

The development of Aztec philosophy from the Post-classic period through the Spanish conquest as it is portrayed in Náhuatl poetry

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Extraordinary Opportunity

Abstract

The goal of this project is to study the development of Aztec philosophy from the Post-classic period through the Spanish conquest as it is portrayed in Náhuatl poetry. Themes such as life and death, the purpose of man, and the relationship between man and the universe are explored. The primary source material is composed of original authors like Nezahualcóyotl, Cuacuauhtzin, Axacayatl and complemented with analysis from observers such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo Bernardino de Sahagún and scholars such as Miguel León-Portilla. By identifying the common themes in Náhuatl poetry, a narrative that contributes to our understanding of Aztec philosophy is established.



Structure

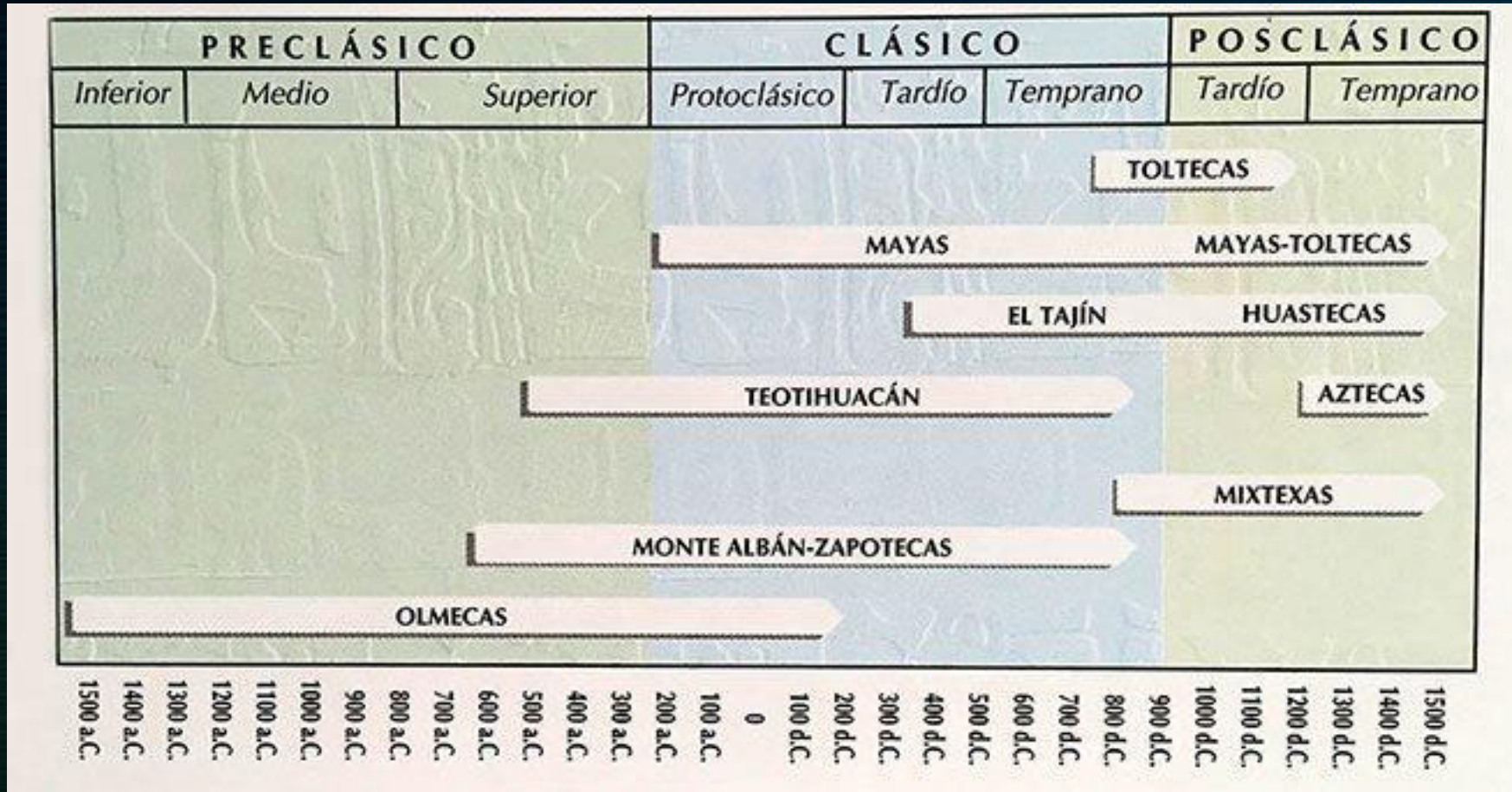
- I. Introduction
- II. Research Questions
- III. Historical Context
- IV. Authorship
- V. Poets & Works
- VI. Conclusion

Research Questions

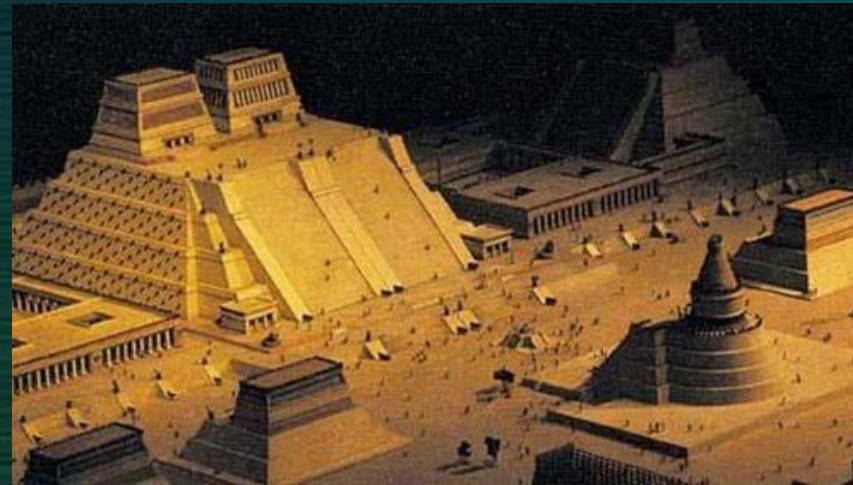
- Who wrote these poems and for whom?
- What function did these poems serve in Aztec society and how did they influence the culture?



Historical Context



Historical Context



Authorship

- Many of the songs do not have a known author
- Many of the named authors were politicians
- Christian Influence
 - After the Conquest, the clergy was in charge of translation
 - Possible distortion of Nahuatl ideas
 - Bernardino de Sahagún and others maintained non-biased records



Philosophical Poetry

- Metaphysical poetry
 - Origin of man
 - Purpose of life
- Relationship between man and universe
- Many are manifested as dreams



Nezahualcóyotl (1402-1472)

- Poet, ruler, architect
- Most renowned Nahuatl poet
- Saw his father murdered
- Formed one part of the Triple Alliance
- Works
 - Brevity of life
 - Human mortality
 - Flower and song



Nezahualcóyotl (1402-1472)

- Flower and song
 - Metaphorical language
 - Connection between nature and man, man and God



At last my heart knows it:
I hear a song,
I contemplate a flower...
May they never fade!

Por fin lo comprende mi corazón:
Escucho un canto,
Contemplo una flor:
¡Ojalá no se marchiten!



Nezahualcóyotl (1402-1472)

I, Nezahualcoyotl, ask this:

Is it true one really lives on the earth?

Not forever on earth,

Only a little while here.

Though it be jade it falls apart,

Though it be gold it wears away,

Though it be quetzal plumage it is torn
asunder.

Not forever on earth,

Only a little while here.

Yo Nezahualcóyotl lo pregunto:

¿Acaso de veras se vive con raíz en la tierra?

Nada es para siempre en la tierra:

Sólo un poco aquí.

Aunque sea de jade se quiebra,

Aunque sea de oro se rompe,

Aunque sea plumaje de quetzal se desgarrá.

No para siempre en la tierra:

Sólo un poco aquí.



Axacayatl (1441-1481)

- Poet and ruler of Tenochtitlan
- Disputed succession
- Came to power at an early age
- Reflective poetry
 - Family
 - War



Axacayatl (1441-1481)

Song of Axacayatl

Where does my heart stray?

I Axacayatl, I seek them,

Tezozomocli abandoned us,

for this I find my way alone out of my difficulty.

Is the city what they deserve,

The lords who came to govern,

who have left them abandoned?

Will there perhaps be an end to pain?

Perhaps they will come again?

Who can teach me about this?

For this I, in solitude, try to do away with my suffering.



War Songs

- War and sacrifice were an integral part of Aztec society
- Multiple functions
 - Motivation
 - Soldiers
 - Towns/Families
 - Historical events



Macuilxochitzin (1435-1480)

- Daughter of a royal advisor
- One of the few accredited female poets
- Women in Nahuatl literature
 - Love
 - Family
- Duality
 - Support for male warriors



Macuilxochitzin (1435-1480)

Song of Macuilxochitzin

I raise my songs,
I, Macuilxochitzin,
with these I gladden the Giver of
Life,
may the dance begin!

With divine flowers,
With flowers of war,
Is covered,
With these becomes intoxicated
He who is on our side.

Above us open
the flowers of war,
In Ehecatepec, in Mexico,
With these becomes intoxicated
he who is on our side.



Nezahualpilli (1464-1515)

- Son of Nezahualcóyotl
- Wise and venerated ruler
- Notorious interest in women
- Poetry of love and war



Nezahualpilli (1464-1515)

My heart is sad,
I am young Nezahualpilli.
I look for my captains,
the lord has gone,
the flowering quetzal,
the young and strong warrior has gone,
the blue of the sky is his house.
Perhaps Tlatohuetzin and Acapipiyol will
come to drink the flowery liquor,
here where I weep?

Canción de Nezahualpilli (Extracto)

Mi corazón entristece,
Yo soy joven Nezahualpilli.
Busco a mis capitanes,
el señor se ha ido,
el quetzal florido,
el guerrero joven y fuerte ha ido,
lo azul del cielo es su hogar.
¿Vendrán Tlatohuetzin y Acapipiyol
a tomar el florido licor
aquí donde lloro?



Conclusion

- Who wrote these poems and for whom?
 - Accredited poems were written by nobility
 - *Cantares* were used in public
 - The audience varied depending on the author
- What function did these poems serve in Aztec society and how did they influence the culture?
 - Historical record
 - Political agendas



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