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Diego Romero April 14, 2020

Feathered Empire: Avian Value in Culture and Economics Before and After the Conquest of Mexico

by

Diego Romero

Dr. Yanna Yannakakis
Adviser

History Department

Dr. Yanna Yannakakis

Adviser

Dr. Adriana Chira

Committee Member

Dr. Megan O'Neil

Committee Member

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Diego Romero

Dr. Yanna Yannakakis

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Abstract

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By Diego Romero

Feathers served as a predominant symbol of Mesoamerican culture well before the invasion of Europeans. This symbology had many facets emphasized by the Nahua peoples of Mesoamerica, but nowhere was it more pronounced than in the Mexica Empire. Feathers were objects associated with almost every sphere of life, from spirituality to social status, gender, and even military service. Feathers carried strong cultural connotations that signified social rank, connected human beings to the sacred, and motivated warfare. Nothing made this more apparent than the feather artwork of the *amantecas* (featherworkers), whose artistic style continued throughout the sixteenth century. After the Spanish conquest, indigenous peoples adapted feather symbology to new Christian imagery, with a pronounced shift from feathers as a marker of personal identification to markers of institutional identification. Feathers held a unique place within the Mexica tributary system and the Spanish colonial economy, and their meaning legitimized empire before and after the conquest of Mexico. Four primary sources serve as the pillars of this study: *The Florentine Codex*, *Matrícula de Tributos*, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*. I engage in comparative textual analysis of these sources, relating the information I found about feathers to additional information in the secondary literature, as well as to Christian feather paintings from the colonial period. I use these sources to trace the changing economic and cultural values of feathers in the Mexica and Spanish empires.

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Introduction

In Central Mexico, the Mexica were the dominant force at the start of the 16th century. They attained this position by using military conquest to subjugate their neighbors, an act spurred on by their imperial cult – that of Huitzilopochtli, their god of war. This subjugation was done in the name of the collection of human sacrifices, and the maintenance of a spiritual economy of souls given to the gods in conjunction with the real pressures and needs of the three city states that made up the Mexica Triple Alliance.[1] The Mexica demanded from each altepetl that they defeated a wide variety of goods, which reinforced their dominance and produced a vast tributary economy. While a great variety of natural and artisanal goods were vital to the tributary economy, feathers enjoyed a privileged position as spiritually-significant items of tribute. Feathers were a luxury component of the Mexica material culture, prized for their color and iridescence. Feathers were used in a wide variety of products, including clothing, symbols of office, shields, art, and ritual objects. The most prized feathers were those of the quetzal, a bird native to what is modern Guatemala, far away from the Mexica Triple Alliance's base of operations. Through conquest and subjugation, the Mexica were able to establish a steady supply of feathers for all of these products, which in turn reflected core facets of Mexica imperial identity.[2]

This study examines feathers as a component of Mexica material culture before and after the Spanish conquest. Feathers played a pivotal role in many parts of Mexica culture, most notably as symbols of power, spirituality, and masculinity. They had a strong connotation to the Mexica Empire's militaristic drive and ideologies, and were a central component of the tributary

[1] Philip P. Arnold, *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 16.
[2] *Pharomacrus mocinno.* "Trogons." *Firefly Encyclopedia of Birds*, ed. Chris Perrins, (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 2003), 362-363.

economy. In the colonial era, feathers remained a central part of Mexica symbology, but Mesoamerican peoples adapted their meaning as a result of Christian missionaries imposing a new spiritual order, a process which took longer for feathers than it did with resources such as cacao and cochineal. Mesoamerican peoples' struggle to survive underneath the foot of conversion invested feathers with new meaning, transforming them into an exploited resource precisely for their blend of European and Mesoamerican artistic styles. In particular, there was a marked transition between feathers as a personal symbol to feathers as an institutional symbol, reflecting the change of power structures such as the church and nobility that occurred after the conquest, retaining their role in the legitimization of rule. This research argues that feathers remained a pivotal aspect of Mexica identity because of their scarcity, their beauty, and their connections to pre-Hispanic worldviews about masculinity and conflict.

Four primary sources serve as the pillars of this study. I engaged in comparative textual analysis of these sources, relating the information I found about feathers to additional information in the secondary literature. I began with the *Florentine Codex*, a comprehensive compendium of all the things of the Mexica Empire from social structure and religion to medicine and professions. The Codex was produced between the years 1545 and 1590 through the oversight of the Franciscan Friar Bernardino de Sahagún. Although Sahagún compiled and edited the work, the principal authors of the document were native Nahuas. It was made with the intent of aiding the conversion efforts of the friars in Mexico, identifying the sources of perceived idolatry to facilitate the spread of Christianity.[3] Mexica nobility provided their own

[3] Jeanette Favrot Peterson and Kevin Terraciano, *The Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of the Nahua World in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 8-9.

accounts in Nahuatl alongside the Spanish text, as well as pictographic art influenced by both the Mexica and European style.[4]

The *Matrícula de Tributos* is another key primary source relative to the pre-conquest Mexica empire. It was created after the Spanish occupation of Tenochtitlan and Central Mexico (sometime between 1522 and 1530) with the intent of elaborating the complex tribute system already in place before their arrival so that the Spanish could have a stronger understanding of it and capitalize upon the infrastructure already in place. It was based on documents known to have existed prior, but these documents were lost.[5] It provides a thorough glimpse at the tributary economic structures in place before the invasion of the Spanish. Each page describes the exact tribute required from each region, item by item. It was also significant in that it served as a source for the tributary record of the Codex Mendoza, however it should be noted that the Codex Mendoza includes records for regions not included in the *Matrícula,* suggesting that the latter may be somewhat incomplete.[6]

The Tlaxcalan Actas, a compendium of records from the cabildo of Tlaxcala, provides important information regarding Spanish colonial administration in the indigenous city of Tlaxcala. Importantly, it includes records of church decrees, most notably a document from 1550 that shows how the Catholic Church appropriated the imagery of feathers by keeping them as part of the litter of the Cross while prohibiting worshippers from dancing with them or otherwise

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[4] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950).

[5] Ferdinand Anders, Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen, Luis Reyes García, Jansen, Remco, and Museo Nacional De Antropología. *Matrícula De Tributos, O, Códice De Moctezuma: Manuscrito 35-52,* (Mexico City: Fondo De Cultura Económica, 1997).

[6] Frances F. Berdan, and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1997).

removing them.[7] This marks a shift from the personal aspect of feathers beforehand to the institutional aspect they would take on.

The final primary source this study relies upon is the account of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*.[8] Díaz, who served as a footsoldier in Cortés' band, wrote an encompassing retrospective account of the events that led to the establishment of the viceroyalty of New Spain. The book was written while he was an old man, in 1576, long after the events in question. Although the conquest took place at the start of the century, this retrospective look provides a nuanced view through a late sixteenth century lens. Bernal Díaz was a common man with little education, and as such was not informed about a great many things. That said, the fact that he was a common man meant that he was also free of the authorial biases which were prevalent in the writings of people like CortesCortés or the missionaries, lending a frank perspective to his narrative. However, he was also living in poverty in Guatemala at the time of its writing, so it should be noted that he wrote to make a case for material reward for his deeds, echoing the *relaciones de méritos y servicios* written by Cortés and other conquistadors. He wrote with admiration of CortesCortés, as well as of the Mexica, and highlighted Spanish imperial intentions. Of course, much of this is sanitized, especially with regards to spirituality, including the claim made by Cortés to the Mexica that the Spanish had come to abolish the practice of ritual human sacrifice. Because of the Spanish interest in gold, Díaz pays close attention to Mexica material culture, especially luxury items.

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[7] "Don't Dance with the Feathers." In *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545-1627*, eds. Lockhart, James., Frances F. Berdan, and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1986), 71.

[8] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico,* trans. A.P. Maudslay (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003).

Section 0. Historiography

Feathers played an important role as a luxury resource that served in the imperial expansion of the Mexica. As has already been demonstrated by historians, feathers served as a fairly central component of Mexica art and culture, and given the system of tributes employed by the Triple Alliance it is clear that their acquisition was a significant incentive for the expansion of their sphere of influence. It is well known that featherworking was a profession made specifically to cater to the ruling class. In *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico,* Manuel Portilla writes;

> "featherwork produced during pre-Hispanic times was related to the importance of the persons for whom it was destined, like royal capes and mantles, plumes and headdresses, as well as other decorations made especially for the arms and legs. Aztec emperors were accompanied by servants who would carry and then yield to their masters the large feather fans, or fly whisks, and the feather ceremonial shields."[9]

The historiography of the Mexica economy, both before and after the colonial period, has long been focused on the comparative analysis of economic systems before and after the conquest. Frederick Hicks argues that the manufacture of basic cloth textiles was a viable economic market on a large scale in the pre-colonial period, while luxury textiles would have been nonviable unless confined to the elite sphere. Despite being entirely different goods than feathers, this and other types of evidence suggest that complex systems were in place for the production of artisan crafts, and that these systems were themselves internally successful and profitable.[10] Hicks particularly argues that the production of such luxury goods was a sustainable profession in the Lake Texcoco region and its subject communities. Similarly, Marcy Norton

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[9] Manuel Cortina Portilla, "Introduction," in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico,* by Teresa C. Yturbide (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, 1993), 20.
[10] Frederic Hicks, "Cloth in the Political Economy of the Aztec State." In *Economies and Polities in the Aztec Realm*, ed. Mary G. Hodge and Michael E. Smith (Albany, NY: University of Texas Press, 1994), 89-111.

examines the use of tobacco and chocolate as currency and luxuries both before and after the invasion of the Spanish. Norton focuses at length on the larger scale of this economic trade, specifically engaging with how the Spanish these organic resources that had spiritual significance in their original use, and how these resources were modified for consumption by Europeans both in Spain and its neighbors, as part of the colonial mercantile economy.[11]

Philip Arnold's research brings together economics and spirituality, examining the manner in which the people of the Basin of Mexico used their natural resources as a means to construct a spiritual identity. Through a thorough examination of the themes of cosmology in the Nahua world, focusing upon the god Tlaloc and the use of various materials within the rituals dedicated to this deity and their domain, Arnold demonstrates the ways in which physical materials impact a culture. His research focuses upon the intersection between the physical world and the spiritual, often facilitated by resources which carry a strong visual or thematic connection between the two. Feathers served most notably in these rituals as adornments to the vestments worn by those participating. Arnold spends some time discussing one ritual of child sacrifice in which the child wears effigies in the shapes of corn tassels or corn flowers made out of quetzal feathers, which served as symbols for fertility and as offerings for bountiful harvests, or else in headdresses assigning them a temporary nobility until their death.[12] Arnold demonstrates that the environment and material resources of Central Mexico were uniquely pivotal in establishing concepts of the universe, fate, and the role of the individual in it.

Spirituality was thus something tied deeply to the figures of deities, and their symbolic connotations. Alfredo López Austin examines the various facets of Nahua spirituality in great

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[11] Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008).
[12] Philip P. Arnold, *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 84, 89.

detail, focusing upon Quetzalcoatl, both as a historical figure and as a spiritual deity. Quetzalcoatl's representation as a feathered serpent, and the deity's name, which is etymologically related the quetzal bird, highlights the cultural value of feathers. In effect, the serpent's feathers served as symbols for the deity in the corporeal world, and to adorn oneself with these feathers brought the wearer closer to the godliness associated with Quetzalcoatl. This created a connection between the human historical figure and the deity of the feathered serpent, which persisted throughout the pre-colonial era.[13]

Clothing as a key symbol tied to rank has been the subject of debate for historians of Mesoamerica. Justyna Olko analyzes costumes of different ranks of people – especially those in positions of power – within the Nahua societies that existed in Central Mexico in this period. This work zeroes in on the exact details of the components of dress and the value of each of these components as symbols for power. Olko focuses deeply upon the value of symbols of station, including the use of feathers in costume and symbols of status such as staffs and fans. She examines pictographic evidence from the codices to produce a vast catalogue of both the physical description of clothing and the symbolic significance of each article. She argues that the various sartorial insignia were an integral part of Mesoamerican culture throughout the sixteenth century. She also argues that the Mexica especially showed claims to an unbroken heritage from the earlier great civilizations of Mesoamerica, and that these claims persisted even into the colonial period.[14]

One of the most common uses of feathers in costume besides use as symbols of authority (politically or spiritually) was in the production of military costumes. Within the militaristic

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[13] Alfredo López Austin, *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl: Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World, trans.* Russ Davidson and Guilhem Olivier, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 42.
[14] Justyna Olko, *Insignia of Rank in the Nahua World: From the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2014).

practice of the Mexica, feathered costume served to reinforce the conquering agenda and proof of the capacity to act upon it. Military conquest was foundational to the Mexica empire, as Inga Clendinnen has written regarding the relationship between ideals of masculinity and the military structures and narrative themes of the Mexica, and argues that these were deeply intertwined with their cosmological worldview.[15] Berdan also examines the role of the military and warrior caste within the society of the Mexica in great detail, and argues primarily against common stereotypes of the pre-hispanic Mexica as uncultured or technologically and societally inferior to the Europeans, using a variety of sources to illustrate the complexity of their society and the way military conquest motivated economic expansion.[16]

The relationship of military and cultural expansion to socioeconomics is a common theme in the historiography of the Mexica Empire. Ross Hassig's work has focused primarily upon this military industry that was so pivotal to Mexica dominance. Hassig has been influential in understanding the tributary system, as he asserts that the Mexica empire was one built upon hegemonic systems rather than territorial ones. These systems were meant to leave regions largely under local control but kept in subservience through threat of force, rather than the supplanting of local government with a singular imperial one. Hassig argues that the Mexica style of conquest through subjugation and tribute was successful in its goal of extensive reach in political power, but suffered from the loose control it was able to exert as well as its technological constraints, which limited the geographic scale of the empire. Hassig notes that the Triple Alliance was fraught with internal power struggles as well as external rebellions, which necessitated the use of armed force more often than desired.[17] This question of statecraft,

[15] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[16] Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (Toronto, Canada: Wadsworth, 2005).
[17] Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 26.

alliance-making, and politics has also been the focus of Camilla Townsend's work, which has argued for the complex and interwoven nature of Mexica empire-building, especially in its relation to the Spanish invasion, and well into the colonial period.[18]

In order to fully understand the nature of feathered craft, however, the physical artifacts must be examined. Given the inaccessibility of many of them, *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* and *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico* bring together essays about the meaning and history behind feather art alongside images of museum specimens of feather artefacts kept in collections around the world. This is more consistent with work done in the field of art history, but nevertheless provides information that can be incorporated into historical research. Alessandra Russo, whose extensive work on the feather paintings of Mesoamerica, contributes important interdisciplinary perspectives.[19] Her research interprets many of these important feather paintings, cataloguing their use across time within the Spanish Empire. The most important of these for my study is the Crucifixion Triptych, which depicts the crucifixion of Jesus Christ produced by native featherworkers. The triptych demonstrates a strong continuity with past feather symbology.[20]

The historiography of the Spanish colonial period has long been focused on the imperial agenda of economic resource extraction employed by the Spanish. Norton argues that this agenda showed an intersection between the economic and spiritual agendas at play as well, as evidenced through her examinations of cacao and tobacco.[21] Gibson tracks and argues for the transition of

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[18] Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico,* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).
[19] Alessandra Russo, "A Contemporary Art from New Spain," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 23-63.
[20] Pascal Mongne, "The Crozier and the Feather: The Crucifixion Triptych in the Musèe National de la Renaissance, Ecouen," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 282-289.
[21] Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

the Mexica from a dominant power to a subservient status beneath the Spanish, and his work greatly focuses upon the economic aspect of this. He also compares the transition for the Mexica to that experienced in Tlaxcala, contrasting the two and showing that Tlaxcala was a much more privileged region under Spanish colonialism than Tenochtitlan.[22] This economic transformation of the region has been tracked by many historians, well into the eighteenth century, showing the effects of Spanish resource extraction in Mesoamerica.[23]

This study's contribution to the historiography is an analysis of the Mexica's mode of expansion, motivated by religious iconography as much as economic extraction, and how that imperial model was transformed by the Spanish conquest. Through the comparison of the economic, spiritual, and political realms, I reconstruct the Mexica's unique, indigenous form of empire. The historiography shows that by virtue of their strong symbolic value, colorful feathers served as one of the motivators for pre-colonial Mexica warfare, and were a cornerstone of the Mexica imperial system. After the conquest, their symbolic importance persisted into the colonial era as Nahua people adapted them as a symbol to cohere with Christian ideology, despite initial resistance by missionaries. In the end feathers came to symbolize not only Mexica ideologies and cultural touchstones, but also the Spanish Empire's expanse and missionary enterprise.

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[22] Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).
Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).
[23] Brian R. Hamnett, *Politics and Trade in Southern Mexico 1750-1821* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
John R. Fisher, *The Economic Aspects of Spanish Imperialism in America* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1997).

Section I. Pre-Conquest Mexica Economics

The Mexica Empire was not an empire along the lines of that of Rome, the primary point of reference for early modern Europeans, but rather something akin to an imperial system by virtue of its economic networks.[24] While other empires have been built through the establishment of a group identity (such as the citizenship of ancient Rome or the later trends of nationalism), the Mexica's was built through the establishment of a dominator-subordinate relationship between themselves and the other *altepeme* around them. By militarily subjugating an altepetl, the Mexica were able to transition into a position of privilege relative to them, drawing payment in the form of resources and products as a manner of tribute. This system of tributary exchange was how the Mexica came to dominate the Mesoamerican world, as it enabled a feedback loop. The Mexica had some of the most skilled warriors in Mesoamerica from their earliest settlement. They would conquer an altepetl, whose resources enabled the production of even finer warriors through access to more labor and material, enabling the Mexica to conquer regions even further away, and so on. A consequence of this system was not only the improved military power of the Mexica as it expanded, but also the increased influx of luxury resources which served to make Tenochtitlan rich beyond its peers.[25]

This hegemonic system was not without its flaws. Because the Mexica did not supplant the leaders of conquered altepeme with their own people, they were only able to exert a loose degree of control over those areas. Control was largely accomplished through the threat of

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[24] Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 18-19; John M.D. Pohl and Claire L. Lyons, *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire,* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2010), 31-39. Sabine MacCormack, *On the Wings of Time: Rome, the Incas, Spain, and Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 5-9.

[25] Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (Toronto, Canada: Wadsworth, 2005), 20-50.

military force rather than its actual application, as armies were usually either kept at home or else on campaign elsewhere and not stationed in conquered regions. As a result, the possibility of rebellion was a persistent concern of the Mexica rulers, as any given altepetl weighed the cost of economic tribute against the benefit of not being engaged in war with the Mexica, who were highly skilled warriors. While the threat of rebellion was real, the Mexica were not overly concerned, as their armies, when forced to, were fully capable of exerting their authority wherever and whenever necessary. The end result was that many altepeme maintained their tributary status for as long as they were weaker than the Mexica's armies. The Mexica also used psychological means to expand their influence. Whenever a victory was won, they sent messengers through their territory to spread the news, which convinced other altepeme to submit without military conflict.[26]

This therefore came to define the structure of the Mexica Empire, such as it was. A polity can act either through force or power, the former referring to the capacity to enact one's will physically through military means, and the latter referring to the capacity to demand something be done by others.[27] When comparing the Mexica definition of "empire" to the Spanish one, the immediate disparity is that the Mexica polity was much more dependent upon power, whereas the Spanish were more dependent upon force. For much of the Mexica's history, this remained the case. It was not until the reigns of Ahuizotl and Moctezuma Xocoyotzinthat that this trend began to shift towards a greater emphasis on direct control as one would expect of a force-oriented empire.[28] In this regard, the Mexica and European models of empire were not the same. Due to the wide range of Mexica influence, as well as the military nature of their expansion, it is

[26] Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare,* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 18-22.
[27] Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare,* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 18-19.
[28] Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 72-83.

simpler to refer to the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan as the Mexica Empire.

The *Matrícula de Tributos* elucidates the Mexica tributary system dramatically. The records are thorough and exhaustive in their detail, and very quickly make apparent the overwhelming demands for three goods: cacao beans, maize, and armor. Also present were feathers, but it should be made clear that the document shows feathers were only a component of this much larger tribute economy. Much more fundamental materials made the bulk of tributes, such as food like maize, clothing, and materials such as stone and lumber, all alongside such luxuries as cacao, tapestries, and feathers themselves.[29]

Cacao and maize were, respectively, mainstays of the political power and diet of the Nahua people, and as such their inclusion is to be expected.[30] As a military power, the demand for armor should not be a surprise either, however, we should consider the types of armor demanded, for these were often quite varied. Usually, there was a demand for (often in batches of twenty or forty) armors for soldiers and warriors of the more typical variety[31]. However, Mexica rulers demanded more specialized armors, including: a single set of armor for *ocelomeh* warriors (commonly referred to as jaguar warriors) demanded of any given region.[32] They also

[29] Ferdinand Anders, Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen, Luis Reyes García, Jansen, Remco, and Museo Nacional De Antropología. *Matrícula De Tributos, O, Códice De Moctezuma: Manuscrito 35-52,* (Mexico City: Fondo De Cultura Económica, 1997),139-141 .
[30] Multiple sources corroborate the cacao was an accepted form of currency within Mexica-controlled lands. Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (Toronto, Canada: Wadsworth, 2005), 49. Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 16.
[31] Referring to standard, commoner foot soldiers.
[32] Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 45.

required ceremonial armors, such as for tlatoani or priests, and every set of armor came with a matching shield, equally adorned with valuable feathers.[33]

Clothing production was an important part of the Mesoamerican peasant economy, and many families produced their own cloaks both for personal use and trade. Frederick Hicks' thorough examination of the economics and time invested in cloak production found that weaving a skirt could take between five and eight days, a huipil (a commoner women's garment) between five and seven, and a sash for a shirt about three.[34] In brief, the production of even relatively simple garments took a considerable amount of time and resources both human and material, let alone the investment that must have been involved in the creation of something as complex and ornate as the armor worn by elite forces such as the ocelomeh or *cuacuauhtin* (also known as eagle warriors).[35] Furthermore, featherworking was done by a specific artisanal caste, not the common peasantry as a household craft. This additional socioeconomic layer suggests that there must have been an additional level of difficulty and labor required of featherworkers on top of the investment necessary for cloth production.[36] Justyna Olko's analysis suggests that these armors may have been patterned entirely with feathers, as she describes the ocelomeh as "an enclosing costume with an animal head topped by a quetzal-feather crest. Although it is illustrated in several color varieties in tribute lists, the only recorded Nahuatl term for this battle gear is simply ocelomeh. However, its appearance in different colors implies that these suits, or

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[33] Ferdinand Anders, Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen, Luis Reyes García, Jansen, Remco, and Museo Nacional De Antropología. *Matrícula De Tributos, O, Códice De Moctezuma: Manuscrito 35-52,* (Mexico City: Fondo De Cultura Económica, 1997), 139-141.
[34] Frederic Hicks, "Cloth in the Political Economy of the Aztec State." In *Economies and Polities in the Aztec Realm*, ed. Mary G. Hodge and Michael E. Smith (Albany, NY: University of Texas Press, 1994), 94.
[35] Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 45.
[36] Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (Toronto, Canada: Wadsworth, 2005) 32-33.

at least some of them, were made of feathers rather than of actual jaguar skins."[37] The complexity of such costumes demanded a high degree of skill and technical fidelity from the craftsman, which when paired with analyses of cloth textile production suggests a significant number of person-hours required for the production of even one such set of armor.

Despite the fact that all of these regions produced armor for tribute, which necessitated the harvesting of feathers, very few of them were actually taxed for feathers themselves. According to the Matrícula, the altepeme which produced feathers as tribute tended to be those regions more distal to the Triple Alliance and Lake Texcoco, and of these, the province of Xoconochco was the furthest from the imperial center. This province was located in modern Soconusco, in the Mexican state of Chiapas, along the border of Guatemala. Lush and tropical, Xoconochco was disembodied from the main realm of influence of the Mexica empire, a vast stretch of territory referred to as the Path to Xoconochco cutting through Zapotec and Mixtec territories and connecting it to Oaxaca. This region is noteworthy because there was absolutely no demand for armor manufacture whatsoever from any of the altepeme in the province, and at the same time was an incredibly high demand for feathers. For each tribute payment, Xoconochco had to produce the following; four hundred bunches of feathers of the xiuhtototl (also referred to as the turquoise-bird or lovely cotinga), four hundred bunches of feathers of the tlauhquechol (American Flamingo), four hundred bunches of green feathers, four hundred bunches of yellow feathers, four hundred bunches of Quetzal feathers, eighty live tzinitzcan (mountain trogon), one amber bezote (a type of labial ring worn by the Nahua), twenty jaguar

[37] Justyna Olko, *Insignia of Rank in the Nahua World: From the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century,* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2014), 113.

pelts, one hundred loads of cacao, one piece of amber, and four hundred tecomates (dry, hollow gourds used as a bowl or vessel).[38]

This tribute was collected bi-annually, first in the second month of Ehecatl for the festival Tlacaxipeualiztli, the festival of Xipe-Totec (the Flayed One), followed by a tribute in the month ochpaniztli, or the monkey month, which was the eleventh month of the Nahua calendar and the opening month of the second half of the calendar year. Xipe-Totec was a god of agriculture, disease, and gold and silver-smithing. The festival in question involved the flaying of slaves and wearing their skins through the streets, and is a complicated ritual with multiple performative steps. These human hides were adorned with feathers and golden jewelry and worn by celebrant warriors.[39] The first tribute was collected from the altepeme of Mapachtepec, Huiztlan, Coyoacan, and Mazatlan, while the second was collected from the remaining altepetl of Xoconochco, Ayotlan, Acapetlaua, and Huehuetlan. Given that the calendrical system of the Nahua had thirteen-day months, we can thus gather that there were about one hundred and seventeen days between tributes for the province of Xoconochco to produce the material demanded. Given this high demand for armor (a logical expectation given the strategy of military dominance employed by the Mexica), and given that much of that armor required some degree of featherworking, it can be reasoned that even in the provinces from which feathers were not demanded, feathers played a crucial role in the tributary process. Provinces were left to their own devices in the acquisition of feathers, harvesting them from local wildlife or through direct trade with neighboring provinces.[40] The majority of regions who provided armor as tribute were those

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[38] Ferdinand Anders, Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen, Luis Reyes García, Jansen, Remco, and Museo Nacional De Antropología. *Matrícula De Tributos, O, Códice De Moctezuma: Manuscrito 35-52,* (Mexico City: Fondo De Cultura Económica, 1997), 139-141.
[39] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 232.
[40] Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (Toronto, Canada: Wadsworth, 2005) 32-33, 40-47.

closer to the Mexica heartland of Lake Texcoco, with more remote regions, such as Xoconochco or the Pacific Coast, providing tribute in other forms such as cacao, cloth textiles, and feathers.[41]

Most of the armament tribute collected by the Mexica was pulled from the provinces closest to Tenochtitlan, which may be for multiple reasons. It may be for the immediate ease of access and control from the seat of power itself, or it may have been ecological – the populations of birds may have just been high enough in this tropical heartland that they could support the harvest of feathers on such a scale. However, more exotic birds, such as quetzals and roseate spoonbills, would have required expansion from this heartland in order to acquire their feathers. Xoconochco was also exempt from the tribute of armor for reasons opposite from the other provinces. As the source of so many valuable bird feathers, and so distant from the empire's core provinces, it makes sense that Xoconochco was valued more for its raw resources than for any goods it could produce on its own.

It is likely that these natural resources were a primary motivation in the conquest of Xoconochco. Ahuizotl conquered the region in 1486 with an army purported to be two thousand strong, and from that point it remained a tributary of Tenochtitlan. However, Xoconochco was a particularly troublesome region, with insurrections forming frequently until Moctezuma Xocoyotzin raised another army and led a series of military expeditions to resubjugate it and to quell the resistance forces that regularly appeared throughout 1502 through 1505. [42] The appearance of these rebellions suggests not only that the residents of the region were opposed to

[41] Ferdinand Anders, Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen, Luis Reyes García, Jansen, Remco, and Museo Nacional De Antropología. *Matrícula De Tributos, O, Códice De Moctezuma: Manuscrito 35-52,* (Mexico City: Fondo De Cultura Económica, 1997), 139-141.
[42] Marco Antonio Pérez de Los Reyes, "El Soconusco y su Mexicanidad," *Jurídicas, no. 12 (1980): 473-500,* https://revistas-colaboracion.juridicas.unam.mx/index.php/juridica/article/view/10865/9938

their Mexica overlords, but also that they understood the value of the resources they gathered for them, which supports the continuation of the theme that feathers drove Mesoamerican warfare.

The combination of economic value in the tribute provided by Xoconochco, as well as the distance it enjoyed from the Mexica heartlands of Lake Texcoco, meant that it was uniquely suited for rebellion. Even if these rebellions were not successful, they reveal the mentality pervasive throughout the culture of Mesoamerica and of the Mexica themselves – that struggle and conflict were the means to transcending oneself and one's environment. This concept would serve as a pillar of the Mexica perception of masculinity, which was rooted in the philosophy of conflict and deeply tied to the military philosophy of the Mexica.[43] Structurally, Xoconochco was oriented in such a way that rebellion against the Mexica was a likely outcome. Because feathers were a symbol of power and a symbol of masculinity, to be forced to collect feathers for another power and ship them off with the regularity of the Mexica tribute system was one form of deep submission. Parallel to the material resources taken in these wars were the human resources. In particular, multiple sources describe the role of the nobility of the captured warrior, whose masculinity was honored by his vanquisher before his sacrifice on the altar.[44] This loss of power demanded a response of equivalent magnitude, and as such the insurrections reported in the region were an obvious reaction against the perpetrators of such an act.

This cultural factor only served to compound the practical ones. While the campaign of Ahuizotl was certainly successful, it was not prolonged. The region in which Xoconochco and its neighbors was located was too far from the Mexica heartlands for an extensive and lengthy campaign to remain viable. Combined with pressures at home, it was impossible for Ahuizotl's armies to remain for long, a fact well known by the people of Xoconochco. With this in mind,

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[43] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 200-215.
[44] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 213-215.

the fear of retaliation was greatly diminished, and the possibility of successful rebellion proved increasingly probable up until the resubjugation by Moctezuma Xocoyotzin.[45]

Xoconochco's subjugation provides a strong case for the economic and cultural value of feathers, but the history of the conquest of a distant region is insufficient in proving that they were the motivation for the conquest itself. Despite the role of feathers in the tribute system of Xoconochco, it should be noted that it was not the only feather-producing region, simply one of the more important ones. So while it may seem that the Mexica had access to many different kinds of precious feathers from other regions of Mexico, the importance of the quetzal and the value of its tail feathers can be shown to have been a unique motivator in expansionary warfare compared to the feathers of local avian populations

The *Florentine Codex* demonstrates that the acquisition of this particularly precious feather was itself an end goal of the Mexica. Through its description of the history of the Mexica, it demonstrates that the acquisition of luxury resources, particularly feathers, was a dominant feature of Mexica conquest. In book 9, The Merchants, Sahagún and the indigenous authors include the testimonies of the merchants of the ward of Amantlan, a section of Tenochtitlan that was home to the featherworkers who served Moctezuma in the time before the Spanish invasion. They came from a lineage that predated even the Mexica in the region of Lake Texcoco, and who had been assimilated over the generations with the enveloping of their capulli into the altepetl of Tenochtitlan. They had their own distinct traditions which were observed, and enjoyed a status elevated above other laborers. In the *Florentine Codex*, they provide a thorough explanation of the entire featherworking process, as well as of the historical precedent for it. In particular, they

[45] Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 217-218.

explain how it developed from the early days of the Mexica on throughout their conquests, and, indeed, as a motivator for those very military expansions.

> "And it is said that before there were precious feathers with which the inhabitants of Amantlan could practice their craft, could decorate the objects, all they required were the common feathers, like those of the heron, and black bird feathers, and white bird feathers, and duck feathers. Only heron feathers corresponded to those of the quetzal; [with them] they made the forked heron feather device in which the winding dance was performed. They made feather balls of turkey breast feathers; for pendants they suspended duck feathers. And to cut them [they used] obsidian blades, which they applied against a bald cypress [board] on which they cut the feathers. But when the precious feathers came to appear, so it is told, it was later, in the time of the ruler Ahuizotl. Those who discovered them, who came upon them, were his noble travelers, his vanguard merchants, who had become trading merchants when first they penetrated the land of Anahuac."[46]

The featherworkers of Amantlan had honed their craft for a long time, as it was widespread in the region of Mesoamerica. There were other featherworkers in the region, of course, especially in the Mayan, Zapotec, and Tlaxcalan cultures. However, the featherworkers of the Amantlan – who came to be known as amantecas –were most impressive in their time, and set the standard for the Mexica empire. What set the Mexica apart was the vast expansion tied to that featherworking, not only in military conquest but in the honing of the craft itself. The rule of Ahuizotl, as elaborated by the merchants in Sahagún's codex, brought with it a great proliferation of precious feathers. It is made clear in Book 11 that the most prized feathers were those which were brightly colored and iridescent in sheen, and it is for this reason that those of the quetzal were so prized. It should come as no surprise, then, that the workers of Amantlan could measure the history of the empire through its acquisition of feathers, marking the use of quetzal feathers to the rise of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin:

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[46] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 9 – The Merchants," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 89-90.

> "And when finally the craft [of] feather design became important, it came to pass in the time of Moctezuma. For when he ruled, precisely when he was reigning, then quetzal feathers arrived, and all kinds of precious feathers. In just his time [this commerce] flourished. So he settled, he housed separately, those who were his feather workers, who pertained to him. He gave them a house of their own. The feather artisans of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco mingled with one another."[47]

This aligns with what has been concluded already about the occupation of Xoconochco. The artisans of Amantlan are recorded as noting that there was a great influx of precious feathers after the rise of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, signifying his successorship to Ahuizotl who conquered the region before him. This conclusion can be made safely given that there would have been a return to normalcy for the tributary system without the insurrection at play (and perhaps even an expansion upon it) meaning that feathers could flow much more freely and rapidly into Mexica lands.

Moctezuma's reign was marked by the expansion of several key institutions, and the concentration of the amantecas into the city of Tenochtitlan was one example of this. As successor to Ahuizotl, who had completed a large-scale series of successful military campaigns that saw a great expansion of the Mexica's sphere of influence, Moctezuma adopted policies to cement Mexica control. This was done through the establishment of a greater administrative presence in the many altepeme subject to the Triple Alliance, which reinforced the tributary system and ensured it worked with greater efficiency. Moctezuma's institution building was marked by the intertwining of state and religious power. He elevated the priestly class through standardization of the clerical institution. In effect, the reign of Moctezuma signaled an

[47] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 9 – The Merchants," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 91.

increasing shift from an imperial system built around power towards one built around force and religious ritual.[48]

Moctezuma's policies coincided with an increased demand for quetzal feathers. The quetzal feathers of the Xoconochco region were a prize won by Ahuizotl, but the work of the amantecas in Tenochtitlan was something brought about by Moctezuma's reforms. With this came an increased emphasis on the richest of feathers in all manner of accoutrements and art, made clear by the *Florentine Codex*'s "The Merchants": "when finally the craft [of] feather design became important, it came to pass in the time of Moctezuma." [49]

Sahagún may have over-emphasized the role of feathers in the *Florentine Codex* while de-emphasizing that of human sacrifice as a motive for Mexica military expansion in an effort to make Mexica culture more understandable and, indeed, more palatable to the European sensibility. While Sahagún attempted to make the peoples of Mesoamerica more consistently in-line with European ideas of civilization, the consistent appearance of feathers as markers of empire in the *Florentine Codex* demonstrates their importance. Nowhere is this clearer than when the work turns to the physical description of the birds themselves. While all sorts of feathers were prized, the special love for those of the quetzal is made very clear in the *Florentine Codex*. In Book 11, they are the first bird to be discussed at all, and much attention is paid to their plumage. The most valuable part of the bird to the featherworker, the long plumage of its tail, receives an artful description: "The tail of this one is black, dark. [These feathers] cover [and] underlie [the *quetzalli* feathers]. These are also green, glistening. [These feathers are] only

[48] Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 72-83.
[49] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 9 – The Merchants," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 91.

on the interior side. They are [rather] long, wide, smoky, blackish, sooty. They cover, they protect [the *quetzalli* feathers]; they become smoky, dark, green, glistening."[50]

There is an ephemeral quality that is emphasized in the description of these feathers. They are those which protect the shorter, more delicate plumage beneath them, yet they are described as smoky and glistening. This quality makes them seem almost supernatural, and continues many of the themes that are consistent throughout the Mexica worldview. Perishability, uncertainty, obfuscation were as deeply tied to concepts of warfare as they were to the nature of feathers as objects themselves. Just as feathers were wispy and delicate things, so too did warfare show how human life was much the same, tying the two together in the symbolism of the thin line between life and death. There were other foci of this symbolism as well, and the strongest of these was in the deity Tezcatlipoca, named the Lord of the Smoking Mirror. Tezcatlipoca was defined by the bringing together of opposite dualities, such as masculine and feminine, night and day, east and west. The smoking mirror worn on his chest or replacing his right foot was a symbol for the opposite aspect of the sun; it both reflected and obfuscated the sun's light. Tezcatlipoca was also depicted with an amputated foot, a violent image which connected the mirror to symbols of warfare. As with feathers, the symbolism of Tezcatlipoca and his mirror ties to concepts of war through the conflation of ideas: Tezcatlipoca represents the necessary oppositions of warfare and combat, while feathers (especially iridescent ones) represented the ephemerality of life, which was so deeply tied to all of Mexica culture.[51]

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[50] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 11 – Earthly Things," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 19.
[51] Guillhem Olivier, *Mockeries and Metamorphoses of an Aztec God: Tezcatlipoca, "Lord of the Smoking Mirror,"* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003), 262-265.

The Florentine Codex suggests that feathers were possessed objects rather than intrinsic objects. In descriptions of bird anatomy, feathers are represented as the bird's property rather than part of their integument. According to Book 11, "the property, the possession, which belongs to all the different birds and to turkeys is feathers. And those which appear on their heads, even the not precious, are called *tzinitzcan.* Those which appear on the head of [the quetzal] are called *quetzaltzinitzcan."*[52] It follows that if feathers can be owned by the bird upon which they grow, they can be taken and claimed by those who hunt them. This transfer of ownership is a microcosm of the greater Mexica themes of conflict and conquest, and in itself appears as an echo of the tributary economy the Mexica established. The consistency of this imagery with those not only of the *Florentine Codex* itself, but of the sources that surround it, suggests that even if Sahagún had exaggerated the role of feathers in Mexica conquest, there was still some degree of motivation related to them that was deeply tied to such campaigns. Thus it is safe to conclude that even accounting for authorial exaggeration, feathers were a strong motivator for Mexica military expansion.

There is one final note to consider in the *Florentine Codex* regarding featherworking's role in the larger machinations of the Mexica realm. Given the power of the symbol of feathers, especially in relation to conflict and the masculine ideal, one wonders what the economic creation of such socially powerful objects as symbols of station and military rank meant for the larger society. The end result of this was the manufacture of masculinity through the creation of symbols that propagated the power dynamics of the region. Evidence for this widespread ideal

[52] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 11 – Earthly Things," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 55.

comes in an excerpt describing the desires parents had for their children during one of Amantlan's feast days.

> "On this occasion the inhabitants of Amantlan pledged all their children as offerings. If it were a boy, one asked that he might serve as a priest, to grow up there in the priests' house, and that when he matured he would acquire understanding, artisanship. But if it were a girl, one asked that she might embroider well; might dye articles well; might tint rabbit fur; might tint well the varicolored rabbit furs wherever they were placed; or might dye feathers in varied colors; azure, yellow, rose red, light blue, black; [that] she might judge colors, so that she could work her feathers."[53]

Here we find that the role of women is also closely tied to the featherworking craft, which is consistent with findings in other fields. Hicks' analysis of the production of cloth textiles found that it was most often a familial (or at the very least, multi-person) process with a consistent workload for the women of the house. While the featherworkers of Amantlan held an especially elevated status even amongst other craftspeople who created luxury goods, their insular status as a calpulli suggests that they maintained strong familial ties to their work.[54] Does this mean that because of the role of women in the production of these masculine symbols, they were reduced in significance? This is unlikely. Women were involved with the creation of all manner of armor and shields just as much as they might be with specific feather-crafted items. Hicks suggests that the wealthier of the Mexica craftspeople may have even been able to employ much larger groups of people than the familial unit, which would only increase the likelihood of the feminine hand. Furthermore, duality was a key component of Mexica cultural symbolism, and was found in many aspects of life. This has already been demonstrated in the dualities of life and death, but it was equally demonstrated in dualities of male and female, two opposites which

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[53] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 9 – The Merchants," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 88.
[54] Frederic Hicks, "Cloth in the Political Economy of the Aztec State." In *Economies and Polities in the Aztec Realm*, ed. Mary G. Hodge and Michael E. Smith (Albany, NY: University of Texas Press, 1994), 103-104.

could not exist without the other.[55] As such the role of women in the production of masculine identity is an expected component. The central theme of conflict remains the focus of masculine identity, and the creation of these objects did not deny that in the slightest. So while there may be some question about exactly how the manufacture of masculine imagery may have affected the Mexica identity and power dynamics, there is no evidence to suggest that the desire for women to learn their place within that manufacture was unusual or unexpected.

In the face of all this, the body of evidence strongly suggests that the Mexica were a society unified by aesthetics and thematic imagery in which feathers played a central role. It is not only that feathers were beautiful things that were difficult to come by, nor only the spiritual connotations they carried, or the thematic implications of being adorned in feathers. It was not any one of these things, but rather it was their confluence that made them such potent icons of social power. Feathers represented physical symbols of many of the core beliefs of the Mexica, from the ever-present struggle and conflict, to masculinity, to spiritual transcendence, to physical dominance. Subjugation of other regions was something necessary to acquire such a wide variety of feathers, and the robust tributary economy put in place certified that there would never be a shortage of feathers again. Indeed, at the outset of the Spanish invasion, accounts like Bernal Díaz's noted just how beautiful the works of the Mexica were, how vast their dominion over the region was, and the abundance of feathers in dress and items.[56] Feathers were, to the Europeans, a sign of the sophistication of the Mexica society – but beyond anything else, they were the subtly flamboyant, omnipresent and crystalized realization of the very heart of Mexica ideals.

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[55] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 292-297.
[56] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico,* trans. A.P. Maudslay (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 197-254.

Section II. Military, Political, and Spiritual Uses of Feathers in Pre-Colonial Mexico

Feathers recurred as symbols throughout many facets of Mexica culture. They were attached to religious figures, with the deities of Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl both being depicted as feathered figures (a hummingbird and feathered serpent respectively). These were deities who held a degree of primacy in the Mexica religion specifically. The deity Quetzalcoatl was deeply tied to the history of the region, syncretized with the story of the man Quetzalcoatl (or sometimes Topiltzin) who was king of Tollan. The role of the deity in figures of authority remained a key component of Mexica culture, and established Quetzalcoatl's relationship to the people as a whole. López Austin writes, "his life, guided by a myth, was virtually the same as the life of others; and that his history, the history of many, was moved by the living force that moves all of history – a community of people, nameless and faceless, that is brought forth on earth."[57] The Mexica attributed Huitzilopochtli, the patron deity of Tenochtitlan itself, with the drive to expand through military subjugation, traceable back to the very origin myths of the Mexica themselves.[58] The hummingbird, as exemplar of Huitzilopochtli, was a particularly poignant image for both combat and the sun. Its maneuverability, bright, reflective feathers, and sharp beak combined aspects of the sun's brilliance and movement through the sky with prowess in battle.[59] Despite the fact that it was not a bird of prey, the hummingbird was attributed these aspects of combat by the Mexica, who likened their iridescent feathers to armor and their beaks to spears or arrowheads.[60]

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[57] Alfredo López Austin, *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl: Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World,* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2015), 195.
[58] Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (Toronto, Canada: Wadsworth, 2005), 5-6.
[59] Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Precolumbian Flora and Fauna: Continuity of Plant and Animal Themes in Mesoamerican Art* (San Diego, CA: Mingei International Museum, 1990), 20.
[60] Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Precolumbian Flora and Fauna: Continuity of Plant and Animal Themes in Mesoamerican Art* (San Diego, CA: Mingei International Museum, 1990), 20.

Mexica culture valorized skill in combat, which sat at the very heart of their imperial endeavors in a cultural and logistical sense. The ideals of warrior-hood were foundational to many aspects of life in Tenochtitlan and its tributaries, a result of the interwoven nature of warfare and spirituality. It was both the cause and the consequence of Mexica wars of conquest, and brought with it an entirely new dimension to the role of the military in imperial expansion. The Mexica had a well-documented modus operandi for the establishment of their control. They would raise an army, demand tribute from a neighboring altepetl, and if refused would wage war to subjugate it. After the altepetl was defeated, it became a tributary of the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan. Captives were taken for sacrifice to the gods, and the priesthood was an institution deeply tied to military accomplishments. These images – of warriors making battle against equal opponents, overcoming them, and conquering – were common motifs of Mexica culture. Evidence of them can be found in sources as widespread as songs, games, and religious rituals. Inga Clendinnen writes,

> "what compelled the Mexica imagination were the men who were prepared to play the end game, to accept and embrace that final ritual of violent death. An imperishable glamour attended those warriors who vowed never to turn their backs in battle... If 'the warrior ideal' animated social ambition as the way to 'honour, flowers, tobacco,' local wealth, and local prestige… it also indissolubly linked the social and the human to the sacred in the person of the great warrior."[61]

Conflict was a distinctly male aspect of Mexica society and represented two things, the fluidity of one's station, providing one with a means to both ascend and fall in social rank, and the ability to attain a degree of spiritual power that Clendinnen coins the 'Cult of the Warrior.' This was made most obvious through the splendor of the armor and shields carried by Mexica warriors, especially those of higher rank, such as the ocelomeh or cuacuauhtin. These were brightly plumed with feathers, intricately woven into them or glued by featherworkers.

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[61] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 212.

The cult of the warrior produced a very particular image of masculinity, one which ties deeply to the symbology of the feather. The core concept of masculinity was the struggle and the conflict of the ephemeral against the whims of a callous and uncaring world, of a fate that was capricious and uncertain. This was one reason for the heavy focus on death and change of status for warriors, and feathers came to exemplify this. Feathers served as symbols of something that was brief and iridescent, something of striking beauty that was ultimately not meant long for the world. While ephemerality was not uniquely tied to masculinity, it was a significant component of it. The entire foundation of the cult of the warrior was the belief in an ever-shifting world and constant redefinition of one's place within it. Most valued of all feathers in this regard were those of the quetzal. Speaking of its place within Mexica culture, Clendinnen says "the quetzal plume held a special place in the Mexica (and the Mesoamerican) imagination. It was rare, the shy male bird which grew the two long curving tail feathers living deep in the remote rainforests to the South… one of those visual experiences quite impossible to bear in mind, so that each seeing is its own small miracle."[62] The difficulty in the bird's acquisition spoke to hardship, the difficulty in *finding* the bird alone spoke to chance and fate, and the difficulty in working the feathers into adornments for armor or ceremony spoke to skill. Catching quetzals was akin to other forms of hunting practiced by men, but the bird's shy nature made it a particularly noteworthy catch. That simply finding a quetzal was so unusual made it a conflict in and of itself, another obstacle to be overcome by the Mexica to prove his capacity as a prized bird-catcher. In all of these ways, the feathers of the quetzal specifically stood as testimonies to the Mexica male's power in both a personal way, and as a member of the military society.

[62] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 306-307.

In considering all of this symbolic power, it becomes clear that the Mexica placed high value on quetzal feathers, making their acquisition a foundational part of the Mexica tributary economy. Of course, it is worth noting that the quetzal was not the only bird whose feathers were used in dress and artisanal goods. Hummingbirds, parrots, flamingos, spoonbills, and trogons are all but a few examples of the many colorful and varied species used by the Mexica in their craft. Birds – waterbirds in particular – were emblems of beings who could transition between the strata of the cosmos, capable of existing on land, in the air, the surface of the water, and diving beneath it as well.[63] Transition was a key theme throughout Mexica society – transition between life and death, between illness and health, and even between social strata. This was most exemplified in the masculine realm of the warrior, as it was here that the greatest amount of social mobility was present.

This foundation in masculinity might be further cemented when considering what roles women had with featherworking. Although there were certainly women who were occupied by the craft and produced pieces for men to wear, the core concept of worn feathers was something women did not figure into. A good example of this is in the figure of Malintzin, a woman who was, with no exaggeration, the most important singular woman in Mesoamerica at the time. This importance is maintained throughout Mesoamerican artistic records, where she is depicted in equivalent importance to Cortés, and often even greater. Despite this, she is never depicted with feathers, although many male figures such as local rulers are.[64] It must be noted, however, that all depictions of her were created after the conquest. In fact, there are depictions of female deities

[63] Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Precolumbian Flora and Fauna: Continuity of Plant and Animal Themes in Mesoamerican Art* (San Diego, CA: Mingei International Museum, 1990),. 76.
[64] Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico,* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006) 75.

with feathers, so the subject of the relationship between feathers and gender is a complex one.[65] Because the concepts of gender and sexuality were fluid in the spirituality of the Mexica, with many deities having male or female aspects, the connections feathers have to masculinity are essentially congruences with the themes apparent in the Mexica ideologies of warfare.[66]

The connection between feathers and warfare becomes even stronger when the imagery of deities comes into play, particularly in that of Quetzalcoatl. While the connection of Huitzilopochtli, the hummingbird god of war, is an obvious one, Quetzalcoatl's is more obscure. Depicted as a feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl effectively represents the unification of two disparate symbols of power; the eagle and the snake, each predators in their own respective realms of heaven and earth, each diametrically opposed to the other yet unified in a single deific form. The foundational myth of the Mexica is an oft-documented story. In brief, it states that the Mexica wandered throughout Mexico for generations in search of the land promised to them by Huitzilopochtli – a land they would recognize upon sighting an eagle devouring a serpent while perched upon a cactus. According to the legend, they at last found this land in the form of an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, which became the site of Tenochtitlan. While the principal deity here is Huitzilopochtli, the connection between the serpent and eagle to Quetzalcoatl speaks to the presence of the deity even in an early form within this myth. The feathered serpent is ubiquitous throughout Mesoamerican cultures, as exemplified by the Maya figure of Kukulkan.[67]

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[65] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 281-283.
[66] John M.D. Pohl and Claire L. Lyons, *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire,* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2010), 33.
[67] Alfredo López Austin, *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl: Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World,* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2015), 37.

The most direct symbolic connection between birds and serpents comes from feathers and scales themselves, with the small feathers of a hummingbird seeming similar to fish scales, and the iridescent scales of a snake akin to the gleaming green feathers of a quetzal.[68] These scales carried with them the imagery of armor, and as such even the hummingbird was ranked among the birds of prey as a symbol of warfare. This symbology came to define the relationship between feathers and the Mexica military class, and would go on to be a prominent factor in the war-driven tributary economy.

Feathers were items of great symbolic power, as has been demonstrated, but the most important thing to recognize is that more often than not, this power was manifested when they were worn or held specifically on one's person. A prime example is in the ritual Atl Cahualo, a ritual performed for the deity Tlaloc during a drought. The ritual was a mournful, rare occurrence where two children would be sacrificed and cast into a lake, and upon the eve of the sacrifice they would be adorned with ritual clothing and carried by a litter covered in quetzal feathers. Among these adornments were feathers arranged to resemble the flowering maize plant.[69] Feathers have nothing to do with masculinity or power here, and instead serve as a reflection of the earth and agriculture. Their green color gave them an association with water, and their use among the nobility also leant the air of nobility to the sacrificed children.[70] This shows that feathers had manifold meanings and symbolisms even beyond what has been explored already.

The unifying aspect of these feather symbols is that they were worn. Be it feathered headdresses, armor, clothing, shields, symbols of office, ritual adornments, they were all in some

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[68] Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Precolumbian Flora and Fauna: Continuity of Plant and Animal Themes in Mesoamerican Art* (San Diego, CA: Mingei International Museum, 1990), 34.
[69] Philip P. Arnold, *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 78-92.
[70] Philip P. Arnold, *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 84, 89.

way connected to the body. Feathers were used in the art of the amantecas as well, but they took on their full symbolic meaning through transformation. When they were worn, feathers gave the wearer a new aspect – perhaps it was the aspect of a ruler, or of divinity, or of a warrior, or of the earth itself but the key discovery is that they provided a transformative power to the wearer. This transformative aspect was critical to the reforms of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, who increased the significance of rituals and expanded the nobility, a process accomplished through the proliferation of precious, transformative feathers.[71]

This transition towards a greater usage of feathers would continue until the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The violence of the conflict shook the Mesoamerican world as the Spanish, over the course of two years, were able to break up the Mexica's domain and decapitate the empire of its leadership. The conquest resulted in a great shift of power dynamics, and in the decades that followed the Spanish were able to establish a thorough colonial enterprise. During this period, Mexica life would see many transformations in the face of this new cultural context, and the role of feathers was no different.

[71] Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 72-83.

Section III. Evolution of the Tributary Economy in Postconquest New Spain

After the establishment of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, the principle drive of the Spanish colonial government was the extraction of resources using indigenous labor for the empire. With the usurpation of control from the Mexica, the Spanish sought to establish themselves as the new dominant power by taking the pre-existing imperial infrastructure and redefining it to suit their own needs. We find evidence of this through the Codex Mendoza and the Matrícula de Tributos, both of which were made with the explicit intent of the Spanish commandeering control of the Mesoamerican political economy in the wake of the Mexica's defeat. As a result of this, material tribute from the various polities in the region became the dominant form of Spanish imperial control, although it shifted somewhat in relation to the Mexica. The Spanish valued material goods very highly – especially gold, silver, and other precious materials – but perhaps the only thing they valued more highly was the labor needed to acquire it. Indigenous workers served as the backbone of Spanish colonial industry, and as such resulted in a varicolored history of the region's exploitation.[72]

A great deal has been written regarding the Spanish interest in the extraction of gold and silver, which was fueled by the rise of mercantilism in Europe.[73] However, another group of resources came to take another form of value for the Spanish: organic resources. Cacao beans, cochineal, and the feathers of native birds all became luxuries valued by the Spanish just as they had been valued by the Mexica before them, only now with different reasons. Whereas before, these materials served as cultural touchstones of the Mexica and the other Nahua-speaking

[72] Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).
[73] John R. Fisher, *The Economic Aspects of Spanish Imperialism in America* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1997), 20-28.

groups around them, to the Spanish they were primarily a symbol for their dominance abroad and the ability of their empire to produce such fine goods on a scale so incredibly vast – stretching from Spain to Mexico to Peru to Manila.[74]

This extraction of organic resources had a unique element relative to the control of labor and mineral resources. While those were key components of Mexica dominance, these organic resources contained specific cultural power that helped to cement the authority of the tlatoani. To examine the way in which feathers themselves were appropriated as symbols of authority and power after the conquest, it is important to establish the trends that existed with the Spanish extraction of these other goods. It is of particular note that these were goods that the Spanish were not initially interested in relative to solid, material goods. Gold, silver and precious jewels were predominant foci of the Spanish colonial effort, with a vast reallocation of indigenous labor to mining operations. The organic resources of the region, while appreciated and recognized for their cultural value, were not a focus for the Spanish until sometime deeper into their colonization. Spaniards appropriated such symbols and resources by grafting their tributary system atop that of the Mexica. Two examples of other significant organic resources besides feathers – cacao beans and cochineal dye – highlight this process.

Cacao was a mainstay of the diet of Mexica nobility, and also a form of currency during the days of the Mexica empire. Cacao was cultivated into chocolate, the drink consumed by Mexica nobility, and was prized most notably for its sacred connotations. To drink chocolate was a very specific privilege that was reserved for the nobles and priesthood, and its cultivation through the Mexica's tributary economy was thus a symbol of power. Many altepeme were

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[74] Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 257-259.

expected to provide cacao beans as part of their tribute to Tenochtitlan, resulting in a great abundance of chocolate amongst the upper echelons of society.[75]

There are several things which are important to recognize about cacao and chocolate's use in their original Mesoamerican contexts to understand their later role as a Spanish commodity. During the time of the Mexica, the cultural groups of the region were vastly diverse and often did not share the same language. Although Nahuatl was a common tongue, especially as a result of Mexica dominance, it was far from the only one – a multitude of languages coexisted, and oftentimes neighboring groups had little in common in terms of language or worshipped deities and ritual practices. In such a space, the use of cacao beans as a currency resulted in a superseding unity. In such a diverse region, the common use of chocolate as an honored drink of notably spiritual value was a bridge between disparate cultures, often at war with each other, that allowed for a common symbol of authority.[76] Chocolate was a drink which was sacred in its connotation, believed to be a means of connecting to the spiritual plain. Norton describes chocolate as "[giving] the celestial realm a flavor,"[77] rooting it in a tactile sensation and making a constant physical reminder of the presence of this cosmic plane at events of high importance. Chocolate was prized for its properties as a stimulant, and the *Florentine Codex* describes the effects of its consumption in some detail.

> "This cacao, when much is drunk, when much is consumed, especially that which is green, which is tender, makes one drunk, takes effect on one, makes one dizzy, confuses one, makes one sick, deranges one. When an ordinary amount is drunk, it gladdens one,

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[75] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 8 – Kings and Lords," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 39-40.
[76] Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 16.
[77] Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 16.

> refreshes one, consoles one, invigorates one. Thus it is said: 'I take cacao. I wet my lips. I refresh myself.'"[78]

This combination of factors – the ubiquity of the cultural relevance of cacao and its physiological effects when consumed – resulted in its high value. This was something not at all lost upon the Spanish, who viewed cacao in a light that shifted dramatically over the course of the colonial period. Like the people of Mesoamerica, the Spanish were a deeply spiritual society, and religious conversion proved a focal point of the conquest long after the work of Hernán Cortés. Thus, the spiritual connotation cacao carried to the people of the region came as a source of trepidation to them. During the conquest, the consumption of chocolate was depicted as a matter of statecraft by Bernal Díaz and other accounts written of the time, such as the *Florentine Codex*. It was a necessity for the diplomacy between Cortés and the native lords he allied with, and was simply a matter of fact – outside of this, contemporary depictions of chocolate by the Spanish during the conquest do not dive very deeply. Interest picked up during the colonial period, when chocolate slowly became a fixture of the colonial economy.

There were, essentially, three aspects to the role of chocolate in colonial society; there was that which did not change, for many native lords maintained their spiritual practices in parallel to the newly-imposed rule of Christianity. There was the Spanish fear of idolatry, within which the consumption of chocolate became a fixed concern. Finally, there was the appropriation of it as a local symbol of authority and an exoticized display of imperial strength within the European sphere. The first of these is seen in Bernal Díaz's writing, where chocolate is largely ignored. For Díaz, chocolate was a local curiosity and a part of the diplomatic process. Its first appearance ties it directly to the Mexica, where it is used as a drink implicitly to appease the

[78] Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Bernardino de Sahagùn, "Book 11 – Earthly Things," *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Monographs of the School of American Research; No. 14, Pt. 1-13. (Santa Fe: School of American Research, University of Utah, 1950), 119-120.

arrival of Mexica taxation workers. Bernal Díaz describes the scene, one which colored his depiction of the Mexica empire throughout his narrative, as such:

> "…five Mexicans, who were Montezuma's tax-gatherers, had just arrived. When they heard the news they turned pale and trembled with fear, and leaving Cortés alone they went off to receive the Mexicans, and in the shortest possible time they had decked a room with flowers, and had food cooked for the Mexicans to eat, and prepared plenty of cacao, which is the best thing they have to drink. When these five Indians entered the town, they came to the place where we were assembled, where were the houses of the Cacique and our quarters, and approaching us with the utmost assurance and arrogance without speaking to Cortés, or to any of us, they passed us by… As soon as they had dined they sent to summon the fat Cacique and the other chiefs, and scolded them for entertaining us in their houses, for now they would have to speak and deal with us which would not please their lord Montezuma; for without his permission and orders they should not have sheltered us, nor given us presents of golden jewels, and on this subject they uttered many threats against the fat Cacique and the other chiefs and ordered them at once to provide twenty Indians, men and women, to appease their gods for the wrong that had been done."[79]

There are two key takeaways from the brief depiction of the role of cacao in this excerpt and in its occasional appearances throughout the text. The first is that its minor, yet named, role suggests that Díaz considered it important enough to mention, but not important enough to explain or explore in great depth. It was a consequential to the events at hand, but it was not itself a cause for investigation. This confirms the blasé attitude of the Spanish to the cultures they were intruding upon. Second, it depicts the Mexica as cruel, unfair, and pernicious overlords to the peoples that they ruled from the perspective of the Spanish author. In Díaz's writing, this depiction of the Mexica empire serves to justify the actions of Hernán Cortés as necessary, not just for Spanish dominion, but for the good of the indigenous peoples of Mexico as well. This narrative is maintained throughout descriptions of the Tlaxcalans and other native allies of the Spanish during the conquest.

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[79] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico,* trans. A.P. Maudslay (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 91.

With this base established, the church's relationship to cacao became in many ways reflective of the Spanish view of the resource. Much as the Spanish painted a picture of the Mexica empire as a diabolical thing, the Catholic church began to paint many aspects of indigenous culture as sacrilegious. There was a different tone here, however, compared to Catholic views of sacrilege in other parts of the world. The people of Mexico were seen as "young Christians," a people who, by no fault of their own, had simply not had the opportunity to be brought into the fold of the church.[80] This infantilizing view became the predominant descriptor the church had for the rituals of the people of Mexico. Within this view, the ceremonial drinking of cacao was feared for its ties to the sacred rituals of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, to which the church was vehemently opposed. With such a strong focus upon spiritual conversion, the preservation of any spiritually-significant markers was a major concern. For a time this made cacao undesirable, but this eventually changed as chocolate's nature as a refreshing drink began to take favor in the Spanish eye. Chocolate became something in Europe to be flaunted as a marker of colonial power, and was further disseminated throughout Europe's markets to other countries. To best examine this change in colonial attitude, the region of Xoconochco can once again be referenced. One Mexican study found that:

> "During the Colonial period, the most important merchandise of agricultural origin remained cacao. It appeared significantly within its contributive payments and systems of exchange, which facilitated the connection between Soconusco's economy with the world market. Cacao satisfied a part of the requirements of the cities of New Spain and ratified its condition as a privileged product, given its great value. When the consumption of chocolate in Europe was established, cacao increased in demand, became an item of exportation, and to that extent affected the formation of interprovincial and extra-regional economic relations. The indigenous population continued contributing cacao until the middle of the 18th century."[81]

[80] Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 135-138.
[81] Antonio Cruz Coutiño, *Cacao Soconusco: Apuntes sobre Chiapas, Mexico y Centroamerica* (Tuxtla Gutierrez: Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, 2014), 60.

Tributary demands from Xoconochco changed over time, as evident in Spanish taxation records. In 1530-1531, the primary form of tribute from the region was gold, but 1548, this had transitioned to cacao. Between 1548 and 1575 the Spanish crown taxed the Xoconochco region in cacao and almonds (which had been imported from Asia), at a rate double what they had paid to the Mexica.[82] This trend demonstrates that the Spanish first largely ignored indigenous organic resources and cultural touchstones, then attributed idolatrous fear to them, then appropriated them as luxuries for their own use. This is a trend that was demonstrated also by feathers, and to a lesser extent by cochineal.

Cochineal was a bright red dye produced by the cochineal scale insect (*Dactylopius coccus)* consuming the juices of a nopal cactus.[83] The beetles were then desiccated, crushed, and the bright dye was harvested. Many of the Mesoamerican codices were in fact originally made with cochineal paint. In addition, the clothing and buildings of the Mexica were also dyed with cochineal. When the Spanish established their colonial authority, cochineal remained a key fixture of the tributary economy.[84]

The importance of cochineal cannot be overstated. In the colonial heyday, it was the single most profitable organic resource that Spain exported from the Americas to Europe, and was second in its value only to gold and silver. The value of cochineal was so great that all the way up until the 18th century, Spanish merchants and colonial officials worked to ensure that the nature of the dye's origin and production were kept secret. This tactic was used to the advantage of the Spanish market, strengthening their position by making Spain the only means to access the

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[82] Antonio Cruz Coutiño, *Cacao Soconusco: Apuntes sobre Chiapas, Mexico y Centroamerica* (Tuxtla Gutierrez: Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, 2014), 60.
[83] Gösta Sandberg, *The Red Dyes: Cochineal, Madder, and Murex Purple* (New York: Lark Books, 1994), 44-45.
[84] Brian R. Hamnett, *Politics and Trade in Southern Mexico 1750-1821* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 1-8.

brilliant red dye in Europe. The process of harvesting cochineal was a lengthy one, and as a result the industry exploded into a large-scale, organized breeding of the cacti and insects that produced the dye.[85]

In comparison with cacao, cochineal was more immediately capitalized upon by the Spanish. The "scarlet grain" of the insects' desiccated bodies enjoyed the convenience of relative ease of transport, and the dye itself was particularly easy to bring to Europe for manufacture in clothing and art. Upon the establishment of New Spain, colonial Oaxaca became the epicenter of cochineal production and exportation, something accomplished by making it (alongside cotton textile production) the primary occupation of the indigenous population of the area. This allowed Spain to produce vast amounts of cochineal, from which it was able to make a fortune.[86]

Unlike cacao, cochineal did not have such a widespread spiritual significance, and as a result there was no interference from the church in its harvesting. More important was the fact that cochineal was a base ingredient to a shared material. Both cultures used dye, but the consumption of chocolate or the construction of feathered headdresses were too deeply tied to local spirituality to be appropriated without conflict into the Spanish's own parallel practices, such as the consumption of the Eucharist or the adornment of Catholic clerical uniforms.

This comparison of Spanish appropriation of diverse Mesoamerican organic resources reveals a series of steps through which these resources were incorporated into Spain's tributary economy. First, the Spanish identified how indigenous people used the resource. Second, the Spanish overcame their unease regarding the spiritual uses of the commodity. Third, the Spanish established the viability of mass production of the commodity and its marketability in Europe. At

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[85] Gösta Sandberg, *The Red Dyes: Cochineal, Madder, and Murex Purple* (New York: Lark Books, 1994), 44-47.
[86] Brian R. Hamnett, *Politics and Trade in Southern Mexico 1750-1821* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 1-8.

the conclusion of these three steps, the organic resource in question became a component of the Spanish colonial economy on the global scale.

Feathers, much like cacao, occupied a position of curiosity more than prestige in the Spanish eye. Bird-keeping was an admired trait of the Mexica nobility and artisans but it was by no means seen as an equivalent trade to mining or other resource extracting operations. Like cacao, feathers were seen primarily as a simple matter of native custom. As regalia, they were not ascribed any more value than a feather in a Spaniard's cap, and as commodities they did not carry much monetary value when compared to such riches as gold, silver, or cochineal.[87] As a result, for a time the interest in feathers was quite sparse, and there is little documentation suggesting any meaningful change in policies regarding them. Given that the Spanish wanted to maintain the taxation practices of the Mexica to a degree, it can be deduced that for many regions – including Xoconochco – taxing by feathers did not change dramatically and continued as a matter of practice. If anything, it may have been somewhat reduced in comparison to more profitable goods like pelts, dyes, and cacao.

[87] Brian R. Hamnett, *Politics and Trade in Southern Mexico 1750-1821* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 10-11.

Section IV. Feathers in Mesoamerican Rituals and Iconography Postconquest

As with cacao, feathers represented a challenge to the Spanish crown by virtue of their spiritual connotations, a matter which would be vehemently opposed by the Catholic church. As has already been demonstrated, feathers were particularly culturally meaningful because of their many spiritual applications. The missionaries struggled constantly against indigenous spirituality and its material culture, while at the same time appropriating aspects of it.

A key component of the Spanish military conquest of Mexico was the alliance with the altepetl of Tlaxcala, which was composed of multiple altepeme and provided armies for the war.[88] The political distinction between the Tlaxcalans and the Mexica is key, but they also shared many cultural similarities, such as featherwork, as evident by the records of Tlaxcala's native cabildo between 1545 and 1627.[89] It is worth noting that the Tlaxcalans presented themselves as allies and equals to the Spanish in regards to the conquest, not their subordinates. While it was true that there was a perceived disparity in power, the Tlaxcalans did not see themselves as becoming subjects of the Spanish. Rather, they saw themselves as allies of the Spanish, working together to form a new union that would undo the tyranny of the Mexica, a sentiment echoed by many other Mesoamerican conquistadors.[90]

While the specifics of the symbology of feathers would have been different between the Mexica and the Tlaxcalans, they still had cultural significance. The religious connotations would have differed, but by looking at the Spanish reaction to the use of feathers in power structures, we can find analogues to how they would have reacted to those same things in the Mexica realm.

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[88] Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 1-27.
[89] "Don't Dance with the Feathers." In *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545-1627*, eds. Lockhart, James., Frances F. Berdan, and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1986), 71.
[90] Florine G.L. Asselbergs, "The Conquest in Images: Stories of Tlaxcalteca and Quauhquecholteca Conquistadors," In *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica, ed. Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 65-73.

Tlaxcala was a province separate from the Mexica empire, was never conquered by it and successfully resisted Mexica attempts to coerce them into becoming a tributary. Tlaxcala was unique in its status as a rival of the Mexica, engaging in frequent, highly ritualized conflicts known as the Flower Wars. During Hernán Cortés' campaign in Mexico, the Tlaxcalans were vital allies to the Spanish forces, and are credited as one of the primary causes for the success of the conflict. As such, Tlaxcala received special treatment and privileges from the Spanish crown upon the establishment of the Viceroyalty of New Spain.[91]

In the cabildo record of April 28, 1550, the native officers established that a litter had been constructed by the missionaries for the performance of the Sacraments, and that the Tlaxcalans had decorated it and the crucifix itself with feathers:

> "And it is to be ordered that no one take away the precious feathers (plumes) and other feathers that are attached to all the church properties, the litter, and the case for covering the cross; that no one take them down or dance with them. And they ordered that both he who gives them to someone and he to whom they are given are each to pay 80 pesos of mine-gold for it, will be divided into two parts: one part will belong to the treasury and exchequer of his majesty, and an equal amount will belong to the judge."[92]

The translators and editors of *The Tlaxcalan Actas* note that the fine was an exorbitant sum for its time period. It was a hyperbolic response to the minor offense of dancing with feathers, which was a fairly common practice in pre-colonial Mesoamerican spiritual celebrations. This correlates with other documents within the source, and suggests that the Spanish had an interest in seriously deterring certain behaviors.[93] Note, however, that here the indigenous authors of the

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[91] Laura E. Matthew, "Whose Conquest? Nahua, Zapoteca, and Mixteca Allies in the Conquest of Central America," In *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica, ed. Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007),
112-122.

[92] "Don't Dance with the Feathers," in *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545-1627*, eds. Lockhart, James., Frances F. Berdan, and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1986), 71.

[93] "Preparations for a Religious Holiday," "A New Church Building Campaign," in *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545-1627*, eds., James Lockhart, Frances F. Berdan, and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1986), 94-95, 122-125.

municipal record do not address conceptual symbolism; in fact, they have embraced it entirely. There is no issue, apparently, with the association of feathers to the holy cross or to Jesus Christ at all. Rather, the fact that the cross and the litter were adorned with feathers seems to be an appropriation of existing Mesoamerican ideas of aesthetics and spirituality. The issue is entirely with the performative aspects of Mesoamerican spirituality, which were not in line with the Catholic doctrine and thus intended to be expunged. While I have already demonstrated the thorough connection between feathers and the Mexica notion of masculinity, feathers still retained strong religious symbolism amongst the other cultures of Mesoamerica. Although Quetzalcoatl was the name attributed to the deity by the Mexica, the feathered serpent was a common trope throughout Mesoamerica, and the feather, a common symbol of power. Therefore, it can be concluded that regardless of the exact specificity of the deity in question, the feathers that the Tlaxcalans syncretized with symbols of Christ were, in themselves, symbols of spiritual and cosmological power.

The church's appropriation of feathers was significant also for its marked transition from their use before the conquest. These feathers were to be seen, not touched. They were purely decorative, not performative and most certainly much less transformative. If feathers before the conquest were a hallmark of the individual's transformation into a new status or level of being, then feathers after the conquest could be said to be symbols of an institution's power rather than any individual. This is clear in the repression of performance with feathers, which had been central to the rituals of pre-conquest Mesoamericans.

The document does not say much about the role of feathers in Tlaxcala or Mesoamerica at large that cannot be gleaned from other sources. While the strong proof of religious syncretism is compelling, the economic systems required for the trade of feathers are not discussed. Even

more problematic is that the exact species of feather referenced is never elucidated, making a meaningful situation of the text within the greater context all that much harder. Were they quetzal feathers, which were so deeply tied to Mexica identity and symbology? If so, that would suggest a conquest of the symbol, that the feathers which denoted the wealth and power of the Mexica had become adopted by the Tlaxcalans. That this symbol was associated with the crucifix, the symbol of the God of the Spanish allies of the Tlaxcalans, suggests a syncretic view of the conquest: the defeat of the Mexica was something accomplished equally through the work of the Spanish God and the Tlaxcalans.

The conquest narrative was not only manipulated by the Tlaxcalans, however. A much clearer image of the systems in place, and particularly of the Spanish reaction to such systems, can be found in Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico.* Feathers appear sparingly throughout Bernal Díaz's narrative; however, when they do appear, they appear with consistent thematic roles and as markers of the same cultural forces. Primarily, feathers appear throughout the narrative in two places; to describe the dress of Mexica warriors, or as examples of gift-giving. Very early on, Bernal Díaz describes the gifts given to the Spaniards by the Mexica Quintalbor on behalf of Moctezuma. Among them are an assortment of feathers, as he describes:

> "Then there were presented crests of gold and plumes of rich green feathers, and others of silver, and fans of the same materials, and deer copied in hollow gold and many other things that I cannot remember for it all happened so many years ago. And then over thirty loads of beautiful cotton cloth were brought worked with many patterns and decorated with many coloured feathers, and so many other things were there that it is useless my trying to describe them for I know not how to do it."[94]

[94] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico,* trans. A.P. Maudslay (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 74-75.

There are other gifts that are granted in this scene, and several others where Mexica nobles presented the Spaniards with gifts in the form of cloth, gold, or feathers. These gifts were consistently reciprocated by the Spanish to their best capacity, according to Bernal Díaz. Gift giving was an important means through which Mesoamericans established political alliances. It has been demonstrated that feathers were a critical component of the Mexica tribute economy as shown by both the *Florentine Codex* and *Matrícula de Tributos*, and these scenes are in keeping with this fact. Regardless of Bernal Díaz's own understanding of these systems, the fact that he reports such a consistent presence of feathers in the gifts offered, particularly by nobility and upper-class individuals, suggests that they maintained a role in the tribute economy at the time of the conquest.

Another key example of gift-giving occurs when Cortés met with Moctezuma for the first time. According to Bernal Díaz's narrative, it was a meeting of peace and diplomacy, and Cortés and his men were invited into Tenochtitlan where they were kept within Moctezuma's own palace. Bernal Díaz again describes a scene of gift-giving, with some emphasis on feathers once more.

> "When this conference was over, the Great Montezuma had already at hand some very rich golden jewels, of many patterns, which he gave to our Captain, and in the same manner to each one of our Captains he gave trifles of gold, and three loads of mantles of rich feather work, and to the soldiers also he gave to each one two loads of mantles, and he did it cheerfully and in every way he seemed to be a great Prince."[95]

Considering the notion of gifts as tribute, this scene goes a long way within Bernal Díaz's narrative for establishing Moctezuma in a position of weakness vis a vis the Spanish. Bernal Díaz framed Moctezuma with much nuance, essentially depicting him as a good but ultimately tragic figure. He portrayed him as a faint-hearted individual who was easily swayed by others,

[95] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico,* trans. A.P. Maudslay (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 204-205.

and although generous and willing to harbor the Spanish for a time, he refused to halt human sacrifices, a practice upon which Bernal Díaz focuses greatly throughout the text. In a manner similar to the potential value of feathers as a symbol of Spanish victory, Moctezuma's gift of feathers (among so many other things) served as a foreshadowing of that same event in Bernal Díaz's narrative. The entire text is filled with such allusions, especially with Bernal Díaz's own perpetuation of the notion that the Spanish were hailed as the true rulers of Mexico by the various native peoples they encountered.

Gift-giving was an important component of Mesoamerican diplomacy in that it provided a means to establish a relationship between two parties, capable of representing both dominance and submission. The Mexica used gifts as a way of seeking submission in prelude to a potential campaign, and it was a key component of the alliance-making between the Spanish and the Tlaxcalans. [96] The act of gift-giving was often blurry, left unclear whether it was done by one party seeking peaceful conclusion to hostilities or the other demanding tribute. In the alliance between the Spanish and the Tlaxcalans, this is presented as the former.[97] These gifts were often recorded very explicitly, and feathers constituted a common example of such a gift.

In regards to feathers as a craft, however, Bernal Díaz says very little. The most significant dedication he offers them is during the initial stay in Tenochtitlan, where he provides a lengthy description of the Mexica royal aviary.

> "Let us leave this and proceed to the Aviary, and I am forced to abstain from enumerating every kind of bird that was there and its peculiarity, for there was everything from the Royal Eagle and other smaller eagles, and many other birds of great size, down to tiny birds of many-coloured plumage, also the birds from which they take the rich plumage which they use in their green feather work. The birds which have these feathers are about the size of the magpies in Spain, they are called in this country *Quetzales,* and there are other birds which have feathers of five colours – green, red, white, yellow, and blue; I

[96] Hassig, Ross. *Aztec Warfare.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. 22, 50.
[97] Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006) 62-76.

> don't remember what they are called; then there were parrots of many different colours, and there are so many of them that I forget their names, not to mention the beautifully marked ducks and other larger ones like them. From all these birds they plucked the feathers when the time was right to do so, and the feathers grew again. All the birds that I have spoken about breed in these houses, and in the setting season certain Indian men and women who look after the birds, place the eggs under them and clean the nests and feed them, so that each kind of bird has its proper food."[98]

The existence of the royal aviary and the harvesting process of feathers that is described suggests that the royalty of the Mexica had a relatively constant supply of the prized quetzal feathers, at least within the royal palace. The most valuable feathers of a quetzal were the long tail feathers of the male, which could be plucked harmlessly and regrown, as stated by Bernal Díaz. This theoretically assured a constant supply of such feathers, and therefore a constant supply of physical symbols of Mexica power. While this provided convenient access for royalty, it was not large enough to supplant the tributary system which provided quetzal feathers already.

With feathers and feather art so definitely ingrained as symbols of native power, and so directly tied to the spirituality of the native peoples, the three-step process of Spanish appropriation of Mesoamerican organic resources that I previously outlined took longer to develop than it did with cacao or cochineal. While the Spanish recognized feathers and featherworked objects as strong local symbols of authority, they did not consider them more than a local curiosity. The church took issue with the use of feathers in Christian ceremonies, as they served to conflate the Christian god with the local deities of the Mesoamericans. These were significant problems that colonial officials faced regarding the export of Mexica feathers for luxury goods. In the end, the final exploitation of feathers by the Spanish came in a fashion that was a blend between the Mesoamerican and European styles: the creation of art depicting religious iconography.

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[98] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico,* trans. A.P. Maudslay (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 212.

Throughout the sixteenth century, a myriad of feather paintings were created in Mexico and delivered to Europe. These paintings were created through feather mosaic patterns, which created vivid images in the style of European art. A particularly noteworthy one was the gift to Pope Paul III, an image of the mass of Saint Gregory, commissioned by Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin and Fray Pedro de Gante.[99] This piece continues the trend of gift-giving as a sign of deference and peace, something which was so pivotal to Mesoamerican politics before the conquest. This gift to the Pope, the highest authority besides the Spanish King, was an act of esteem for the new order. While the peoples of Mesoamerica had much practice with such art in their own cultures, this was an entirely new style. The resulting style is a blend of two distinct cultural footprints, something that was itself quite emblematic of the mixing of peoples that took place within New Spain over the course of the colonial period.

There are many paintings of this kind produced throughout the territories of Mexico, but one of the most valuable is a triptych of the crucifixion with Saints Jerome and Francis, henceforth referred to simply as *Crucifixion.*[100] The piece was made by native amantecas, the local featherworkers of the Mexica, and the mosaic style it was made in was one which required high levels of skill and training. The end result is a triptych which is believed to be the largest of all feather paintings created in the colony of New Spain, measuring 33 inches in width when fully expanded.

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[99] Gerhard Wolf, "Incarnations of Light: Picturing Feathers in Europe/Mexico, ca. 1400-1600," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 82-86.

[100] Pascal Mongne, "The Crozier and the Feather: The Crucifixion Triptych in the Musèe National de la Renaissance, Ecouen," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 282-289.

Figure 1. The Crucifixion Triptych.[101]

The image depicts the crucifixion of Christ, who is nailed to a large cross and flanked by Saint Jerome and Saint Francis. In the wings of the triptych, the virgin Mary and Saint John are depicted, as well as three figures in black who represent the Roman soldiers who bore witness to the death of Jesus. The image contains many visual symbols that hold strong metaphorical power within both the Christian canon and Mexica culture. One example is the sun and moon, each on either end of the cross upon which Christ hangs, with a pelican perched in the middle. This pelican has an open chest cavity with its heart bleeding, and serves as a metaphor for the Passion of Christ.[102] Christ himself has four wings sprouting from his body in a formation reminiscent of

[101] Source: Image from Pascal Mongne, "The Crozier and the Feather: The Crucifixion Triptych in the Musèe National de la Renaissance, Ecouen," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 282-289.

[102] Pascal Mongne, "The Crozier and the Feather: The Crucifixion Triptych in the Musèe National de la Renaissance, Ecouen," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 286.

the seraphim, angels of Hebrew myth often described as being made out of wings. All of this coalesces into a series of themes that conflate the major symbols of the Mexica and the Catholic faith into a singular image.

Figure 2. Detail of the *Crucifixion.* [103]

As has been established, the norm in Mesoamerica was for the conflation of deities, especially when a region was conquered and a new god was imposed onto the locals. Christianity was no exception, but came with new challenges. Christianity, especially in Spain, opposed religious pluralism, and yet it was adopted by many Mesoamericans alongside pre-existing spiritualities, not as a replacement for them. This was the core of much of the conflict in the conversion process, and this piece serves as a strong example of this struggle between

[103] Source: Image from Pascal Mongne, "The Crozier and the Feather: The Crucifixion Triptych in the Musèe National de la Renaissance, Ecouen," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 282-289.

dominance and syncretism.[104] While the angelic wings present upon Christ's body conveniently linked with imagery of sacred beings in the bible, they also represented common tropes of Mexica art. As the Mexica depicted Quetzalcoatl as a feathered serpent, or Huitzilopochtli as a hummingbird, so too did they depict Jesus Christ as a being with feathered wings. Furthermore, both Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli had claims to the sun, making its inclusion another connection to the indigenous roots of the piece.

Yet stronger than even the use of feathers as a denotation of divinity is the fact that the Passion of Christ so strongly correlates with the old Mexica ideals of masculinity. These idolized the stoic acceptance of death, the honor of fighting against an uncaring external world to the last moment, even if such a battle was futile. The protracted, painful death of Jesus Christ on the cross strikes deep on the same chords of these cultural themes, and the importance of this becomes all the clearer when one considers the colors used in this piece. Since the piece was made with feathers, dyes like cochineal would not have been used, suggesting the use of rare red feathers to symbolize the blood of Christ. Even more extreme than the red is the use of gold to construct straight beams of light and circular halos around the head of Jesus and the saints. As there are no gold feathers, these were made out of long strands of gold. The piece has suffered much destruction from the looting of this gold, and where there were once gold strands, there is now gold paste that was used to repair it.[105]

The use of such difficult colors in a piece of such a large scale suggests that the artists considered the work to be of incredibly high importance. While we do not know the true origin

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[104] John M.D. Pohl and Claire L. Lyons, *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire,* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2010), 31-39, 70-73.
[105] Pascal Mongne, "The Crozier and the Feather: The Crucifixion Triptych in the Musèe National de la Renaissance, Ecouen," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 286.

of the *Crucifixion,* or where it was kept before the nineteenth century, educated guesses can be made. There exist two possibilities in this regard; either the artists were commissioned (or perhaps better stated, commanded) to create the piece for the royalty of Spain, and as such the piece was tied directly to the church, or it was produced independently by Mexica amantecas for reasons of their own. Of the two, the former seems much more likely. The *Crucifixion* was probably made as a piece for conversion, potentially commissioned to prove that such conversion was proceeding apace by the missionaries. While it may have been made by indigenous hands, the ultimate place where it was kept may have been anywhere from a local church to the home of a Spanish aristocrat. In any case, the piece was not discovered until the second half of the 1800s, when it was acquired by the art collector Stanislas Baron.

This was only part of a trend towards elite collection of feather art produced by amantecas in Europe.[106] Once again, the appropriation of feathers shows a strong inclination towards feathers in the institutional sphere, not the personal one. The feathered art of the Catholic church and the Spanish Empire was used as a symbol of the power of those institutions, of their capacity to control people and create complex and beautiful icons. These symbols, made by the hands of the native people, still carried some of the symbolic imagery from before the conquest, but they were no longer something tied to any individual, nor were they the same transformative adornments that they had been when they were worn.

Whatever the case of the origin of the *Crucifixion,* the reality of its creation implies that in the end the Spanish did find a profitable use for the rich feathered resources of Mexico. While resources like cacao and cochineal had direct consumption value, feathers were a different matter. Although their innate beauty was unquestioned, it was in the mixing of European and

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[106] Alessandra Russo, "A Contemporary Art from New Spain," *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 23-63.

Mexica styles that the Spanish found a means to exploit them and profit from that exploitation. They did not profit monetarily as they did with cacao or cochineal, but they profited in terms of clout. The feathered art symbolized their ability to control such skilled artisans as the native amantecas, and as proof of their conversion of these people to the Catholic faith. In the eyes of the pope, and thus of the church, this was an important thing to establish. Thus, instead of becoming more direct luxury commodities, feathers continued to serve the purpose under Spanish colonial rule that they had under the Mexica: they were a tool for the legitimization of political rule. Under the colonial government there was an explosion of colorful feathered paintings produced by the combination of the European renaissance style and the skill of Mexica amantecas. This blend of cultures was a parallel vision of the mestizaje that would come to define the Spanish colonial enterprise, most notably in Mexico, in microcosm.

Section V. Conclusion

The evolution of the role of feathers as symbols of sacred and military power, masculinity, personal status, and empire in Mesoamerica is a complex one. Throughout the sixteenth century alone, feathers transitioned from a near-ubiquitous symbol of authority to a specifically-commissioned prize of colonial power. While the specifics of this transition may have been greatly different from one culture to the other, the symbology inherent to the feathers remained consistent within certain spheres. While there was significant continuity, there was also great change in the meaning of these symbols, and that change heralded the new order of the colonial era. In the brief span of the sixteenth century, the most stark evolution that occurred with feather symbology was the change of their meanings when worn as opposed to kept in place. The adoption of feathers by the Catholic church in its iconography and artwork marked a transition from feathers as symbols of personal power and divinity to feathers as a symbol for those same things attributed to an institution.

Feather paintings became symbols of the Spanish and Catholic capacities to impose their will, and to demonstrate the power of the Catholic God and the church that served Him. This change from feathers as a marker of personal status or identity signified the imposition of the new structure of political control that supplanted and adapted the Mexica structure. Under the Spanish, feathers became ties to the power of larger entities rather than individual rulers, and their use was a means of establishing the systemic relationships between the rulers and their subjects rather than reflecting the transformative nature of the wearer.

While the meanings and uses of feathers were appropriated and changed, some of their symbolic imagery remained. Feathers continued to serve as symbols of masculinity, of the Mexica ideal of difficulty and overcoming hardship, and as markers of rulership. And feathers

were still used by individuals to mark their status or power.[107] However, these meanings had to change to fit the new cultural context in which they were found by adhering to the themes of the Passion of Christ and Christianity. These thematic meanings had to be folded into the Christian sphere, and as such they were no longer quite the same as they had been before the invasion of the Spanish. Feathers, well into the colonial era, served as a subtle force of Mexica culture that maintained its prominence for centuries, adapting to the new Christian world that the Spanish imposed and forming its own new identity within it.

[107] Corrina Tania Gallori, "From Paper to Feathers: The Holy Names of Jesus and Mary from Europe to Mexico," In *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400-1700* (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 311-319.

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