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Abstract: The fall of the Aztec Empire in 1521 was a surprising feat given the well-known, vast power, and fighting capabilities of the Aztec people. Many questions since then have arisen as to how such a mighty empire had so rapidly fallen. These theories hold implications that the Aztecs were victims to the incoming disease, famine, and domination inflicted by the Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes. Alongside these proposals I suggest that by examining archaeological and historical evidence, the Aztec traditional practices were also responsible for its society's collapse. By identifying the significance of the human sacrifices, the cultural, political, and economical ramifications lead a straight line to the destruction of this massive civilization. Taking into account some major hypothesis in the causation of this society's downfall, I further examine the capabilities of Aztec technology and their possible weaknesses that may have suggested other factors contributing to their defeat. By exposing the causes behind the frequency and procedures with which the Aztec practices their rituals of human sacrifice, conclusions can be drawn about the cause of the fall of the Aztec empire.

Born and Bred in Blood;
The Fall of the Aztec Empire

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INTRODUCTION:

The Aztec, otherwise known as the Mexica or the Triple Alliance, was an empire during the Late Postclassic period in Mesoamerica (Smith 1987). Amongst all other empires to populate Mesoamerica, the Aztec culture is predominately recognized by several distinguishable varieties: first, their constant state of warfare; second, their vast architectural and engineering feats; third, their remarkable record keeping abilities; and lastly, by their prominent practice of human sacrifice. Despite the power of this empire that featured a capital home to 200,000 or more estimated inhabitants, the city fell within the three years of European contact that had initiated in 1519 (Clendinnen 1991). The question of what caused the Aztec civilization to collapse is drawn from archaeological and ethno-historical data, typically focusing on the rippling consequences of contact with the Spanish. This view purports that the Aztec were both overwhelmed and outsmarted by the Spanish and their leader, Hernan Cortes, and is frequently presented as the primary cause for the civilization's collapse. Some alternative views rely on the role that disease played, noting it was used as a tool by the Spanish to sever the number of Aztec fighters and block necessary trade-routes, thereby starving out the Aztec for them to succumb to the advanced capabilities of Spanish weaponry. Fewer proponents conclude that the fault lay within the Aztec's relationship with conquered tribes, stating that manner in which Aztec enforced tribute and trade caused those tribes to assist Cortes in paving the way to defeat (Clendinnen 1985). Of all of these commonly known theories, the latter appears to be the most credible to archaeological and ethno-historical analysis with the exception that it fails to centralize the common denominator, the involvement of Aztec ritualistic behavior. The practice of human sacrifice and definite, albeit less mentioned occurrence of cannibalism (Isaac 2002) played major roles throughout all aspects of Aztec society. These practices effected their behavioral demeanor, their political interaction, their

stratification of social classes, and is deeply rooted into the heart of their engineering feats. Given this significant role, we ought to reform our causal understanding of the collapse of the Aztec empire so that it identifies that it was their very own cultural practices that lay at the heart of their undoing.

Evidence of ritualistic practices derives from many staple accounts of Aztec culture; namely, architecture and written accounts from the Spanish. In examining Aztec pyramids we can see not only the outward suggestions of sacrificial practices (altars, etc.) are prevalent, but also that such sacrifices were central to their engineering as remains of victims of human sacrifice have been found within the foundation of Aztec temples (Sugiyama 2013). Further accounts offer support that this ritualistic behavior was despised by neighboring tribes who were obliged to provide victims for these sacrificial rituals, typically via being attacked by the Aztec in what has been commonly referred to as "The Flower Wars" (Clendinnen 1985). This specific activity of the Aztec to conquer and essentially harvest victims was taxing to neighboring tribes, specifically like that of the Tlaxcalans, and is believed to be the motive by which inspired them to assist the Spanish in challenging the Aztec empire (Clendinnen 1991). More importantly than fostering such hatred from neighboring tribes, the need for tributes to be sacrificed heavily factored into the strategy of Aztec warfare. Rather than outright kill the enemy, Aztec warriors aimed to take them prisoner (Isaac 1983) which hindered their success against the combined powers of higher numbers of enemies with advanced technology. Cortes even used these practices to motivate his own agenda; he pursued both acquiring the wealth of their natural resources (gold, to be specific) and was able to sway his appearance to be that of a hero for Catholicism in eradicating the Aztec, whose activities had been condemned as atrocities. This demand of culturally central ritualistic practices shaped the lives of the Aztec people, arguably so much so that it paved the way for their defeat. In

order to adopt the idea that Aztec cultural practices were the primary cause of the empire's collapse, the other theories must be disproven and/or integrated. I will employ a series of specific methods to evaluate the occurrence and influence of Aztec cultural practices to conclude how the Aztec, despite being one of the world's greatest empires, caused their very own doing.

METHODS:

Applying data from ethno-historical, archaeological, and experimental sources provide basis for much of the inferences made. In terms of most significant ethno-historical references, most of the data comes from the works of Father Bernadino de Sahagun, as his is recognized to be the one of the more accurate and least biased. Debate surrounds the accuracy of many Spanish records in account to Aztec lifestyle and culture; some suggesting that those who were present during to conquest preserve falsely dramatized distortions of the Aztec, while others conclude that the use of translators during this time accounted for a loss of honesty. However, in the case of Father Sahagun, he began his research almost ten years after the empire had been conquered and had himself spoke the Aztec native language of Nahuatl. Thus allowing him to interview the Aztec in face-to-face settings instead of relying on third-party communications and further allowing us to retain a more effective, less subjective recount of Aztec lifestyle.

From this we further explore the consequences of cultural pressures in Aztec society to conclude how these they affected their social, political, and warfighting activities. Primarily, we will approach the argument that Aztec collapse was solely due to the Spanish's use of advanced technology, illness, and attrition warfare. Here we'll examine weapons exclusive to the Aztec with a consideration that contrasts them to that of the Spanish arsenal. Utilizing the capabilities of experimental archaeology, the effectiveness of these weapons are evaluated in conjunction with

how the ethno-historical information dictates they were used. Such examination will revolve around analyzing the practical aspects of the weapon as it contributes to the various tactics, weapons systems, and combat victories. Together, these methods of evaluation will reveal that cultural practices were the true catalyst that initiated the collapse of the Aztec empire.

RESULTS OF INTERPRETATION:

Aztec religion was multi-polytheistic and featured gods that are equated as being their way for explaining natural forces (i.e. the god of sun, the god of rain, and the god of wind). The core of their beliefs revolved around their gods and the idea of constant creation and destruction from them. Thanks to archaeological findings like that of the Sun Stone, we know that the Aztec believed that human sacrifice was required to appease their gods (Hodge 1998). The Aztec held that in order to create the world, one of the gods had to jump into a fire that would consume them (thus emphasizing the importance of sacrifice) and then they would be forced to act as the sun itself. Each time this god became angered, they would destroy the world and this would drive the process to repeat, marking the beginning of a 'new sun' which is used interchangeably as meaning age, era, or epoch (Isaac 2002). The Aztec people believed they fell under the time known as Fifth Sun, and that the god, Tonatiuh, had sacrificed himself to become the sun. Thus Tonatiuh's image is observed in the center of the archaeologically renowned Sun stone where he is surrounded by the council of four gods (two of them being Huitzilapochtli, the war god, and Tlaloc, the rain god, were critical to Aztec worship). In this depiction Tonatiuh's face has a tongue shaped like a blade, linking to the obsidian blade utilized for rituals, as well as two claw-like hands extending out from him shown holding human hearts (Clendinnen 1985). This vital construct of mythology reveals that sacrifice is considered absolute and critical to the Aztec way of life. Recognizing this

we can commit that the priesthood held a reign of control over the society and that the need to practice human sacrifice fueled the Aztec empire to become the war machine that it had been (Harner 1997).

The hierarchy of the Aztec empire is thus founded upon the basis of two things; religion and victorious acts in war. Warriors were the elite of the society given exclusive access to luxuries with strong social influence succeeded only by that of the priesthood. Even the emperor himself was a warrior who acted in conjunction with a council of three others, one of which was another warrior of high standing (Clandennin 1985). Interestingly enough the concept of being 'royal blood' is not even deemed as relevant to warrior status in Aztec culture, this in comparison to monarchies and empires of similar structure makes the Aztec culture more unique in this regard. A man born from a lower-class lineage can enter the higher classes by performing well as a warrior just as conversely a man of more noble birth can fall into the lower class by proving to be cowardly in battle. At a young age, males born in Aztec society are inundated by training to become a distinguished warrior regardless of their family's social standing. Should any of these young men flee or turn their back in battle they are quickly removed from this warrior program and forbidden from re-entry, thus forcing them into a lower class where they would serve alternative functions such as merchants, craftsmen, or mere laborers (Clandennin 1985). Those who remained and succeeding in the program were granted their elite standing in the hierarchy of the Aztec society.

Of all the perceived luxuries granted to the elite warrior-classes of Aztec society, the most valuable is also perceived by us to be the most disturbing; the right to consume human flesh. The act of cannibalism within the Aztec culture is often undisclosed due to contemporary efforts to combat ethnocentric and negative views of native tribes (Harner 1997), but this behavior is undeniable given the numerous recordings that mention the practice from combined accounts of

friars, soldiers, conquistadors, and even Father Sahagun. Despite irrefutable evidence of it, the question of why the Aztecs practiced cannibalism is considered subject to dispute. More common theories contend that it was simply an act that was committed in devotion to the gods of the Aztec religion (Winkelman 1998) while others say it was a necessary act required for the Aztec to survive and thrive (Harner 1997). Given that commune to the gods was so heavily valued in Aztec culture and therefore deemed a necessity, we can infer that in either instance it was considered a required practice for the Aztec, perhaps both for subsistence as well as religious values. By denying the commoners access the ability to feast on human flesh, which was considered a delicacy, the Aztec had intentionally inspired all of their citizens to be a part of the warrior community (Clendinnen 1985). Therefore, the basis of human sacrifice in turn with the consumption of the victims became not only an important attribute of religion, but also a political necessity.

Sacrifices served to remind those identifying with the Aztec tribe, be it by force or choice, why it was beneficial for them to be a part of the empire. It also acted as a way to persuade other tribes as to why they ought to not rise up against them. Aztec both believed and insisted that their victories were not merely coincidence but the will of the very gods they had worshipped (Isaac 2002). They used their ritualistic behavior to intimidate their neighbors and adopted it heavily into the governing structure of their empire. Being a cannibal empire made the Aztec starkly unique as a dominant group in Mesoamerica; rather than reform and incorporate the groups they had conquered as many other groups in the Mesoamerica had done, the Aztec would purposefully designate them as tributaries. Upon such designation as a tributary alliance, the conquered group would be obliged to give goods to the Aztec and produce victims for their rituals (Issac 2002). The goal for the Aztec was to collect sacrifices when engaging these other tribes and their technique of warfare tailored to this specific aspect of capturing rather than killing.

As the Aztec strategy of war changed so did the manufacture of their weapons. The Aztec utilized both long-range and short-range weapons but reserved different intentions when employing them. A primary long-range weapons included bows as well as atlatls, which were long javelin-like devices that gave their spears additional torque value to be thrown further. Contrary to initial assumption these were not designated to kill enemies from a long range, but instead to disperse large groups so that Aztec warriors could easily select and engage other fighters in one-on-one combat. When approaching an enemy, these warriors utilized a variety of short-range weapons: the sling, a small, knotted piece of string that was used to accurately launch stones at high speeds; the shield, which could be used to disperse enemy arrows as well as inflict blunt trauma; and the macuahuitl, a sword made of sliced wood that had sharpened obsidian blades epoxied into its edges featuring dual flat edges that could be used to knock their opponents unconscious. These weapons were undoubtedly capable of being very lethal, but the Aztec were so deeply focused on capturing sacrifices that they had specifically trained themselves to use them as a means to help them capture enemies. Meanwhile, the Spanish were intent on surmounting kills through the use of canons, matchlock rifles, steel swords, and metal armor. Given the advanced reputations of these weapons, it is easy to see how many are quick to agree that it was the cause of defeating the Aztec. However, the Aztec had two distinct features that allowed them to be victorious that the Spanish did not: numbers and convenience. The Spanish canons and rifles were prone to malfunction and took time and skill to repair/reset, which was an issue when an Aztec warrior rapidly charged and closed their distance to them in battle. On the other hand should an Aztec weapon such as the sling malfunction, it took no more than a couple minutes to fix their product in the middle of an engagement. The number of Aztec citizens in Tenochtitlan at the time of encounter with the Spanish in 1519 is estimated to be more than 200,000 in number meanwhile

the Spanish had arrived with under 500 individuals, only some of which were soldiers converse to the Aztec society which prioritized warrior status (Clendinnen 1991). Specific recounts of battles, like that of the event dubbed Noche Triste where the Spanish were defeated by the Aztec, proved that the Aztec were more than capable of defeating the conquistadors in one-on-one engagements.

Hernan Cortes, in his motive to take over the Aztec empire and acquire fame and fortune, recognized that he could not defeat the Aztec with his small group. Cortes thus ventured to encounter neighboring groups to seek assistance with defeating the Aztec, one of which was known as the Tlaxcala, a tribe that had been conquered and coerced into a tributary alliance to the Aztec empire. Having grown tired of the dominating Aztec force, the Tlaxcala needed no convincing to join the Spaniards in their conquest. Through his efforts, Cortes learned to block off incoming resources to the Aztec (a fault to the capital city of the Aztec empire was that they needed to haul resources in via specific routes) and thus ensued a war of attrition to weaken the empire which was being hit simultaneously with resource scarcity and sickness. After considerable time and with the addition of thousands of new fighters recruited from neighboring tribes, Cortes led his army to charge the city of Tenochtitlan. Having faced the Aztec before, Cortes further adjusted his fighting strategy to having the Spanish attack from a distant front line, using their long-range weapons to knock down the Aztec charging warriors. Then he would have the assisting tribal members flank the Aztec from the side before they could reach the Spanish long-range weapons (thereby granting them sufficient time to reload). When and if they did encounter close-range combat they relied on the usual application of swordsmen in hand-to-hand combat. Overall, in conjunction with their fighting style being to kill rather than the Aztec's goal of capture, the Spanish gained a quick victory and officially conquered the capital city of Tenochtitlan in August of 1521, thereby signaling the end of the powerful Aztec empire (Clendinnen 1991).

DISCUSSION:

The importance and influence of cultural attributes of the Aztec empire in their political, social, and militaristic systems is undeniable. The Aztec manipulated their society and culture to revolve around specific ritualistic practices and furthermore used them to expand their empire. Neighboring tribes feared the ferocity of the Aztec warriors and were forced to give into the demands of the empire. As cultural pressures met fighting tactics, Aztec warriors adjusted their fighting style to suit capturing victims for ritualistic means and thus focused their training on learning how to use their weapons for that very purpose. When confronted with the Aztec the Spaniards challenged the empire and gain control of its riches. After discovering their inability to conquer the empire on their own, they furthered their success by condemning the Aztec for their cruel sacrificial practices and gave tribes in tributary alliances with the Aztec motivation to assist them in their endeavor. Combined Spanish forces with advanced weaponry, fighting strategy to include attrition, and the most important addition of tribal forces is often recognized as the cause of the defeat of the empire. However, the common denominator in each of the aspects that enabled the Spanish to be conquer the empire is the resounding consequence of Aztec cultural practices, particularly human sacrifice. The Aztec weaponry would have been more advantageous had the warriors trained to use them for lethal purposes rather than to merely injure, subdue, and capture. Had the Aztec endeavored to have their neighboring tribes join their society rather than using them as a means to their ritualistic demands, they would not have given their neighbors reason to side with the Spanish and pursue their downfall. Reforming this view of how one of the most powerful civilizations collapsed can be crucial to understanding the temporal effects of atrocities that coincide with cultural elements, specifically we can denote that although the Aztec believed their

efforts were to serve an important cultural characteristic, it fostered hatred from those who endured the consequences of their forces. Overall, the Aztec empire serves as a prime example of how a powerful society can collapse not by simply being overwhelmed by external forces, but by being hindered and, in the end defeated, by their own internal complexities and cultural demands.

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