

Chapter 9

Aztec Feasts, Rituals, and Markets

Political Uses of Ceramic Vessels in a Commercial Economy

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Some of the most vivid written accounts of Aztec society describe exclusive gatherings where the emperor hosted other kings and nobles in elaborate ceremonies consisting of sumptuous meals, theatrical rituals, formal speeches, and luxury gift-giving. These and other feasting events were important parts of Aztec political process. As in nearly all ancient complex societies, Aztec political feasts involved the use of a variety of distinctive ceramic serving vessels, allowing archaeologists to document aspects of ancient feasting. But unlike some of the societies described in this volume, neither the production nor the distribution of these feasting vessels appear to have been under the control of the state or the elite. Nearly all Aztec ceramic wares were manufactured by independent producers, and they were exchanged as commercial commodities in the marketplace.

The Aztec economy was the most highly commercialized economy of the ancient New World, and this had implications for the uses of ceramic vessels in political feasting. The Aztec economy consisted of two contrasting sectors: an open

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commercialized market sector, and a politically-controlled sector involving land, labor, and state finance. The market sector consisted of practices and institutions centered on a system of marketplaces found in virtually every town and city. Several forms of money were in regular circulation in these markets and at least two types of full-time entrepreneurial merchants could become quite wealthy from their trading expeditions. Most of these commercial activities were conducted outside of direct state control, and the overall volume of exchange was much higher than what the evidence suggests for the earlier civilizations of Mesoamerica (Smith and Berdan 2003). This dynamic and open market sector coexisted with a political sector that consisted of a system of city-states and an overarching empire. Within Aztec city-states, land and labor were under strict centralized political control. Nobles owned the land and rights to the labor of commoners, while kings extracted tribute from their subjects to finance both government institutions and the lavish lifestyle of the ruling elite.

Whereas the feasts of the nobility were associated with the political sector, the ceramic vessels employed in these feasts were obtained through the market sector. The Aztec state did not control the production, distribution, or consumption of ceramics. Even the fanciest and most valuable serving vessels were sold in the markets, available to commoners (Blanton 1996; Hodge and Minc 1990). As a result, the same types of elaborately-decorated polychrome vessels used at the highest level of imperial feasting could also be used for meals in commoner households. The one major exception to this pattern was a complex of distinctive ceramic vessels recovered in offerings at the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. These objects, by far the most complex and elaborate of Aztec ceramics both aesthetically and symbolically, may have been manufactured under state control solely for placement in these offerings. These were the only true “state ceramics” in Aztec society, but they were not used for feasting or other kinds of activities by anyone outside of the Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan.

AZTEC POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

At the time of Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century, Aztec central Mexico was divided into a mosaic of city-states, most of which were subject to the Triple Alliance empire centered at Tenochtitlan (Berdan et al. 1996; Smith 1996). Although the surviving documentary sources are heavily biased toward the empire and its capital, the *altepetl*, or city-state, was the most important polity for local administration and regional political and economic dynamics (Lockhart 1992; Smith 2000). As we discuss below, feasting played important roles at both the imperial and city-state levels, although documentary descriptions of the latter are far less abundant.