CHAPTER 31

MEXICA WAR

New Research Perspectives

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Precolumbian studies focused on the Mexica have proliferated in recent years. The Mexica world is well documented by data from multiple sources, including ethnohistoric documents, the Spanish chronicles, and archaeological studies. However, not all aspects have been adequately addressed: such is the case for warfare.

General Historiography of Mexica Warfare

Following on the heels of the chroniclers and subsequent researchers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of the first outstanding examples of early research on Mexica warfare were published during the late nineteenth century. For example, Adolphus Bandelier (1877), in particular, marks the beginning of a much deeper concern with the study of warfare as part of the Mexica world.

During the first half of the twentieth century, important researchers, such as Pedro Armillas (1942), Eduardo Noguera (1945), Celia Nuttal (1891, 1892), Antonio Peñafiel (1903), and Eduard Seler (1960), offered some precursor proposals in the topic. By the middle of the twentieth century, the first synthetic works began to emerge; these are considered complete works, devoted entirely to this topic. One important example is Jorge Canseco's (1966) *La guerra sagrada*, in which the author offers a vision of what he calls "The Sacred War." Some of the works that formally give rise to the historiography of Mexica warfare include those by José Lameiras, which are primarily based on written sources and codices, including *Los déspotas armados, un espectro de la guerra prehispánica* (1985) and *El encuentro de la piedra y el acero* (1994).

Of all the books published to date on warfare in the Mexica world, none has had as much impact on the academic world as the work of Ross Hassig. However, while Hassig's pioneering work continues to be indispensable, it is not definitive. With a mature and focused theoretical basis, Hassig's (1988) *Aztec Warfare Imperial Expansion and Political Control* as well as his second work, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Hassig 1992) present a basic outline of our knowledge of prehispanic warfare. These works also provided future researchers (e.g., Bueno 2005, 2007; Cervera 2007, 2011; Pohl 1991) a solid basis for developing some of the finest studies based on this initial framework.

Military Archaeology: A New Discipline in Mexico

Studies on Mesoamerican warfare have always been dominated by explanations based on the ritual functions of this activity. Unfortunately, such studies almost completely ignore the other side of the coin: human involvement in warfare. Hassig (2000:169) warned of this epistemological limitation:

> This is true regardless of whether the society in question creates Jehovah, Allah, Huitzilopochtli, or Chac. The army can only advance a set number of miles, every soldier consumes a certain amount of food and drink each day, and these supplies must be provided if the war is to be won, regardless of ideology. . . . I believe that the knowledge of what happens on earth is an essential requirement.

The words of Fernando Quesada (2006), another great scholar of warfare in antiquity, offer a revealing glimpse into the topic. Championing the need to address the problems of military history, from the perspective of military history and archeology, Quesada (2006:149) warned against viewing this approach as archaic or outmoded, urging rather that "Unapologetically, military history must be focused on the military."

This is likely one of the main factors preventing a more balanced view of the subject. This does not mean that the religious and symbolic aspects of warfare, which of course are many (González 2011:317), should be minimized but rather that alternatives on the other end of the spectrum should also be considered. The goal is to eventually achieve a balance that permits us to consider all possible angles and mechanisms, whether religious or mundane, related to the phenomenon of warfare in the Mexica world.

Starting with Carlos Brokmann's (2000:261–286) work, we begin to see the development of research with a more mature perspective of concepts of warfare in the Mexican school. Some of these new ideas derive from the discipline of military archaeology (Gracia 2011). Thus military archeology, also known as conflict archaeology—with strong proponents in England, France, Spain, and the United States—has allowed us to understand more fully how warfare is conducted and what that meant for the armies of antiquity (Gracia 2011:3). Although not without limitations, the application of these

FIGURE 31.1 Experimental reconstruction of a *macuahuitl* by Marco Cervera and Marco Antonio de la Cruz. (Photo: Marco Antonio Cervera File).

theoretical models to data from a variety of Mexica sources has painted a different picture of this subject. Military archeology is concerned with the painstaking task of creating a scientific typology of weapons based on the available iconography (i.e., sculptures) (Trejo 2000:221) and the recovery of weapons from archaeological contexts. This permits morpho-functional studies of these artifacts in order to identify their defensive or offensive uses in the battlefield. Recently, such studies have included experimental archeology of Mesoamerican weapons (Cervera 2006:34–35, 2011:118–125) (Figures 31.1 and 31.2).

From the Aztecs we have mostly obsidian artifacts, although there are also a few examples of wooden weapons, such as the recently published *macuahuitl* uncovered in Mexico City by Juana Moreno Hernández of the Subdirection of Archaeological Studies at the National Institute of Anthropology and History (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

Military archaeology has also been concerned with the identification and excavation of battlefields as part of a subdiscipline known in the English-speaking world as battlefield archaeology (Gracia 2011:14). For various reasons related to conservation, it has been very difficult to take a similar approach to the study of Mexica warfare. Mexican military archeology (Cervera and Bueno 2014) has been under development for, at

FIGURE 31.2 Experimental reconstruction of a *teputopilli* by Marco Cervera and Marco Antonio de la Cruz. (Photo: Marco Antonio Cervera File).

most, a decade. Future generations of researchers will secure the place of this discipline and ensure its development in Mexico.

War in the Mexica World: Two Perspectives

The driving force behind the expansion of the empire and the development of the Mexica civilization was war, which therefore must be considered with great care and consideration. Much of the political, economic, and religious foundations were thoroughly saturated by the Mexican military phenomenon, and therefore the problem and its explanation become increasingly complex.

To facilitate analysis, I delineate two types of Mexica warfare: wars of conquest and the "flowery" wars. The difference between the two is obvious from their names. The former was the real engine of expansion for the empire, with the primary objectives of obtaining tribute and economic resources and ensuring territorial expansion. Although not the primary objective, no doubt war captives were also obtained, as is the case in any military conflict.

The latter, which are the source of considerable debate among researchers, are better known as the holy wars. This type of warfare had as its primary objectives the capture of prisoners for sacrifice and the advent of mobility within the Mexica military structure, which was particularly important for the *macehualtin* who had few other options for advancement (Cervera 2012b:36). Various authors, including Hassig (1998:54) and Isabel Bueno (2007:158), argue that these wars were part of a political strategy to keep subjected nobles at bay, as it was difficult to truly subjugate them and far easier to simply keep them in a state of constant exhaustion from defending themselves against the Mexica military. Sometimes these two types of wars could merge into a single vision or be modified as political and military processes developed, as was the case with the war waged against Chalco.

Note that these two basic types of war are specific to the Mexica world—it would be wrong to apply them to all Mesoamerican societies, as often happens when trying to explain this phenomenon in other societies that were contemporary with or even preceded the Mexica. The flowery or ritual warfare was a Mexica invention, and warfare did not take on the same form in other Mesoamerican cultures (e.g., Teotihuacan or Tula).

Each type of warfare has its respective implications; that is, how they were carried out was distinct. Thus the number of troops assembled for combat, tactical maneuvers, the use of weapons, and the forms of combat were likely very different. Different objectives clearly marked the strategies and logistics of each campaign.

Generally, a war began with a request from the Mexican state for a particular kind of tribute, which, depending on the area, might be different manufactured items or raw materials, among other things. Many such demands were recorded in documents like the *Matrícula de Tributos* or the second part of the *Codex Mendoza*. Should the towns in question refuse this request (which they did on two occasions), the Mexica army could declare war (Berdan 1978:78; Carrasco 1994:186).

Typically, the Mexica sent an emissary to carry out the ritual of declaring war. The representative, sent on behalf of the ruling aggressor, offered the following gifts: a lead carbonate ointment, feathers, a shield, and darts for armed conflict. If the opponent accepted the military dispute, the Mexica representative offered him a *macuahuitl* and a shield decorated with a flower (Durán 1967, Vol. II:ch. IX). It was understood that this initiated the preparations for war. The next step involved the provisioning of armies, which included corn-based food items like tortillas, tamales, cornmeal, and, as mentioned in written sources, tortilla chips, which were easier to preserve and transport, as well as weapons (Hassig 1988:73).

Much discussion has focused on how to use the written sources to distinguish between wars of conquest and the flowery wars. This is significant because, in many cases, the sources contradict each other. In fact, some sources mention that the flowery wars were "agreed upon" with six specific adversaries. According to Durán (1967, Vol. II, ch. XXVIII): "And it would be very strategic to have our market and festival in the six cities I have mentioned: Tlaxcala, Huexotzingo, Cholula, Atlixco, Tliluhquitepec, and Tecoac, as the people of those towns will accept our god as they would bread hot from the oven, soft and tasty." Thus, theoretically, any other campaigns mentioned in

the Spanish documents were wars of conquest, and their development was different. Of course operating a campaign with the nearly exclusively goal of transporting captives to Tenochtitlan was strategically more convenient than having adversaries located in the Basin of Mexico.

The Structure of the Army

By the "structure" of the Mexican army I mean in particular the bureaucratic body and the chain of command in which it was established. Elsewhere I have proposed that Mexica warfare be understood in terms of three stages: origins, mercenaries, and imperial stages. The Mexica army changed considerable during its history (Cervera 2011:62). Thus, during the Imperial period, the Mexica social and military structures were better developed (López Austin 1985:215) and could sustain a true control system, which is hotly debated today.

The eagle and jaguar warriors were the most emblematic aspects of this typically Mesoamerican control system. They were present at least from Teotihuacan times (Cabrera 2002:137; Cervera 2012a:21), and their symbiotic relationship with these predatory animals is undeniable. The capture of prisoners, particularly as part of the flowery wars, was the main mechanism for mobility within the Mexica chain of command. Captives were more important than the number of enemies killed. This is a rather contradictory situation where warfare is concerned (*Codex Mendoza*, Plate 67r). Mobility within the control system was reflected by the diversity of uniforms available, each very ornate and adorned with very specific symbols (Broda 1978:120).

The flowery wars were an important route, in particular for the *macehualtin*, for gaining access to military rank, prestige, and some privileges. However, the most important ranks were reserved only for *pipilltin*. In many cases, the ranks are identified by Nahuatl words that do not necessarily correspond to a logical and consecutive chain of command, such as *Yaoquiscayacanqui, yaoquiscatepacho, yaociscatachcahu, yaotachcahu,* and *yaotequihua*, terms that are simply translated as "commander of men" or "men of war" (Lameiras 1985:173–174). Therefore, it is not entirely clear which ranks correspond to the modern military ranks of general, captain, and lieutenant. In addition, other systems such as weaponry and communications were also intimately linked with warfare.

There has been considerable discussion of how many troops the Mexican army could muster to do combat on the battlefield. Estimates are calculated as a percentage of the total population. The inherent military probability (IMP), a concept coined by military historian A. H. Bume (Quesada 2006:151), is often used by archaeologists and military historians. The IMP permits estimation of the number of troops available to ancient armies based on population estimates. It is estimated that between 6 percent and 10 percent of the population, excluding the disabled, children, women, and the elderly, would be available for combat and able to wield a weapon. Most authors consider that, at its height, the city of Tenochtitlan housed an estimated 200,000 people (Hassig 1990:67),

thus a total of 20,000 troops for the armies of Tenochtitlan alone and around 60,000 soldiers if the other members of the Triple Alliance are included would have been available. There were also auxiliary troops, many of which were provided by subjected cities. When the Mexican army passed by such towns or initiated a campaign, the townspeople had an obligation to provide troops, food, and weapons (Hassig 1990:107). Estimates based on the IMP agree somewhat with the figures cited in the Spanish sources. For example, for the war against the Tarascans, the armies numbered 40,000 and 25,000 warriors for the Tarascans and Mexicas, respectively.

The size of an army is often an important element in terms of winning or losing a battle, though it is not the only factor. In the battle between the Tarascans and the Mexicas, however, it was a determining factor. The larger Tarascan army defeated the Mexicas, who, until that moment:

> had never feared that any army would attack them, nor had they ever faced weapons or other war supplies of higher quality, were concerned what other nations would say that if they returned now, having arrived without being summoned or provoked [Durán 1967, Vol. II:ch. XXXVII].

The communication system (the way the Mexica army transmitted and received orders) is well-known. Written sources, like Torquemada (1975), Durán (1967), and Sahagún (1997), as well as iconographic sources, such as the *Codex Ixlilxóchitl,* Folio 106r, report that information could be transmitted by audio or visual means. The former was achieved through two basic instruments, the conch shell and a small drum that generals carried on their backs (Figure 31.3).

In contrast, the visual transmission of information typically involved the use of flags carried by soldiers on their backs. Each of the flags represented either the *calpulli* or the village of origin, to facilitate organization on the battlefield (Durán 1967, Vol. II:ch. XXXVII).

Weapons, Weapon Systems, and Tactical Approaches

Much has been said about the basic typology of Mexica weapons, both offensive and defensive arsenals. In *El armamento entre los mexicas* (Cervera 2007), I attempt to establish the origins, types, functions, and various roles of these in the Mexica world. Using a variety of data sources, I outline our basic knowledge on the topic. However, this earlier work did not include experimental archaeology, which has since revolutionized what we know about Mexica weapons.

Thus Mexica weaponry has drawn more attention over the past decade. On the one hand, we have passive defensive weapons, such as the *ichcahuipill* cotton breastplate and

FIGURE 31.3 Nezahualcoyotl as a soldier, with weapons that include a *macuahuitl* and *chimalli*. He carries a small drum on his back to transmit orders on the battle field. *Codex Ixtlilxóchitl*, Folio 106r.

helmets, while on the other were active defense weapons that included shields or *chimalli*. Offensive weapons may be divided into two types: long-distance weapons such as the *atlatl*, sling, throwing darts, and bow and arrow, and weapons for hand-to-hand combat, such as the *quauholloll* (mace or club), *macuahuitl* (hand spear or sword), and *teputzopilli* (similar to both a halberd and a spear).

The best way to understand the functional aspects of these devices is through experimental archeology. In terms of analyzing weapons, this school of thought has only recently garnered interest in Mexico. However, new generations of researchers, in particular, have successfully employed this analytical method. Among the researchers who have generated experimental results are Bob Perkins, Ross Hassig, Alfonso Garduño, Alejandro Pastrana, and Marco Cervera. Many of these studies have yet to be published in scientific journals or books (Cervera 2006, 2011:118), although some television networks have aired segments involving re-creations. In fact, tests have been carried out in order to examine the lethality of the weapons used by the Mexica against the Spanish.

The structure of these weapons systems, that is, the balance between offensive and defensive weapons, can be divided—with all the epistemological problems that entails—into two segments: light infantry units with throwing weapons and heavy infantry, such as *ichcahuipilli* and spears, *macuahuitl*, and shields (Cervera 2011:110).

The Future of Research on Mexica Warfare

Among new topics only recently receiving attention, Isabel Bueno (2005, 2007:175) has recently offered important new interpretations of naval warfare. Moreover, as mentioned previously, experimental archeology involving Mexica weapons is still an area of active investigation. This is apparent in the discussions generated by the recently recovered *macuahuitl*. Detailed analyses of historical sources shed light on the tactical approaches and details of the major battles fought by the Mexica while also offering specific details on their weapon systems and combat patterns (Cervera 2011:185). All of these aspects, of course, are related to control systems, an area ripe for future investigation.

Case studies accompanied by experimental archeology will allow us to approach these topics in an even more didactic manner (Cortadella 2011:91) (Figure 31.4).
The clearest examples of this new interest in prehispanic military archeology and history are the different symposia and conferences that have been held in Mexico over the past decade, starting with FES-Acatlan, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 2008

FIGURE 31.4 Resin replica of a Mexica soldier, dressed as *Tzitzimitl*. First hyperrealistic reconstruction developed in Mexico for artistic and scientific purposes by *Caronte Lab* in consultation with Marco Cervera. (Photo: Marco Antonio Cervera File)

and followed by the *Primer coloquio sobre la Guerra en el México Antiguo*, which was held at the Museo del Carmen in 2009 and another conference at the Museo del Templo Mayor in 2010. Various meetings have also been organized by the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in 2012 and 2013. Such displays of interest, particularly among younger generations and in conjunction with the increase in graduate theses on the subject, have greatly advanced our knowledge of warfare in the Mexica world. The future of Mexica warfare studies has much to offer.

Dedication

In memory of Felipe Solís Olguín.

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