

State-Sanctioned Violence for Geopolitical Power in the Aztec Empire

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Acts of violence have always been a part of humanity, whether it be state-sanctioned or amongst civilians, in the past or in the present. Amongst the people and as a state-sanctioned act, the forced extension of geopolitical power or unrest today often results in acts of violence. Despite witnessing these acts of violence today and understanding why they occur, there is a tendency to find other reasons to justify these acts amongst past populations. In studying past peoples and the uprise of empires there is often a blanket of mysticism laid across geopolitical thinking; past peoples are interpreted as stargazers who feared defying their gods. The iconographic and/or textual evidence of state-sanctioned religion and physical remains of temples in city-states frequent as the anthropological evidence supporting the mysticized perspective.

In ancient Mesoamerica, the Aztec empire was one of the mysticized geopolitical powers participating in state-sanctioned violence commonly referred to as human sacrifice. Today, there are multiple theories on the reasonings behind the state-sanctioned violence incorporated into the Aztec empire. This paper will argue in favour of geopolitical power fueling state-sanctioned acts of violence dubbed human sacrifice in the Aztec empire. Firstly, a summation of widely accepted theories for Aztec state-sanctioned violence is provided, followed by the definition of sacrifice and why the mass killings of people in the Aztec empire do not fall under the definition. Secondly, the history of the Aztec people is outlined, followed by origin myths and population trends. Thirdly, Aztec mythology is reviewed with an analysis of similarities to mythologies of other ancient Mesoamerican origins. Fourthly, examples of state-sanctioned violence are examined, followed by evidence of violence leading to trauma. Lastly, a review of the listed discussions is followed by the conclusion of geopolitical power legitimizing state-sanctioned violence.

Theories and Sacrifice

Nonevolutionist and Ecological Theories

The initial theory for Aztec human sacrifice revolved around the dependency of Aztec political leaders and their followers adhering to religious-based demand (Winkelman 1998:286; Graulich 2000:355) and penance for the sins of people (Graulich 2000:355) termed the “nonevolutionists” theory by Harner (1977:117). The theory appears Eurocentric in nature, over-exaggerating the Indigenous relationship with mysticism and excluding the features of city-states. Human sacrifice for religious gain implies mythology overrode geopolitical awareness in the Aztec empire; an outdated misconception of Indigenous peoples of the past.

The next developed theory behind human sacrifice was referred to as the ecological hypothesis (Hamer 1977:117; Winkelman 1998:286). The ecological hypothesis deemed human sacrifice a byproduct of population pressure combined with a lack of food resources to maintain said population without occurrences of starvation and death. Intertwined with the ecological hypothesis are suspicions of the Aztec practicing cannibalism as a resource for protein consumption (Harner 1977:119; Winkelman 1998:286). During times of ecological stress, such as drought, it may have been plausible that instances of cannibalism did occur, as other peoples around the world practice it today. Cannibalism does not fit as an overarching explanation for human sacrifice due to the multitudes of occurrences throughout the calendar year.

If human sacrifices were conducted to provide a source of protein during times of crop failure, ecological stressors would have needed to be present multiple times a year throughout the empire. Provinces and the city-states within them paid taxation fees through the distribution of goods, known as tributes, to the capital of Tenochtitlan (Smith 2003:158). Referring to the Codex Mendoza one city-state could send an annual amount of 3800 jars of honey, 3200 items of

deer skins, and 1600 items of balls of rubber as tribute (Smith 2003:163). The numbers tallied in the Codex Mendoza argue against a continuous state of ecological distress required to justify human sacrifice for cannibalism.

What is Sacrifice? Did the Aztec Practice it?

To sacrifice is to surrender something without the expectation of receiving something in return (Reinert 2016:256). Dictionary definitions of sacrifice include “to suffer the loss of, give up, or renounce” (Merriam-Webster 2022). The Aztec empire, hegemonic in nature (Chase et al. 2009:175; Smith and Montiel 2001:245), did not suffer, renounce, or surrendered anything without expectation during ritualistic mass killings as public displays. Religion and ritual are critical elements of a complex society (Ross and Steadman 2017:7). Understanding the power of religion, the rulers and religious leaders of the Aztec empire used religion and ritual to their geopolitical advantage. Ruling from the city-state of Tenochtitlan, control was exercised through state-sanctioned killings in the name of religious piety. The Aztec empire controlled with fear through acts of violence, aiding in its success in expansion and power all across Central Mexico during its reign up until its collapse in the early 16th century after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in 1519 (Ross and Steadman 2017:326; Smith 2003:57).

Origins and Expansion

Origin Stories; Myth or Truth?

The people of the Aztec empire claimed their origin from Aztlan (Smith 2017:241). Whether Aztlan refers to a geographical location of a different name or a place lost to unrecovered mythology is still up for debate. What is thought to be confirmed was the migration path of the Nahuas people (Smith 2017:241), the ethnic group considered to be of true Aztec

origin (Smith 2017:242; Vargas-Alarcon et al. 2006:747). The theorized path of migration of the Nahuas originated in areas of the Southern United States known today as Arizona and New Mexico (Vargas-Alarcon et al. 2006:747). According to the migration theory, the Nahuas travelled South to Central Mexico (Vargas-Alarcon et al. 2006:747-748) to where the main city-state of Tenochtitlan would be located. Studies researching the haplogroups of the descendants of the Nahuas people that lived in the areas ruled by the Aztec empire do not correlate with the Aztec origin story and migration theory (Vargas-Alarcon et al. 2006:753).

Population Growth and Expansion

Located in ancient Mesoamerica (Figure 1), the complete growth of the Aztec empire took place during the Middle Postclassic period (AD 950-1150) to the Late Postclassic Period (AD 1350-1520) (Smith 2017:29-30). Various populations of different origins began to migrate toward Central Mexico (Smith 2017:241) establishing the roots of the Aztec empire. The development of city-states and populations in between were connected through trade routes that reached all across Central Mexico (Figure 2 and Figure 3; Lugo and Alariste-Contreras 2019; Smith 2017:159). The political stronghold that developed to maintain the Aztec empire consisted of three major cities: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan (Smith 2017:243). Together, the three cities were called the Triple Alliance (Smith and Montiel 2001:252; Smith 2017:243). The Triple Alliance governed a vast amount of land over 160,000km² (Smith 2017:245).

During the Late Postclassic, the average population was 11,000 people per 2.5km² (Smith 2017:246), with an overall population in Central Mexico floating around 2 million people (Pennock 2012:279). Tenochtitlan was the largest city of its time period (Smith 2017:242) with a population average of 200,000 (Smith 2017:243; Iverson 2017:92). Spanish conquistador Cortés documented an average of 60,000 Aztec citizens traversing through central Tenochtitlan on a

daily basis (Smith 2017:248). Population size grew in Tlatelolco during the Middle Postclassic and Late Postclassic periods (Morales-Arce et al. 2019:3460-3461), the peak expansion of the Aztec empire. Tlatelolco had the resources to host a large population. Like Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco markets could house an average of 50,000 people (Morales-Arce et al. 2019:3460). The Aztec empire proved itself as a massive geopolitical power with millions of people within its grasp, during its peak years.

Religious Origins and Legitimization

Aztec Mythology

The Aztec had around 200 name variations for deities worshipped (Smith 2003:199). Of the 200 names, the ones state-sanctioned killings were dedicated to most were Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, Quetzacoatl, and Xipe Totec (Smith 2003:199-206). Aztec mythology taught their citizens that their deities offered themselves up for death to give life to human beings (Almazán 1999:163; Pennock 2012:286; Smith 2003:192). Prior to the era of the Aztec empire, there were four previous eras named the four suns, each ending with the elimination of humankind (Almazán 1999:163; Smith 2003:193). To create the fifth sun, in the era of the Aztec empire, the Aztec deities needed to give up their flesh and blood for humankind to live and breathe, and for the sun to move across the sky (Almazán 1999:163, Smith 2003:195). The deity Quetzacoatl (the feathered serpent) gave his blood in exchange for humans to live, Nanahuatzin jumped into a fire to become the sun (as the deity Tonatiuh) that stayed still in the sky, and Tecciztecatl jumped into the same fire, becoming the moon (Smith 2003:195-196). In addition to giving his blood, Quetzacoatl permitted the removal of his heart in offering to Tonatiuh to convince him to move across the sky (Smith 2003:196).

In archaic empires, religion and political dominance went hand in hand (Ross and Steadman 2017:7). In relation to state-sanctioned religion as a means of control, the cult of the feathered serpent was the following of choice all over Mesoamerica (Ringle 2004:169). For the growth of an archaic complex society, such as the Aztec, state-sanctioned religion needed to be acknowledged and followed by its citizens (Ross and Steadman 2017:7). In borrowing mythology from other cultures, the Aztec political and religious leaders altered aspects of the mythology to better legitimize their rulership (Smith 2003:93).

The Feathered Serpent in Mesoamerica

The cult of the feathered serpent had already been present all over Mesoamerica prior to the rise of the Aztec empire. The feathered serpent deity was present in ancient Mesoamerican cultures wherever there was a following of Venus (the planet), the archaic war star (Garcia and Márquez 2021). Origins of the feathered serpent and its relationship with Venus go back to the Formative period (1200-400 BC) in ancient Mesoamerica (Garcia and Márquez 2021). The Olmec site of La Venta (900-400 BC) shows a carved image of the feathered serpent on Monument 19 (Garcia and Márquez 2021). At the site of Teotihuacan, a pyramid was built in dedication to the feathered serpent deity (Price et al. 2020:215). The time period in which the Temple of the Feathered Serpent was built predates the Aztec empire by almost a thousand years. Isotopic analysis of teeth from bioarchaeological remains found within the pyramid suggests victims of the Maya areas (Prince et al. 2020:219) were killed in dedication to the same deity the Aztecs claimed as their own. At Chichén Itzá, a temple dedicated to ‘Kukulcan’, the Maya name for the feathered serpent deity, was built between AD 900-1100 (Tejero-Andrade et al. 2018:1).

Violence as a Mean for Control

Desecration of Other Cultures

Archaeological evidence uncovered at Tula suggests the Aztec rulership extended North of Central Mexico. Charred temples and the presence of Aztec ceramics suggests the temples were desecrated (Iverson 2017:101) as an act demonstrating the successful overthrow of the Toltec deities (Iverson 2017:103) to make room for their own. Evidence of desecration was uncovered at pyramid B and Pyramid C (Iverson 2017:101, 107, 108). In taking Toltec ideas and shaping them into their own, the grandeur of the Aztec empire extended into the North. The Aztec empire grew to be a superpower in Central Mexico (Iverson 2017:107), colonizing wherever possible. The colonization by the Aztec demonstrate the political power possessed over such a large territory.

Methods of State-Sanctioned Killings

Methods of the ritualistic killings included, but were not limited to, beheadings, removal of the heart through the chest cavity, drownings, and falling to one's death (Graulich 2000:353; Tiesler and Olivier 2020:170). At times, beheadings were followed by the removal of the heart or flaying of the victim (Graulich 2000:353; Tiesler and Olivier 2020:170). Altogether, regardless of the chosen method, the ritualistic were extreme acts of violence that citizens were present to witness. In Aztec rulership, violence between citizens was against the law (Pennock 2012:284-285), but state-sanctioned violence against citizens was revered.

How Many were Killed?

An average of 20,000 people were ritualistically killed in the name of Aztec deities on an annual basis (Harner 1977:117). Using the guise of state-sanctioned religion during difficult times such as drought or general crop failure, political leaders would call for the ritualistic killing of human beings (Harner 1977:130). Perpetuating the religious belief of feeding the deities for their blessings consistently justified the legitimacy of ritualistic killings (Harner 1977:131),

especially through the following of a calendar determining which festivals called for state-sanctioned killings (Pennock 2012:282).

Xochiyaoyotl - Flowery War

Xochiaoyotl (flowery war) was a politically-driven ritual that took place within the Aztec empire, specifically between the mid-15th century and the arrival of Cortés (Isaac 1982:415). The Triple Alliance (Hicks 1979:88), Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, and Cholula were active participants in Xochiaoyotl (Isaac 1983:415; Smith 2003:171). The purpose of Xochiyaoyotl was to acquire humans for the state-sanctioned killings (Graulich 2001:91; Hicks 1979:88). The number of casualties from Xochiaoyotl varied per ritual, but remained in the thousands each time (Isaac 1983:421). The numbers did not always reflect additional captives taken separately for state-sanctioned killings at a later time (Isaac 1983:421).

Tzompantli - Skull Racks

Uncovered during an archaeological excavation in 2015, Tzompantli (the Aztec skull rack), was a display of human skulls at the base of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan (Smith 2003:220; Wade 2018:1289). Ideas that are admired are often replicated in some way. The Aztec borrowed ideas from Tula, which led to the construction of Tzompantli at Tenochtitlan (Iverson 2017:104). Tzompantli is presumed to house thousands of human skulls (Smith 2003:221; Wade 2018:1289) all belonging to the victims of state-sanctioned killings. The display of Aztec trophy skulls consists of large racks up to 5m high and 36m in length, with two large cylindrical displays of skulls at opposing ends at the front of the structure (Figure 4; Wade 2018:1292). Of the skeletal remains analyzed thus far, percentages of adult males, adult females, and juveniles are present (Wade 2018:1292). An assortment of modifications of the skulls and teeth within them have been identified, suggesting the individuals on display were of various cultural and

possibly genetic origins (Wade 2018:1292). Only a portion of the Tzompantli has been excavated, meaning all of the possible diversity of the bioarchaeological remains are not yet uncovered. In Tenochtitlan, Templo Mayor was the temple atop which the majority of state-sanctioned killings would occur (Pennock 2012:280), witnessed by citizens and anyone in the city-state at the time (Wade 2018:1290).

The Effects of Violence

Traumatic events are defined as events in which a person is faced with the threat of death, witnessing death, or their person has experienced a form of physical assault (Maercker and Hecker 2016:28). Immediately following traumatic events, victims respond with extremes such as fear, despair and revulsion, or with a form of dissociation (Maercker and Hecker 2016:31). A possible byproduct of traumatic experiences is a newfound religious perception or supernatural awareness (Maercker and Hecker 2016:32).

The events during state-sanctioned killings included festivities of dance with tributes of gold and flowers, creating a pseudo-joyous and celebratory environment for witnesses (Graulich 2001:94-95). Victims of state-sanctioned killings were universal amongst the Aztec (Graulich 2001:104-105), demonstrating the level of power religious and political propaganda had over their citizens (Smith 2003:220). Warriors, prisoners, criminals, children, healthy or unwell; all were eligible for state-sanctioned violence.

Discussion

The earlier theories developed to explicate the reasoning behind state-sanctioned mass killings in the Aztec empire were not developed from unbiased perspectives. The Eurocentric tendency has put more emphasis on mysticism than realism in the case of the development of complex societies and their inner workings. The past and the people from it are romanticized and

underestimated. In an analysis of contemporary society, theoretical possibilities for the legitimization of state-sanctioned violence of the past are ever-present. In eliminating the mysticism behind archaic empires, it is easy to see that geopolitical entities always have had a desire for control and power over land and people.

For the Aztec, religion and polity were interconnected (Smith 2003:220), legitimizing state-sanctioned killings in the name of religious piety as a method of geopolitical advancement. Through the Aztec origin myth of the gods giving up flesh and blood for humankind to live, the political and religious leaders used it as leverage over the people as a debt to deities only repayable in their flesh and blood (Almazán 1999:164; Smith 2003:195). The deities worshipped, which allegedly called for human blood, were not deities new to Mesoamerica. To support the legitimization of the Aztec state-sanctioned religion, familiar deities were called to be worshipped under different names.

Generally, religion is an effective method of asserting control over people and exercising their will to be obedient. Just as provinces offered up goods as tribute to the main city-state as tribute, human beings were offered up as well (Graulich 2001:106). The Aztec empire used familiar deities, such as the feathered serpent, to win over the people in conquered territories and to further ensure a seamless transition for the religious conversion of the population. If the population was given deities to worship that are already familiar all over ancient Mesoamerica, the likelihood of unquestionable dedication is higher.

It was customary for prisoners captured during non-flowery warfare to be killed in the name of religious piety (Hicks 1979:90). Considering prisoners were a byproduct of general warfare, the need for flowery seemed dubious at best in terms of geopolitical expansion. The demand for flesh and blood from the deities (Hicks 1987:87) would be the only legitimized

reasoning behind an additional type of warfare specified to seek out victims for state-sanctioned killings. Flowery wars were a method of boasting the amount of power the Aztec empire possessed over Central Mexico. The high number of deaths was a testament to how disposable human beings were in the eyes of political leaders.

In regards to the population size of the Aztec empire, the thousands of people who experienced state-sanctioned acts of violence was insignificant amongst millions of citizens. The continuous growth of the Aztec empire ensured that population pressure rapidly increased the number of mouths to feed (Harner 1977:132). The victims of state-sanctioned killings could be easily replaced by others, as having access to a large population, people become disposable. State-sanctioned killings of the past are comparable to sending soldiers off to war in contemporary society; regardless of the people killed, there is always more available to be sent in their place.

In using religious piety as a reason for public displays of violence, citizens are more likely to believe in the supernatural effects of deities. In front of the Templo Mayor, the Tzompantli was on display (Wade 2018:1290), a grand display of power intimidating to those who could ever possibly want to rebel against their political and religious leaders. The fastest method for news to travel across is word of mouth. People would have been naturally inclined to discuss state-sanctioned killings, cementing the fear-stricken and obedience of citizens as byproducts. Composing celebratory events to commemorate acts of violence by using festive activities is a clever method to soften the blow of witnessing violence. In convincing populations that state-sanctioned violence was associated with a form of positive outcomes, as if being rewarded, it became easier for people to comply. In any society which is ruled by a combination

of polity and religion, the people under rule will be more inclined to do what is expected, especially if there is a belief that some form of reward is received.

Conclusion

Up until recent decades, the complexity of archaic states have been undermined and underestimated. The ability to successfully overthrow and control vast geographical areas, and the people within them, is an impressive feat for any geopolitical entity. The use of state-sanctioned violence was the key to the geopolitical success of the Aztec empire. Formulated during an era dependent on religious piety, the leaders of the Aztec empire capitalized on the importance of obedience and worship, using them as strings to control the people as puppets. Even if citizens were unhappy with their political and religious leaders, displays of state-sanctioned violence were more than enough for the population to keep their heads down in obedience.

The Aztec empire is an excellent example of extreme geopolitical control executed seamlessly in Central Mexico. As demonstrated through the expansion of territory and population growth, the Aztec empire was not losing during its peak, before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. With the growth of territory and population, trade routes extended across Central Mexico, leading back to its geopolitical center of Tenochtitlan. The continuous shipments of goods as taxation to the capital demonstrated the richness of provisions provinces around Central Mexico, and the unquestionable dedication to the Aztec empire.

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Figures



Figure 1. Map of Ancient Mesoamerica (Britannica, 2012).

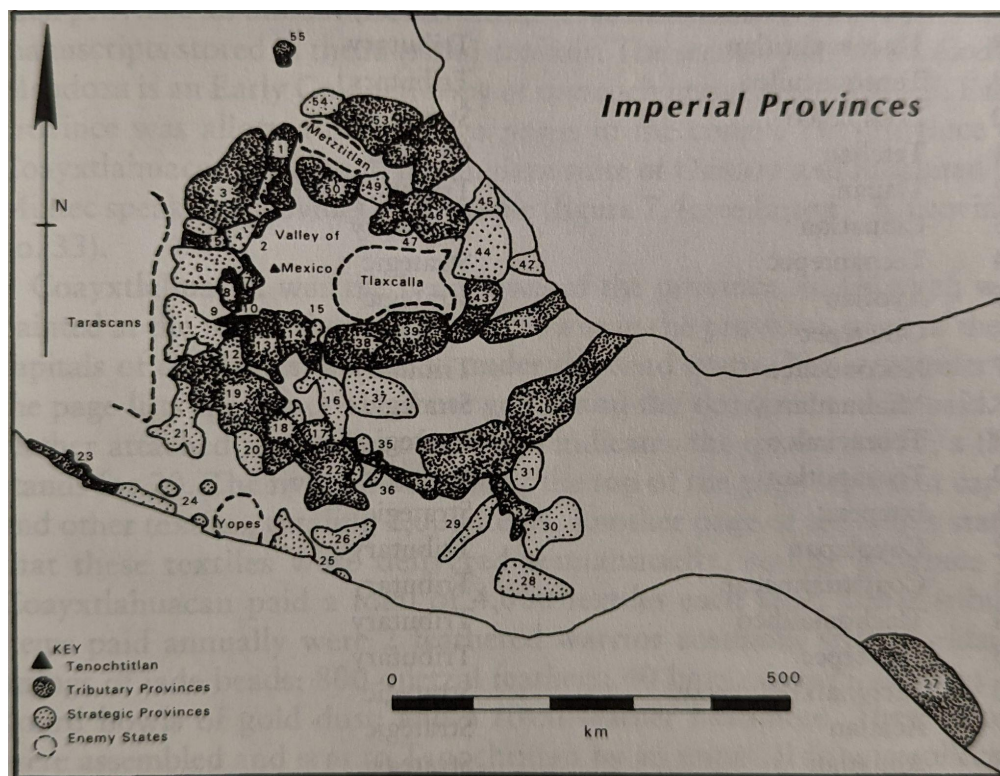


Figure 2. Map of Aztec Provinces in Mesoamerica (Smith 2017:159).

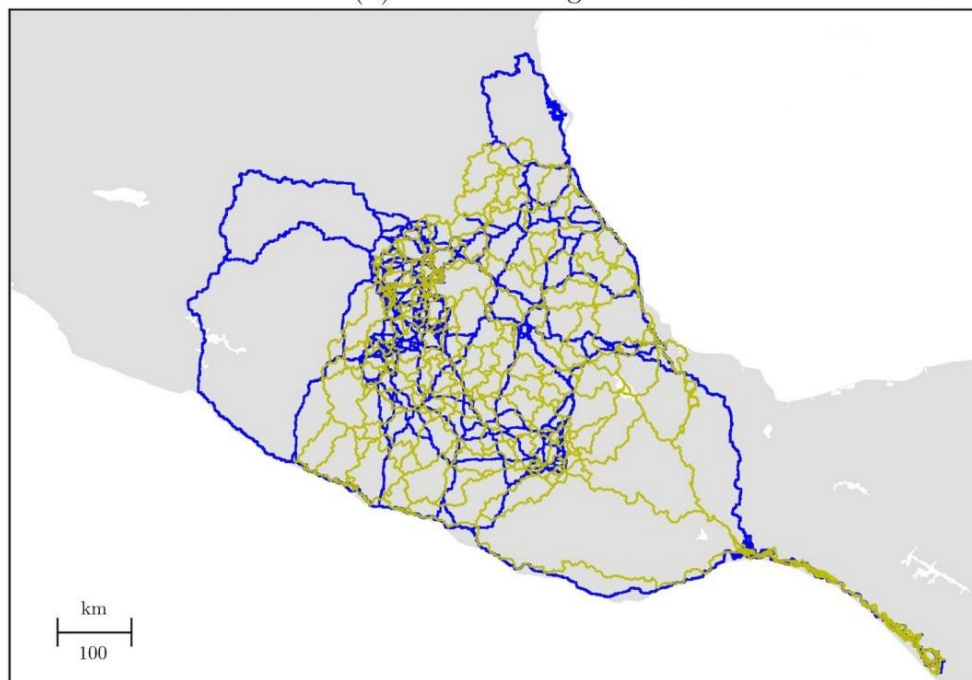


Figure 3. Map of Aztec Trade Routes (Lugo and Alariste-Contreras 2019).

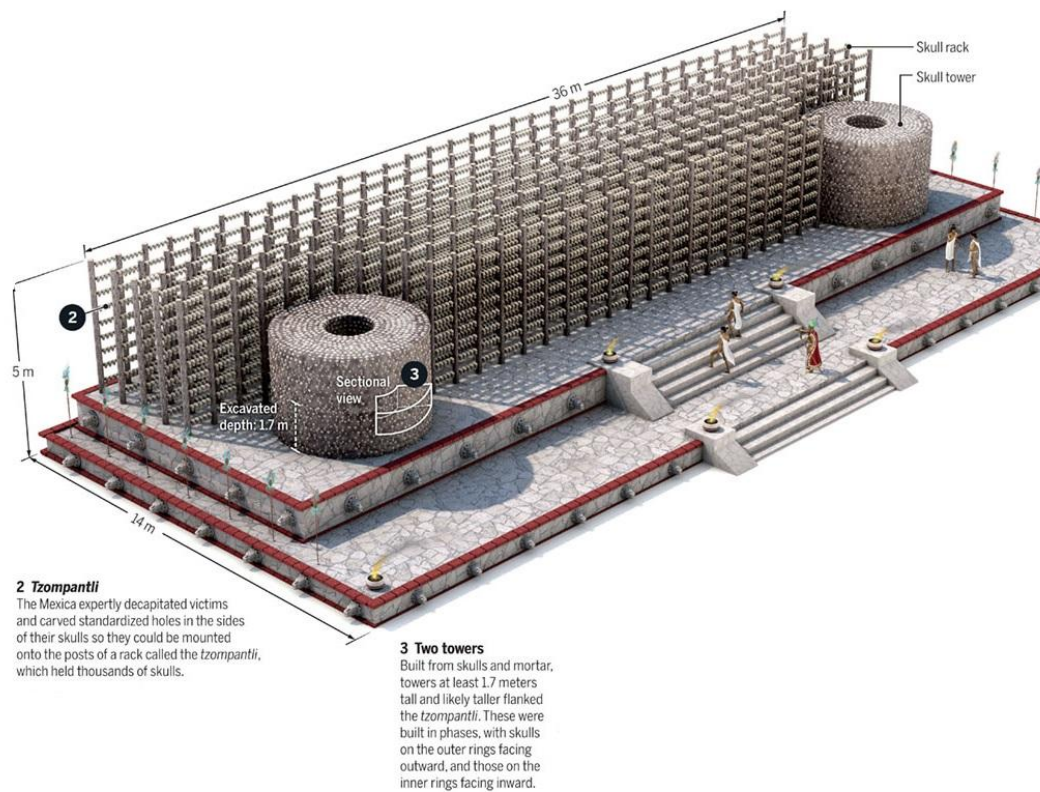


Figure 4. Tzompantli at Tenochtitlan (Wade 2018:1292).