

## **THE PEOPLE, THE PLACE, AND THE TIME**

For the reader unfamiliar with Nahuatl scholarship, my use of the term “Nahuatl” may need explanation. First, the term prioritizes linguistic unity, referring simply to people who spoke the language Nahuatl. Second, the alternative term, “Aztec,” implies some sense of national identity and cohesion that did not exist among the city-states that comprised the “Aztec Empire” at the time of the Spanish conquest.<sup>1</sup> Third, “Nahuatl” has become a term used by many academics to describe the bulk of the indigenous peoples of central Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest.

“Aztec” was a term sometimes used before the Spanish conquest to describe the people of Tenochtitlan, the leading city-state of the empire. I instead use the term “Mexica” when discussing the people of Tenochtitlan. This is the term that they most commonly used, at least in written form, to refer to themselves. I reserve the term “Aztec” for discussions of the empire.

According to most accounts, the Mexica, a group of wanderers, arrived in the area now known as central Mexico sometime in the twelfth century CE, and after a series of struggles, they settled in Tenochtitlan in the early 1300s. In another hundred years, they had become the dominant city-state in an alliance that would go on to conquer vast swaths of territory throughout northern Mesoamerica.<sup>2</sup> They had great pride in a

city that they built up to be among the largest cities in the world at the time of the Spanish conquest. Tenochtitlan, a city in the middle of lake Texcoco, served both as a bustling metropolis crisscrossed by canals and as an important ceremonial center.<sup>3</sup>

This book begins with the time period immediately preceding the Spanish conquest of the so-called Aztec Empire, the military phase of which took place between 1519 and 1521. The book ends in 1650, the time when, because of increased contact between Spanish and Nahua people, we witness significant changes in Nahua culture and society. At that point, the nature of Nahua documents changes fundamentally. The year 1650 saw the beginning of what James Lockhart calls “stage three” of the process of Nahua cultural change.<sup>4</sup> This period of increased bilingualism and biculturalism presumably also transformed the relationship that Nahuas had to their fertility rituals and their sexual lives, though I will leave it to others to study this process in later colonial times.