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Isabel Bueno Bravo
Palma

The Mexica Polity and the Chalco Conflict: A Case-Study in Mesoamerican Warfare

These pages focus on war and military institution insofar as they constitute a key element for the understanding of the socio-political organization of the Tenochcas or Mexica (the core group among the so-called Aztecs) political community. The latest research on the wider Mesoamerican cultures' power structures shows how these societies grew by relying on armed force and developed a complex system of domination over the peoples around them. They were not, as earlier historiography has sometimes supposed, peaceful theocracies. Since the scope of this article does not allow us to take in all the groups present before the Spanish Conquest in today's Mexico, we will focus on the Mexica. They provide indeed the best example to illustrate war in Mesoamerica, because Mexico-Tenochtitlan grew up on the basis of a long inherited tradition; because it reached an unprecedented scale; and finally because (owing to the Spanish Conquest) it constitutes the last representative of this fascinating world, and as such left behind more abundant data than other societies. Much in the Mexica system was based on what in modern terms is called military deterrence. This d i s s u a s i o n was not the result of spontaneous or occasional violent reactions. It entailed, rather, the requirement that basic institutions such as education and religious and social values granted the military a key role. War also constituted a factor for promotion in this hierarchical society.

Evolution and Social Development

In comparison with other great ancient civilizations, there are not many studies as should be desirable devoted to Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Even more, for some specific aspects, the information is virtually nil. One of these voids relates specifically to the framework surrounding the sphere of war.

Until the 1980s, Mesoamerican studies had devoted a lot of attention to the religious or mythological dimensions. The latter had captured the attention of scholars and the general public. Some studies, like Jacques Soustelle's pioneering 1955 French book, *La vie quotidienne des Aztèques a`la veille de la conquête espagnole*, did however consider side-by-side myths and warfare[1].

The new turn was, broadly speaking, anthropological. It demonstrated the fruitfulness for researchers to overcome their isolation and to initiate interdisciplinary collaborations. Only so could one display the rich Mesoamerican society in full and in all its nuances. In this sense, the study of war using an anthropological approach allows one to discover almost completely how the war effort as a social act involves politics, ideology, economy, religion, social relations and even art[2].

One problem has been that secondary studies on the topic are practically inexistent. One has to turn the so-called "classical sources", mainly codices and chronicles written by Spanish and indigenous mestizos. While they have since long been extensively mined, they always provide interesting data when subjected to new questions – thus came about, starting with the 1980s, the harvest of Anthropology.

Today, there is no way to be "romantic" and imagine a peaceful Mesoamerica – this is true both for the Classic period (150-650/900 AD) and for the Post-Classic period (900-1521). One can say that in Mesoamerica there never were long periods of peace. As I see it, it was structurally determined: all major cities were very close to each other, forcing them to compete for the same ecological niches. The desire to control resources and obtain political and economic hegemony was latent in every age. So there was no break between the emergence of a powerful center, its decline, and the birth of the next. On this basis, this allows one to speak about societies in which the military was very present; over time, even, it became more important. This is being increasingly confirmed as archaeological discoveries accumulate themselves.

Mexica rulers, aware of this fact, undertook reforms that affected education and the army. Education was key to getting good soldiers who did not question the importance of their life when fighting for the welfare of their people. Rulers, as is at least visible for Aztec society, designed a mandatory, state-funded education system, where children were indoctrinated. The second type of reform involved remodeling the army, to make it more attractive to society, expanding its base, and opening the possibility of upward social

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1 English translation as J. Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, Stanford 1961. I want to thank here the dossier's editor, Dr. Philippe Buc, for his invaluable help, kind suggestions and continuous encouragement.

2 A recent example is the synthesis by F.F. Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, Cambridge (UK) 2014, with an introduction to the sources.

mobility through success in war. Conversely, this infused in society an ideology that surrounded the soldier with a halo of virtue, in the most classic sense. Fame and prestige were essential for being a respected member of the community and obtaining access to certain political charges (which otherwise would have been impossible in an increasingly more complex administration).

Religion also supported the military development because it had an official character, very dependent on political power. It was used to protect and hallow these changes, render acceptable a pantheon of new warriors gods and a "gospel" that proclaimed to one's fellows that they were a chosen people, with a hard mission that doomed them to a permanent war in order to delay the world's end[3]. Had not the gods, after humankind's creation, sacrificed themselves for the latter? Following this notion, Mesoamerican ideology introduced into society the concept of being indebted to one's creators[4].

Next to religion, art – being as a rule an exceptional witness for the period in which it develops – immortalized in beautiful, enigmatic and sometimes terrifying works all the changes that happened to the warriors, the army and their countless battles.

Finally, we cannot forget the relationship between war and the Mesoamerican economy[5], because trade, in particular long-distance trade, provided enormous wealth, especially to the strongest political regime (in comparison with other, less developed counterparts). This was possible by controlling the monopolies on basic products, as well as on luxury ones used mainly for elite consumption. These rich caravans received military protection to prevent unwanted attacks. The exciting pairing war-economy is well reflected in the conflict between the Aztecs and the Confederation of Chalco, as we will see in the relevant section.

Mexica Society and Its Relationship with the Army

The Mexica founded Tenochtitlan, their capital city, in an island in the Texcoco lake. This location made it impossible for them to have enough fields to nourish its growing population[6].

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3 Common among pre-Hispanic peoples (and not only particular to the Mexica) are myths of origin involving a journey under divine leadership towards a promised land.

4 M. Graulich, *El sacrificio humano en Mesoamérica*, "Arqueología Mexicana" XI (2003) 63, p. 19.

5 I. Bueno, *Objetivos económicos y estrategia militar en el imperio azteca*, "Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl" XLIV (2012) 2, pp. 135-163.

6 I would highlight that Mesoamerican cities were quite populous in comparison with European cities from the same era. At the time when Hernán Cortés arrived in America,

Given the proximity of Tenochtitlan to other coastal cities, and especially considering that the island on which it was founded belonged to Azcapotzalco, the power actually dominating the valley, the Mexicas could hardly have gotten land through pacific means. So the lack of cultivable land and the desire to dominate trade routes and their monopolies, on the model of Azcapotzalco, the city to which the Tenochcas were initially subordinate, is likely to have compelled Tenochtitlan to live in a permanent state of war.

For the successful development of armies and their mobilization, weather, topography, and also technology, are very important. These aspects were not favorable in the Mesoamerican area; there, neither metals nor the wheel were yet in use. Then which were the keys of the Mexica success in creating the huge empire that Cortés encountered?

THE MEXICA SUCCESS

Tenochtitlan's leaders, once independent from Azcapotzalco (1428) through a bloody war in which they ended victorious, opted for a management system governed by what I call "the law of flexibility", which they applied to all kinds of political situations, as well as to the way in which they mobilized the army. But let us go step by step and see how the military sphere was in the Mexica period.

In Nahuatl, the ruler was called *tlatoani*, which we might translate "king" or "emperor". He was also the highest representative of the army; he was the one who declared war, but he could not do it without the agreement of the Council consisting of himself, his right hand called the *cihuacoatl*, and two senior army officials, the *tlacateccatl* and *tlacochcalcatl*[7]. Once the decision was made, the *tlatoani* announced it in the main square, giving time to the warriors to prepare and to the messengers to forward the orders to the friendly areas, and, further, to allow the ambassadors to enter into negotiations with the hostile province, if the latter preferred a diplomatic arrangement[8].

A good logistical organization was paramount because due to successful expansion objectives were increasingly further away. One cared that foodstuffs

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Tenochtitlan, Texcoco or Coatlichan had a population of between 250 thousand and 400 thousand inhabitants. Contemporaneously, in the 16th century, European cities with over 100 thousand inhabitants were scarce; only Naples, Constantinople, Paris, Venice and Milan surpassed that figure early in the century, and it is only later that we can add Seville, Lisbon, London, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Palermo and Rome.

7 Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Madrid 2001, pp. 506--507.

8 J. Lameiras, *Los déspotas armados: Un espectro de la guerra prehispánica*, México 1985, pp. 104-116; Alonso de Zorita, *Relación de los Señores de la Nueva España*, Madrid 1992, p. 95.

should not go bad too quickly, or suffer extreme humidity, and additionally that they did not occupy a big space and weigh too much, since the Mexica had neither draft animals nor wheeled carriages. The army supply problem was solved by demanding from villages through which the troops passed to provide it with food – omelet, roasted corn, cornmeal, ground chili and beans – plus the men and the weapons they needed[9]. When the Mexica decided to attack a target, they usually sent messengers to the friendly zones or vassal polities to announce in advance the arrival of their troops, so they could have everything ready.

To avoid unexpected attacks, the men and the bulk of the weapons did not journey at the same time or through the same paths. The men responsible for transporting the supplies and the weapons were professionals called *tlamemes*. Each one, carrying 23 kilos, walked a daily distance of 25 kilometers. When the army arrived at the camp, the tributaries were already prepared, with the *aoxacali* or official's tents raised plus another one, much bigger, called the *yaotanacalco*, which was used to store food and weapons. There were also lots of blankets for the warriors' use[10].

Next to avoiding ambushes, the reasons for travelling in separate groups responded to tactical considerations: to prevent the enemy from gaging the army's actual size, and to attack the target by different routes in order to destroy its defenses. These tactical motivations overrode logistical factors, as we can deduct from the fact that, in comparison, all war-groups returned by a single road after the campaign[11].

The imperial troops were formed in *xiquipilli* or units of 8 thousand men, supplied by the districts or *calpullis*. A *xiquipilli* was divided in twenty squads of four hundred men each under the command of a captain[12]. The imperial army grew greatly with the incorporation of the auxiliaries composed of young people from subjugated populations, but these forces were used only to complete and to help in situations in which the threat constituted a high risk[13]. However, in the case of a lower threat level, the problems were solved by means of the tributary armies, who defended the empire's borders at their own cost. With this organization the Mexica obtained the allegiance of

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9 Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme*, ed. A.M. Garibay, México 1984, p. 156.

10 Ibidem, p. 180; T.R. Orellana, *La guerra*, in: *Esplendor del México antiguo*, ed. W. Jiménez Moreno, II, México 1959, p. 860.

11 R. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control*, Oklahoma 1988, pp. 70-71.

12 F. Katz, *Situación social y económica de los aztecas durante los siglos XV y XVI*, México 1966, p. 160; R. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare...*, p. 56.

13 Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias...*, p. 164.

subjugated peoples and a proof of their loyalty to the Tenochtitlan regime. This represented a considerable saving for the Mexica administration and, in turn, this kind of organization was a good way to dose the terrific staging of the imperial army with its strict discipline. Indeed, in the imperial army, it was punishable by death to disobey orders during battle, and after the completion to kill a prisoner, to attribute to oneself a captive belonging to another warrior, to reveal plans to enemies, etc.[14]

The Mexica government, like any state, had a good channel of intelligence formed by official ambassadors, messengers, traders, and spies, whose services were richly rewarded[15]. With the data that they provided, it prepared military campaigns, since this permitted to draw detailed maps with geographical obstacles, to calculate the days of travel, to know how many people lived in the hostile region and of what sort were their weapons, etc.[16] While such preparations were made, there was time to harvest crops and to let the rainy season pass[17]. But diplomats were not always or only spies. Mesoamerican politics were extremely complex; intrigues, factions and alliances were a dynamic element. Diplomacy could be needed to avoid armed conflict. In these diplomatic missions the men in charge of the negotiations had be as brave as the warriors, because on more than one occasion Mesoamerican ambassadors were cooked and eaten[18].

The military's use of force was accompanied by continuous diplomatic actions in search of a balance between, on the one hand, the clear demonstration of who was the mightiest, displaying the terrible consequences of forgetting

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14 Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, p. 671; Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, ed. M. León-Portilla, México 1969, p. 384.

15 C. Cipolla, *Entre la Historia y la Economía*, Barcelona 1991, p. 187; R. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare...*, p. 49.

16 J. Lameiras, *Los déspotas armados...*, p. 108; Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, p. 670.

17 R. Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, New York 1994, pp. 14-36.

18 See Francisco Chimalpahin, *Relaciones Originales de Chalco Amaquemecan*, ed. and transl. S. Rendón, Mexico 1965, p. 207, relating an incident during the war of 1473 between Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan in which the ambassadors who went to Chalco were later cooked and eaten. We cite this savory text: "Ninguno de ellos quiso prestar ayuda al Moquíhuix para tratar de vencer a los tenuchcas, antes bien allí mismo aprehendieron a los embajadores de Tlatilulco, les ataron las manos, los echaron de bruces en una canoa, les metieron un rollo de tules en las bocas y durante toda la noche así los anduvieron trayendo de aquí para allá en la canoa. Al día siguiente, que era de signo 7-Jaguar, los chalcas los tomaron y los llevaron a la presencia del Señor Axayacatzin. Fueron colgados pasándoles un mecate por el cuello, frente a este jefe, en el día que tenía por signo 1-Lagartija, mismo día en que le fueron mostrados. Después de haber sido muertos, los hicieron bañar para hervirlos en una vasija y los trajeron a Chalco para allí cocerlos; mandaron convidar a un banquete al Señor Moquíhuix y a otros varios tlatilulcas para que vinieran a comer de sus propios embajadores ignorando que éstos hubieran sido muertos por los tenuchcas. Esto se hizo en el día que tenía por signo 1-Movimiento".

this raw fact, and, on the other hand, the offer of enough incentives to the conquered people to incite the latter to not in any sense rebel, not even in their dreams.

While there is no doubt that the use of the weapons was fundamental for Tenochtitlan to reach its political targets, there is still a heated debate concerning the professionalism or not of the Mexica army. Greece never had a professional army, and Rome did not professionalize its armed forces until the reforms of Augustus. While it is true that in earlier times, ca. 108-109 BC, the generalissimo Gaius Marius had made some reforms in this direction, it must be said that it was more a professionalization of fact and not a matter of law.

Of course, it may seem paradoxical to speak of imperial expansion without the existence of professional soldiers, working full time for the state and paid by it. Although Ross Hassig claims that in Tenochtitlan there was such a body of professional soldiers, this position goes against the opinion of the majority of the researchers, for whom data that would demonstrate the express payment to men devoted solely to warfare has not been found in the sources[19]. However, we should reflect on two considerations. On the one hand, what is understood as a "professional" soldier? How can we contextualize it for Mexica society? And on the other hand, what would have constituted a "salary" at the time? Was not the state in an equivalent manner responsible for the warriors' livelihood and did it not share with them a part of the booty? Did it not in addition bestow social privileges on successful warriors, which we could see as equivalent to a "salary"?

Yet there are countervailing considerations. In the model of imperial organization the Aztecs had chosen, a non-professional army was a necessity. If the roads were for much of the year impassable for both conquerors and their targets; if, in addition, the security of the borders of the subjugated peoples were not the Mexica's responsibility, as explained below, it is arguable that a professional army would have been a useless expense for an administration that aimed at maximizing economic performance in any circumstance with a minimum expenditure.

In fact, Tenochtitlan had an effective army that perfectly fulfilled the role adjudicated by the imperial system. Subject to political objectives, it obtained the reputation of being fierce and terrible, a fame instrumental for conquering, pacifying uprisings, and securing trade routes, etc., without any need for a permanent presence in all conquered territories. Nor should we forget that the imperial army had invaluable support with the creation of an

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19 R. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare...*, p. 169; idem, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica*, Berkeley 1992, p. 142.

"auxiliary" army, composed of men from the polities of the Triple Alliance (Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, and Tlacopan), as well as of the subjugated peoples[20].

The auxiliary troops represented a substantial saving for the Mexica treasury not only in human but also in economic terms, because each *auxilia* (we use here the Roman military term) entered the army with the necessary weapons and supplies, which was a key for imperial expansion. Again, Tenochtitlan found the ideal formula for the provinces not to be of any burden. The military contribution was established as a tribute, although not named as such; thus, some provinces were forced to give men to reinforce the army's ranks[21].

The political apparatus selected the target, and the army launched itself to conquer these economically productive areas from which the Mexica obtained several kinds of tribute; in exchange for their loyalty, they allowed these areas to continue with their local organization. It was a way to get what Tenochtitlan's elites wanted, but at a minimal cost in men and intendance. Sometimes, the Mexica kept the local ruler, after checking his loyalty; otherwise, he was replaced by another member of the dynasty; or a military government managed by Aztecs was imposed (as discussed in the case of the conflict against Chalco), applying the "law of flexibility".

This arrangement created a strong bond with the army, because the local ruler was not only responsible for his people's payment of the tribute to Tenochtitlan, but also for their guarding their own borders. With this formula the empire economized in military and administrative expenses.

The imposition of a tax also varied and depended on the conquered people's resistance[22]. If the area had a tendency to rebellion, a Mexica governor was left in charge of the area; and in some places the conquerors set up garrisons populated with settlers from the cities of the Triple Alliance[23]. The existence of Mesoamerican garrisons has been a rather controversial issue, with researchers taking varied positions over time. Yet the sources expressly refer to their presence throughout the territory of Mexica expansion. The issues raised by their existence, their function and the evidence (or lack thereof) supporting their presence will be the subject of the following lines.

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20 I. Bueno, *La guerra mesoamericana en época mexica*, Madrid 2007.

21 E.E. Calnek, *Patterns of Empire Formation in the Valley of Mexico: Late Postclassic Period, 1200-1521*, in: *The Inca and Aztec States, 1400-1800: Anthropology and History*, eds. G.A. Collier, R. Rosaldo, J.D. Wirth, New York 1982, p. 56; R. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare…*, p. 227; Alonso de Zorita, *Relación de los Señores...*, pp. 76, 95.

22 Alonso de Zorita, *Relación de los Señores...*, p. 142.

23 Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Historia de la nación chichimeca*, ed. G.V. Chamorro, Madrid 1985, pp. 179, 188; Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, eds. G.D. Migoyo, G.V. Chamorro, Madrid 2001, pp. 182, 319-332.

Garrisons in the Aztec Empire

In the historiography one finds different positions on this issue. Shirley Gorenstein and Nigel Davies[24] doubt that the places mentioned in the chronicles were garrisons. Ross Hassig rejects their arguments. For him, there may be no unambiguous proof in the sources that might confirm that there were garrisons in major tributary provinces. But the same contain clear hints of the establishment of settlements in strategic locations that were populated with people from Central Mexico. In these places (so Hassig, on the basis of these hints), there was placed an officer of high rank in charge of the government; the peoples of the region in which they settled had an obligation to provide supplies and military service to the corresponding garrison. One can name a number of these "colonies-garrisons" that the Aztec empire established: Oztuma, Alahuiztlan, Asuchitlan, Chinantla, Oaxaca, Cuestlahuaca, the Mixteca region, Acatlan, Teozacualco, Ayusuchiquilazala, Xilotepec, Cotastla and Otopo, and Tepecuacuilco. These were the most warlike and difficult borders, facing Tenochtitlan's most powerful enemies, especially the Tarascans. The latter, conversely, were constantly on guard against Aztec attacks; and so they had established garrisons in Taymeo, Sirándaro and Guayameo. Metztitlan also had a garrison on the border it shared with the Aztecs to oversee the latter's movements[25].

Recent studies have been providing more information in this regard, allowing to confirm that the number of officials and colonies was higher than what previous researchers believed[26]. Even Pedro Carrasco and Rudolph van Zantwijk[27] claim that there were real "military districts" that match the names that ancient sources offer. These garrisons were established in remote provinces of the empire; Michael Smith has called them strategic[28]. Their mission was to protect the most productive provinces from hostile raids given that the imperial center was supplied by them; to maintain peace and ensure the flow of taxes; to discourage rebellions; and to impose Mexica authority. The information provided by Bernal Díaz del Castillo in his report of the

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24 S. Gorenstein, *The Differential Development of New World Empires*, "Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos" XX (1966), pp. 60-63; C.N. Davies, *Los Aztecas*, Barcelona 1977, pp. 97-100.

25 R. Hassig, *Comercio, tributo y transportes: La economía política del valle de México en el siglo XVI*, Mexico 1990, pp. 100-101.

26 E. Umberger, *Aztec Presence and Material Remains in the Outer Provinces*, in: *Aztec Imperial Strategies*, ed. F. Berdan, Washington, DC 1996, p. 152.

27 P. Carrasco, *Estructura político-territorial del Imperio Tenochca: La Triple Alianza de Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco y Tlacopan*, Mexico 1996; R. Zantwijk, *La organización de once guarniciones aztecas, una nueva interpretación de los folios 17v y 18r del "Códice mendocino"*, "Journal de la Société des Américanistes" LVI (1967), p. 531.

28 M. Smith, *The Strategic Provinces*, in: *Aztec Imperial Strategies…*, pp. 141-147.

conquest of Mexico backs those scholars who affirm the existence of frontier garrisons on – to use Michael Smith's coinage – "strategic" (as contrasted with "tributary") provinces[29].

The relationship of the Mexica Empire with "strategic regions" was different than the one it had with the "tributary provinces". Although both paid tribute, its nature was different. For the strategic provinces, most important was their military contribution. Rather than providing material goods, they assisted by furnishing military equipment and also captive enemy soldiers (who would be sacrificed in the capital). These contributions were not depicted as tribute but as gifts. The delivery schedule also varied, being more flexible when subjected to the needs of military campaigns. Furthermore, these "strategic regions" were responsible for the maintenance and supply of garrisons, although here again the sources do not present this contribution as a tribute, but (more honorably for the donors) as a gift. To mention just an example,

> Axayacatl made war [on the people of Totoltepec] until he subjugated them. They did not bring him tribute because they were on the Tarascan frontier; they supplied the Mexica soldiers that were stationed there and at the fortress of Oztuma. A few times each year they sent presents to Mexico consisting of mantas, green stones, and copper[30].

As to the way in which garrisons were recruited and how their troops were paid, let's see if the sources provide sufficient information. Garrisons were populated with people coming from of the Basin of Mexico, i.e., people belonging to the Triple Alliance, an organization formed by Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tacuba for mutual support. These people migrated with their families and rendered military service. Towns adjacent to the garrison, usually conquered by the Empire, were obliged to furnish supplies and support it militarily[31]. In addition, the law was modified to serve the policy of garrison settlement, benefiting both the soldiers and the Empire. For example, Nezahualpilli, ruler of Texcoco, the second largest city of the Triple Alliance after Tenochtitlan, abolished the death penalty for soldiers convicted of adultery, in exchange for being exiled for life to frontier garrisons[32].

We have enough data to not doubt of their existence. Careful reading of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl or Hernando

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29 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, ed. M.L. Portilla, Madrid 2000, p. 344; J. Litvak, *Cihuatlan y Tepecoacuilco: Provincias tributarias de México en el siglo XVI*, Mexico 1971, p. 38; B. Holt, *Mexica-Aztec Warfare: A Developmental and Cultural Analysis*, Austin 1979, pp. 366, 367.

30 Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario de la Nueva España*, I-XVI, Mexico 1939-1942, VI, p. 149.

31 Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Historia de la nación chichimeca*, pp. 147, 179; Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, pp. 75-77, 182, 319-332.

32 Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Historia de la nación chichimeca*, p. 202.

Alvarado Tezozómoc, in addition to names of places where the empire used to set up these garrisons, offers a fairly complete picture about the custom of the Alliance of leaving "gente de guarnición en las más fuertes ciudades y cabeceras de aquellas provincias" (people in garrison in the strongest cities and capitals of these provinces [they conquered]), and at the borders[33]. They did so in order to protect the empire, both from a revolt by the newly conquered people and from potential external attacks; to guarantee the continuous flow of taxes; and to ensure quiet areas for trade caravans' transit; and to discourage with their presence the rebellious aims of the provinces more distant from the imperial heartland.

This all being said, and while it is true that the sources provide data on the organization and operation of the garrisons that allow us to imagine how they were, the fact remains that there are still many aspects lacking a satisfactory explanation. They await to be unveiled through new ethnohistorical and archaeological studies.

Mexica Tactics

The previous pages have been devoted to logistics and strategy. But to ensure success, a tactical approach was essential. Tactic is the art of arranging, moving and employing military force for combat or for the implementation of the strategy designed. We do not know if the army was divided into infantry and navy, or if all its components received a mixed preparation in the *telpochcallis* or military schools.

The organization in battle was very strict. There was a captain for each unit of two hundred men, another one for units of four hundred, and yet another one of higher rank who coordinated both. Each captain paid attention to the convened-upon signals to start the fight[34]. These could be acoustic – drums, sea-conches, trumpets, and other instruments, shouts and slogans, or smoke. He also took care to transmit orders an encouraged the fighters. These signals also served to frighten the enemy (as reflected by two exceptional witnesses, Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo)[35]. In addition to this type of signals, each body of warriors was clearly identified by its distinctive banner; the purpose was for all of them to fight together, and in case they got separated, the banner helped the reorganization.

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33 Ibidem, p. 188.

34 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista...*, p. 62; Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias...*, pp. 166-167.

35 Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de Relación de la Conquista de México*, Mexico 1963, p. 121; Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista...*, pp. 57, 236, 514; Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, p. 538.

In addition to the main army, there were Special Forces, elite commandos, composed of the *Cuauhuehuetl* ("very experienced old Eagles"), captains with many hours of fighting; the *quachic* ("very brave warriors"), something like martyrs who died in battle rather than falling back[36]; and the *otomitl* who were placed at the forefront[37]. These warriors were not only excellent fighters, but also experts at ambushes, as well as great scouts. They operated in groups of a minimum of four and, if the mission required it, they could form a commando of twenty men[38].

Once the attack signal was given, the battle began with missiles, to continue at close combat[39]. The warriors were not only very skilled in handling all kinds of weapons, but they also combined direct attack with ambushes (in which they deceived the enemy by fleeing away to allow fresh squads that were hidden to attack the pursuers)[40]. At other times, they used traps, pre-digging covered holes in which were placed pointed stakes to wound the enemy driven towards them, or they placed obstacles on the roads by different means to hamper and delay the enemy's progression[41].

Attacks took place according to the most varied scenarios. If the clashes were in cities, they combined "land" attacks, combining direct fight, traps and the burning of military objectives with "air" ones, launching from the rooftops sturdy showers of arrows and stones, as described by Cortés and his men during the conquest of the Mexica capital[42].

Continuing with war tactics, it is worth investigating in what sense the Aztecs can be said to have practiced "naval warfare". This very interesting mode of combat has not been given due attention[43]. While the Aztecs did not live on the coast, theirs was in fact a lacustrine environment that imposed the use of canoes to navigate, and perhaps also to attack and/or defend. If the scene of the battle was one of the cities located in the lakes, to ground combat was added a naval component. There also the order of battle was fundamental. For naval warfare, there were at least two types of ships, of different size. There were battleships with shields behind which the soldiers took cover to

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36 Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, p. 775.

37 Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias...*, pp. 166-167.

38 A. Bandelier, *On the Art of War and Mode of Warfare of the Ancient Mexicans*, "Annual Report of the Trustees of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology" X (1877), p. 118, cited in: J. Lameiras, *El encuentro de la piedra y el acero*, Mexico 1994, p. 70.

39 Jean de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, pp. 538-539.

40 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista...*, p. 32; Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias...*, p. 330.

41 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista...*, pp. 274, 287, 304; Jean de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, p. 539.

42 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista...*, pp. 453, 454.

43 I. Bueno, *La guerra naval en el valle de México*, "Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl" XXXVI (2005), pp. 199-223.

throw a shower of arrows at the target, while remaining protected from enemy fire. As depicted in particular in the plates of the *Lienzo Tlaxcala* (a Tlaxcalan book depicting step-by-step the Spanish Conquest), these ships look at first sight quite fragile, especially in comparison with the Spanish brigantines. Yet they could bear much more than one would expect. During these battles on lakes the Mexica also used the same tricks as in land-war, setting traps in the water to sink enemy ships, and simulating flight in order to attack later more fiercely.

Interestingly, two combat modes we would categorize as "modern" – psychological and chemical warfare – were already part of "premodern" Mexica military tactics. Chronicles describe how great psychological pressure was applied on the enemy, using different methods. For example, the Mexica were wont to emit unceasingly, day and night, sounds of instruments and screams that not only prevented the enemy from resting, but also reminded these enemies of their presence. Furthermore, they used body painting, with terrifying designs; and as is well known intimidating human sacrifices were commonly practiced. One can also speak of a chemical warfare, in the sense that they made "bombs" with the spiciest chilies, which functioned as genuine tear gas, to produce suffocation[44]. Additionally they launched another kind of bombs: made with honeycombs full of wasps, these forced attackers out in disarray, even to surrender. Finally, they also poisoned the water supply of the besieged population.

Poison takes us to doctors. An experienced medical staff took part in combat, attending the wounded in battle. Aztec Nahuatl historiography provides terms that refer to this type of specialists known as *texoxotlaticitl* or war surgeons[45]. There were men specialized in the collection of the wounded in battle to bring them to the medical station, where they were served by these medical professionals. The Spanish admitted that there were better and cheaper physician staffs in Mexico than in Europe[46].

The same men who collected the injured also carried those fallen in combat. Not all the deceased received the same treatment; some fallen warriors' flesh was pared to the bone in the camp to offer meat to the gods, in an attempt to buy divine favor[47]. Warriors of high rank were cremated, their ashes stored and carried back to Tenochtitlan, where they would be honored according to their social status[48].

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44 Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias...*, p. 198.

45 J. Lameiras, *El encuentro...*, p. 73.

46 Jean de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, p. 539.

47 M. León-Portilla, *Itzcóatl, creador de una cosmovisión guerrera, Siete ensayos sobre cultura náhuatl*, Mexico 1956, p. 43.

48 Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, p. 1101.

Once the battle ended, emissaries were sent to Tenochtitlan to inform the tlatoani of its outcome, of the deceased, of how many of the fallen warriors were of high social status, of individual feats, and of the number of captives brought back by the army[49]. With these data, one prepared to receive back the army. Impressive public commemoration ceremonies were held, where the tlatoani rewarded the warriors' gallantry and exalted their power over the conquered peoples.

As we have seen, close combat had much importance in Mesoamerican war; because once formations broke, only the most skilled in direct struggle survived. This skill was of particular relevance in a kind of war that owing to its name, Flowery War or *xochiyaoyotl*, has attracted the attention of researchers. Yet scholarship has mostly stressed its ritual aspect, without analyzing its practical significance.

Sources call them "flowery", but the vision we have of them is far from soft or harmless. Generally we have a point of view that is Mexica, so their interpretation is biased. But prior to the formation of the Mexica state, flowery wars can be traced also among Chalcas, Tepanecs, and even Tarascans. I have discussed this form of warfare in another article[50].

But where did these great warriors learn the tactics of combat, melee, and the handling of weapons? One could not improvise or learn "on the job". Furthermore, it was no less laborious to create a "collective consciousness" about war, its values and benefits. To explain these two dimensions – proficiency and ideology – we turn to Mexica schooling.

Military Schools in Mexican Society

Governments that glorify war are particularly keen to inculcate military values from childhood on. In order to achieve this goal they indoctrinate young people in state schools that spread these ideals. The Mexica rulers were no exception. They quickly understood the importance of controlling education in transmitting the new imperial ideology that followed the 1428 Aztec victory over Azcapotzalco. This took place especially starting with the reign of Itzcóatl (1427-1440)[51], the first tlatoani independent from Tepaneca yoke. Itzcóatl's reign marked a new stage in Aztec history; it embodied a new cycle and a new geopolitical order in the Valley of Mexico. It was time to rewrite history, delete information from old books, and build a new "official

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49 Ibidem, pp. 671, 683.

50 I. Bueno, *Las guerras floridas*, "Revista de Historia Militar" CVI (2009), pp. 11-34; eadem, *Mesoamérica: territorio en guerra*, México 2015, pp. 95-116.

51 Throughout, we use regnal dates and not life dates.

history", according to which Itzcóatl had brought back, as it were, to new life and energy a courageous and proud people, whose ancestors had been the flower of the Valley.

We cannot say whether the burning of the codices was real, total, partial or metaphorical. Indeed, one also finds this fire in ancient books to represent temples burning; this is not only a symbol of defeat, but marks the abolition of an older order and the imposition of a new one. Such was the meaning of Itzcóatl's ascension to the throne: the end of the traditional forms of authority based in the *calpullis* and their surrender to a new political system in order to achieve social unification.

The ideologues of this reform were two brothers, nephews of Itzcóatl and sons of Huitzilihuitl (1396-1417), the second ruler of Tenochtitlan: Tlacaelel, a key political figure, who remained in power throughout three reigns, and Moctezuma Ilhuicamina. The latter, after his uncle Itzcóatl's death, assumed the throne and sanctioned obligatory education for all young Mexica.

In Tenochtitlan, education thus became the responsibility of the government[52]. To develop it, a school was built in each district or *calpulli* at least. The *calmecac* was for the nobles and *telpochcalli* for the commons[53]. This is confirmed by the majority of classical sources as by modern authors. However, a closer reading of the documents reveals that both nobles and common could attend both schools, where they received different formation in addition to military training. The lessons were taught by priests and war veterans; they did not limit themselves to teaching the use of weapons, but emphasized the social doctrine of war that was central for the Mexica society. They imposed upon the young man that to be a respectable member, he had to develop virtues that could be achieved only through military success[54].

The need to engrave in the society the importance of the war was not conveyed only by state schools. From the moment a Mexica came to the world he was received by the midwife with very significant words. These have been recorded by the Franciscan Bernardino Sahagún[55]: "Tu oficio y facultad es la guerra, tu oficio es dar a beber al sol con sangre de tus enemigos, y dar de comer a la tierra, que se llama Tlaltecutli, con los cuerpos de tus enemigos" (Your office and competence is war, your office is to give the sun to drink with your enemies' blood, and to give the earth, which is called *Tlaltecutli*, to eat with your enemies' bodies).

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52 F. Hicks, *Flowery War in Aztec History*, "American Ethnologist" VI (1979), p. 89, 90.

53 J. Lameiras, *El encuentro...*, p. 77; Juan Bautista Pomar, *Relación de Texcoco*, ed. J. Vázquez, Madrid 1991, p. 55, n. 48.

54 R. Hassig, *War and Society...*, pp. 141-148; J. Lameiras, *Los déspotas armados...*, pp. 90-104; idem, *El encuentro...*, pp. 77-81; Alonso de Zorita, *Relación de los Señores...*, p. 99.

55 Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, p. 551.

As said above, under government auspices there were at least two types of schools. First was the *calmecac*, a school intended mainly for the nobles. It seems to have been located within the ceremonial precinct of the Templo Mayor[56]. Many of the classes were taught by priests; this guaranteed the state more control over what was taught. It is difficult to determine at which age children entered in the *calmecac*, given that the information varies from chronicler to chronicler. Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, for example, does not know exactly if they entered shortly after birth or at the age of five; Fray Bernardino de Sahagún writes that it was at about ten or twelve; the *Codex Mendoza* says categorically that fifteen years was the age of the schooling of young Mexica[57]. Making a practical analysis of these data, one might propose the following hypothesis.

Nowadays children enter school at different ages, and whether they go to a college or another depends on the needs and social status of parents. It is by analogy thus likely that when the Franciscan Motolinía mentions that newborn kids just weaned were put in school, he must refer to the promise that parents had to make when a child was born, swearing to take him to school in due time, as was required by the State. The other ages mentioned in chronicles likely respond to the individual needs of male households. If the child was from a noble family, he could enter as a five year old; and if he did not belonged to the nobility, a reasonable age would have been, rather, ten or twelve years, because at that age he could have learned the family business and how to handle farming. The age that the Codex Mendoza proposes, around fifteen, may refer exclusively to the *telpochcalli*, the school specialized in the knowledge and handling of weapons, as well as in personal fighting, for which training it was necessary to be physically mature. It is at least clear that children entered the *calmecac* at an earlier age than the *telpochcalli*.

Even though sources simplify the educational issue by dichotomizing nobles and commoners, it seems that the *calmecac* could tend to both social strata; however, most of its students were children of nobles, given the nature of the subjects there taught, more fitted to future leaders and priests[58]. Its regime was internship, in which pupils had an extremely hard life. We have to recall that according to Mexica ethics, privileged people, if they disrespected the law, should be punished more severely than other members of society. So it was logical that at the school they had to learn to live according to social rules.

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56 Toribio Motolinía, *Memoriales e historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*, ed. F. de Lejarza, Madrid 1970, p. 133; Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, p. 250.

57 *Códice Mendoza*, Mexico 1979, fol. 61; Toribio Motolinía, *Memoriales e historia de los Indios...*, p. 133; Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, p. 682.

58 Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, pp. 300, 305-307, 580.

According to Bernardino de Sahagún the subjects taught shaped students holistically, both academically (with topics such as rhetoric, pictography, poetry, astrology, computation of time, courtesy and protocol rules) and militarily. The Franciscan further confirms – through information provided by the indigenous students he was educating at the College of Santa Cruz de Santiago in Tlatelolco (founded in 1536) – that from the *calmecac* flowed the highest ranks of the army. There young men had studied cartography, strategy, tactics and everything needed to command the imperial armies. This teaching was rounded up with the handling of weapons and combat techniques when the students entered the *telpochcalli*. Subjects that were only taught in the *calmecac* placed its students above and over the common run of the citizenry; through the knowledge of pictographic writing, astrology and calendar, they could control the lives of the community.

The main activity that the *telpochcalli* developed was related to war; according to the chroniclers, there was a school of this type in each *calpulli*[59]. As we have argued, youths would enter it with fifteen years, to be trained in handling weapons and learn fighting techniques; indeed, at this age students would already have had enough strength to do so. The Mexican State's interest to have its men well prepared for its frequent wars is evident from the fact that attendance at the *telpochcalli* was compulsory. All Mexica men attended one, regardless of the social class to which they belonged. The bulk of the army was provided by the common or *macehuales* who were mostly students. It could be that the *telpochcalli* was divided into two sections, one in which the nobles received better treatment and another one for lower ranking soldiers.

In contrast to the *calmecac*, the *telpochcalli*'s educational regime was open to such an extent that if field work was required, students were allowed to go help their families; furthermore, although they slept in the *telpochcalli*, they used to eat at home. This made the youth's daily lives less harsh than in the *calmecac*. The young men's teachers were war veterans. The latter brought their pupils into battle under their tutelage, to implement acquired knowledge and skills; this lasted as long as the student was moving up in the military ranks[60].

Young men used to leave school at the age of twenty. This did not take place, however, before they had received from their instructor an exhortation, reminding them that they should live with honor. And indeed upon leaving the *telpochcalli* it was common to get married; thus one was obliged to keep up the family with dignity, to educate properly children, and in time of war to be brave. This was the condition for the gods to help them and give them prosperity. The Mexica male's fate depended largely on his behavior in battle,

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59 Toribio Motolinía, *Memoriales e historia de los Indios...*, p. 136.

60 Ibidem, p. 136; Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General...*, pp. 302-304.

because by means of combat outcomes he could materially improve his life and social status. This success was assessed by the number and quality of the captives taken, which might enable him to reach the maximum rank of *tlacateccatl* and *tlacochcalcatl*. If however a male did not demonstrate military qualities, yet came from a wealthy family, he could live without social recognition but comfortably thanks to family wealth. However, such a male unsuccessful at war had to survive on his work, and was not allowed to dress with dignity[61].

The *calmecac* and *telpochcalli* were the main Mexica state schools, but they did not monopolize completely the field. The new ideology developed under Itzcóatl based some of its power in the impact of the image. Therefore, there existed also important schools dedicated to singing and dancing, such as the *cuicacalli* and *mecatlán*, or conservatories where one learned to play musical instruments. To have skills in these respects was not as important as being a famous warrior, but certainly a political organization in which diplomatic relations and ceremonial had much relevance needed skilled musicians and dancers to amuse embassies and animate ritual ceremonies. These specialists were responsible for conveying the regime's message in big spectacles, representing myths of the past which subjugated and enflamed the masses[62].

Thus was Tenochtitlan in its mature stage. But before becoming a military power, the city had fought under the command of the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco. It was during this time that began the long conflict against Chalco; it perfectly illustrates what we have discussed in the preceding paragraphs. To it we now turn.

The Conflict with Chalco

The ideological framework that placed the warrior as an essential component of the preservation and prosperity of Mexica society was promoted by two important political figures, Tlacaelel and Moctezuma Ilhuicamina. The latter succeeded on the throne of Tenochtitlan to Itzcóatl; it was during this Moctezuma I's reign (1440-1469) that the conflict with the powerful Chalca confederation was be resolved. It had lasted eighty-nine years.

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61 I. Bueno, *El sacrificio gladiatorio y su vinculación con la guerra en la sociedad mexicana*, "Gladius" XXIX (2009), pp. 185-204; Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias*..., p. 189; Bernardino Sahagún, *Historia General*..., p. 302. For gender and war, see C.D. Pennock, *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture*, Houndmills 2008.

62 I. Clendinnen (*Aztecs: An Interpretation*, Cambridge (UK) 1991) proposes an anthropological reading of Mexica aesthetics and violence; see also eadem, *The Cost of Courage in Aztec Cociety: Essays on Mesoamerican Society and Culture*, Cambridge (UK) 2010.

The first time the Aztecs had fought against Chalco, they had done it under the orders of Azcapotzalco, the city to which they were tributaries. Acamapichtli (1376-1396)[63] was the first Mexica tlatoani who took part in war against Chalco, under Tepanec leadership. This tlatoani was succeeded by his son Huitzilihuitl (1396-1417); during his reign the war hardened[64]; the clashes were continuous, without a clear winner. Chalco was difficult to defeat because it was coalesced in the Chalco-Amecameca confederation[65] of Tlamanalco, Amaquemecan, Tenanco Texocpalco and Chimalhuacan. Although "none of the four largest entities had a tlatoani with authority over all", they commonly united when war threatened[66]. Thus although Azcapotzalco tried to conquer the Chalcas for decades, it did not managed to defeat them. One factor may have been the Mexica. Chalco was a priority target for the Aztecs, not only for its abundant resources and fertile lands (irrigated by the river Amecameca), but also for its privileged geographical location, if one wanted to open a trade route to the coveted luxury goods that were produced in the south and southwest. It enjoyed an extraordinary network of canals across the lake and roads that allowed the movement of people and products easily[67]. Yet Mexica tlatoque prior to Montezuma I, although aware of this potential, had been unwilling to do so, in this first phase because the Aztecs were not independent. They did not want to win Chalco for their Tepanec overlords.

Thus by the time the Aztecs overthrew Tepanec yoke, the Chalcas had not been defeated yet. And after they freed themselves from Azcapotzalco, the Mexica had to focus on ensuring basic necessities for the population. The priority was subduing areas close to Tenochtitlan, before embarking on expansion. That goal was attained during the reign of Moctezuma I; this allowed him to expand his sight beyond the nuclear area. In the second decade of his reign (1450), famine struck Tenochtitlan for four years, and prompted by the need for fertile land the disputes with Chalco flared. Moctezuma Ilhuicamina set his sight on Chalco not only because it would serve as a granary for Tenochtitlan, but also because it would open the door to further expansion. The tlatoani was aware of the power of the Chalca confederation, so he planned the conflict in several campaigns (that not always were positive for the Mexica).

Moctezuma I had inaugurated his reign (1440-1469) with the construction of a new temple in honor of Huitzilopochtli. He had asked the Chalca for

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63 The dates correspond to the years of reign and not those of birth and death.

64 Francisco Chimalpahin, *Relaciones Originales...*, pp. 83, 85.

65 P. Kirchhoff, *Composición étnica y organización política de Chalco según las relaciones de Chimalpáin*, "Revista Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos" XIV (1954-1955) 2, p. 279.

66 S. Schroeder, *Chimampahin y los reinos de Chalco*, Mexico 1994, p. 303.

67 Ibidem, p. 31.

materials for the work but, as expected, their answer was negative[68]. By means of this incident hostilities could begin without much need for Moctezuma I to work hard to convince his allies. All the more as in a previous confrontation Chalca had killed two sons of Nezahualcoyotl, tlatoani of Texcoco, and two sons of Axayacatl (the future tlatoani of Tenochtitlan at that time a high Mexica commander). All the more as details of the cruelties that the ruler of Chalca had inflicted upon them had reached the alliance leaders' ears: "les sirviesen de candeleros sus cuerpos en una sala donde de noche hacía sus saraos y convites, y los corazones de ellos con otros de los más famosos capitanes y gente ilustre que había muerto en el discurso de esta guerra, le sirvieron de collar y joyas a Toteotzintecuhtli [señor de Chalco]" (Their bodies served as chandeliers in a hall where they held by night their banquets and dances, and their hearts, along with those of other very famous war-captains and illustrious people who had died in the course of that war, served Toteotzintecuhtli [the lord of Chalco] as necklace and jewelry)[69].

The clash in 1450 was favorable to Chalco; however, in 1455 the result was contrary: "fue entonces la primera vez que los chalcas quedaron derrotados" (it was then the first time that the Chalcas were defeated)[70]. In that year, after an interlude forced by the famine, and taking advantage of Chalco's being weakened by internal dissensions with the members of their Chalco--Amecameca confederation[71], attacks began again. At that point, though, the major Chalca cities remained unconquered. Moctezuma wanted to end this conflict that had killed too many men (including some of his brothers) and in which he himself had been captured and imprisoned. However, he had to wait until 1465 to get the final victory. This came thanks to a betrayal of the Chalcas by three princes who defected to the Mexican side. The pro-Mexica sources say that having listened to the traitors, the Mexica refused their aid. Possibly they thought it could be a trap. It is also possible that they did accept the proposed information and help, but that they did not wanted it to be known, lest it diminish their glory for a victory that they had so long desired[72].

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68 Francisco Chimalpahin, *Relaciones Originales...*, p. 97; Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias...*, p. 136.

69 Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Historia de la nación chichimeca*, p. 161.

70 Francisco Chimalpahin, *Relaciones Originales...*, p. 202.

71 The inter-dynastic marriages kept together the unity of the confederation, because they were made for political rather than economic reasons, see S. Schroeder, *The Noblewomen of Chalco*, "Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl" XXII (1992), p. 45. The confederation, also called *Chalcayotl* included the cities of Tlamanalco, Amaquemecan, Chimalhuacán, and Tenango Tepopollan.

72 Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias...*, p. 148; Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, cap. 28.

Due to the harshness of the war and the resistance offered by the Chalca confederation, the punishment imposed by the Mexica was exemplary: an increase of tribute; land distribution among components of the Triple Alliance; the imposition of a Mexica military government that lasted until the reign of Ahuitzotl (1486-1502)[73]; and the forced exile of Chalca leaders and their wives in Huexotzinco[74]. This punishment lasted during the twenty-two years of Aztec rule over the region of Chalco, though the victors reintegrated gradually the Chalca legitimate rulers into governance. In 1484, Tizoc, tlatoani of Tenochtitlan (1481-1486), restored some Chalcas to positions of authority. Yet although these men belonged to the Chalca nobility, they were not in the first line of succession. Tizoc's intention was thus probably to make them less problematic to Tenochtitlan and more manageable[75]. Ultimately, Ahuitzotl restored to the government the Chalca tlatoque, but the situation never returned to something like what it had been before the defeat. Though the Chalcas could elect their leaders, these had to be sanctioned by the Mexica rulers[76].

The victory against Chalco was so important that it was registered as an Aztec-only conquest even though, if we trust Mary Hodge[77], it had been obtained thanks to the joint efforts of the Triple Alliance. Frederic Hicks disagrees with this position, and maintains that the war with Chalco was so difficult to win precisely because the Aztecs fought it without allies. It is for this reason that they imposed a government of regents for twenty-two years, instead of leaving in place the native rulers[78].

After having defeated the Confederation of Chalco Amecama, the Mexica army returned in triumph to Tenochtitlan. After a few days for relaxing, "the honors and funerals for all those who died in war" were ordered. Chimalpahin confirms that after the victory, Moctezuma lived only "cuatro años más" (four more years)[79], but this was sufficient. With Chalco conquered, the South now lay wide open. The Aztecs were thus able to pursue successfully their imperialist and commercial policy. Chalco's defeat had unlocked the Mexicas' expansion and made it unstoppable.

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73 Francisco Chimalpahin, *Relaciones Originales...*, pp. 218, 223.

74 S. Schroeder, *Chimampahin y los reinos...*, p. 73.

75 F. Hicks, *Alliance and Intervention in Aztec Imperial Expansion*, in: *Factional Competition and Political Development in the New World*, eds. E.M. Brumfield, J.W. Fox, Cambridge (UK) 1994, p. 115; S. Schroeder, *Chimampahin y los reinos...*, pp. 125-126.

76 S. Schroeder, *Chimampahin y los reinos...*, pp. 126, 136, 266.

77 M. Hodge, *Political Organization of the Central Provinces*, in: *Aztec Imperial Strategies*, p. 37.

78 F. Hicks, *Alliance and Intervention...*, p. 115.

79 Francisco Chimalpahin, *Relaciones Originales...*, p. 205.

FINAL THOUGHTS

War provided results that satisfied all groups in Mexica society. For the upper strata, it allowed the maintenance of status; for the rest it gave the opportunity to move up in the social hierarchy or to improve one's standard of living in some respect.

Everything about Mexica war was perfectly regulated. The rank to which an individual warrior belonged was defined through clothing and badges, whose abuse was punishable by death. Promotions were achieved according to the number of prisoners made in battle; whether the warrior had taken captives in close, hand-to-hand combat (more prestigious) or in the general din of battle (less prestigious); the status of these captives, etc.

Given these circumstances, warriors climbed to various positions in the military career. Yet several discriminating factors have to be kept in mind. A nobleman and a commoner would not have received the same practical training, and they did not wield similar weapons or possess identical defensive equipment. Of course! We are not dealing with egalitarian societies. Thus it goes without saying that a noble had all the cards in hand to perpetuate his status. As for the ordinary Mexica, although certainly social mobility through war was a possibility, its achievement was very remote. Notwithstanding it, it was an incentive to go into battle. Therefore, ranking in the army affected society, luring people to get involved in military life. Both weapons and insignia accentuated this differentiation, and although according to state ideology a warrior might demonstrate enormous value in battle, in practice he would never reach the highest rank if he did not belong to an ancient lineage.

The Aztecs fought many battles and the powerful lords of Anahuac (the lake area) obtained many victories. We can say that during the period of Aztec hegemony, almost all wars fought showed a positive balance. Yet undoubtedly among all of them, two became emblematic and were remembered and immortalized in art: the Tepaneca war of 1428, which gained the Aztecs their political independence, and the Tlatelolcan war of 1473, where Tenochtitlan conquered the monopoly over commerce in luxury items, up until then in the hand of its twin city Tlateolco. With these riches, the Mexica could fly unimpeded toward the expansion of their empire.

Next to these two wars, the conquest of Chalco had an enormous impact on the economic and expansionist policy of the Triple Alliance, because it made possible to reach a key aim. Indeed, the Alliance's three cities were now located at the crossroads of major trade routes, to the South and Southeast, which connected the Plateau with the desired products from the Mixtecs, from the Gulf and from Guatemala. Thus the defeat of Chalco was literally

a real treasure for the Mexica political elites. Chalco was the "lugar de jade o piedra preciosa verde" (place of jade or green gemstone)[80].

What was true of the Mexica and of the wider Aztec group, was also true of societies around them: The military sphere was hugely present in Mesoamerican societies. As we noted, this was structural: Primarily due to the fact that city-states developed very close to each other, and that the population density increased rapidly since all streamed to the same ecological niches, and wanted to have political and economic power. This desire kept weapons always at the ready, making Mesoamerica an authentic war territory.

Abstract

The first time the Aztecs had fought against Chalco, they had done it under the orders of Azcapotzalco, the city to which they were tributaries. Acamapichtli was the first Mexica tlatoani who took part in war against Chalco, under Tepanec leadership. This tlatoani was succeeded by his son Huitzilihuitl; during his reign the war hardened; the clashes were continuous, without a clear winner. Chalco was difficult to defeat because it was coalesced in the Chalco-Amecameca confederation. Thus although Azcapotzalco tried to conquer the Chalcas for decades, it did not managed to defeat them. One factor may have been the Mexica. Chalco was a priority target for the Aztecs, not only for its abundant resources and fertile lands, but also for its privileged geographical location, if one wanted to open a trade route to the coveted luxury goods that were produced in the south and southwest. It enjoyed an extraordinary network of canals across the lake and roads that allowed the movement of people and products easily. Yet Mexica tlatoque prior to Montezuma I, although aware of this potential, had been unwilling to do so, in this first phase because the Aztecs were not independent.

These pages focus on war and military institution insofar as they constitute a key element for the understanding of the socio-political organization of the Tenochcas or Mexica (the core group among the so-called Aztecs) political community. The latest research on the wider Mesoamerican cultures' power structures shows how these societies grew by relying on armed force and developed a complex system of domination over the peoples around them. They were not, as earlier historiography has sometimes supposed, peaceful theocracies. Since the scope of this article does not allow us to take in all the groups present before the Spanish Conquest in today´s Mexico, we will focus on the Mexica. They provide indeed the best example to illustrate war in Mesoamerica, because Mexico-Tenochtitlan grew up on the basis of a long inherited tradition; because it reached an unprecedented scale; and finally because (owing to the Spanish Conquest) it constitutes the last representative of this fascinating world, and as such left behind more abundant data than other societies. Much in the Mexica system was based on what in modern terms is called military deterrence. This *dissuasion* was not the result of spontaneous or occasional violent reactions. It entailed, rather, the requirement that basic institutions such as education and religious and social values granted the military a key role. War also constituted a factor for promotion in this hierarchical society.

80 S. Schroeder, *The Noblewomen of Chalco*, p. 45.