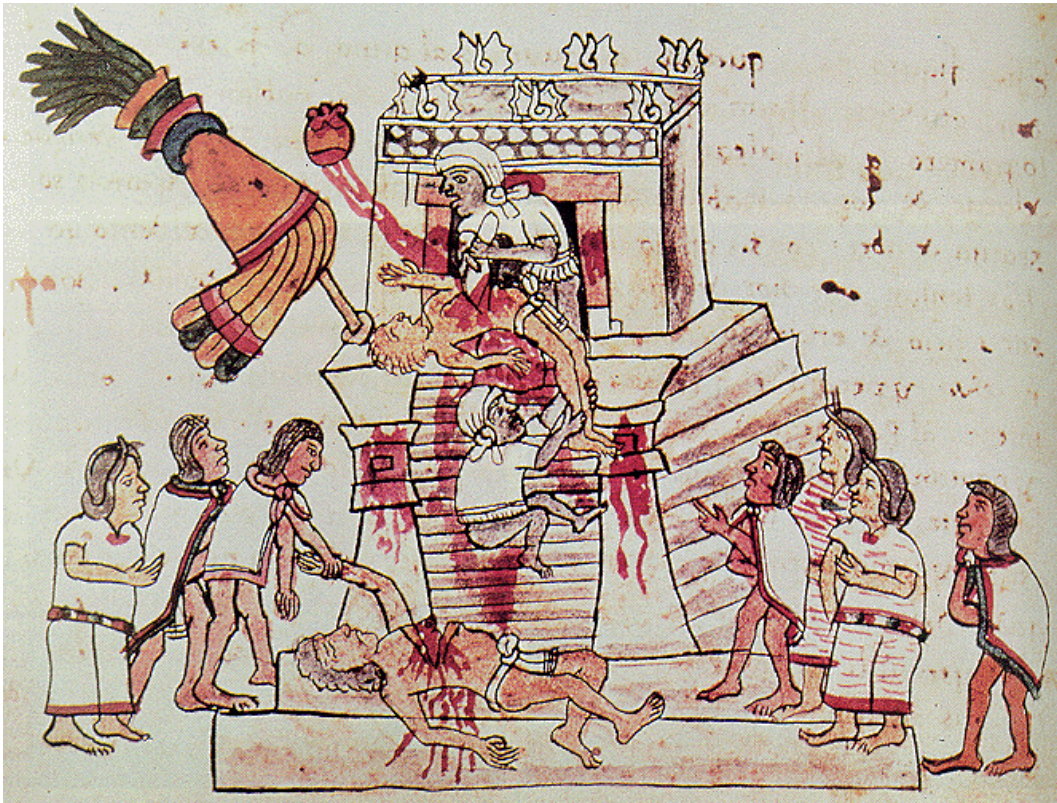


# Aztec Human Sacrifices

and the museum exhibitions



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Bachelor thesis

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## **1. Introduction**

When thinking about the Aztec civilisation human sacrifice will most likely come to mind first. This bachelor thesis is concerned with the rite of human sacrifice the Aztecs performed and the recent Aztec museum exhibitions. The research question is: What is the discourse on Aztec human sacrifices from the Late Post classic period in the Valley of Mexico and does it coincide with the contemporary Aztec museum exhibitions?

What will be looked into is how the Aztec human sacrifices are being portrayed in the literature and how the contemporary museum exhibitions portray the Aztec culture including their sacrificial rituals. Are they both portrayed barbaric and bloody and is it done from an etic or emic point of view. Is it possible to come up with alternative views about human sacrifice?

The thesis will start with a theoretical framework followed by background information on the Aztec culture to get a better idea of the context. Then the literature about Aztec human sacrifice will be highlighted. Starting with the sixteenth century chronicles mainly written by fray Bernardino de Sahagun, including a table with the monthly rituals involving human sacrifice, and then continuing with more recent work on the subject for comparison. Then a chapter will be dedicated to the archaeological finds at Templo Mayor in Mexico City. Consequently three recent museum exhibitions concerning the Aztecs are chosen. The artefacts that were used for the exhibition will be considered and determined whether they pertain to the sacrificial ritual to make an estimate of how focused the museums were on ritual artefacts. An impression of the exhibitions will be given including reviews of the shows.

The last chapter will be a comparison between the literature dealt with in a previous chapter and the chosen museum exhibitions including the manner in which they portray the Aztecs. The outcome of the research question will be explained in the conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In *Orientalism* Said (1978) writes about the Eurocentric and western prejudice towards eastern cultures. Said says the concept of orientalism started with the European colonisations, when Europeans came in contact with civilisations from the east. (Said 1978, 43). The east was less developed than the west and they found their culture to be exotic and uncivilised, therefore felt it was their duty to civilise them. The Europeans thought of themselves as the superior race and with that perception justified the colonisations. Generalisations were made about the Orientals from a preconceived notion that all people from the east were the same and everything they were, the Europeans weren't. They used these generalisations to identify themselves. These are important concepts that can be applied to the way people think about the Aztec civilisation which makes you consider if we still think with this European biased view about the Aztecs and their custom of human sacrifices.

Mason writes about the concept of otherness or alterity. He states that Native Americans are considered as the other to Europe and the difference between them is sexual and economic which is made apparent in the images and written texts about Native Americans. American men are portrayed with feminine traits and the women are more masculine (Mason 1990, 173). These kinds of images of a reversed world made the Europeans want to restore the balance again. Mason says monstrosity is a recurring aspect in the European representation of native America, both in texts and iconography. In western imagination these monstrous human races can exist anywhere as long as it is somewhere else, over the border, which makes them the other (Mason 1990, 161). Mason points out that liminality and monstrosity are linked to each other.

Arens (1979) who is the author of *The man-eating myth: anthropology and anthropophagy*, states that in order to look at the past of the New World it requires an open mind with no preconceived notions or any conclusions already made. After the Conquest many prejudiced opinions were formed about the Aztecs. Four centuries later, it is according to Arens almost like a well-known

historical fact all around the world that the Aztecs were a barbaric and cannibalistic civilisation (Arens 1979, 58). Arens makes a good point, we should look at the Aztecs with an unbiased perspective as much as possible in order to understand them better.

Regarding museum exhibitions Moira Simpson explains how changes were occurring in the nineties in the way museums function and the way the relationship between the dominant western cultures and the minorities and indigenous cultures was altering. The museums became more aware of the needs of different cultures (Simpson 1996, 1). The post-colonial society in western countries brought up issues such as display and interpretation, and cultural bias in representing other cultures (Simpson 1996, 2). Simpson discusses problems that can occur when for example tribal societies are exhibited in museums. Certain methods of display in combination with the type of collection can give a false impression of the culture represented (Simpson 1996, 35). This does not only apply to still living societies but can also apply to ancient cultures that are being represented nowadays in museum exhibitions such as the Aztecs.

Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine say that exhibitions represent identity by implication. This means that when cultures that are considered to be the “other” are involved, exhibitions tell us who we are and aren’t (Karp and Lavine 1991, 15) Exhibitors should provide context and sources within exhibitions for the visitors to be able to rearrange their pre-existing knowledge (Karp and Lavine 1991, 22-23) Michael Baxandall who wrote a chapter on exhibiting intention says there are three agents involved in an exhibition. The first agent is the maker of the artefacts that are on display in a museum. The second agent is the exhibitor (Baxandall 1991, 36). The third agent is the viewer/visitor of the exhibition. The goal of an exhibitor is to create a good exhibition and to instruct the visitors. (Baxandall 1991, 37). The exhibitor also decides what the label of each artefact will say. The label represents what the exhibitor thinks and what he wants the viewers to know about the artefact (Baxandall 1991, 38). Certain artefacts that are designed to be looked at will cause less misunderstanding with viewers. Baxandall calls these objects intended for exhibition (Baxandall 1991, 39). Other objects that

have been chosen by the exhibitor for their cultural aspects are more likely to be misinterpreted by museum visitors (Baxandall 1991, 39). Baxandall states that exhibitors can't represent other cultures. They can be encouraging agents but still remain cautious and shouldn't lecture about other cultures, because that would be sharing their own view. Therefore they should set up the exhibition in a manner that it is not perceived as misleading in any way, concerning selection of the artefacts and choosing what the label will say. This way it is up to the viewers to form their own opinion about the artefacts (Baxandall 1991, 41). Essentially an exhibition should be between the maker of an object and the person viewing the object as much as possible. The first and third agent according to Baxandall (1991). The exhibitor is only the intermediary who should be unbiased and not force his own opinion onto the museum visitors but let them form their own opinions.

Are the Aztecs nowadays being portrayed with an unbiased view to the larger public in the museums or are the issues concerning representation of other cultures still as current as they were years ago. Are the exhibitions still created by people with a Eurocentric prejudice and who express their own opinion and views about other cultures through the exhibitions they set up.

### 3. Overview Aztec culture

The Aztec people who called themselves the Mexica migrated from the north to the Basin of Mexico in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. They spoke the Nahuatl language (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 25). The heartland of the Aztecs was in the Valley of Mexico in central Mexico. Most of the Aztec towns and cities were established in what is known to be the Mesoamerican Middle Postclassic period or Early Aztec period (AD 1150-1350) (Smith 1996, 32-33). The capital city Tenochtitlan was founded in 1325 on an island in Lake Texcoco which is in the Basin of Mexico. The real growth of the Aztec society began in the Late Postclassic period or what is also known as the Late Aztec period (AD 1350-1520). In this era the formation of the Triple Alliance (1428) occurred along with the growth of Tenochtitlan (Smith 1996, 33). The alliance was between the city-states Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan (Smith 1996, 50). The downfall of the Aztec empire started in 1519 and lasted until 1521 due to the Spanish conquest led by Hernan Cortes. By the time the Spaniards arrived there were approximately one million Aztecs living in the Valley of Mexico and around two million in the surrounding valleys (Smith 1996, 60).

This region has a difficult climate, it consists of a wet and a dry season. The Aztecs managed to stabilise their food supply by developing an agricultural system. They used their natural rainfall along with irrigation in the dry season, terracing, garden cultivation, and raised fields. The raised fields, which are called the chinampa system, (also called by the Spaniards the 'floating gardens') were used in areas with swampland, like the Basin of Mexico (Smith 1996, 70). It consisted of long, rectangular pieces of garden land in the lakes that were raised using mud and vegetation in between pylons, surrounded by canals. They mainly harvested corn, beans, squash, amaranth, tomatoes, chili peppers, and avocados. The harvest was taken to the market (*tianquiztli*) by a canoe (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 69). Another source of food, though limited, came from hunting for wild game, fishing and gathering wild plants. They also domesticated dogs,



turkeys, and the Muscovy duck which they all ate. Another source of protein was insects (Smith 1996, 67).

Every Aztec town/city had a ceremonial centre with a sacred shrine, temples, a governmental house, living quarters, and a marketplace. The most important one was in Tenochtitlan, it had over eighty buildings (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 76). Carrasco and Sessions compare their social structure with a pyramid. The largest group of people which consisted of agricultural workers and urban commoner families were at the base of the pyramid (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 127). Smith also mentions slaves, who were at the absolute bottom of the social classes. It was neither a hereditary nor necessarily a permanent state (Smith 1996, 151). Above them was the middle group of merchants and warriors. At the top of the pyramid and social class were the nobles, artists, high-level warriors, priests, and the ruler who at the time of the conquest was Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, also known as Moctezuma II, who reigned from 1502 up until his controversial death in 1520 (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 210). The status of a noble was hereditary. The neighbourhoods around the main ceremonial centre and marketplaces were inhabited by the nobles. And it is where the administrative buildings were. They were made of adobe or stone and were covered with stucco. These residences were built on platforms. Some nobles even had a two-story house. The rulers lived in palaces that were surrounded by a walled garden and consisted of several rooms with different purposes. The size of the residences varied and reflected the status differences within a social class. The farmer families lived near the chinampas in houses made of wood, cane, and reeds (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 74).

Smith explains how the Aztecs were often in war with other city-states for the purpose of claiming tribute and not to expand the Aztec territory. Another reason was to capture warriors they could sacrifice. All boys were sent to school to learn military skills (Smith 1996, 170). These skills entailed martial arts and eventually they were sent off to war for the purpose of practical training which started with assisting the warriors and later on participating in combat and capturing sacrificial victims (Smith 1996, 138). There were several ranks a

warrior could achieve which were shown by a certain type of dress and whether or not jewellery was worn. The status of a warrior would rise as the amount of captives he seized increased (Smith 1996, 170). Hicks notes that military training was also provided through “flowery wars”. He states that those wars did not have the purpose of conquest or to obtain sacrificial victims, but simply to provide practical military training (Hicks 1978, 91).

The Aztec writing system consisted of several hundred hieroglyphs. Their manuscripts usually included pictures along with hieroglyphs (Smith 1996, 249). Olivier explains how the Aztecs along with many other Mesoamerican cultures lived in accordance with two calendars. The oldest one is the ritual calendar (*tonalpohualli*) that consisted of 260 days. Each day was identified by one of the twenty signs in combination with a number from one till thirteen. The second calendar is the solar calendar (*xiuhpohualli*) which consisted of 365 days that were divided over eighteen months plus five extra days. Both calendars were used to celebrate certain feasts that were accompanied by many different kinds of rituals, including the rite of sacrifice (Olivier 2004, 194-196). According to Smith there is a third calendar the Aztecs also inherited from previous Mesoamerican cultures, which is the 52-year calendar round. The ritual calendar was combined with the solar calendar which resulted in a cycle of 52 years. Each day had a different combination of entries from the ritual and solar calendar. This cycle was repeated every 52 years. Each year in this cycle was given a number and a name. Four names were used (*calli*, *tochtli*, *acatl*, and *tecpatl*) in combination with the numbers one through thirteen. This was called the year-count (Smith 1996, 257).

The Aztecs were passionate about astronomy, much like other cultures in Mesoamerica. The nobles and the priests made most of the observations and calculations (Smith 1996, 258). Especially important was the exact direction of the sun at sunrise. Astronomy was used for the lay-out of cities and buildings, such as the Templo Mayor. Astronomical alignments and orientations were used for this (Smith 1996, 260).

Carrasco and Sessions explain how the Aztecs were religious people with a polytheistic belief system. This meant they believed in a whole pantheon of gods

(Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 47). These deities were represented in many aspects of their life. The most important gods were the creator gods, gods of fertility, and the sacrificial gods. Omteotl was the Supreme Creator God. Other main creator gods were Quetzalcoatl, Xiuhtecutli, Tezcatlipoca, and Tlaloc who was also a fertility God as he was the God of rain (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 50). The fertility deities contained many goddesses, such as the earth-mother Goddess Coatlicue (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 52-53). Making offerings to the gods was a big part of life for the Aztecs. There were different kinds including offerings of material things, food or flowers, animals, auto sacrifice, and human sacrifice. Auto sacrifice was the most common form of making an offering to the gods and everyone in the Aztec society had to participate. This ritual involved making oneself bleed with a thorn or a blade. During specific times a parent would make a child bleed for reasons such as protection (Carrasco 1999, 185). Human sacrifices and auto sacrifices were considered to be “debt payments” which will be clarified further along.

Carrasco and Sessions (1998) explains how the Aztecs considered the human body to be sacred. It could receive divine powers. Every human body contained three souls and each resided in a different part of the body. The souls could increase in strength during a lifetime. The *tonalli* was present in the head with the hair keeping it safe inside. The source of it was the supreme God Omteotl (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 53). The *teyolia* was present in the human heart. It symbolised a divine fire and the rational force in life. Some people such as priests and the ones that were dressed as gods before they were sacrificed had more of it. Another soul remained in the liver and was called *ihiyotl*. It was a magical entity that could do harm or good to other people (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 55).

The Aztecs had several creation myths. One of them explains how they believed they lived in the fifth age which is called a sun. The previous four suns were each time ruled by a different god and were inhabited by a characteristic race. Each sun was destroyed by a distinct catastrophe at the end of a cycle. According to their myth the current age (the fifth sun) will eventually be

destroyed by earthquakes and its inhabitants will be eaten by sky monsters. The fifth sun is controlled by the sun God Tonatiuh, and the people that live on this earth are maize-eaters (Smith 1996, 205). Smith explains how a sun could only be destroyed at the end of a 52-year cycle. The beginning of a new cycle was therefore celebrated with the New Fire ceremony at the sacred site of the Hill of the star. Carrasco (1999) explains how this ceremony was performed by Aztec fire priests to guarantee the rebirth of the sun and the movement of the universe for the next cycle of fifty-two years. The priests performed a heart sacrifice ritual of a warrior that was chosen by the ruler (Carrasco 1999, 96), during which the sky was watched to see if movement of the star cluster Pleiades occurred. After this movement was detected, the heart was placed into a fire after which the body of the sacrificed warrior followed. The organized fire was then taken to the centre of Tenochtitlan to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli at the Templo Mayor, after that it was dispersed through the empire starting with the temples and ending in people's homes (Carrasco 1999, 97). Another important myth is the one about the Aztec migration. Many different versions exist, but the core of the myth remains the same. Carrasco and Sessions (1998) write about this migration story and explain how the Mexica left their homeland of Aztlan ("place of the white heron") and Chicomoztoc ("place of the seven caves") to seek a new place to live. The people from Aztlan and Chicomoztoc (the Chichimec) were both led by a shaman or a priest, who had dreamed about this journey, so they would eventually arrive at the Basin of Mexico (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 6).

The Aztecs considered the city of Tenochtitlan to be the centre of the world. In their cosmovision Templo Mayor, the main temple of the city, was the symbolic centre of their universe (Matos Moctezuma 1995, 63; Roman Berrelleza 2004, 148). The four horizontal directions of the universe radiated out from the temple, corresponding with the four cardinal points, each associated with a god, a colour, and a glyph. The world also has three vertical levels that started at the temple. The upper level is the celestial realm which has thirteen heavens. The upper heaven 'Omeyocan', a place of duality, was considered the most sacred. Underneath this realm is the earth/terrestrial plane on which humans and all other

living beings live. The lowest level is the underworld which was divided in nine levels. The lowest level of the underworld named 'Mictlan' is where the gods of death live (Roman Berrelleza 2004, 148). Templo Mayor was divided in two parts, which symbolically represented the dual economic needs of the Aztec society. Therefore the northern part of the temple was dedicated to the god of rain 'Tlaloc' for the supply of water for agricultural production. The southern part of the temple was dedicated to the god of war 'Huitzilopochtli', which was a means for collecting tribute (Roman Berrelleza 2004, 148). Another goal of war was to obtain sacrificial victims (Smith 1996, 170), which for the Aztecs was a means of survival. The temple also symbolises two hills; the northern temple side represents 'Tonacatepetl' (mountain of sustenance), it contained all nutrition that the rain gods would give; the southern side of the temple represents the mountain 'Coatepetl' (mountain of the serpent), the birthplace of the god who became the protector of the Aztec people. According to Matos Moctezuma and Roman Berrelleza the Templo Mayor essentially represented the Aztec model of the universe in which duality was an important part (Matos Moctezuma 1995, 63; Roman Berrelleza 2004, 148).

#### 4. Aztec human sacrifice through time

The following chapter will highlight what has been written in literature about Aztec human sacrifices, starting with the sixteenth century chronicles.

Subsequently the more recent work on the subject will be discussed using literature written by Broda (1987), Carrasco and Sessions (1998; Carrasco 1999), Clendinnen (1991), Graulich (1992; 2000), and van Zantwijk (1992).

According to Taube chroniclers from the sixteenth century were extremely focused on the sacrificial aspect of the Aztec society. The human sacrifices were therefore described in detail by the chroniclers. This in turn was used by the Spaniards to justify the Spanish Conquest and even the suppression of other native religious traditions (Taube 2004, 168). Archaeologist Matos Moctezuma explains how Spanish friars wrote about the Indians to inform the missionaries with enough knowledge in order for them to convert the Indians to the Christian religion (Matos Moctezuma 1987, 17). The chronicles of fray Bernardino de Sahagun serve as our source for the sixteenth century. He was a Franciscan friar and a missionary priest from Spain who travelled to the American continent in 1529. He wrote *La Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, which translated in English means *The General History of the Things of New Spain* (Sahagun 1951). Usually it is referred to as the *Florentine Codex*. It consists of twelve books, with each a different theme. Book II *The ceremonies* is mainly used here, it is named *Second book, which treateth of the feasts and sacrifices by which the natives honored their gods in their state of infidelity* (Sahagun 1951, 1). This part deals with the rituals and feasts held throughout the year.

Sahagun (1951) gives a detailed description on the eighteen monthly calendric feasts and rituals that were held on fixed dates. He also described feasts that are movable, which means they did not occur on the same day or month each year, they correspond to one of the twenty day signs of the ritual calendar. A table has been made to get an overview of the calendric rituals using Sahagun's (1951) descriptions (table 1.). Several rituals involving human sacrifice will be explained further using Sahagun (1951) and Aguilar-Moreno (2006), Carrasco and sessions

(1998), Carrasco (1999), Clendinnen (1991), Graulich (1992; 2000), Townsend (2000), van Zantwijk (1992), to see if there are any differences between them and Sahagun's description.

The human sacrifices that were performed on the permanent dates occurred on a fixed date in each of the eighteen months. Each month was dedicated to a specific deity and in name of that deity a feast with many ceremonies was held in those twenty days with a ritual sacrifice on a certain day (Sahagun 1951). Captives and slaves were most often sacrificed, but on certain occasions children or women were required (Sahagun 1951; Smith 1996, 224).

<b>Name festival/month</b>	<b>Time ritual: Xihpohualli and Gregorian calendar</b>	<b>The sacrificial ritual</b>	<b>Patron deity</b>	<b>Who is involved</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Author and date</b>	<b>Century</b>
Atlacahualco/ Quavitleloa	1 <sup>st</sup> month. Feb. 14- March 5.	Hearts were extracted and then the bodies were cooked and eaten.	Tlalocs, Chalchiutlicue, and Quetzalcoatl.	Children and captives.	To be granted rain from the gods of rain.	Sahagun	Aguilar-Moreno (2006), Broda (1987), Graulich (1992), Townsend (2000).	Sixteenth century.
Tlacaxipeualiztli	2 <sup>nd</sup> month. March 6-25.	Hearts were extracted and the skin was flayed and then worn by a deity impersonator. The rest of the bodies were cooked and eaten.	Xipe Totec and Huitzilopochtli.	Captives and deity impersonators.	For rain and the renewal of vegetation.	Sahagun	Carrasco (1999), Clendinnen (1991), Graulich (2000).	Sixteenth century.



Tozoztontli	3 <sup>rd</sup> month. March 26- April 14.	Extraction of the heart.	Tlaloc, Chalchiuhtlicue and Coatlicue.	Children.	To ensure rainfall.	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.
Hueytozoztli	4 <sup>th</sup> month. April 15- May 4.	Children left over from the first month were sacrificed.	Cinteotl, Chicomecoatl, Tlaloc.	Children and deity impersonators.	To ensure abundance of rain.	Sahagun	Carrasco (1999).	Sixteenth century.
Toxcatl	5 <sup>th</sup> month. May 5-22.	Heart was extracted and then the head was severed and placed on the skull rack.	Tezcatlipoca, Titlacauan, Huitzilopochtli, Tlachahuepan, Cuexcotzin.	A young man with no physical flaws.	For fertility after a dry period.	Sahagun	Carrasco (1999).	Sixteenth century.
Etzalcualitzli	6 <sup>th</sup> month. May 23-June 13.	The priests performed auto sacrifice; cutting of the ears with flint knives. The captives' and slaves' hearts were extracted.	Tlalocs.	Priests, captives and slaves.	Fertility.	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.
Tecuilhuitontli	7 <sup>th</sup> month. June 14-July 13.	The captives were killed first and then the impersonator of the	Huixtocihuatl and Xochipilli.	A female deity impersonator and captives.	-	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.

		goddess Huixtocihuatl. The hearts were extracted.						
Veytecuilhuitl	8 <sup>th</sup> month. July 4-23.	The impersonator of the goddess Xilonen was decapitated first and then her heart was cut out.	Xilonen, Chicomeocoatl, Ehecatl, and Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl.	A female deity impersonator.	So green maize could be eaten.	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.
Tlaxochimaco	9 <sup>th</sup> month. July 24-Aug. 12.	The first flowers of the year were offered to the god of war Huitzilopochtli.	Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca, and Mictlantecuhtli.	Noble and common men and women.	To honour the dead.	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.
Xocotlvetzi	10 <sup>th</sup> month. Aug. 13-Sep. 1.	The slaves were thrown alive into fire and before they died they were taken out and then their hearts were extracted.	Xiutecutli god of fire.	Slaves.	-	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.
Ochpaniztli	11 <sup>th</sup> month. Sep. 2-21.	The impersonator of the goddess Toci/Teteo	Toci/ Teteo innan.	A female deity impersonator	For plant regeneration.	Sahagun	Carrasco (1999),	Sixteenth century.

		innan was decapitated en flayed in silence. Then the hearts of four captives were cut out.		and captives.			Clendinnen (1991).	
Teutleco	12 <sup>th</sup> month. Sep. 22- Oct. 11.	Captives were thrown into fire.	All the gods.	Captives.	Arrival of the gods.	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.
Tepeilhuitl	13 <sup>th</sup> month. Oct. 11-31.	Their hearts were extracted, then they were rolled down the temple steps and finally were decapitated and cut into pieces to be eaten.	In honour of the high mountains and the Tlalocs.	Four women and a man.	To ensure rainfall.	Sahagun		Sixteenth century.
Quecholli	14 <sup>th</sup> month. Nov. 1- 20.	After a ritual hunt the victims were sacrificed on top of two different pyramids.	Mixcoatl.	Slaves, captives, and a male and female deity impersonator.	Honour the dead.	Sahagun		Sixteenth century.

Panquetzaliztli	15 <sup>th</sup> month. Nov. 21-Dec. 10.	Victims were sacrificed all over the city starting at the ball court and ending at the temple of the god of war Huitzilopochtli.	Huitzilopochtli.	Captives and slaves.	-	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.
Atemuztli	16 <sup>th</sup> month. Dec. 11-30.	Figurines that represent mountains are offered to the gods of rain.	Tlalocs.	Priests.	To invoke rainfall.	Sahagun		Sixteenth century.
Tititl	17 <sup>th</sup> month. Dec. 31- Jan. 19.	The woman's heart was torn out as she lay on the sacrificial stone. Then she was decapitated.	Ilamatecutli/ Tonan.	A female deity impersonator.	-	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.

Izcalli	18 <sup>th</sup> month. Jan. 20- Feb. 8.	The sacrificial ritual only occurred in the leap years.	Xiuhteculli.	Captives and slaves.	Growth of new crop.	Sahagun	Clendinnen (1991).	Sixteenth century.
Nemontemi	5 useless days. Feb. 9-13.	No rituals were conducted in these days as they were considered unlucky.	-	-	-	Sahagun	-	Sixteenth century.

*Table 1. Aztec monthly calendric feasts.*

The table demonstrates the importance of duality in the Aztec society as is discussed in the previous chapter. The rituals are revolved around the dry and wet season. Five feasts will be discussed further, but first a general description of Aztec human sacrifice will be given from Carrasco and Sessions (1998) who used Sahagun's *Florentine Codex* and Diego Duran's *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, as their source from the sixteenth century (Carrasco and Sessions 1998).

Rituals like these had to be prepared. That preparation usually consisted of a couple of days of fasting done by the priests, and offerings such as food, flowers, and objects were made. On the day of the ritual the deity impersonators, called *teteo ixiptla*, were adorned to resemble the deity in question and the participants proceeded to a temple while people were playing music, for example on a flute. Often this preceded ritual bathing of the victims (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 188). When it came down to ascending the steps of the temple most victims had to be escorted or even forced. Once they arrived to the altar at the top they were thrown onto the sacrificial stone and held down by their limbs by four priests. The fifth priest cut open the chest of the victim with a ritual knife made of flint, in Nahuatl it is called a *tecpatl* (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 190). Then the priest reached into the chest and tore out the heart, where the *teyolia* resided, and held it up towards the sun in the sky as a sign of an offer. An example of this can be seen in (fig. 1). This was supposed to give the sun god divine energy. Then the heart was deposited in a bowl, called an eagle vessel or *cuauhxicalli*. The heartless body was now named the "eagle man" and was rolled or thrown down the stairs of the temple so it would land on the ground in front of the temple (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 190). The body was taken and the head was severed from it, only in the festivals that involved decapitation. Now the city had attained more *tonalli* from the decapitated head. The soft tissue was completely removed from the skull and it was placed on the horizontal poles of the skull rack (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 190).

For the Aztecs a new year started on February the second according to their solar calendar (Sahagun 1951, 1). According to Richard Townsend and Manuel Aguilar-Moreno the new year started on the fourteenth of February

(Townsend 2000, 220; Aguilar-Moreno 2006, 295). Due to the fact that Sahagun did not mention exact dates further along with the rest of the feasts, the dates of the Gregorian calendar that are used by Townsend and Aguilar-Moreno are maintained in table 1. A new cycle began with the first month, called *Atlacahualco* (by Mexicans) or *Quavitleloa*, many children and prisoners were sacrificed in honour of the Tlalocs the gods of rain, goddess of the water Chalchiutlicue, and god of the winds Quetzalcoatl (Sahagun 1951, 1). Sahagun writes that children with a favourable day sign were bought and then sacrificed on seven different mountaintops where their hearts were torn out (Sahagun 1951, 42-43). If the children cried a lot it was a sign for the Aztecs that there would be plenty of rain that year, because tears were a symbol of rain. The prisoners were stabbed and then taken to Xipe Totec's temple Yopico where the sacrificial ritual was finished by taking out their hearts (Sahagun 1951, 44). According to Sahagun some accounts said that the children that were attained the first month of the year weren't all killed at once but were sacrificed each month up until the rainy season, which meant they were divided by four (Sahagun 1951, 8).

Broda (1987) mentions how these child sacrifices are documented frequently from the time of the Spanish Conquest and are also the earliest accounts of these type of events in the archaeological context of Mexico (Broda 1987, 88).

Graulich (1992) who wrote an article named *Aztec festivals of the rain gods*, states that in this month's festival sacrificing children was the main event. In the consecutive three months where children were also sacrificed it was more a secondary event, because the other sacrificial rituals were more important (Graulich 1992, 34). As mentioned above Sahagun (1951) wrote about children being sacrificed on seven different mountaintops. Graulich says that both fray Diego Duran and fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinia wrote about only two children who were sacrificed, namely a boy as a deity impersonator of Tlaloc and a girl impersonating Matlalcueye (Graulich 1992, 37).

Carrasco extracted his information from Sahagun's *Florentine Codex*. He discusses the *Tlacaxipeualiztli* (the feast of the flaying of men), another "debt

payment” to the gods. This feast was celebrated in honour of Xipe Totec (Our Lord the Flayed One) in the second month of the solar calendar, in the western calendar it is in March. As every month the ritual started much earlier than the actual killing. Carrasco mentioned an account where it began forty days prior to the sacrificing when captive warriors and slaves were cleaned and adorned to make them resemble the deity Xipe Totec (Carrasco 1999, 140). The ceremony was reallocated to the temple of Xipe Totec where the prisoners were renamed and had to dance with their captors (Carrasco 1999, 140). On the night before the ritual sacrifice the captors held a vigil in the temple all night long and cut off parts of the hair of the captives from the top of their head (Sahagun 1951, 46). Carrasco and Sessions explain how the hair on a person’s head kept the *tonalli*, one of the souls a person contained, save inside the head (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 54). It makes sense now why the captors cut off the hair of the captives. They wanted the *tonalli* not to be save anymore in order to extract it. The next morning the priests dragged the captives by the hair to the top of Templo Mayor to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli (Sahagun 1951, 46). One by one they were placed on the sacrificial stone where six priests took over and cut out their hearts with a flint knife called a *tecpatl* and offered it to the sun to nourish it, just as is shown in (fig. 1). After this ritual the hearts were placed in a ceremonial bowl also called an eagle vessel or *cuauhxicalli*. The heartless body was now named the “eagle man” (Sahagun 1951, 47). Following this process the bodies were flayed and their skins were worn by Aztecs who then progressed through the city and either fought mock battles with young Aztec warriors or collected gifts from the inhabitants. After the flaying the bodies were thrown down from the steps and taken to the captor’s homes where they were dismembered and then the pieces were distributed to be cooked and eaten. (Sahagun 1951, 3-4). A thigh was given to Moctezuma, the ruler, and the rest remained with the captor and his relatives (Sahagun 1951, 47). Captors did not eat the flesh of the captives they obtained themselves. That was considered as if they were eating their own flesh, because they felt a mutual familial bond (Sahagun 1951, 52).



Carrasco explains how the Dominican priest Diego Duran wrote that consuming human flesh of a sacrificed person was done in a ritual manner with great respect and was treated as if it was divine. The Aztecs believed that the actual flesh they were eating was part of the gods (Carrasco 1999, 169). Essentially it is a reciprocal process, the Aztecs offer human beings to the gods and in return they receive a part of the gods by eating the human flesh after the sacrificial ritual. Graulich claims in his article on Aztec human sacrifice that the primary meaning behind the sacrificial ritual was to expiate oneself from sins to be worthy of a better afterlife and not to nourish the gods (Graulich 2000).

On the following morning the ceremonies continued when more captives that were acquired through war were sacrificed and flayed in what is called a gladiatorial sacrifice (Sahagun 1951, 48). (Clendinnen 1991, 94-97).

The fifth month entailed the most important festival of the year, called *Toxcatl*. Sahagun compared its importance to Easter for the Christians (Sahagun 1951, 9). This feast was in honour of the god Tezcatlipoca. A young man with no physical flaws was specifically chosen to impersonate the deity for a year; they called this impersonator *teotl ixiptla*. In that year he was treated as a god and lived in wealth (Sahagun 1951, 9). His hair was cut twenty days prior to the ending of the month and he was given ornaments and four wives. When the day of the sacrificial ritual came his wives left him and he travelled to the city of Chalco, south of Tenochtitlan, where he ascended the steps of a the small temple Tlacuchcalco by his own free will. At the top of the temple priests were waiting for him to lay him down on a stone to cut his heart out and raise it to offer it to the sun. The body was brought down to the court where the head was severed and after they had removed the soft tissue they put the skull on a skull rack, called a *tzompantli* (Sahagun 1951, 10). The impersonator was immediately replaced by another young man who was to be sacrificed during this ceremony a year from now (Sahagun 1951, 9). This ritual supposedly indicated that those who lived in wealth and with pleasures would die poor and in grief. In this same month another sacrifice was made in honour of the god Huitzilopochtli (Sahagun 1951, 68).

This ritual of *Toxcatl* is one of the rituals that is extensively described by Carrasco (1999) who also used Sahagun's chronicles for his book. The actual killing is only a small portion of the entire ritual. These kinds of ritual human sacrifices were called a "debt payment", because it was an annual payment to one of the gods that sacrificed themselves in order for human kind to exist (Carrasco 1999, 118). The priests offer the heart to the sun to ensure the daily rising of the sun. On the famous "Aztec Calendar Stone" the sun, Tonatiuh, is depicted in the centre of the stone as a face with an open mouth and inside is a tongue shaped as a sacrificial knife which symbolises the need for human sacrifices (Carrasco 1999, 175). According to Carrasco the Toxcatl ceremony was the perfect human sacrifice for the Aztecs, because the Tezcatlipoca impersonator knew what was expected from him and cooperated during the sacrificial ritual by ascending the stairs of the temple with no coercion. After the sacrifice his body parts were carefully carried by four men instead of thrown down the stairs of the temple as was usually the case after the ritual (Carrasco 1999, 136).

The eleventh month was called *Ochpaniztli*. It was eight days of dancing in silence. Then a woman dressed to resemble the goddess named Toci or Teteo innan was led to a temple. The fact that she was to be offered was kept from her so that she was taken by surprise and not feel sad, because that would have been a bad omen and as a consequence warriors would die in battle or women would die in childbirth. Therefore the woman was deceived and she was told she was going to the ruler Moctezuma to have intercourse. When she arrived at the top of the temple a priest took her on his back and then she was quickly beheaded and flayed. Her skin was put on by a young man (Sahagun 1951, 19) After this ceremony the man who wore the skin went to the temple of Huitzilopochtli along with captives and sacrificed four of them by cutting out their hearts, the rest of the captives were killed by a priest (Sahagun 1951, 20). Clendinnen clarifies that the woman who is impersonating the deity at the beginning of the ritual is called Teteo innan. When she is sacrificed and her skin is flayed, the man who puts on her skin is now the impersonator of the deity Toci and he is now named this way

and is perceived as female (Clendinnen 1991, 201). From this point on Sahagun refers to him as 'she' (Sahagun 1951, 112).

Carrasco discusses the events of the ritual killing of women. He points out there were six feasts that involved the sacrificing of women. They occurred in the fourth, seventh, eighth, eleventh, thirteenth, and seventeenth month (Carrasco 1999, 188). He explains how the focus of the short and long descriptions of the feasts in the second book of Sahagun's *Florentine codex* is different. The short descriptions are more focused on the sacrificing of the deity impersonators while the long descriptions are more focused on the ceremonies surrounding the ritual killing (Carrasco 1999, 195-196). Carrasco claims that in the fourth month a woman was sacrificed even though Sahagun did not describe this event (Carrasco 1999, 200). This is because each month involving the killing of women the ritual is basically the same. Sahagun reveals more of the ritual each time he describes such a feast. It is only on the feast of *Ochpaniztli* in the eleventh month when Sahagun describes what happens to the woman after she is sacrificed (Carrasco 1999, 195). Sahagun pays more attention to what is done with the flayed skin than to the actual process of killing the woman. According to Carrasco this is the most astounding feast that involved the ritual sacrifice of a woman (Carrasco 1999, 205). He says the act of giving is the central theme in this rite and the young woman is obliged to perform these acts. She and other women were essentially forced by men to participate in these offerings because they decide who will be offered (Carrasco 1999, 205). The acts of giving occurred during the journey to the temple where the woman was to be sacrificed. The places where she stopped were sacred or became sacred after her visit. It started with giving seeds at the market, then giving her virginity to the ruler at his palace, then giving her life at the temple, and finally her skin is taken by the priests which is also considered as a gift (Carrasco 1999, 205).

Sahagun clearly mentions the sacrificing of a male and female deity impersonator of the god Mixcoatl in the fourteenth month *Quecholli* (Sahagun 1951, 26). According to Carrasco's enumeration this was not one of the months that required the killing of women.

The eighteenth and last month of the year was called *Izcalli*. This month's festival was in honour of the fire god Xiuhtecutli. The sacrificing of captives, slaves and the deity impersonator only occurred in the leap years. So every four years they carried out many ceremonies surrounding the ritual, unlike any other month of the year. Blood was extracted from the children that were born in those years by piercing their ears (Sahagun 1951, 33). Both men and women were adorned to resemble the deity and were put in a house where they were guarded at all times (Sahagun 1951, 150). Their hair was cut at midnight and the next day they were sacrificed, the deity impersonators were saved for last (Sahagun 1951, 151). This festival was also considered movable, because it did not happen every year. Clendinnen points out how in most festivals the victims were cooperative to some degree, but in this case they had to be guarded (Clendinnen 1991, 101). On the other hand it is remarkable that captives were often cooperative in the earlier stages of the ceremonies, up until the moment where they have to ascend the temple steps, seeing as they were captured in battle and were strangers. According to Clendinnen this is probably because the victims who are to die are treated very well in the preparatory phase of the festivals (Clendinnen 1991, 102).

In *De Azteken: Oorlog tegen de Goden*, -van Zantwijk (1992) writes about some events that involved human sacrifice. He used several chronicles from the sixteenth century, but mainly he used the twelfth book of the *Florentine Codex*, which deals with the Conquest of Tenochtitlan (van Zantwijk 1992, 14). During the Conquest the Spaniards and the Aztecs were at war. Like in any war there were many casualties on both sides. In one chapter of the book it is described how at one point during this war the Aztecs captured warriors, among them were fifty-three Spaniards and some Mexican allies of them. The Aztecs took them to Yacacolco in order to sacrifice them. The Spaniards were lined up first then after came their allies and one by one they were placed on the altar to be sacrificed. After which the decapitated heads of the Spaniards were placed on the horizontal wooden stakes of the skull rack on display and the heads were turned towards the sun (van Zantwijk 1992, 155).

Van Zantwijk also used another translation of his of a document from 1528. It is probably the oldest Tlatelolcan report; it's called *Unos annales historicos de la nacion Mexicana* which translated in English means *Some historical annals of the Mexican nation*. The writer of this document is unknown, but from the text it is made apparent that it was an eyewitness of the siege and battle in Tlatelolco in the Basin of Mexico. The report mentions the inflation caused by the siege, it is expressed in the price of a human being. Each type of person had its own price, for example a priest, a virgin, or a young child (van Zantwijk 1992, 170). Van Zantwijk suggests that due to the awareness the Aztecs had of the price of a human being it might be possible that the high amounts of sacrificial victims that are often mentioned refer to the price of the human beings instead of the actual amount of victims (van Zantwijk 1992, 170). An example of an event with many sacrificial victims is the initiation of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan in 1487. Various Aztec sources mention an amount of over eighty thousand victims, but Codex Mexicanus mentions an amount of three hundred and twenty victims. It is possible that the number of eighty thousand refers to the price and the three hundred and twenty refers to the number of sacrificial victims (van Zantwijk 1992, 171).

In the translated version of van Zantwijk of the Tlatelolcan annals it is described how Cortes came to Tecpantlayacac in 1519 and he was greeted by the governor of Cuetlaxtlan with gifts and a human sacrifice after which he was handed a sacrificial bowl with blood of the victim. This made Cortes mad and he responded by taking his sword and killing the sacrificial priest who tried to hand him the bowl with blood (van Zantwijk 1992, 173).

Van Zantwijk explains how there are far less chronicles written in Nahuatl about the Conquest from the capital city Tenochtitlan than from surrounding cities, because Tenochtitlan was almost completely destroyed after the Conquest. Furthermore they date from the second half of the sixteenth century unlike the chronicles from neighbouring cities that date from the first half of the sixteenth century. One of those chronicles is Codex Aubin, written in 1566, it describes an account of a prevention of human sacrifice in May of 1520. During the celebration

of the tenth day of *Toxcatl*, dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the Aztecs made an image of the deity out of corn dough and brought it to the altar at the top of Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan while the Spaniards were observing. The Aztecs were chanting as they were about to perform the rite of human sacrifice, but at that moment Pedro de Alvarado, commander of the Spanish garrison in Tenochtitlan during absence of Cortes, gave the command to the Spaniards to kill all the Aztecs present which were mainly nobles and priests (van Zantwijk 1992, 187).

Matthew Restall explains how all of the Franciscan friars acknowledged how important Hernan Cortes was for them, because his support was the reason they were able to conduct their mission in Mexico to provide the missionaries with sufficient information about the Indians to convert them to the Christian religion. Among those friars were Motolinia and Sahagun. Sahagun even rewrote parts of his account of *The General History of the Things of New Spain* in 1585. He claimed that he only corrected some mistakes, but the revised version reflected more of a justification of the Spanish Conquest and was more praising towards Cortes (Restall 2004).

A quotation from Carrasco and Sessions that might be helpful to comprehend as to why the Aztecs felt they had the need to sacrifice human beings.

“Once you get human beings to internalize a world view and believe it as cosmic truth, they can be motivated to do anything” (Carrasco and Sessions 1998, 185).

When thinking about the Aztec world view and how they thought it to be a cosmic truth and therefore believed the human body was sacred and the head and heart were recipients of divine power it makes more sense why they specifically chose those parts of the body to be removed. They believed the heart contained the *teyolia*, which symbolised a divine fire and the rational force in life and priests and deity impersonators had a higher amount of. The head contained the *tonalli*.



*Figure 1. Image of the heart sacrificial ritual from the Florentine Codex.*

([http://clio.missouristate.edu/chuchiak/HST%20350--Theme%203--Aztec\\_religious\\_rituals.htm](http://clio.missouristate.edu/chuchiak/HST%20350--Theme%203--Aztec_religious_rituals.htm))



—After Paso y Troncoso

15-21. Toxcatl (Chapter 24)

Figure 2. The ritual of Toxcatl from the Florentine Codex. (Sahagun 1951)



## 5. Archaeological finds at Templo Mayor

Excavations at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City began in 1978 by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) (Lopez Lujan 1994, 18). Lopez Lujan (1994) the director of this Templo Mayor Project did research on the archaeological finds of the offerings found at the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan in nowadays Mexico City. During the excavations seven main construction stages (I-VII) were discovered, with stage I being the oldest. Five additional amplifications were found on the western side of the temple indicated with a letter (Lopez Lujan 1994, 64). According to Matos Moctezuma stage I should be before A.D. 1375 (Lopez Lujan 1994, 68). This stage could not be excavated because the building materials had perished (Matos Moctezuma 1987, 32). He proposed that stage VII was during the reign of Moctezuma II (1502-1520). This is the stage of Templo Mayor the Spaniards must have seen upon their arrival in Tenochtitlan (Lopez Lujan 1994, 68).

Lopez Lujan writes that in total there were 118 offerings. Fifty human skulls have been recovered from those deposits and all of them were on the axes of stage IVb (Lopez Lujan 1994, 265). This stage contained Complex A which consisted of eleven offerings. Nine of them contained forty-one skulls (Lopez Lujan 1994, 314). These skulls were found with the first cervical vertebrae still attached to the occipital condyles of the cranium, which suggests decapitation (Lopez Lujan 1994, 265). Complex A also contained twelve skull-masks decorated with shells and stones in the eye sockets and some of which had a flint knife in their mouth cavity. The complex also included forty-nine sacrificial knives made of flint that were actually used to kill people in sacrificial rituals (Lopez Lujan 1994, 314-315). This was concluded due to the location of the flint knives in the offerings where the victims were and due to the fact that the knives were not decorated (Lopez Lujan 1994, 265). Lopez Lujan mentions there are written accounts from the sixteenth century of buried heads in the Templo Mayor (Lopez Lujan 1994, 270). This might be the result of celebrating the inauguration of the temple with human sacrifices which was common for the Aztecs when a

new ruler ascended the throne, such as the initiation of Templo Mayor in 1487 (Lopez Lujan 1994, 269; Broda 1987, 65; van Zantwijk 1992, 170). Another explanation he suggests it could be the result of the gladiatorial sacrifices during the Tlacaxipehualiztli feast of the second month that is described by Sahagun (Lopez Lujan 1994, 270). He notes that Sahagun never did say in his chronicles what eventually happened to the heads after the decapitation during an initiation of a building (Lopez Lujan 1994, 270).

According to archaeologist Matos Moctezuma who has led the excavations at Templo Mayor a majority of the chronicles resembled the archaeological findings at the temple (Matos Moctezuma 1995, 4). He states that out of all the offerings (118) that were discovered at the Templo Mayor excavations more than seven thousand objects were recovered (Matos Moctezuma 1987, 37). Matos Moctezuma writes about a stone from construction stage II of Templo Mayor and how it resembles the descriptions of Sahagun when he described a sacrificial stone that was used during the feast of Tlacaxipehualiztli in the second month. The uncovered stone wouldn't have been the exact same one Sahagun described due to the early construction stage it was found in, but a similar one used years earlier prior to Sahagun's arrival (Matos Moctezuma 1988, 65).

Excavations from construction stage IVb of the temple revealed two offerings in a small altar on the northwest side of the temple on Tlaloc's side (Matos Moctezuma 1988, 74). One of the offerings called 'Offering 48' contained the skeletal remains of children that were sacrificed in honour of the god Tlaloc (Matos Moctezuma 1988, 77). Physical anthropologist Roman Berrelleza determined it were the remains of forty-two infants (Roman Berrelleza 1987, 132). The cist also contained artefacts such as eleven polychrome sculptures/vessels with the image of Tlaloc and greenstone beads (Matos Moctezuma 1987, 45). This deposit was classified as a primary and multiple burial due to the fact that anatomical articulations were still present on some bones even though the majority of the bones was disarticulated and mixed (Roman Berrelleza 1987, 133). Roman Berrelleza determined the age of the children between three and seven years old (Roman Berrelleza 1987, 138).

(Roman Berrelleza 1987, 139). He stated that the method and cause of death of the infants in 'Offering 48' was most likely by slitting the throat since no cut marks were found on the bones (Roman Berrelleza 1987, 140). Roman Berrelleza also stated that this manner of sacrifice corresponds to what friars Motolinia and Duran described regarding the sacrifice of children. He believes that the heart sacrificial ritual that was performed on children according to Sahagun did not happen in the way Sahagun described it (Roman Berrelleza 1987, 140).

Smith writes as well about the remains of children that have been excavated in the vicinity of large temples in Tenochtitlan. Smith also believes those children were probably sacrificed in the name of Tlaloc (Smith 2011, 559). Lopez Lujan states that the archaeological information accumulated at the excavations of 'Offering 48' coincides with the historical records regarding the sex and age of the children, but not entirely with the large quantity of the human remains (Lopez Lujan 1994, 201). This offering corresponds to the first four festivals of the year where children were sacrificed in name of Tlaloc for the purpose of rain.

Ximena Chávez Balderas wrote a report regarding the osteological findings at Templo Mayor that were excavated during 1978-2005 (Chávez Balderas 2007, 2). Seventy-four skeletons were excavated that corresponded to an offering context. The skeletons were found in nineteen separate offerings, dated between 1440-1502, which is primarily construction stage IVb (Chávez Balderas 2007, 3). According to Chávez Balderas the osteological analysis and the ritual manner of the offerings provide evidence for human sacrifice (Chávez Balderas 2007, 5). Fifty-four per cent of the seventy-four individuals that were sacrificed was classified as male (Chávez Balderas 2007, 11). What is also striking is that the majority (46 per cent) of those individuals was between twenty and thirty years old (Chávez Balderas 2007, 12). This corresponds to Sahagun's (1951) account, when he described the eighteen monthly feasts it is apparent that the majority of the sacrificial victims were male captives who were seized in war. It is likely that those war captives would fit the age category. The marks that were discovered on the bones of the seventy-four individuals were studied and the

majority was classified as post-mortem, which meant it happened after death as a result of either removing the skin, scraping of the bones, ripping of the flesh, disjunction, fractures, and cleavage caused by friction (Chávez Balderas 2007, 13). Evidence for the sacrificial ritual of extraction of the heart was found on one infant that was recovered from what is called 'Offering 111' (Chávez Balderas 2007, 13). The osteological analysis of the bones of the infant showed indentations on the inner part of the ribs and displayed marks near the joint between the rib and the costal cartilage (costochondral joint). Chávez Balderas explains how this can be interpreted; a child was placed on its back and a priest reached for the heart through the abdominal cavity, which left the indentations, then he placed his hand behind the heart, which left the marks, and finally he cut the arteries and veins which left a repetitive pattern on the inner side of the ribs due to the motion of cutting (Chávez Balderas 2007, 15). Evidence for decapitation was also detected. Osteological analysis showed different methods of decapitation were used, but the victim was always placed on its back. The head was usually severed between the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae (Chávez Balderas 2007, 17). What is interesting in these cases of decapitation is that it was not the cause of death (Chávez Balderas 2007, 19). This means that it again corresponds to several descriptions of Sahagun of the monthly feasts. For example during the feast of *Toxcatl* extraction of the heart preceded decapitation (Sahagun 1951, 9).

Considering all this information it certainly does corroborate some of the accounts written in the sixteenth century chronicles about the Aztec human sacrifices at Templo Mayor.

## **6. Aztec museum exhibitions**

Attention will be given to three museum exhibitions on this topic around the world in recent years and how they portray the Aztec culture including their sacrificial rituals in order to make a comparison with chapter four regarding the literature. The exhibition “The Aztec Empire” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, “Moctezuma: Aztec ruler” at the British Museum in London, and “Aztecs” at the Royal Academy of Arts in London will be taken as an example. Several artefacts that were included in the exhibitions will be named to give an impression of the shows. Some reviews regarding the exhibitions will also be mentioned.

### **6.1 Moctezuma: Aztec ruler**

The most recent exhibition took place at the British Museum from September the twenty-fourth of 2009 until January the twenty-fourth of 2010 in collaboration with the INAH. The exhibition curator was Colin McEwan. The museum collected over a hundred and thirty pieces for the exhibition on the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II. According to the British Museum press release concerning the exhibition the show represents a story of the ninth elected ruler of the Aztecs dealing with his life, reign, and several interpretations concerning his death. The exhibition was opened with a portrait of Moctezuma II painted with European ideals by a Spaniard named Antonio Rodriguez in the seventeenth century, which appears to be a way to restore the balance Mason wrote about (Mason 1990). The show was divided into several topics; the Aztecs; Moctezuma as ruler; religion and the gods; warfare and empire; conquest; Moctezuma in history. The section of religion and the gods displayed some objects that are associated with human- or auto sacrifice. A hundred and thirty-one artefacts can be viewed in the exhibitions catalogue (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009).

Four artefacts are displayed as highlights on the British Museum’s website, namely; a mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca consisting of a human skull covered with turquoise and black mosaic (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 169);

a sacrificial knife with a mosaic and wooden handle and a chalcedony blade (fig. 3) (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 147); a mask representing either Quetzalcoatl or Tlaloc with a base of wood covered with turquoise mosaic, it might have been worn by a priest during a ritual ceremony in a month that was in honour of Tlaloc (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 158); and a turquoise mosaic of a double-headed serpent also made of wood and covered with mosaic ([www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)). It is striking that three of the artefacts that are called highlights by the museum are in some way related to human sacrifice. The sacrificial knife (fig.3) was tested for blood traces and results came out negative. This information combined with the fact that only a small part of the flint blade was imbedded in the handle suggests this particular knife was never used in the ritual of human sacrifice and was solely there for ceremonial purposes (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 146). Eighty-two objects were on loan from Europe, the United States, and Mexico, but the overall majority came from the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico-city.

Some of the artefacts from the exhibition's catalogue that pertain to sacrifice will be named here to form a better image objects in the exhibition. On display were several *cauhxicalli* or "eagle vessels" which is a vessel used during the sacrificial ritual for the heart and blood of the victim (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 153). A casket that might have been used to store sacrificial instruments (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 53), and a stone box carved with the name glyph of Moctezuma II that was a present given to the ruler. It might have been used to keep paraphernalia for auto sacrifice. Some believe that after the ruler's death the box was used to keep his burned remains (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 71). The Stone of Moctezuma, it is a stone slab with carvings of the earth Goddess Tlaltecuhтли with open jaws waiting for sacrificial blood (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 153; Lopez Lujan *et al.* 2009, 34). A stone monument representing a bundle of reeds and the Teocalli of Sacred Warfare which is a big monument made of stone, both monuments are in commemoration of the New Fire Ceremony in 1507 (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 176). Several objects that represented the ritual of heart sacrifice were a heart made of

greenstone, it represents a sacrificed heart with cut off arteries and a stone altar with the date 10 rabbit with images representing human heart sacrifices (McEwan and Lopez Lujan, 2009, 144). The festival of *Tlacaxipeualiztli* is represented by a figure of the deity Xipe Totec that is wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim (McEwan and Lopez Lujan 2009, 142). A complete list of the artefacts with some pictures can be viewed in the exhibitions catalogue (McEwan and Lopez Lujan 2009). Some of the artefacts used in the exhibition were also used by the Guggenheim in “The Aztec Empire” exhibition and in “The Aztecs” by the Royal Academy of Arts.

Considering the entire exhibition including the moderate size of it the show does not present the viewer with many artefacts pertaining to the sacrificial ritual, only about ten percent. Nevertheless the show received some negative reviews. A review by the ‘Independent’ calls it a scary show. Richard Cork wrote:

“Sacrificial rituals lay at the alarming centre of the culture developed by these people, who adopted the name "Mexica". And wherever we look, the British Museum's mesmerising show testifies to this remorseless obsession.”

(<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/moctezuma-aztec-ruler-british-museum-london-1793707.html>)

Charlotte Higgins wrote for the ‘Guardian’:

“Clearly it is a trap to apply 21st-century western judgements to a civilisation such as that of the Mexica people in the 16th century [...] I couldn't help finding it profoundly chilling. First there is the sheer ugliness of the objects [...] the grotesqueness of imagery: it's all about bloodletting and the sacrifice of humans [...] Even the apparently most striking objects – the masks decorated with turquoise – are fantastically ugly”

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2009/sep/23/museums-exhibition?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>)

Philip Hensher wrote a review for the 'Daily mail':

“[...] statue [...] designed to hold the hearts of the victims of human sacrifices. This detail, for me, obliterates any observation about whether the sculpture is otherwise well crafted. Similarly, I don't care whether a Nazi lampshade fashioned from human skin is beautifully made or not. [...] An elaborate knife [...] has been revealed not to be strong enough to carry out human sacrifices [...] Well, whoopee-doo. [...] I suppose I should have been prepared. The Royal Academy's equally repulsive show of Aztec artefacts [...] This one reached a similar low point with a stone casket made to contain 'the bodies of children sacrificed to the rain god Tlaloc'. [...] revoltingly inhumane and despicable society [...] there is the undeniable fact that almost everything they made was aesthetically hideous [...] difficult to imagine a museum display that gives off such an overwhelming sense of human evil as this one.” (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1216380/British-Museums-Aztec-artefacts-evil-Nazi-lampshades-human-skin.html>)

These reviews appear to be written from an etic perspective with a complete disregard of the Aztec culture and art and so may not be a true representation of the exhibition. The latter review is by far the worst and most negative. It is filled with biased opinions from the writer. He compares the Aztec civilisation from centuries ago to the Nazis of the twentieth century. That is an unequal comparison that cannot be made. The Aztecs had an entirely different worldview from any society in the twentieth century and in addition to that they weren't a western society. Hensher also states as a fact that everything the Aztecs made was ugly, from art to jewellery. This cannot be called a fact, because it is just his own subjective opinion. Perhaps this is an example of what Baxandall wrote about objects that have been chosen by the exhibitor for their cultural aspects, that they are more likely to be misinterpreted by museum visitors, because these objects were not intended to be viewed for their aesthetic attributes (Baxandall 1991, 39).





*Figure 3. Sacrificial knife with a mosaic handle and a chalcedony blade.*

([http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats\\_on/exhibitions/moctezuma/explore\\_the\\_collection.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/moctezuma/explore_the_collection.aspx))

## **6.2 Aztecs**

The exhibition named “Aztecs” at the Royal Academy of Arts in London from November the sixteenth of 2002 until April the eleventh of 2003 preceded the exhibition at the British Museum. The exhibition curators were Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and the late dr. Felipe Solís Olguín director of The National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. The show contained over three hundred and eighty artefacts from collections in the United States, Mexico, and Europe. The artefacts are divided over ten galleries with each a different theme. The purpose of this exhibition was to show that the Aztecs were more than a cruel culture that performed human sacrifices, they were also highly sophisticated. The show contains elements of their social, economic, and religious life. The galleries were divided over the following themes; antecedents; the human form; the natural

world; gods of life; gods of death; religion: priests, ritual and the calendar; rulers and warriors; Templo Mayor; treasures; contact and codices.

Artefacts from the exhibition that pertain to the sacrificial ritual will be mentioned here. The ‘gods of life’ gallery contained several statues of Xipe Totec dressed in flayed skin of sacrificed warriors which refer to the second festival *Tlacaxipeualiztli*, a brazier, a plaque representing the *Ochpaniztli* festival that involved human sacrifice, and a stone slab with an image of the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue carved that might have been used as an altar. The ‘gods of death’ gallery contained two altars, three braziers, several statues that represent human sacrifice, a ceremonial vessel, and an urn with an image of the god of the dead Mictlantecuhtli that was used to contain ashes of sacrificed captives in Tenochtitlan. The ‘religion: priests, ritual and the calendar’ gallery included a sacrificial knife, three eagle vessels (*cuauhxicalli*), a brazier, a heart of greenstone, a sacrificial stone (*techcatl*) used as an altar for human sacrifices, an altar commemorating the end of the 52-year cycle, and two stones with sacrificial images. The ‘rulers and warriors’ gallery included golden items and symbols of status. This room also contained two caskets, one of which was the box of Moctezuma II, and a *Temalacatl* which is a sacred stone disc that was used in a ceremony preceding human sacrifice. The ‘Templo Mayor’ gallery displayed artefacts that were found during excavations at the temple which were the commemorative plaque of Templo Mayor from ca. 1487, it has the date and rulers Tizoc and Ahuitzotl performing auto sacrifice, sacrificial altars, several votive vessels, a brazier, several burial masks, several models of temples used for human sacrifice, an eccentric flint used as a sacrificial knife, and another sacrificial knife made of obsidian with a face on it. The last room that contained items that pertained to the rite of sacrifice was the ‘treasures’ gallery. It had on display a sacrificial knife and another handle of the same type of knife, a casket used for ashes or sacrificial blood, a femur with inscriptions that belonged to a young man who was most likely sacrificed, and again several burial masks. A complete catalogue of the artefacts can be reviewed in Breuer’s book about the exhibition (Breuer *et al.* 2002).

It is obvious this exhibition incorporated far more artefacts associated with the sacrificial ritual, namely over fifty items, than the exhibition at the British Museum. Although considering the total amount of artefacts displayed in the exhibition it is not an overwhelming amount. A review of the show on the BBC News website reveals not very positive comments about the Aztec culture. Michael Gove, a British politician, even calls it a disgusting culture that is saturated in blood.

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/review/2493663.stm>).

Chris Harman from the 'Socialist Review' wrote:

“The Aztec exhibition will stun and perplex many people who see it [...] There are displays of magnificent sculptures from pre-Hispanic Mexico. There is a beautiful filmed reconstruction of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan [...] but there are also written descriptions of how many of the sculptures and buildings were used for gruesome religious rites.”

(<http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=8242>).

The latter review is less negative but still focused on human sacrifice. Another review by the 'Observer' mentioned it was a popular exhibition in England with many visitors. Vanessa Thorpe wrote:

“At the present rate of popularity, before the show closes in five months' time, an astonishing half a million people are likely to have enjoyed a nightmarish glimpse into the world of the Aztecs, a world which featured brutal human sacrifice and ritual dismemberment [...] the fountains in front of the Royal Academy were illuminated by a red light warning queuing ticket-holders that the show inside was not for the faint-hearted.' It was evil,' said Roy Avvey, from Nottingham, one of the visitors to emerge from the exhibition. 'A feeling of it comes out at you. It is absolutely chilling.”

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/nov/17/arts.education?INTCMP=SRCH>).

This exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts displayed more ritual artefacts and these objects were presented in a way perceived more negative by the public. This applies to the situation Simpson discussed about how certain methods of display in museums in combination with the type of collection can give a false impression of the culture represented (Simpson 1996, 35). Especially critics can make false or unfounded assumptions when writing reviews about cultures represented in these exhibitions when they don't have sufficient knowledge regarding the culture. This is also the case with museum visitors and can explain why they would call an exhibition like this "evil".

### **6.3 The Aztec Empire**

The exhibition "The Aztec Empire" took place at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York from October the fifteenth of 2004 until February the thirteenth of 2005 in collaboration with the 'Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes' (CONACULTA) and the INAH. The exhibition's curator was the late dr. Felipe Solís. According to the press release on the museum's website the show contained over four hundred and fifty artefacts drawn from collections in the United States and Mexico. The exhibition consisted of twelve themes; the glory and richness of the Aztec Empire; Mexican bestiary; ancestral cultures; the Templo Mayor; daily life of commoners and the nobility; people in the Aztec world; gods and rituals; writing and calendars; the Aztec Empire; apotheosis; the Tarascan Empire; the twilight of the empires ([www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org)). The exhibition included monumental sculptures, vessels, reliefs, jewellery etc. Among the artworks displayed from Tenochtitlan the show also included artefacts from other Postclassic neighbouring cultures such as the Tarascans, Toltecs and the Mixtec, and from the Classic period Teotihuacan that had already collapsed by the time the Aztecs emerged (Solis 2004).

The Guggenheim Museum had to loan many items from diverse collections including from the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

This was the largest collection of the three exhibitions. It contained several artefacts pertaining to the sacrificial ritual of which a few will be mentioned here to get a small impression of the exhibition; a model of a temple with a skull rack and a sacrificial altar; commemorative stone monuments of the New Fire ceremony; an anthropomorphic eccentric flint which is a sacrificial knife; a human skull mask with two flint knives, one in the mouth and the other in the nasal cavity; funerary caskets (including the stone box of Moctezuma II); several ceremonial/eagle vessels (*cuauhxicalli*); a polychrome brazier that is also displayed on the museum's website as a highlight of the 'gods and rituals' section (fig. 4); a calendar stone with symbols for human sacrifice (Solis 2004).

This exhibition contained almost twenty artefacts that pertained to the sacrificial ritual which out of a total amount of over four hundred and fifty artefacts is not much at all. A complete catalogue of the artefacts can be reviewed in Solis's book about the exhibition (Solis 2004).

A review in the 'New York Magazine' explains how the show was set up with a dark atmosphere by not using central lighting only spots. Mark Stevens wrote about the exhibition:

"The show at the Guggenheim, where a razzle-dazzle installation of choice objects emphasizes why the Aztecs remain a source of obsessive interest [...] In Western societies, the Aztecs are a blood-red symbol of passion, the very definition of "primal" power. Their unrelenting emphasis upon war, death, religion, and human sacrifice [...]"

(<http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/reviews/10104/>)

An art review in 'the city review' had positive remarks about the show and the artefacts. Michele Leight wrote:

"The show at the Guggenheim is biased towards the most pleasing aspects of Aztec civilization and it is noticeable that there are far fewer sacrificial daggers and references to human sacrifice in the Guggenheim exhibit than there were at Burlington House [...] so my only criticism of this show would be the down-

playing of the ritual violence that was ever-present in the lives of this particular ruling elite.” (<http://www.thecityreview.com/aztec.html>)

When looking at the artefacts used by the Guggenheim only about five percent of the artefacts displayed in the exhibition are related to the sacrificial ritual. This is clearly less than the other two exhibitions in London displayed in their show. Nonetheless the ‘New York Magazine’ review reveals a focus on the ritual of human sacrifice, the writer even calls it an obsessive interest. This is done purposely by creating a certain atmosphere and by placing the artefacts in a specific way in the show. Again this is an issue of methods of display and representation. The latter review was positive about the artefacts, but made a complaint that the show wasn’t showing enough of the ritual violence and only displayed the nicer aspects of the Aztec society. In this case according to the review they were biased, because they were diminishing the ritual of human sacrifice.



*Figure 4. Deified warrior brazier.*

([http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/aztecs/highlights\\_7.html](http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/aztecs/highlights_7.html))

## **7. A comparison between the literature and the museum exhibitions**

In this chapter the literature on Aztec human sacrifices through time will be discussed and what the chosen museum exhibitions want to portray on the subject. The two will be compared including the shortcomings of this research.

### **7.1 The literature**

As mentioned before Taube pointed out how the sixteenth century chroniclers were focused on human sacrifices (Taube 2004, 168). This has been shown when describing Sahagun's chronicles. Out of the twelve books the *Florentine Codex* consists of, one book namely book II is entirely dedicated to the Aztec feasts and the sacrifices and ceremonies that went along with it. Sahagun was very thorough when describing the rituals of human sacrifice the Aztecs performed on a monthly base. His purpose for writing the chronicles are clear. He came to Mexico to learn about the Aztecs as much as he could in order to inform the missionaries with everything he had learned about them. In turn the missionaries would have sufficient knowledge about the Aztecs to convert them to the Christian religion. As Restall stated earlier Sahagun's interpretation was affected by Hernan Cortes. His revised version of his chronicles reflected more of a justification of the Spanish Conquest (Restall 2004).

The authors from more recent literature regarding the Aztec human sacrifices also obtained their information from the sixteenth and seventeenth century chronicles. The difference lies in their intentions to write about it. These authors write from a scholarly interest and not for the purpose of converting anyone. It is clear that writers such as Carrasco and Sessions (1998; Carrasco 1999), Clendinnen (1991), and Graulich (1992) tried to write about the Aztecs with a more emic approach. They tried to understand and in a way explain why the Aztecs performed the ritual of human sacrifice. They also highlighted many other aspects of Aztec culture as well. The role the Spaniards played during the Conquest is often stressed, because when they killed many Aztecs, by their own hand and even by their diseases they brought to the continent, it was done out of

pure cruelty and then they used the Aztecs' own ritual customs against them to justify the killings. This aspect certainly does evoke more sympathy for the Aztecs. Among others van Zantwijk (1992) even proposed a theory that diminishes the amount of sacrificial victims the Aztecs made. Smith also mentions that the amount of 136.000 skulls on the skull rack near Templo Mayor that one of Cortes's soldiers reported about is most likely an exaggeration (Smith 1996, 228).

Over the centuries there has been a change of perspective regarding the literature. The basic information about Aztec human sacrifices remains the same, because all sources originate from the chronicles written in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Perspectives have changed because current authors have different motives for writing about the Aztecs and a different worldview compared to the chroniclers. Nonetheless the imagery the Spaniards have left behind is still embedded in today's society. This will be discussed in the following paragraph.

## **7.2 The museum exhibitions**

The three chosen museum exhibitions give a somewhat contradictory impression. On the one hand the artefacts that were displayed in the exhibitions did not overwhelm the public with sacrificial objects. With each exhibition the amount of artefacts that pertained to the ritual of sacrifice was fairly low. On the other hand the reviews of the exhibitions gave an impression the shows had something gruesome on display. Imagery is what formed these views about the Aztecs. This thesis is mainly focused on the literature and museum exhibitions of Aztec human sacrifice, but it is not just the literature and exhibitions that contribute to this view about the Aztecs. Other mediums of representation are important in this imagery as well, for example documentaries on the television from networks such as the National Geographic, the History Channel, PBS, and movies that often don't have historical accuracy and are sensationalised. What is educated in schools is also an important factor to consider, because preconceived notions about cultures can



already be formed early on. Another factor that contributes to this view are the methods of display that museum use.

Out of the three exhibitions the show at the Royal Academy of Arts displayed the most artefacts that pertained to the sacrificial ritual. This show in 2002 was also the first of the three exhibitions. Perhaps the following two shows at the British Museum in 2010 and the Guggenheim in 2004 had learned from the experiences of the Royal Academy of Arts, but clearly it was not enough to prevent bad reviews. The exhibition at the British Museum did have a much smaller collection of Aztecs artefacts on display so it would be possible the ritual artefacts stood out more. Still it is questionable why all three exhibitions that were years apart received negative reviews in the papers. It could not be a coincidence, it had to be purposely done. The museums had to have set up their exhibitions with much preparation and thought of the result and the way it would be portrayed to the general public keeping in mind that the majority of this public has little knowledge of the Aztec world. The general knowledge the public has would be from the earlier mentioned factors such as television, literature and education.

As Arens pointed out people should look at the New World with an unbiased perspective in order to understand them better (Arens 1979). In this case the museums should have an unbiased perspective and approach when setting up an exhibition, especially when it is regarding a civilisation that is known for human sacrifice. Just as Simpson pointed out issues involving display and interpretation, and cultural bias in representing other cultures can occur (Simpson 1996, 2). After reading the museum reviews it can be states that this occurred with the three Aztec museum exhibitions. When representing a culture such as the Aztecs in a museum exhibition, certain methods of display in combination with the type of collection can give a false impression of the culture represented (Simpson 1996, 35). An attempt can be made to prevent cultural biases if exhibitors provide context and sources within the exhibitions, for the visitors to be able to rearrange their pre-existing knowledge as is stated by Karp and Lavine (1991, 22-23). In addition exhibitors should be encouraging agents but still remain

cautious and shouldn't lecture about the Aztecs. They should set up the exhibition in a manner that will not be perceived as misleading in any way, this includes selection of the artefacts and the text chosen by the exhibitor for the label. This gives the museum visitors an opportunity to form their own opinion about the artefacts (Baxandall 1991, 41). In this way the exhibition is more between the Aztec makers of an artefact and the person viewing the object, which are the first and third agents according to Baxandall (1991, 36-37). With this approach the exhibitor and also second agent is only the intermediary who should be unbiased and not represent his own view onto the museum visitors, but let them form their own opinions. This way the public that is visiting these exhibitions will get a more complete picture of the Aztec world without any prejudices, which might help in breaking the chain of thought of the European biased view against civilisations that are the other to us, just as Mason pointed out with his concept of alterity or otherness (Mason 1990). If the above described methods work then perhaps next time the visitors will come out of the museum with less cultural biases.

### **7.3 The comparison**

As it appears the literature about Aztec human sacrifice seems to have become less prejudiced over time about the Aztecs and more considerate about the other aspects of the Aztec world such as their art, religious beliefs, and their intelligence. The museum exhibitions do not seem to be focused on Aztec human sacrifice when only looking at the catalogues with the artefacts, but when also taking the reviews of the shows into consideration it gives an entirely different impression. This shows how much impact the museums can have with the way the artefacts are displayed and the way the entire exhibition is set up and portrayed to the public. But just like the literature has differences so do the individual exhibitions. It was shown that the earliest Aztec exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts had more intent of highlighting the human sacrifices than the other two exhibitions.

Attempts have been made to contact the museums but unfortunately with no success. A downside is that the exhibitions could not be visited anymore as they already ended and no virtual versions were available. The reviews written about the show are still subjective opinions of a journalist.

## 8. Conclusion

To conclude this thesis the research question will be answered; What is the discourse on Aztec human sacrifices from the Late Post classic period in the Valley of Mexico and does it coincide with the contemporary Aztec museum exhibitions? To answer this question background information about the Aztec culture was given followed by a chapter regarding the literature on Aztec human sacrifice through time, which was used to highlight sixteenth century chronicles and more recent literature and was corroborated by archaeological findings of sacrificial remains at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City in the next chapter. Then in chapter six three museum exhibitions were highlighted. Chapter four and six were discussed in chapter seven using the theoretical framework from chapter two to see how the literature and museum exhibitions are portrayed and consequently a comparison was made.

The discourse on Aztec human sacrifices through time reveals a change in perspective of the author. The basic information regarding Aztec human sacrifices remains the same, because the same sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth century are used. As time passed the literature seemed less biased and showed more awareness of factors that should be considered when writing about human sacrifices. The sixteenth century chronicles, with a focus on book II of Sahagun's *Florentine Codex*, were especially focused on Aztec human sacrifices and were detailed descriptions compared to the recent literature that was written with a more emic approach and attempt of the authors to view the human sacrifices in the context of the Aztec culture.

The museum exhibitions also reveal a slight change in time. The first chosen exhibition 'Aztecs' at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2002/2003 was most focused on the human sacrifices which is shown in the amount of artefacts that pertain to the ritual of sacrifice, which is approximately thirteen percent in combination with the negative reviews that were written about the show. The exhibition 'Moctezuma: Aztec ruler' at the British Museum in 2009/2010 was slightly less focused on human sacrifices when looking at the

artefacts, but the exhibition did receive negative reviews and the Aztecs were even compared to the Nazis. 'The Aztec Empire' at the Guggenheim museum in New York in 2004/2005 was clearly least of all focused on human sacrifice, with less than five percent, as is shown as well in the amount of sacrificial artefacts displayed in the exhibitions. In addition the reviews were the least negative with even some positive remarks. Thus all three museum exhibitions do not appear to be extremely focused when only considering the catalogues of the artefacts used in their shows. Nevertheless the reviews regarding all three exhibitions remain mostly negative and aim their attention at the Aztec human sacrifices. This can be explained by the overall representation and imagery of the Aztec culture. As we have seen it is a combination of factors why the Aztecs remain to be seen in a negative light. The Spanish sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth century have created an image of the Aztecs that is negative. It is regarding the human sacrifices and that image is still imbedded in the mind-set of the current society and it is difficult to escape from. Other factors that were influenced by this and contribute to this image besides literature are television documentaries and movies, education, and representation of the Aztecs in museum exhibitions. The manner the Aztec exhibitions were set up and portrayed to the public is perceived as negative and this is because the visitors and journalists are also influenced by the aforementioned factors. Therefore it can be concluded the discourse on Aztec human sacrifice and the contemporary chosen museum exhibitions do not entirely coincide. It is certainly possible to come up with alternative views of human sacrifice, and not the general view of a bloody and barbaric civilisation that kills, as long as it is approached with an unbiased perspective and the context is taken into consideration. The museums could apply the methods of representation from the theoretical framework.

More research should be conducted in order to be able to comprehend the issues surrounding representation of the Aztec culture. Statements of the museums should be taken into consideration as well as the different forms of media.

## **9. Summaries**

### **9.1 Summary**

The goal of this bachelor thesis is to answer the research question;

What is the discourse on Aztec human sacrifices from the Late Post classic period in the Valley of Mexico and does it coincide with the contemporary Aztec museum exhibitions?

Sixteenth century chronicles, mainly Sahagun's, were used and more recent literature. Three museum exhibitions were chosen; two from London and one from New York. The research showed that in time the authors of the literature became more considerate and less prejudiced towards the Aztec culture and placed the human sacrifice in more proper context, even though all sources originated from the sixteenth and seventeenth century chronicles. The three recent museum exhibitions did not display many artefacts that pertain to the sacrificial ritual but reviews concerning the show were nevertheless negative, which is the result of several factors including literature, media, education, and methods of display of the Aztec museum exhibitions. This information led to the conclusion that the discourse on Aztec human sacrifices does not entirely coincide with the chosen recent museum exhibitions.

## 9.2 Summary in Dutch

Het doel van deze bachelor scriptie is om de volgende onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden;

Wat is het discours met betrekking tot de Azteekse mensenoffers uit de Laat Post klassieke periode in de Vallei van Mexico en is het congruent met de hedendaagse Azteekse museum voorstellingen?

Kronieken uit de zestiende eeuw, voornamelijk die van Sahagun, zijn hiervoor gebruikt en meer recente literatuur. Drie museum voorstellingen zijn uitgekozen; twee uit Londen en één uit New York. Het onderzoek heeft getoond dat na verloop van tijd de auteurs van de literatuur attenter en minder bevooroordeeld waren tegenover de Azteekse cultuur en plaatsten de mensenoffers vaker in de juiste context. Hoewel alle bronnen uit zestiende en zeventiende eeuw kwamen. De drie recente museum voorstellingen toonden niet veel artefacten die te maken hadden met de rituele offers, maar alsnog waren de recensies negatief. Dit komt door verschillende factoren waaronder literatuur, media, educatie, en de manier waarop de Azteken worden gerepresenteerd in musea. Deze informatie heeft tot de conclusie geleid dat het discours met betrekking tot Azteekse mensenoffers niet congruent is met de hedendaagse museum voorstellingen.

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[www.guardian.co.uk/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2009/sep/23/museums-exhibition?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487](http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2009/sep/23/museums-exhibition?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487)

[www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org)

[www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/moctezuma-aztec-ruler-british-museum-london-1793707.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/moctezuma-aztec-ruler-british-museum-london-1793707.html)

All websites were viewed on April the twenty-fourth of 2012.

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