

Art of the Aztec Empire

LD10: Interpreting Aztec Poetry and Philosophy

Introduction: As with all forms of creative expression, the generation and representation of themes, and thematic content, is part and parcel a primary form of communicating social concerns, values, preoccupations, and critical ideals. The Aztec, who invested considerable resources in the elaboration of their primary civic-ceremonial and religious centers also invested heavily in the creation of histories, religious almanacs, and related sources of recorded information. In fact, Moctezuma Ilhuicamina's tribute list included some one million sheets of paper per year used for the preparation of books and documents, and ceremonial paraphernalia. One source of artistic expression not governed so closely was that of poetry. Despite this fact, much of what has survived was largely produced by the elite classes of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

Instructions: Today's deliverable is intended to get you into the spirit of learning to interpret the primary themes and concerns of the Aztec people as expressed through their poetry and poetic license. This assignment will require that you make use of those poetry samples and readings (Samples 1-4) presented in Miguel Leon-Portilla's book, *Aztec Thought and Culture*. In addition, you may make use of the following Internet sources of poetry: <http://www.red-coral.net/Hungry.html>; <http://www.azteca.net/aztec/nahuatl/literatu.html>; and <http://www.indians.org/welker/aztpoem.htm>.

Part I: Aztec Themes: Please review and ponder those cultural, ideological, philosophical, and religious meanings and auto-biographical representations presented through Aztec poetry, and be prepared to answer the following questions:

1. What are the primary themes represented in at least five of the thirteen poems provided in the handouts?
2. What do you believe constitutes the overriding Aztec view of life and fate given the narratives reviewed this day?
3. What do you believe that the epic poem (Poem M) on pages three and four of the handout has to say about the Aztecs as a people and a culture?
4. Were you to interpret Aztec poetry in terms of your own life and your respective values, how much of what you have reviewed this day would apply to you?

Part II: The Aztec Composite: Having responded to at least three of the foregoing questions, please use the foregoing responses as the basis for creating a composite representation of a member of Aztec society. Please consider the following elements or questions of that composite based on your analysis:

1. What beliefs and aspirations do you believe were held in common?
2. What moral codes appear to dominate Aztec society, and how do these moral values differ from your own?
3. Do you believe that the concept of "fatalism" adequately accounts for Aztec beliefs as expressed through their poetic tradition?
4. Do you believe that Aztec values and concerns expressed in those 15th and 16th century examples presented parallel modern day concerns with life, love, and fate?