

Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos

Coloquios, 2006

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Circulation of Feathers in Mesoamerica

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Referencia electrónica

Frances Berdan, « Circulation of Feathers in Mesoamerica », *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* [En línea], Coloquios, 2006, Puesto en línea el 21 janvier 2006. URL : <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/index1387.html>
DOI : en cours d'attribution

Éditeur : EHESS

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Document accessible en ligne à l'adresse suivante : <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/index1387.html>

Document généré automatiquement le 03 octobre 2009.

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Frances Berdan

Circulation of Feathers in Mesoamerica

- 1 Feathers, especially those from colorful tropical birds, were among the most highly prized materials in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Likewise the craft of featherworking was among the most esteemed in the Mesoamerican world. Feathers were fashioned into exquisite adornments for nobles and gods, worked into fancy textiles for the elite, and provided embellishment for the shields and military costumes of highly achieved warriors. Not only were feathers highly valued for these elite productions, they were also in demand in large and sustained quantities. This required predictable economic, political, and social mechanisms for moving such great quantities of these precious commodities from their diverse sources to their ultimate consumers.
- 2 This paper addresses the manner in which birds, feathers and featherwork traveled from hand to hand in the complex process of acquisition, manufacture, and finally consumption. I focus on the different roles of trade, markets, tribute, and elite exchanges in moving these precious commodities from diverse ecologies (tropical lowlands to chilly highlands), from countryside to city, and across the social stratum. While feathers and featherwork as prized commodities had considerable time depth in the Mesoamerican world, emphasis here is on the time and realm of the Aztecs (the Mexica of Tenochtitlan) during the last century before their conquest by the Spaniards, roughly the time of the expansion of the Aztec empire itself (Figure 1).

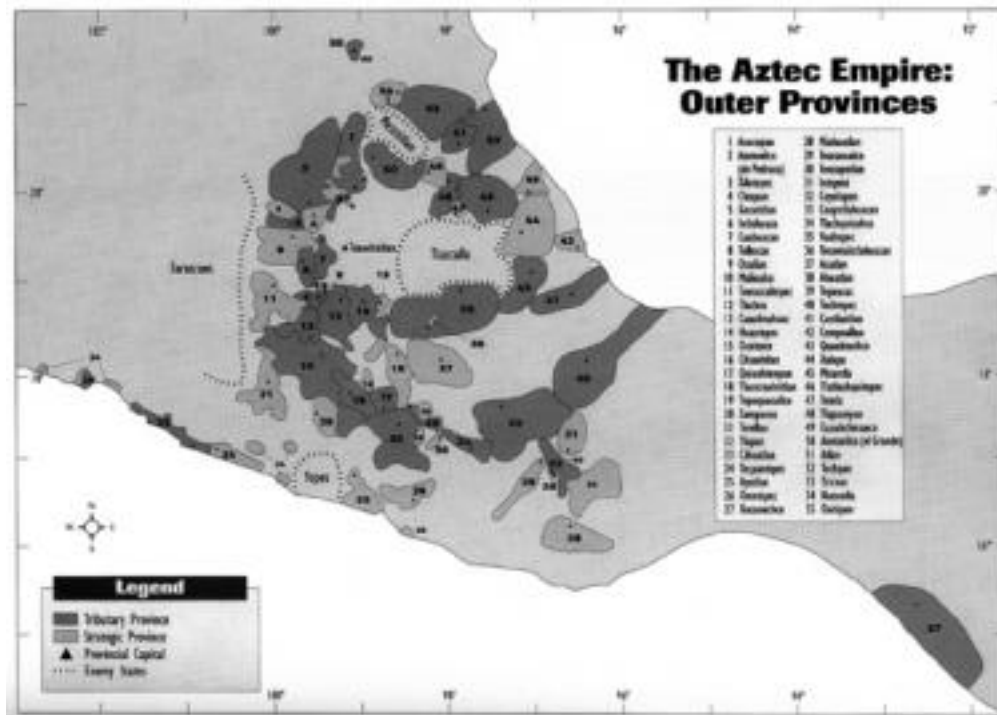


Figure 1. Map of the Aztec empire, 1519. From *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (Michael E. Smith and Frances F. Berdan, eds.): 324. 1996. Reprinted with permission from Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.

Some Initial Considerations

- 3 The craft of featherworking and the wide use of feathers in Mesoamerican life was embedded in an intricate cultural milieu and in a complex web of economic, social, political, and religious institutions and activities. As with many other aspects of Mesoamerican culture and social life, this realm is rife with ambiguities in information and difficulties in interpretation.

- 4 First, there is not universal agreement about the identification of the birds from which the feathers derived, an important problem. For instance, the bunches of red feathers in the Matrícula de Tributos and Codex Mendoza may be either roseate spoonbill (*tlauhquechol*) or scarlet macaw (*alo*); green feathers in the same documents could be from the green or Pacific parakeet, or from a trogon; yellow feathers (*toztli*) may be either *Amazona ochrocephala* or an oropendula (Sahagún 1950-82, Book 11; Gasco and Voorhies 1989). Furthermore, most birds display feathers of many different colors (and some individual feathers are multicolored). So, for instance, scarlet macaws exhibit stunning blue and yellow feathers along with the well-known red, green parakeets display feathers ranging from yellow to green, and the feathers of roseate spoonbills fade from bright red to soft pink. Some of these birds resided in different regions and had different life cycles and behavior, so this is significant in terms of their acquisition and circulation to the “feather consumers.” However, as a theme throughout this paper, I think of the Mexica and their neighbors as “opportunists” and “innovators,” and I can see them, in some cases, using feathers from a wide range of birds, not only the ones commonly listed in the documents.
- 5 A second consideration involves a certain amount of linguistic ambiguity and confusion. For instance, the term *tzinitzcan* can refer to either a specific type of bird (possibly Mexican trogon), or to the head, neck, or back feathers of any bird (Sahagún 1950-82, Book 11: 19, 54). In addition, Nahuatl glosses in codices are not necessarily neat and tidy: sometimes the referent is the name of the bird (e.g., *quetzalli*), sometimes the name of the feathers (e.g. *cueçalin*, feathers of the scarlet macaw, or *alo*). In this particular case, the names are frustratingly close (especially considering the variable 16th century spelling practices) and create fertile ground for misinterpretations.
- 6 A third matter to establish is the multitude of uses for different kinds of feathers in ancient Mesoamerican life. They were woven into fancy cloaks and other articles of noble attire, they were fashioned into ornate warriors’ costumes, they were the primary material for exquisite mosaics on shields and other objects. They adorned deities, nobles, renowned warriors, and at times much of the Tenochtitlan population during special ritual events when they were worn as flowing adornments, pasted on arms and legs, or carried as banners and fans (which were also carried by ambassadors and messengers on their missions [e.g., Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. III: folios 66r, 67r, 68r, 70r]). Plumes were frequent items for ritual offerings, whether for a deity at a monthly ceremony or at a ruler’s funeral. Feathers also served more practical purposes, such as fletching for arrows, ingredients in medicines (e.g., Hernández 1959, II: 325, 330, 343, 361), or the rather ineffective war club of a gladiatorial sacrificial warrior (perhaps not so mundane after all). They were also commonly wagered in gambling ventures. Thus some feathers were required in great abundance all the time, some were needed at special events at different times during the year, and others were only sparingly needed. Some feathers were used in contexts that allowed them to be reused. Others were destroyed, hoarded, or otherwise needed to be replaced by new supplies, thus stimulating a constant round of circulation. Overall, the most common feathers used by the Mexica (as mentioned in the documentary sources) were quetzal (*quetzalli*), scarlet macaw (*alo*), roseate spoonbill (*tlauhquechol*), Mexican trogon or green parakeet (*tzinitzcan*), lovely cotinga (*xiuhtototl*), yellow-headed parrot or an oropendula (*toztli*), heron (*aztatl*), and eagle (*quauhтли*, as down).
- 7 Fourth, birds generally were widely available throughout the Aztec imperial realm, from the wide-ranging herons, to the northern eagles, to the aquatic birds of highland lakes and coastal shores, to the quetzal’s mystical cloud forests, to the colorful tropical delights of the coastal and southern rain forests. While local highland birds such as herons, eagles, ducks, grackles and hummingbirds were used widely by the Mexica, they placed a special value on the more distant birds and their plumage. While this required active and workable tribute or trade networks, in some cases the people of the Basin of Mexico need not have traveled

long distances for access to all these prized feathers: the ruler Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (1502-1520) maintained a *totocalli*, or aviary (which housed at least eagles, roseate spoonbills, troupials, yellow parrots, parakeets, large parrots, and pheasants) along with a stable of royally-employed featherworkers (Sahagún 1950-82, Book 8:45). Durán (1994:203) tells us that live birds were paid in tribute: “Some were green, some red, others blue; parrots large and small; other splendid and handsomely colored birds such as eagles, buzzards, hawks, sparrow hawks, ravens, herons, and small and large wild geese.” Of these, only eagles appear in the Codex Mendoza/Matricula de Tributos tribute levies. Whether they arrived through tribute or other means, it is likely that these birds were housed in the royal aviary.

8 Finally, birds and their feathers were incorporated into the rich and complex symbolism of the Mesoamerican peoples. This affected their choice of feathers for particular rituals and other uses. For instance, the eagle symbolized the sun and hummingbirds represented transformed warriors; *quetzalli* served as a metaphor for preciousness and these feathers were used in the most highly valued settings and events.

9 Importantly, feathers were not randomly chosen: decisions were based on availability, artistry, and appropriate symbolism. Despite difficulties in identifying specific feathers and interpreting documentary language, it is clear that they served a variety of uses in virtually every realm of Aztec life, that a great diversity of birds and feathers were widely available, and that institutional mechanisms were necessary to move these precious commodities from their native habitats to their ultimate consumers.

Circulation of Feathers in the Aztec Realm

Trade and Markets

10 The late prehispanic time focus of this does not mean that, despite Sahagún’s informants’ claims, precious tropical feathers were not widely available in the Basin of Mexico and other highland regions until that time. Sahagún (1950-82, Book 9) suggests that these precious feathers, fashioned into elaborate devices and ornaments, reached the Basin of Mexico during the reign of Ahuitzotl (1486-1502). What probably is meant is that these items arrived as booty or tribute after a long and distant military campaign, or as a result of state-sponsored trading expeditions. The good friar notwithstanding, feathers of many kinds were in extensive use in both highland and lowland Mesoamerica well before the advent of the Aztecs. For instance, an abundant body of visual data (such as murals, stelae, and painted pottery) attest to the common use of elegant feathered devices among the Classic Maya, and interestingly, also among their contemporaries the highland Teotihuacanos and the somewhat later people of Cacaxtla, whose murals suggest that they traded in feathers and other luxuries. Further afield, scarlet macaw feathers made their way from southern or central coastal Mexico all the way to the American Southwest at least 400 years prior to the advent of the Aztec empire (see Borson et al 1998). In other words, feathers circulated broadly in Mesoamerica and beyond well before Aztec hegemony and its extensive tribute system. While more restricted tribute systems may have been in force in earlier times (e.g., with Teotihuacan), it can be asserted that most of the early movements of birds and feathers took place through ancient trade networks. These trade networks (in a variety of goods, not just feathers) antedated the Aztec empire by at least hundreds of years.

11 A second, related point is the continuation and persistence of these trade networks beyond the changing dynamics of city-state and imperial politics and the imposition of tribute. Civilizations and empires came and went, but the trade networks stayed generally intact despite these volatile political and military changes (see Berdan 2003). As an example, the distribution of the Aztec-period tribute in known scarlet macaw feathers was heavily oriented toward the northwest, on the trade routes to Paquimé and the American Southwest (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Tribute to Mexico in scarlet macaw feathered attire. Base map from Aztec Imperial Strategies (Michael E. Smith and Frances F. Berdan, eds.): 324. 1996. Reprinted with permission from Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.

- 12 There were several different types, even “levels,” of trade. Trade involving feathers, certainly the most precious ones, was largely in the hands of long-distance professional merchants (*pochteca* in central Mexico, *ppolom* in the Mayan region). These merchants (the *pochteca* at least) traded both imperial goods and their own wares in their commercial endeavors (in which many of them gained considerable wealth). In one well-documented account, the Mexica ruler Ahuitzotl (1486-1502) entrusted his goods (cloaks) to such *pochteca*. The merchants carried these goods to Gulf Coast (and probably Pacific Coast) trading centers and exchanged them for precious goods including quetzal (tail and other feathers), lovely cotinga (*xiuhtototl*), trogon or green parakeet (*tzinitzcan*), roseate spoonbill (*teuquechol*), blue honeycreeper (*chalchiuhtotoli*), and yellow parrot [or oropendula] (*tocihuitl*) feathers (Sahagún 1950-82, Book 9:17, 19). We may call these activities “foreign trade,” since they carried political overtones and took place between distant polities (see Figure 3).

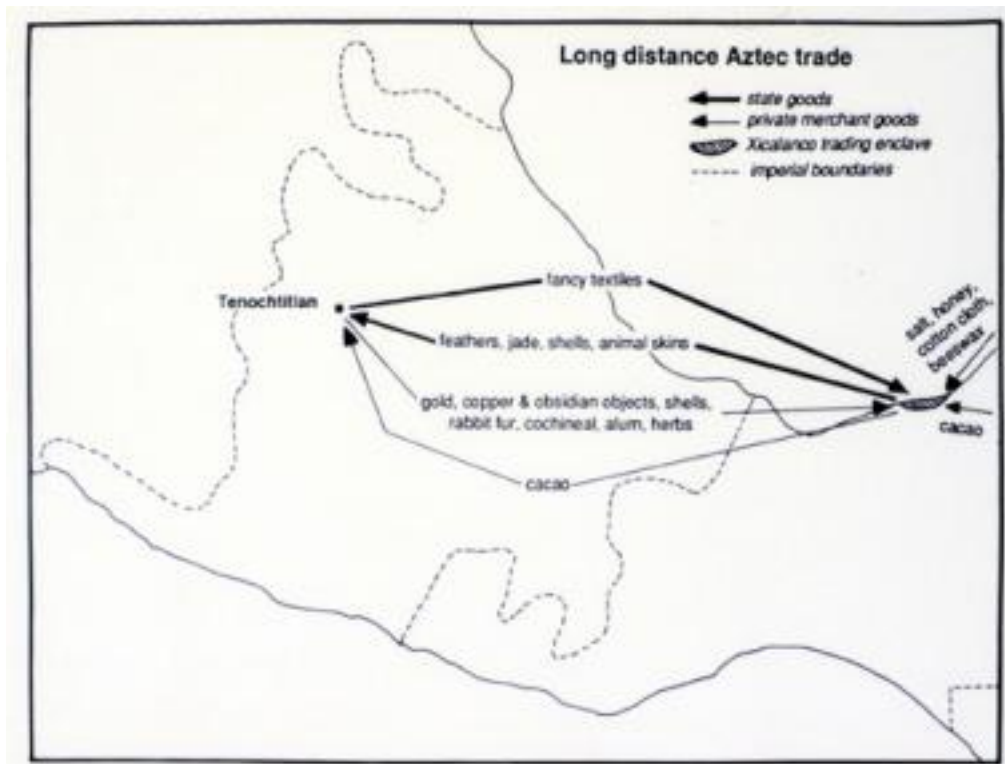


Figure 3. Movements of goods in Aztec foreign trade, early sixteenth century.

- 13 But these same professional merchants also pursued commercial advantages within the bounds of the Aztec empire. Indeed, this probably constituted the bulk of their exchanges (Berdan 1987). Whether operating inside or outside the empire, they dealt in valuable goods, those that were low in bulk and high in value (such as feathers). Their returns were high, and many of these merchants amassed great wealth.
- 14 Most of their transactions took place in marketplaces. Feathers were among the commodities that changed hands in the many bustling marketplaces of the realm (at least the larger ones). This included, of course the great Basin of Mexico market at Tlatelolco, and also those at Coaxtlahuacan to the south and Tepeacac to the east (Durán 1994: 159, 182; Sahagún 1950-82, Book 8: 67-68 [birds only], ill. 96; Book 10:61). For Tlatelolco, Sahagún (*ibid.*) tells us that those who sold feathers there were either the featherworkers themselves or merchants, and they dealt in colorful tropical delights: at least the feathers of quetzals, trogons, troupials, lovely cotinga, along with chili-green feathers. (An illustration in Sahagún's Book 8 (ill. 96) depicts probable quetzal tail feathers and a feathered cape available for sale in the market). Both raw feathers and worked objects were sold in the markets. Purchasers would have been primarily nobles, achieved warriors, and priests. However, some feathers were used by the general populace and would most likely have been available in the markets: these included the small feathers pasted on the arms and legs of youths and maidens during specific ceremonies, as well as feathers used in weddings and funerals.

Tribute

- 15 Given the extensive use of tropical feathers in Mexica daily life and ritual, it is no surprise that we find these as major tribute items. Feathers were demanded and sent as tribute in both unworked and worked forms. Information on these tribute levies is available but probably incomplete. For instance, most of this discussion is based on the Codex Mendoza/Matricula de Tributos tribute lists. However, 16th century textual documentation suggests that other tributes may also have been levied on conquered provinces (or different tribute paid at different times).

For instance, the initial tribute paid by the Gulf coastal province of Cuertlaxtlan consisted of “many colored feathers” along with fish, sea snails, shells and turtles; only quetzal feathers and none of these other goods appear in the pictorial tribute levies for this province (Durán 1994:194). Similarly, the initial tribute of Pacific-rimmed Xoconochco included clothing, none of which appears in the relevant pictorials (*ibid.*:379).

- 16 Tribute in feathers was extensive, and paid by conquered provinces throughout the imperial domain. It is notable that more feathers were paid in the form of manufactured objects such as warriors’ costumes, mosaic shields, and feather adornments than were delivered as raw feathers alone. Provinces giving raw feathers in tribute roughly correspond to the areas of actual occurrence of the birds. This applies to tropical avians in the southern and coastal provinces, and to eagles in the north.
- 17 While raw feathers were sent by distant provinces, nearly every conquered province sent manufactured featherwork objects. In contrast to the payment of raw feathers, provinces paying tribute in manufactured featherwork were often located in regions located at considerable distances from the natural occurrence of the exotic birds and their luxurious feathers.
- 18 With featherworking activity going on in all corners of the empire (and certainly beyond as well), skilled featherworkers were present throughout the empire, not just in the imperial core. Not only were contexts necessary to ensure the transmission of knowledge and skills and to assure high standards of quality, but highland featherworkers also needed predictable access to precious feathers from distant ecological zones. It would have been necessary for these artisans to tap into established systems of foreign trade, regional commerce, and marketplace exchange. In some powerful urban areas, tribute stores may have been available to some featherworkers (Sahagún speaks of “palace artisans”); some of these royal warehouses may have been stocked from gifts from other rulers in a sustained system of elite reciprocity (see below).
- 19 Conquered regions not only sent warrior attire and shields in tribute, but they also used these in their own military ventures, whether against their neighbors or against the Aztec forces. Such materials were often carried off the field of battle by the victors as booty, and would have circulated about in this rather less predictable manner.
- 20 Many feathers were widely used by the Mexica but are not recorded in the tribute documents. These included (among others) feathers from ducks (for the ruler’s capes), heron (for numerous headpieces), many types of hummingbirds (for a wide range of decorative uses), and grackle (for mosaics). If they were not paid in tribute, then trade and marketplace exchanges would have provided accessible sources for these important and widely used feathers. Even the “palace artisans” would have needed to tap these commercial avenues to obtain the complete range of feathers required for their splendid productions.
- 21 It would be interesting to figure out some tribute quantities, but there are a few nagging problems in the area of feathers. Two provinces, Xoconochco and Tochtepec, were especially prolific in sending multitudes of feathers in tribute to Tenochtitlan (see Figure 4).

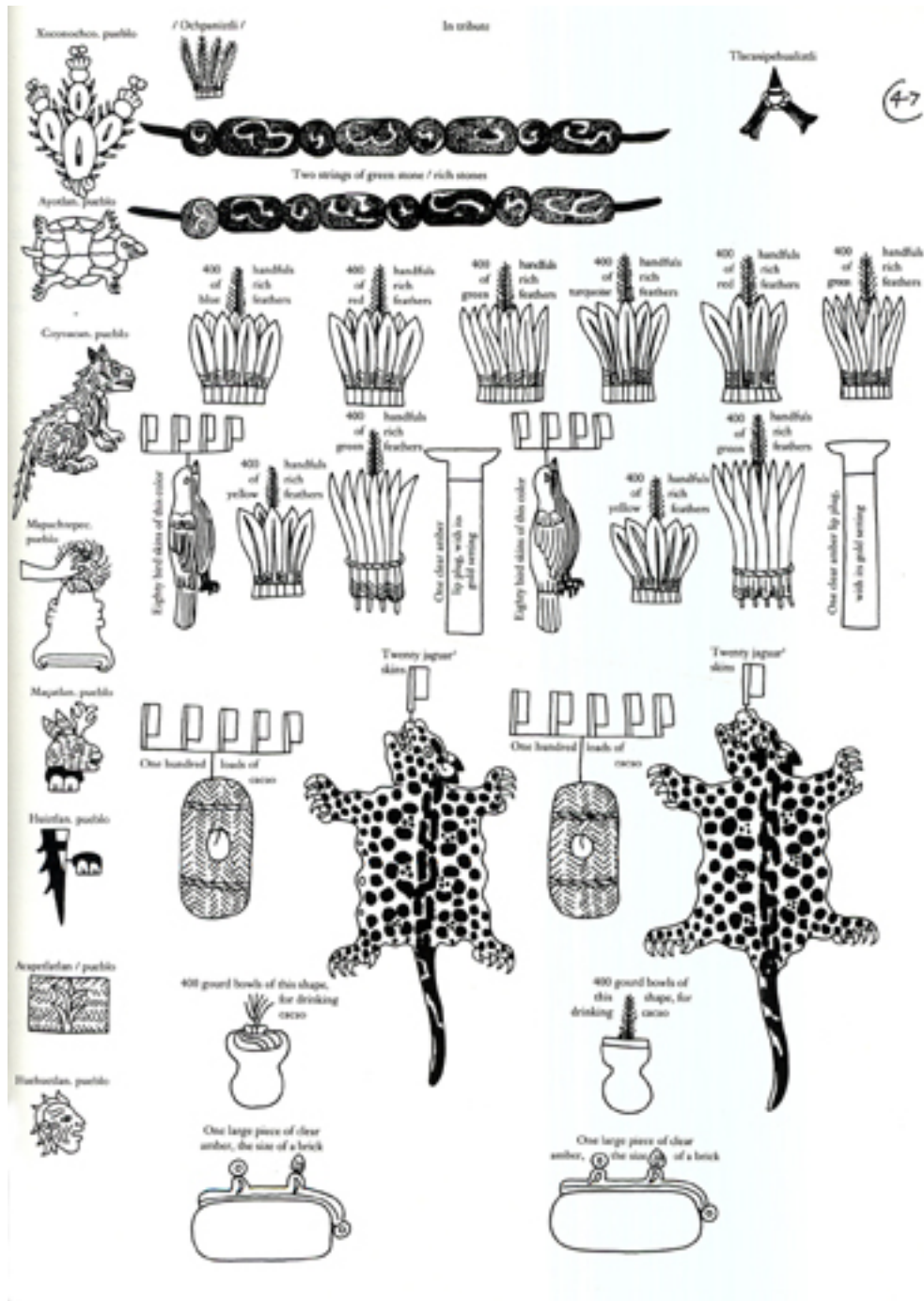


Figure 4. Tribute from the province of Xoconochco, including numerous feathers. From *The Codex Mendoza* (Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt): vol. 4: folio 47r. 1992. Berkeley: University of California Press.

22 The smaller items, in quantities of either 400 (Xoconochco) or 8,000 (Tochtepec) are glossed as “manojos” in the *Codex Mendoza* (folios 46r, 47r). It is entirely possible that these are indeed handfuls of feathers, small feathers of the type needed for the intricate mosaics of the featherworkers. I have forged ahead on a little preliminary experiment to calculate the number of birds required to fulfill these tribute needs. First, I estimated a handful of such feathers (which repeatedly approximated 60, using several different hands), and then counted the numbers of feathers on several representative birds. For the smaller birds, such as trogons and a yellow-crested parrot the numbers of feathers on the head, neck, back and breast ranged from 438 to 480, resulting in about 7-8 handfuls of feathers per bird. If 8,000 handfuls were

required, this would amount to something over 1,000 birds annually. For Xoconochco, the 400 handfuls sent twice annually amounted to the feathers of some 50 birds for each delivery. For a larger bird, like a scarlet macaw, each bird could supply an average of 20 handfuls, so about 400 and 20 birds would have been needed, for the respective provincial tributes. These figures are very rough and approximate (and preliminary), but offer some suggestion of the impact of the tribute on the bird population (other factors that might lessen this impact, such as the use of moulted feathers or variations in the definition of “handful,” also need to be considered).

Elite Reciprocity

- 23 It is often overlooked that a good deal of fancy featherwork moved about from place to place in a rather intense round of elite exchanges, whether in ceremonial, political, or social contexts. Each city-state ruler controlled varying amounts of “state treasure,” to be distributed as desired, needed or required. Within a city-state, some goods (including fine feathers) were distributed down the social scale to distinguished warriors, some goods were given in payment to palace artisans and workers, and still other goods (primarily foodstuffs) were distributed to the general populace on certain ceremonial occasions.
- 24 In addition to these hierarchical movements of goods, exchanges also occurred frequently between rulers of allied or competing, or even enemy, city-states. It was a kind of political posturing to impress the other rulers, and a great deal of finery, feathers and featherwork included, was exchanged in these events. It also meant that any ruler’s storehouses needed to be constantly replenished, if not with gifts from other rulers (to recycle), then with taxes and “gifts” from his own subjects and production from his palace artisans. Again, this meant that there was significant featherworking activity throughout the empire, not just in the imperial core. Areas that did not boast resident featherworkers needed to rely on trading networks to supply them with these needed luxuries to maintain their political and social status.

Conclusion

- 25 Different types and levels of trade, imperially imposed tribute, and extensive gift-giving among the aristocracy all contributed to moving birds, feathers and featherwork from their points of origin to their ultimate consumers. Some of these were sold in marketplaces by local producers or manufacturers. As a raw material, there is no evidence for state or imperial control of the birds or of feather production. This is an interesting characteristic of the production of many raw materials throughout Mesoamerica, including the important obsidian (see Smith and Berdan 2003).
- 26 Some feathers were transported long distances by professional merchants and sold in far-ranging markets or carried as part of an emperor’s treasure. Many moved about as tribute or battlefield booty. Still others changed hands in obligatory noble gift giving ceremonies or political events. For the most part, precious feathers remained in the hands of the nobility and the gods, and were used by them in public and ritual displays.
- 27 However, some feathers and feather creations filtered down the social scale as gifts to accomplished warriors, as the result of a lucky wager, or were required by everyday participants in certain ceremonies. And, importantly, there was no end to the need. The Aztec economy was bursting with more and more extravagant displays and intense military ventures, the latter necessitating both new feathered attire and endless repairs to battle-torn warriors’ costumes and shields. All of these activities required new and renewed supplies of feathers as essential ingredients in the maintenance of the hierarchical social, political and religious order. Predictable and effective systems of trade, markets, tribute, and elite exchange were necessary in maintaining and facilitating this constant flow of socially significant materials.

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Para citar este artículo

Referencia electrónica

Frances Berdan, « Circulation of Feathers in Mesoamerica », *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* [En línea], Coloquios, 2006, Puesto en línea el 21 janvier 2006. URL : <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/index1387.html>

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Abstract

Feathers, especially those from colorful tropical birds, were among the most highly prized materials in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Likewise the craft of featherworking was among the most esteemed in the Mesoamerican world. Feathers were fashioned into exquisite adornments for nobles and gods, worked into fancy textiles for the elite, and provided embellishment for the shields and military costumes of highly achieved warriors. This presentation focuses on the manner in which feathers traveled from hand to hand in the complex process of acquisition, manufacture, and finally consumption during the last century before the Spanish conquest. Emphasis is on the circulation of feathers through well-established channels of tribute, marketplace exchange, “foreign” trade, and elite reciprocity.

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