, as did the battles of earlier empires. However, the weapons had changed, notably by the addition of bows and arrows, which had been brought into Mesoamerica from the north around AD 1100. Signalled by the commander's drum or trumpet, the Aztec attack typically started at dawn. Fighting began with a projectile barrage after the armies closed to around 60 metres (66 yards). Wearing only breechcloths and sandals and perhaps carrying shields, archers and slingers could strike well beyond 60 metres. However, the high rates of fire quickly exhausted the limited supply of arrows and slingstones, so archers and slingers held their fire until they were close enough to guarantee the accuracy and effect of their projectiles.

When the barrage began, soldiers advanced carrying stone-bladed wooden broadswords (*macuahuitl*) and thrusting spears (*tepoztopilli*). These were both relatively recent innovations. The thrusting spear was an elaboration on earlier versions, but now possessed an elongated wooden head inset with obsidian blades. The broadsword, however, was a more radical departure and probably emerged in the mid-fourteenth century. Perhaps an evolution from the Toltec short sword, the broadsword was made of oak inset with obsidian blades and, with its greater size (0.84 metres or 2 feet 8 inches), it displaced the former. The most experienced and accomplished warriors were well protected, wearing quilted cotton and armour under suits of woven feathers or skins and usually helmets, functional protection. Although the elite warriors were heavily armoured, the novices wore no armour at all, a reflection of their respective accomplishments in battle.

Both sides opened with a deadly barrage, particularly to the less protected, so the opposing armies closed quickly. As they advanced, the soldiers shot darts, or short spears, with their spearthrowers: these had a much shorter range than arrows or slingstones but had

greater striking force at close range, could penetrate cotton armour, and were used to disrupt the opposing formations. Soldiers carried only a few *atlatl* darts because each side advanced only about 30 metres (33 yards) before the armies met. At that point, they dropped the *atlatls* in favour of the greater effectiveness of swords or thrusting spears and the combatants intermingled in combat, forcing a halt to the massed projectile fire.

The most experienced soldiers led the attack. First came the military orders (similar to those of medieval Europe), followed by veteran soldiers leading organized units. Last came novice warriors under the supervision of veterans who ensured that they were not unduly endangered during training. Slingers and archers were unarmoured and required both hands to shoot, so they were extremely vulnerable if the enemy got close enough for hand-to-hand combat. Thus they remained back from the battle but continued to fire at isolated targets, harassing enemy reinforcements, covering withdrawals and preventing encirclement by the enemy.

Aztec movements into and out of battle were orderly so as to maintain a coherent formation, allowing the soldiers to concentrate their fighting toward the front rather than on all sides. But once the army closed with the enemy, combat was inevitably an individual affair, although small skirmishing units remained cohesive. Otherwise, soldiers risked being separated and captured by the enemy. But oral commands could not be heard over the din of battle, so the soldiers followed the tall feather standards worn by their leaders. Strapped to the back, these standards towered above the combatants and allowed the soldiers to see where their comrades were going. If the standard bearer was killed, his unit was effectively blinded and thrown into disarray.

Battle was heaviest between the soldiers at the front of the armies, as only they could bring their weapons to bear. The Aztecs usually extended their front as much as possible, taking advantage of their numerical superiority to envelop the enemy troops and cut them off from reinforcements and resupply. However, ambushes were also used on occasion, typically at physically disabling times and locations, such as narrow passes, where the advantage lay with the attacker. The most spectacular ambushes, however, involved feigned retreats in battle. If executed convincingly, the enemy troops advanced to press their supposed advantage until they were drawn into a compromised position. Then the Aztecs turned on them while hidden troops attacked from behind, disrupting the enemy formations and cutting them off.

Defenders occasionally chose to wait behind city fortifications rather than meet the Aztecs in the open. Urban fortifications were not typical in late preconquest central Mexico, but some cities, such as Quetzaltepec, were completely encircled by high walls, often in concentric rings, although usually not free-standing. A more common type of fortification was the stronghold, detached from the city and usually atop an adjacent hill where the advantage of height and a difficult ascent augmented walls and battlements, as at Cuezcomaixtlahuacan. From there, simply throwing stones down on attackers provided an effective first line of defence. However, strongholds were most often used as refuges for dependants and political leaders and did not protect the city itself. Instead, they offered safety while the city's terms of surrender were negotiated.

Unless they gained entry by deceit or through treason, or simply withdrew, the Aztecs had to breach or scale any fortifications they encountered, or they could besiege the city. Breaching fortifications was difficult and time-consuming: scaling walls with ladders was a quicker alternative but was relatively uncommon, probably because the attackers needed so many more men than the defenders. The remaining option was to lay siege to the town. This was feasible within the Valley of Mexico where the besiegers could be resupplied by canoe, but extended sieges were difficult to sustain elsewhere.

Fortified defences could be very effective tactically, but they were seldom used for several reasons. First, they were not foolproof whereas, under favourable conditions, the Aztecs' siege tactics were effective. Second, even if the defenders built effective fortifications, they required many soldiers to man the entire perimeter. This was particularly true for sprawling agricultural towns where manning the entire wall could disperse the defenders and effectively weaken their forces. But third, and most important, the city could not be divorced from its wider social networks: even if the city itself were safe behind fortifications, its fields and stores beyond the walls remained vulnerable, as did its smaller unfortified dependencies, and their loss meant economic catastrophe even if the city remained intact. Thus, only an active defence in which the enemy was met and vanquished would guarantee the city's continuation as the hub of a viable social network.

In any case, the Aztecs' primary objective was to induce the people to submit, not to destroy them, although the conquered temples and associated buildings might be burned as the ultimate sign of Aztec victory. Beyond the symbolic significance of defeating the local gods, burning the temples was a devastating practical blow

since they were usually the most heavily fortified sites within the city and their destruction meant that the strongest resistance had been overcome. Furthermore, the temple precincts contained the city's armories, which meant that their destruction deprived the defenders of additional arms and war supplies. The entire town was burned only if the people continued to resist after their main temple was destroyed.

We have seen that climatic cycles dictated when campaigns were fought, and where they were fought depended on the earlier expansion of the empire, which established where logistical support would be available. But neither of these factors actually determined the strategic direction of the empire's expansion. Although there were doubtless strategic goals – probably related to economic and security concerns – Aztec imperial expansion had a course-of-least-resistance quality. They launched all-out attacks primarily on towns that they were sure they could defeat.

Much of Aztec expansion was determined by geography. Broken terrain channelled conquests through easily travelled territory which gave the Aztec empire a patch-quilt appearance. Independent towns were often bypassed because they were not important to a particular campaign. Only towns posing a military threat to the further expansion of the Aztecs or needed to supply logistical support were conquered. Other towns could be bypassed in comparative safety, to be conquered later, either by force or by intimidation.

Most conquests took place along valley floors where major towns were located near their agricultural lands. Only major towns had to be conquered because that meant the *de facto* submission of their surrounding dependencies as well. Comprehensive conquest was unnecessary: because control was exercised through the existing political structure, unconquered dependencies also became part of the Aztec empire when their capitals were conquered. Thus, Aztec expansion depended less on a strategic vision than on the practicalities of logistical support that dictated the immediate direction and sequence of conquests.

In other words, the Aztecs did not simply emerge from the Valley of Mexico in all directions, sweeping everyone before them. Rather, practical considerations fostered two general strategies for conquests – a relatively straightforward approach for easy targets and a more complicated approach for difficult ones. Because they were concerned with military success, the Aztecs concentrated on easier targets, maximizing their chance of victory and minimizing the risk of failure. The primary advantage of this strategy was that

victories over weaker opponents exacted a smaller toll on Aztec manpower so further expansion was unhindered. But this approach also eased three other goals of Aztec expansion. First, this expansion enabled the Aztecs to build a far-flung logistical network to support their armies in transit. Second, success buttressed the reputation of the empire and discouraged rebellions by other tributaries. And third, it ensured the tribute that the king needed to guarantee the support of the nobles. The Aztecs were excellent soldiers and their emphasis on easy conquests and targets of opportunity reflected internal political considerations rather than military weakness.

An Aztec defeat meant only the loss of a battle: an Aztec victory, however, meant the subjugation of the city-state and all its dependencies. The same was not true for confederacies and empire: they controlled large hinterlands, so advance warning allowed them to marshal large armies and march to their borders to meet them. Under these circumstances, victory meant the conquest of only the area around the battlefield: defeated confederated or imperial armies could withdraw into their territorial interiors while the Aztecs, who were dependent on tributaries for logistical support, could not safely pursue these armies into hostile territory. For a city-state, losing a battle meant subjugation, but for confederacies or empires, it meant the loss of only a limited area of their peripheries. Mesoamerican logistical limitations offered large polities a protection that their armies could not. A single, decisive blow to the heart of an empire was usually beyond the Aztecs' ability: conquering them was a long-term project achieved only by gradually chipping away at the edges of the polity. Even if the Aztecs could conquer such large opponents, some were nevertheless so strong that even a victory would leave the Aztecs too weakened to maintain control elsewhere. The costs of such a conquest were too high for an empire that had to balance many strategic interests. To deal with this situation, the Aztecs fought flower wars (*xochiyaoyotl*), designed to pin down major opponents while their own expansion continued elsewhere. Because of their prolonged nature, early accounts claim that flower wars were fought for military training, to take captives for sacrifice to the gods, and to display individual military skill. This was all true, but the flower war was only a part of a larger military strategy for dealing with major powers.

A flower war began as a show of strength in which relatively few combatants fought to demonstrate individual military prowess. An impressive display of capability could lead to the enemy's

capitulation without further conflict. But if the opponent remained un intimidated, additional flower wars would be fought – often over a period of years – gradually escalating in ferocity. In the initial flower war, injuries and deaths were not deliberate and prisoners were not sacrificed afterward. But as the war escalated, captives were sacrificed rather than returned, the number of combatants increased, bows and arrows introduced indiscriminate death rather than individual demonstrations of skill and bravery until, eventually, the flower war resembled a conventional war of conquest. Thus, a flower war began as a low-cost exercise in military intimidation, but both costs and consequences escalated until it became a war of attrition. And with that, the numerically superior Aztecs could not lose since even equal losses by both sides took a greater toll on the smaller polity, gradually undermining its ability to resist.

It could take considerably longer to defeat an enemy through a flower war than through a war of conquest, but flower wars had significant advantages. By engaging the enemy in limited but enervating warfare, the Aztecs could pin down strong opponents and reduce their offensive threat. They then conquered the surrounding groups and gradually encircled their opponents, cutting them off from external assistance and reducing their areas of logistical and manpower support. By escalating flower wars, the Aztecs slowly chipped away at their enemies' territory until they fell. Thus, the Aztecs' weak-opponent-first strategy generated tribute revenue and increased their logistical capability at low cost, while flower wars isolated and slowly reduced opponents too strong to be attacked directly.

But what exactly did it mean to be conquered by the Aztecs? The most obvious consequence was having to pay tribute, which was the typical economy of Mesoamerican city-states. Although the crown, nobility and temples frequently held their own lands and labourers, most of their income was in the form of goods and labour paid as tribute by the commoner classes. In the case of an independent city-state, the king was the highest level in the tribute system, but once conquered, Aztec tributary demands were added, requiring the payment of additional goods and labour but operating through the local tribute system. The Aztecs merely tapped into the existing system, positioning themselves at the top. This tribute payment was a net loss to the subject towns but conquest typically caused few other overt changes in the local society. Except in the case of recurrent rebellion, conquered rulers remained in place and exercised local control, which freed the Aztecs from local

administration and allowed them to continue their military expansion.

Local economic relations were left largely intact because the Aztecs sought to maintain healthy local economies that were able to pay their new tributary obligations. Imperial tribute siphoned off wealth, which was a local net loss, but Aztec demands also stimulated local production and often expanded trade relationships to secure the goods required. Moreover, tributaries were now linked into an Aztec-dominated trade network dispersing rare and elite goods throughout the empire. As long as local rulers complied with Aztec wishes, leaving them in power was more efficient than replacing them. However, this system was constantly vulnerable to dissolution because it did not shift the loyalty of tributary populations from their traditional rulers to the Aztec kings.

Religious organizations solidly supported the Aztec state and its imperial aspirations, but religious conversion did not play a major role in Aztec imperial ideology. Wars were not primarily religiously motivated, although kings often manipulated religious mandates to further their aims. For example, the Aztec kings occasionally demanded labour and materials from both tributary and independent towns to help in the construction of temples to the gods; failure to comply meant war. The timing of these construction campaigns was decided by the king, not by priests or regular religious events, and the groups targeted tended to be in the direct line of existing Aztec expansion, strongly indicating the primarily political use of religious mandates rather than the opposite. Moreover, conquered towns did not suffer forced religious conversion and Aztec gods were not exported beyond the Valley of Mexico except by the occasional migration of the Aztecs themselves; even then, the local gods and their ceremonies were left intact.

However, not everything continued in conquered city-states because Aztec domination caused major, even if unintentional, changes in the local political system. In most central Mexican polities, rulership did not descend in a fixed fashion, such as from father to eldest son. Mexican kings typically had multiple wives, numerous children and thus many potential successors. The selection of a royal successor was an issue internal to the kingdom, but who was chosen was greatly influenced by external ties. External as well as internal political support for a royal contender was crucial and the single most important factor in terms of the formal requirements for eligibility was his mother.

Intermarriage among allied rulers was common, with rulers

giving their daughters as wives to other rulers, which added an important political dimension to the selection of a successor. Consequently, the successor was likely to be the son of the king by his most important wife – the daughter of the king's most powerful ally. The pool of potential successors was determined by that kingdom's rules of succession, but which among the various eligible candidates was actually chosen depended on the larger political context, and this was massively altered by Aztec conquest.

To be without political alliances left a city-state vulnerable to aggression, breach of trade, and so forth. The king of a conquered polity achieved and held his position in large part because of his alliances with other city-states. But the Aztecs inevitably altered these – first and foremost by inserting themselves as the most important ally, but also because not all of a given polity's original allies were likely to have been incorporated into the Aztec empire at the same time; even if they were, their own political situation was also drastically altered. Whatever the impact of this on succession, Aztec conquest altered the local political environment and shattered the reigning king's political base. There were still other political contenders who had different ties and many of these nobles might well have greater support under the altered circumstances. Thus many reigning kings cleaved closely to their new dominant ally – the Aztecs – to avert overthrow from within. Nevertheless, the potential for dethroning kings remained, and any major shift in political power in the region could easily lead to a change in rulers.

Although the Aztecs reigned supreme in Mesoamerica, they did not rule everywhere, nor did they preside over a group of homogenized societies fully integrated into the empire. Many areas of Mesoamerica remained independent and often hostile. Nevertheless, most posed little military challenge to Tenochtitlan, despite their access to the same military technology as the Aztecs.

Most central Mexican armies shared common weapons and adopted others as they were disseminated by, or in advance of, the Aztecs. Commoner soldiers typically wore loincloths and primarily relied on such weapons as bows and slings, whereas the nobles and military leaders wore more elaborate armour, carried shock weapons (i.e. crushers and slashers, such as maces and swords), and frequently used battle standards and war suits. These armies also shared similar forms of military organization, although their order of battle varied widely.

The military similarities between most Mexican city-states and the Aztecs were superficial, however. Even though there was general

access to Aztec tactics and weapons, how and whether these were incorporated depended on the size and composition of the various armies, which is particularly illustrated by the use of the *atlatl*. In major conventional armies, such as the Aztecs', the *atlatl* was used to disrupt opposing army formations. But armies too small to train large numbers of specialists discontinued use of the *atlatl*, replacing it with the bow which, in these forces, was essentially a lower-class tool turned to military use. As a result, *atlatis* remained important in large conventional armies but they were discarded elsewhere.

Groups among whom this was true include the petty Mixtec and Zapotec kingdoms of Oaxaca, the Totonacs of the Veracruz coast, the Huastecs of the northern Gulf coast, the Mazahuas in the Valley of Toluca, many Nahuatl-speaking city-states scattered throughout central Mexico, and the Maya city-states of Yucatan. Although the Aztecs had not yet conquered all of these groups, neither did they pose a significant military obstacle. Even though these small kingdoms and city-states posed little obstacle in and of themselves, united they could become formidable opponents. In most of Mesoamerica, there is little evidence of the emergence of such larger political groupings at this time, but even regional powers could become powerful magnets for the disaffected and grow to threaten Aztec dominance.

Two such regional powers existed and confronted the Aztecs when the Spaniards arrived. One, the Tarascan empire centred in the modern state of Michoacan, was probably the most powerful group facing the Aztecs. Theirs was a multi-ethnic empire incorporating Tarascan, Otomi and Nahuatl speakers, many of whom had fled Aztec expansion. Much of the mechanics and underlying strategy of Tarascan warfare was similar to, though less sophisticated than, that of the Aztecs and the Tarascan empire was also organized as a hegemonic system. The Tarascans had the same weapons inventory as the Aztecs, but used these in different proportions, relying extremely heavily on bows and arrows.

The Tarascans had defeated the Aztecs in a minor battle when King Axayacatl (ruled 1468–81) invaded their territory, but they were nevertheless not a major military power: they had a relatively small population and made little provision for the specialized military training of commoners. Most Tarascan soldiers were unarmoured and fought with bows and arrows; only the elite used armour and shock weapons, yet their heavy reliance on archery gave the army great defensive strength. They were considerably less formidable offensively because they lacked large numbers of

hand-to-hand combatants and consequently did not use the *atlatl*. Although the Tarascans successfully expanded within the area around their capital, their early attempts to expand toward the east thwarted by the Aztecs' pre-emptive conquest of the area. Nevertheless, their heavy reliance on archery gave the Tarascans a decisive defensive advantage in their own territory, where they had ample ammunition and a favourable logistical situation. These tactical advantages and the advantage of operating within a large hinterland that denied aggressors logistical support, combined to thwart Aztec thrusts deep into Tarascan territory. Nevertheless, the Aztecs remained a significant threat so the Tarascans built a series of fortifications on the major routes from Aztec-allied areas. Responding in kind, the Aztecs built counter-fortifications, but their main expansionary thrust was around Tarascan territory. Bypassing the fortifications, the Aztecs conquered and incorporated the surrounding groups as part of a long-term strategy to strangle the Tarascans, a process cut short by the Spanish conquest.

The second major power to confront the Aztecs was the Tlaxcallan confederacy made up of Nahuatl-speaking city-states in central Mexico. Individually, these city-states were too weak to resist the Aztecs, but joined into shifting alliances. At various times, this alliance included Tlaxcallan, Cholollan, Huexotzinco, Atlixco and Tiliuhqui-Tepec; thus united, it was a significant threat. Unlike some of their other adversaries, these fought wars the same way as the Aztecs and used the full complement of Mesoamerican weapons, although their commoners received less formal training than did most of the Aztecs.

Even though the Aztecs could muster a larger and better trained army, Tlaxcallan controlled a powerful confederacy and, even in victory, the Aztecs would have been badly mauled. Thus, they dealt with the Tlaxcallan confederacy through a series of flower wars, pinning them down while they were completely encircled, cut off, and finally crushed. This was a decades-long process, but by the time the Spaniards arrived, the Aztecs had already completed their encirclement, they had escalated the ferocity of their battles, and Tlaxcallan's final defeat was perhaps no more than a decade away. The Aztecs were dealing effectively with the Tarascans and the Tlaxcaltecs, but both remained threats, in part owing to their military potential, but primarily because of their political potential to lure and unite other disaffected Mesoamerican groups.

In brief, Tenochtitlan was the capital of the mightiest empire in

Mesoamerica. However, it did not rule unchallenged over a unified region. Even within the empire, individual tributaries could, and did, revolt almost at will if the Aztecs proved too weak to compel continued allegiance. This was because the various parts of the empire were not politically, economically, ideologically or socially integrated into the whole. The Aztecs thus ruled over an empire with a remarkably varied social and political mosaic. Moreover, there was little incentive for independent groups to become part of the empire, but whether the Aztecs were resisted depended largely on the balance of power. Thus, the only large powers anywhere near Tenochtitlan – the Tlaxcallan confederacy and the Tarascan empire – remained free. Nevertheless, both of these powers were being slowly encircled and their days were numbered. The Aztecs were undoubtedly the greatest power in Mesoamerica and, without external intervention, there was no major threat to the internal security of Tenochtitlan.