## INTRODUCTION

The story of the Aztecs, whatever else it may be, is a tale of midnight murders, intrigues, and wild revenges. Disguises and espionage were commonplace and came to their culmination in the most hair-raising escapades. The din of battle was relentless and unceasing. All this, added to the constantly shifting loyalties that marked the relationships among the various Aztec states during the short period of their floruit, sows confusion in the mind of the scholar, tempting him to believe that Aztec history is before all else passionate and episodic in character.

The Mexica, that branch of the Aztec people investigated in this book, seem to exemplify nicely this view of Aztec history. Indeed the Tlascalans described them as a "people who seem to have been born never to rest, never to leave anyone in peace," while the Otomí cried out to all who would hear: "The Mexican is an inhuman person. He is very wicked. . . . The Mexicans are supremely bad. There is none who can surpass the Mexican in evil." <sup>2</sup>

The history of the Mexica—microcosmic of the whole Aztec world—has a lurid quality not often met with in the chronicles of nations. The historian feels that he is looking back upon a people adrift in a great tempest of their own making.

Yet these same Mexica were in no sense a heaven-storming people; they were, on the contrary, most submissive and melancholy servants of their gods. The perturbations and egotisms in their political lives xvi Introduction

were merely enchantments thrown upon them. In fact they formed a steadfast and sacred society, disciplined by their belief in the sacrament of human sacrifice and forever humble under the bans and demands of gods and demons. The lordship of the heavens was the salient fact in all their calculations. Deep under the tumults of their daily lives, they were eminently quiet slaves.

The personage who stood in the very center of Aztec history was the teuctli. We will have much to say about him later, but a short introduction is necessary here. He was both the hero and the victim of his society. The word teuctli referred primarily to the successful warrior, but beyond that it carried implications of superior social status. Proper translations of the title should undoubtedly be taken from among that constellation of words so well known to us from the Middle Ages: "knight," "baron," and "lord." Certainly all of the connotations of those terms are present in the Nahuatl word, as well as others that are specific to the Aztec world.

It was this *teuctli* whose voracious hunger for battle, whose boastfulness, whose monstrous dignity and unending search for honors form the dynamic in Aztec history. The Aztec states were institutions shaped by his hand and geared to the fulfillment of his needs. These states were therefore platforms displaying him in all his armorial gaudiness to the world at large. Out of his knightly enterprise was to come the energy, the treachery, and the tumult of the times.

But this Aztec baron was in addition the high priest of his culture, scrupulously intent on advancing the millenial purposes of the gods. More was asked of the *teuctli* than of any man. The sacrifices he was called upon to make were very great indeed, and his death on the field of battle or on the sacrificial stone was in every sense redemptive for his people. Still he knew himself to be a defeated man whose end was certain, and in bitterness he could and did lament the enchantment in which he was locked:

We came here only to sleep,
Only to dream—
It is not true that we came to live on the earth,<sup>3</sup>

The basic stuff of Aztec history is the appearance of this teuctli, his

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seizure of power (or rather his reformulation of it) upon the ruins of the Toltec empire, and his attempts to find a legitimacy for that power. Mexican history shares in this common Aztec history but is unique both in the high intensity of its political life and in its final solution to the problem of legitimacy.

The Mexica are probably as controversial to us today as they were to themselves in their own times. Their catastrophic end is better known to most than the events of the fall of Rome, but their beginnings and their corporate life as they lived it for a few fleeting decades are generally not known to the majority of serious readers. The whole tale is, as it were, a skeleton, its bones split and scattered about by the years. These we can inspect one by one and even curiously reassemble them. Within those bones lies, still fat, the historic marrow of an amazing people. Their tale should be known and is here offered.