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Question: How did the Aztecs maintain their political and social power during the height of their empire?

Document One

Source: Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), selection from chapter 6, "Trade, Transport, Temples, and Tribute: The Economics of Power."

A good way of assessing the distribution of power and the allocation of social status is by comparing the tribute commitments of various groups. In Aztec society, which may be visualized as a pyramidal structure, tribute was based on class affiliations and economic specialization. The nobility, at the apex of the pyramid, provided military service, as did the class of professional warriors, who through bravery could achieve a higher status than the one into which they had been born. Further down the pyramid were commoners and farmers. Their labor and production supported those above. Merchants and craft specialists provided the goods that flowed through the arteries of the empire. In the more distant reaches of the empire, trade was conducted and tribute paid in regional specialties, such as feathers or obsidian.

Document Two

Source: Johnathon Norton Leonard, *Ancient America*, Time-Life Books, 1967.

Home life for the ideal Aztec family was both well-disciplined and warm. Parents had a close relationship with children and brought them up according to a strict regime.... If children stepped out of line, parents were entitled to give them the smoke treatments, prick their flesh with thorns, or leave them outside all night to sleep in a mud puddle. When adults themselves erred, the consequences were considerably more severe: thieves, drunkards, and adulterous couples were put to death-- commoners in public, aristocrats by private execution.

Document Three

Source: Bernardino de Sahagún, in *A General History of the Things of New Spain*. Sahagún was a Franciscan friar who wrote extensively on the daily life of Aztecs and their cultural practices in the mid-16th century. This fragment, written down by Sahagún, appears to be a Mexica (Aztec) woman's advice to her daughter, likely of marriageable age.

My beloved daughter, very dear little dove, you have already heard and attended to the words which your father has told you. They are precious words, and such as are rarely spoken or listened to, and which have proceeded from the bowels and heart, in which they were treasured up.... Take care that your garments are such as are decent and proper; and observe that you do not adorn yourself with much finery, since this is a mark of vanity and of folly.... When you speak, do not hurry your words from uneasiness, but speak deliberately and calmly. Do not raise your voice very high, nor speak very low, but in a moderate tone.... In walking, my daughter, see that you behave becomingly, neither going with haste, nor too slowly; since it is an evidence of being puffed up, to walk too slowly, and walking hastily causes a vicious habit of restlessness and instability. Therefore neither walk very fast, nor very slow; yet when it shall be necessary to go with haste, do so,—in this use your discretion. And when you may be obliged to jump over a pool of water, do it with decency, that you may neither appear clumsy nor light.

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Document Four

Source: Bernal Díaz del Castillo, trans. by Albert Idell in *The Bernal Díaz Chronicles*, 1957. Bernal Díaz was one of Cortés' soldiers during his 1519 expedition.

When we saw so all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading toward [Tenochtitlán], we were astounded.... It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen, or dreamed of before.

We turned back to the great market and the swarm of people buying and selling. The mere murmur of their voices was loud enough to be heard more than three miles away. Some of our soldiers who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, in Rome, and all over Italy, said that they had never seen a market so well laid out, so large, so orderly, and so filled with people....

Document Five

Source: Bernardino de Sahagún, trans. from Spanish and originally in *The Florentine Codex*, circa 1555. This section, recorded by Sahagún, documents a seventeen-year-old Aztec scribe's impressions of the sacrifice ritual, and was likely related to Sahagún sometime around 1529.

This seasoned warrior, whom we change from a human into the god Tezcatlipoca, can have no blemish upon his body, and he is treated like our most royal family member during the long year leading up to his sacrifice. During that time he is given all the finest luxuries from the nobles' storehouses, including foods, clothes, teachers, women, and instruction. He walks among us as a living god.... Many of us became attached to this living god, and a terrible sadness comes over some of the women when, at the end of the year, he is taken to Chalco and dismembered in public view.

Document Six

Source: Michael E. Smith, professor at Arizona State University. "The Aztec Empire," *The Aztec World*, eds. Elizabeth M. Brumfiel and Gary E. Feinman, 2008.

Aztec imperial expansion was carried out by military action. Armies were led into battle by the most experienced warriors, spurred on by drums and trumpets. Three primary weapons were used: swords whose edges were composed of rows of razor-sharp obsidian blades; thrusting spears; and bows and arrows. Aztec warfare was considered a sacred duty in several respects. First, all men were subject to military service, a basic duty to one's king and altepetl [local community]. Second, warfare was considered a cosmic struggle that paralleled battles between light and darkness and between gods such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca.

The twin elements of warfare as political expansion and warfare as cosmic duty had a strong effect on battlefield actions. On the one hand, armies sought to kill opposing soldiers and gain battlefield victory. On the other hand, soldiers tried to injure or cripple enemy fighters in order to capture them alive. Battlefield captives were the primary source of victims for human sacrifice, and taking such captives was one part of the sacred mission of war.