CHAPTER 4
AZTEC IMPERIAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

Formation and Organization of the Aztec Empire

Pre-Imperial Political Organization

Prior to imperial consolidation, the Valley of Mexico was divided among a number of independent, competing, and often conflicting polities that can best be described as city-states (Bray 1972; Hodge 1984; Marcus 1989). Each city-state (Nahuatl: altepetl) consisted of an urban center (the locus of political administration and elite residence) and a discrete territory containing dependent villages and hamlets. In late prehispanic times, the Valley contained ca. 50 such polities, with territories of about 100-200 km² (Gibson 1964:34; Sanders and Price 1968:151-152). Each city-state was traditionally ruled by one or more tlatoque (sing. tlatoani; lit. “he who speaks”) who were entitled to the position through inheritance and membership in the elite stratum, and who governed by divine right. These city-state rulers were assisted by a hierarchy of officials filled by members of the nobility (pipiltin).

Historical chronicles report that groups of city-states formed alliances or regional confederations for purposes of mutual defense or military campaigns (Anales de Cuauhtitlan 1938, 1945; Chimalpahin 1965; Durán 1967; Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975-77). These confederation territories may also have facilitated exchange over a larger region -- exchange that would have been essential when basic resources could not be found within the narrowly circumscribed territories of individual polities (Calnek 1982:45; Blanton 1994). Confederations were often chartered on shared origin myths and thus have been called “tribes”, although they were not ethnic groups per se (Hodge 1984:139).
In the late preconquest period, eight “tribes” or confederations co-existed in the Valley: the Acolhua, Tepaneca, Mexico, Chalca, Mixquica, Cuitlahuaca, Xochimilca, and the Culhua (Hodge 1984; Gibson 1964:14, Map 2). Of these, the Acolhua and Tepaneca were the largest and most durable. Both of these confederations had evolved an internal political hierarchy in pre-imperial times, in which one city-state served as capital and the ruler of the capital directed the rulers of the other, dependent polities (Hodge 1984:139). Other confederations, such as the Chalca and Xochimilca, formed alliances of separate but equal polities.

**Processes of Empire Formation**

The Aztec empire has its origins in the environment of conflict between city-states and confederations that had developed in the Valley by the late 1300s. By the end of the 14th century, two dominant confederations had emerged in the Valley: the Tepaneca, headed by Azcapotzalco, along the western side of the Valley and the Acolhua on the eastern side (Brumfiel 1983:Fig. 1). Beginning in 1371, the city-state of Azcapotzalco, ruled by Tezozomoc, and aided by its client-state, the Tenochca of Tenochtitlan, began an aggressive campaign of expansion, at the expense of the Acolhua. By the early 1400s the Azcapotzalcs had incorporated the major Acolhua cities into their realm. With the defeat of Texcoco in 1418, Azcapotzalco came to control almost the entire Valley (Gibson 1964:16-17; Brumfiel 1983).

Their dominance was short-lived, however, and when a crisis in dynastic succession following the death of Tezozomoc in 1426 or 1427 temporarily weakened Azcapotzalco, several polities seized the opportunity to rebel. In 1428, a military force assembled by the ruler of Tenochtitlan and the deposed heir of Texcoco defeated Azcapotzalco and a new coalition of three city-states -- the so-called Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan (the latter representing the more “accommodating” nobility of Azcapotzalco) -- was forged (Brumfiel 1983). This Triple Alliance quickly consolidated their control within the Valley of Mexico,
conquering polities in the northern, central, and southwestern portions of the Valley to form an imperial core. The Triple Alliance attempted to defeat the still-independent Chalca in the SE part of the Valley, but the polities in this area successfully resisted, and the entire Chalco region was not brought into the empire until A.D. 1465 (Chimalpahin 1965:199-207). Meanwhile, aided by their dependencies, the Triple Alliance capitals conducted a series of wide-ranging military campaigns outside the Valley of Mexico, eventually extending their control to the Gulf Coast of Mexico and the Pacific coast of Guatemala.

The internal organization of the Triple Alliance empire initially followed a threefold division based on pre-existing confederation boundaries. Tlacopan nominally controlled much of the Tepanec realm along the western side of the Valley, Texcoco continued as head of the Acolhua domain along the eastern side of the Valley, and Tenochtitlan administered territories acquired in the south. Each division was considered politically autonomous, and each ruler was considered king and head of his domain (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1965, Vol. II:154; Berdan 1975:71; Carrasco 1991) (Table 4.1).

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<th>Rulers of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco Under the Triple Alliance</th>
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<th>Tenochtitlan (Mexica)</th>
<th>Texcoco (Acolhua)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ruler</td>
<td>Reign (A.D.)</td>
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<td>Itzcoatl</td>
<td>ca. 1427-1440</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motecuhzoma I</td>
<td>ca. 1440-1468</td>
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<td>Axayacatl</td>
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<td>Tizoc</td>
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<td>Ahuitzotl</td>
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Although theoretically equal powers, Tenochtitlan continually encroached on the administrative powers of its confederates, particularly Tlacopan. Tenochtitlan assumed the right to appoint the highest level rulers in Tlacopan's territory, and the lords of city-states subject to Tlacopan were confirmed at Tenochtitlan. In contrast, Texcoco remained a powerful member state in the Triple Alliance (Gibson 1956, 1964; Hicks 1982b; Offner 1983; Carrasco 1991). Texcoco continued to appoint rulers to Acolhua city-states (Hodge 1984:141) and remained independent enough to strongly resist the meddling of Tenochtitlan in its internal dynastic affairs (Gibson 1964:18-19 on role of Texcoco in rebellion of A.D. 1515).

External affairs of the empire were more directly centralized. By the late 1440s, Tenochtitlan emerged as the capital of the Triple Alliance empire, with the collection of imperial tribute and military affairs directed by its ruler (Gibson 1971:388; Davies 1987).

**Hegemonic Control**

The pattern of Aztec imperial expansion conforms closely to the hegemonic imperial model (Hassig 1985:92-103, 1988:17-22; Hicks 1992). In contrast with territorial empires, seizure and control of territory was not an Aztec goal except within the immediate core zone. Rather, Aztec expansion appears to have been directed at the economic exploitation of territories by tapping into local tribute flows. Outside of the imperial core, Aztec conquests focused on areas of high economic potential (Adams 1979:69), and within these areas on the main centers representing the apices of local tribute hierarchies. The result was a widespread, but territorially discontinuous empire (Barlow 1949; Berdan 1975, 1994; Smith and Berdan 1992, 1994).

In subsequent imperial rule, the Aztec exercised very little direct administrative control, relying on indirect rule and indirect strategies of exaction for purposes of administration and taxation (Berdan 1975:75-76, 242-243; Hassig 1985, 1988:21; Hicks
On conquering a territory, the indigenous political structure was generally left intact, and local, traditional rulers were frequently retained. These rulers were required to pay tribute and to supply warriors for imperial military campaigns, but as long as they cooperated, they were supported in office by the imperial core (Hicks 1987:95; 1992:1). Although hostile local rulers were removed, they were usually replaced by Aztec nobles who married into the local ruling families (Carrasco 1976, 1984). This intermarriage with local dynasties served a dual function: it gained traditional legitimation and support for Aztec rule, and it provided continuity, enabling local relations of dependency (and hence tribute flows) to continue.

The Aztec empire also relied heavily on local means of exacting tribute for the empire, a system that was both efficient and cost-effective (Adams 1979:65; Gibson 1971:390; M. Smith 1986:81; Zorita 1963:190-191). Once a political center was dominated, so too were its dependencies, and tribute, flowing from dependency to city-state center to provincial capital, could be drained from an entire region simply by dominating the center (Hassig 1985:104). The cost of this indirect system of exaction was correspondingly low. By relying on pre-existing tribute systems, the Aztec needed to control only the highest level of the local tribute hierarchy, a tactic that greatly reduced the number of imperial tribute stewards required to collect the imperial assessment (Hassig 1985:147). Further, since tribute demands were moderate, they could be backed by the threat of Aztec reprisal, rather than by actual military presence. Thus, the costs of maintaining a standing army throughout the provinces to enforce compliance was eliminated.

The hegemonic system was characteristic of both the imperial core and the periphery (Hicks 1992:1), although the degree of direct control and manipulation was obviously greater closer to the imperial capitals. Within the Valley, imperial rulers admittedly intervened in both the structure and personnel of local administrative hierarchies to varying degrees (Hodge 1984, 1991), but pre-existing city-state territories
remained largely intact, and the city-state, under the direction of the traditional local elite, remained the basic unit of administration within the Valley until well after the Spanish conquest (Calnek 1982:44).

In essence, the Aztec imperial system sacrificed depth of control for breadth of extraction. In order to facilitate the efficient exaction of tribute, the Aztec empire not only permitted, but relied on, the existence of largely autonomous governments (Hassig 1985:99). As a result, formerly independent polities both near and far were conquered, but only partially integrated, into the empire (Calnek 1982:56). The corollary of this incomplete integration, of course, was that internal rebellions were rife (Berdan 1975:243). Tenochtitlan's chronicles report planned and actual rebellions frequently enough to suggest almost continual attempts by dependent rulers and elites to regain independence, wealth, and power (Kelly and Palerm 1952; Gibson 1971; Hodge 1991; M. Smith 1986:82). Hassig (1985:94; after Holt 1976), for example, records 28 revolts against Aztec rule involving 17 different provinces, many of which were located near the center of the empire.

For the most part, these rebellions were not armed uprisings, but the cessation of tribute payments to the Triple Alliance capitals (M. Smith 1986:82). They should therefore be interpreted not as a nationalistic response to foreign imperial domination, but as attempts to keep a larger share of local tribute revenues to themselves. M. Smith (1986, following Broda n.d.) suggests that the Triple Alliance policy of local autonomy in tribute arrangements coupled with economic benefits and political support from the imperial core was the root cause of these rebellions: by increasing the local authority and prestige of the provincial nobility, these rulers gained sufficient power to attempt withdrawal from the empire. Thus, by strengthening local elites to their own fiscal ends, the imperial elite also produced the conditions for political instability.

The Aztec were clearly facing the endemic problem of empires: the need to simultaneously dominate and support the traditional rulers upon which the empire was
dependent for tributary flows. Although rebellions suggest that political control was incompletely consolidated, the dramatic expansion of the empire just as clearly indicates that imperial rulers had sufficiently wrested political and economic control from local rulers to finance imperial policies.

**Strategic Goods as a Means of Imperial Political Control**

The strategies and mechanisms of political integration (above and beyond the threat of military force) that supported the continuance and expansion of the Aztec empire have generated considerable academic interest, and studies have identified a broad spectrum of strategies for realigning social and political connections (Rounds 1979; Carrasco 1984; Brumfiel 1983, 1987a, 1987b; Hicks 1992; Hodge 1984, 1991, 1994b; M. Smith 1986). Without denying the importance of these often mutually supportive tactics, this section explores how political integration was achieved through the control and manipulation of two major classes of strategic resources.

**Strategic Goods in Imperial Economy**

The primary bases of wealth and power in Aztec society were (1) land and the labor of commoners to work the land, and (2) luxury goods as the outward displays of status and prestige (Berdan 1975:145; Davies 1973:79; Hicks 1986:48-49). Because position within society depended on access to and control over these strategic resources, the emerging imperial elite actively manipulated both resources to achieve political compliance.

**Land and Labor.** Land and labor represent the more fundamental basis of power, in that the income from this land could be converted into the other major form of wealth, that of exotic luxury goods, thereby allowing elites to maintain and enhance their positions through giving gifts and sponsoring feasts. The size of land-holdings was therefore a key to the political and social order. Land and labor were also bases of power that were comparatively easy to manipulate, since the administrative structures
and relationships of dependency between elite and subject commoners were well established in pre-imperial times.

From the formation of the Triple Alliance, each successive conquest within the Valley of Mexico was marked by the taking and redistributing of lands and the tribute labor of commoners. The Triple Alliance rulers retained the largest share of the newly conquered lands, thereby assuring themselves a firm basis of economic power, independent of the claims of traditional rulers (Durán 1964:59, 71-72; Davies 1973:79; Hicks 1987:95).

The redistribution of land-holdings or the rights to produce from expropriated lands was the primary means of rewarding loyal allies and dependent nobles for participation in imperial conquests. These war prizes generally consisted of fields of a specific size within a dependent community, that were worked by commoners who otherwise continued to serve their local ruler in matters of war and corvée labor. Frequently the tribute fields allotted to a meritorious noble were widely scattered and distant from his traditional administrative jurisdiction. By rewarding loyal nobles not with whole domains, but with the receipts of individual fields, nobles were prevented from accumulating an independent basis of power from which to oppose the empire. As Hicks (1987:95) noted, these nobles could live handsomely, but they remained dependent on the stability of the empire to ensure continued access to their possessions. These nobles thus came to share an interest in the perpetuation and expansion of the empire as the power defending their rights to tribute fields and supporting their standard of living (Adams 1979:65; Berdan 1975:281; Brumfiel 1983:273-274).

**Exotic Prestige Goods.** The second category of strategic goods -- exotic luxury items -- represented a more fluid system, although this category also had a long tradition in pre-imperial times as well (Hicks 1981; Brumfiel 1987a, 1987b, 1989). Items in this category include exotic, and hence precious, raw materials (such as cotton,
tropical bird feathers, gold, amber, jade, turquoise, and other semi-precious stones), as well as specific items of dress and adornment fashioned from these goods.

As symbols, these classes of exotic luxury goods both represented and constituted relative status within Aztec society. Outward symbols of status were prevalent and rigidly defined under imperial rule; each rank in the society, whether inherited or achieved, carried with it certain exclusive items of dress and ornamentation (Berdan 1975:144-45; Anawalt 1980). The display of prestige items therefore provided the means by which rulers defined their own social statuses as well as the statuses of others, with all the rights and obligations attending to those positions (Brumfiel and Earle 1987:4). By controlling the distribution and rights to display elite goods, the Aztec state established and imposed on the larger society “its own evaluations of people and events and its own interpretation of the universe” (Brumfiel 1987a:679).

Prestige goods were also essential in constituting relative statuses. In this context, luxury items functioned as a form of political capital, whose value was actuated through gift-giving (Brumfiel 1987b:112; Hicks 1981, 1982a; M. Smith 1986:75-76). Brumfiel's (1987b) analyses of exchanges of prestige goods both before and after the emergence of the Triple Alliance indicates that gift-giving was an essential component in affirming and manipulating the configuration of sociopolitical relationships in ancient central Mexico. Political transactions such as rewarding clients, attracting allies, and soliciting favors from superiors all involved the exchange of precious goods. Following the foundation of the Triple Alliance, Brumfiel (1987b:112) notes a tremendous increase in the level of gift-giving as Aztec rulers instituted a system of centralized patronage to consolidate their power. The lavish distribution of prestige goods by Aztec rulers both established the pre-eminent position of the givers, and forced the recipient into a position of submissive reciprocity. In sum: “The distribution of elite goods by Aztec rulers was clearly an important means of enhancing
political integration and centralization immediately prior to Spanish conquest” (Brumfiel 1987a:676).

Brumfiel (1987b:114) also suggests that through time, a shift occurred in the patronage system from rewards in tribute lands to prestige goods. Initially, the emphasis appears to have been on the distribution of tribute lands; distinguished warriors were rewarded with tribute lands and noble titles (Durán 1964:70). Later, prestige goods began to overshadow tribute lands as the reward most frequently distributed. This trend may partially reflect a greater availability of these goods relative to tribute lands, as discussed below. But Brumfiel argues that the shift may represent a conscious and politically astute move as well: “The Aztec ruler Itzcoatl is said to have argued against the restoration of local rulers on the grounds that it would be better to have them dependent upon the gifts and honors that the state would bestow only when their acts and good service merited it” (Brumfiel 1987b:114).

Imperial Incentive Plan and Patronage System

The distribution of these primary classes of strategic goods (i.e. land and labor, and exotic prestige items) through royal patronage was simultaneously directed to two ends: (1) to control the traditional ruling elite, and (2) to create an alternative hierarchy of status positions and potential administrators to serve as a check and balance on traditional bases of power.

Control of Traditional Rulers. The traditional hereditary elite (or “nobility of lineage”) constituted the established administrative authorities (tlatoque) in the Valley of Mexico. Aztec political economy accordingly focused on control of this class of individuals as key to the control of subject populations. A number of direct controls over traditional rulers have been mentioned in passing: removal from office, intermarriage with the royal lineages (Carrasco 1976, 1984), forced attendance on the imperial court where they could be kept under direct observation (Durán 1967, Vol. II; M. Smith 1986:77-78), and the requirement that noble youths be educated in
Tenochtitlan where they served as political hostages. Control of strategic resources that served as the bases for power and prestige in Aztec society provided an equally effective means of control.

The rulers of the expanding Triple Alliance empire created an elite ‘incentive plan,’ including both positive incentives (imperial support and patronage) and negative deterents (loss of tribute lands or removal from office), to encourage cooperation with imperial interests. A large portion of this plan involved the control and manipulation of traditional bases of power and symbols of status. Through controlling access to sources of wealth (land and labor) as well as the outward symbols of status and authority (prestige items and insignia), the imperial elite were able to make the continued rule of traditional rulers contingent on their compliance with imperial goals. Thus patronage, through the distribution of these strategic resources, played a critical role in inverting the empire's dependency on traditional rulers by making them dependent in turn on the imperial rulers' will for status, prestige, and income.

The success of this elite incentive plan was assisted by the long period of internecine wars that directly preceded political consolidation under the Triple Alliance. These struggles had virtually depleted the pool of direct descendants to local tlatoani seats (Brumfiel 1983). As a result, appeals to the higher authority of Tenochtitlan or Texcoco were necessary to support local claims to rule by less direct descendants.

Imperial gift-giving and display led to a cycle of inflation in elite goods consumption. As Hicks has noted, “The lavishness with which the Triple Alliance rulers were able to dispense gifts must have raised the general standard of high-level gift giving throughout the region” (cited in Brumfiel 1987b:116). This inflation may also have increased the level of gift-giving among private citizens. Brumfiel (1987b:116), for example, comments that private feasting and competitive gift-giving as a means of marking life crises were integral parts of Aztec culture by the time of the Spanish conquest. These celebrations were competitive events in which the elite vied for pre-
eminence through conspicuous consumption and/or conspicuous gift-giving. This increase in private gift-giving played into the imperial elites' hands in two ways (Brumfiel 1987b:116). First, competitive gift-giving undermined the establishment of horizontal alliances among nobles, thereby preventing the emergence of organized opposition to the empire. Secondly, it created a sustained demand for goods distributed by the empire through its patronage system, a demand that supported vertical alliances with the imperial center.

**Creation of System of Achieved Statuses.** The Aztec also created an alternative system of achieved statuses, open to both nobility and commoners, through military service in the expanding empire (Berdan 1975:66-69). This nobility of service provided a new sociopolitical hierarchy, whose ranks were defined on the basis of the number of captives taken on the field of battle. Distinguished military service was rewarded with rights to land (held on life tenure only) and the rights to wear specific luxury goods as symbols of attained status (Davies 1973:79; Zorita 1963:86). Feathered warrior costumes and cotton mantles (*tilmatli*) of different designs were distributed in recognition of the number of enemy prisoners taken (Berdan 1975:127; Anawalt 1980). Warriors who successfully captured four or more prisoners were qualified to attend war councils and to serve in important military and civil offices (Berdan 1975:67).

For the nobility, participation in imperial conquests provided the opportunity to increase their landholdings and status (and not to increase was to stand to lose). For commoners, military service provided the primary means of social mobility. Although commoners could not attain full noble status through military success, they could attain high status, and access to goods and services otherwise reserved for the nobility (Berdan 1975:67). For the empire, the emphasis on achieved status pitted the nobles against one another to compete for honors and limited the number of noble claims to imperial liberality (Brumfiel 1983:274). More importantly, the new sociopolitical hierarchy provided an alternative source of military and civil administrators whose loyalty was tied
to the continuance of empire and who served as a vital check on the independence of traditional elite.

There is some evidence that the elite stratum came to resent the encroachment of promoted commoners on the perquisites of elite status and feel competition with this class for important military and civil offices. Wolf (1959:138) suggests, for example, that during the last phase of Aztec rule, an aristocratic reaction may have prompted Motecuhzoma II to curtail the privileges of the service nobles in favor of a renewed monopoly of power in the hands of the nobility of descent (see also Berdan 1975:238-39; Davies 1973:214-216). At that time, Motecuhzoma II ordered that all officials of low descent, whether in the capital or in the provinces, be replaced by persons of noble blood (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1952, II:310).

The system of acquired statuses through military success contributed to the unity of the empire in a number of ways. First, it directly tied status (and hence individual elite interests) to the expansion of the empire. It thus created a community of interest uniting imperial Aztec rulers and traditional rulers in a common goal (Calnek 1978b; Rounds 1979; Brumfiel 1987b:114). Second, it channeled competition between nobles into avenues that did not disrupt imperial integration. In the pre-imperial period, competition over succession to positions at the heads of noble houses had generated considerable strife, since there were many more qualified persons than positions to fill (Brumfiel 1987b:114). As long as the empire continued to expand, the hierarchy of achieved statuses could accommodate as many qualified individuals as existed. At the same time, the competition for military success created a division among the nobles, preventing them from acting as a unified class in opposition to the state (Brumfiel 1983:274).

**Imperial Controls over Strategic Goods**

Given the importance of land and luxury goods in achieving imperial political integration, it should come as no surprise that Aztec dominance was accompanied by
attempts to consolidate control and limit access to these key resources. Of the two classes of goods discussed here, land and luxury items, the former proved less easy to manipulate. Traditional avenues of access and control over land and labor were already defined in pre-imperial times. Except as a direct consequence of conquest, the imperial rulers could not alienate elite control of lands without politically alienating the nobility as well; thus compliant traditional rulers retained a level of independent income from their patrimonial lands. Elite rights to landholding were in fact strengthened against encroachment by meritorious commoners by the restrictions set on non-nobles that limited their holding to life tenure, prohibited the transfer of these holdings, and forbade the use of attached (*mayeque*) labor in their cultivation (Berdan 1975:68).

Where traditional landholding rights could be alienated, as through conquest, the imperial rulers consolidated their control over this resource by reserving large portions of conquered lands for their own support and retaining the rights to distribute the remainder at their own discretion (Berdan 1975:44). They also restricted competing traditional rulers from gaining access to this resource (1) by increasingly rewarding military and administrative service with the rights to produce only, rather than with land-ownership, (2) by disbursing widely scattered land parcels rather than contiguous domains, and (3) by attaching the rights to income to a particular administrative office, not as the personal property of the incumbent office-holder.

In contrast, exotic luxury goods constituted a more open system, and it is here that political maneuvering for control is most apparent. Although the value of these goods was established in pre-imperial times, control over the circulation of these goods was not. Imperial strategies to control these resources targeted three main areas, including rights to consumption, mechanisms of redistribution, and avenues of acquisition and circulation.
Control over Consumption

During the reign of Motecuhzoma I (A.D. 1440-1468), sumptuary rules were dictated decreeing who had rights to display certain types of luxury goods as status symbols. This decree established a clear hierarchy of statuses and their associated insignia. Durán (1964:131-132) records that Motecuhzoma's decree:

(a) restricted use of gold diadem, gilded sandals, and fine embroidered cotton mantles to the king;

(b) established that only kings and sovereigns of the provinces could wear gold armbands, anklets, rattles, garlands, headbands, chains of gold and jewelry of semi-precious stones;

(c) limited to the great lords the rights to wear lip-plugs, ear-plugs, and nose-plugs of gold and semi-precious stones;

(d) reserved for other valiant warriors the right to wear common garlands and eagle and macaw feathers as well as necklaces of bone, small snail or scallop shells, or of small cheap stones, while brave captains and soldiers were to wear ornaments of bone, wood, or other inferior materials;

(e) restricted the wearing of cotton to the nobility, while commoners were to wear only maguey fibers, upon pain of death. Within the royalty and nobility, the king was entitled to wear fine mantles of embroidered cotton, lords could wear less fine cotton mantles, while warriors were entitled to only the simplest type of plain cotton mantles.

Motecuhzoma's regulations also dictated how goods were to be displayed and garments worn. For example, high ranking nobles and priests were permitted to tie their cloaks in front, under the chin, while the majority of the male population tied these cloaks over the right shoulder (Anawalt 1980). Similarly, only the highest ranking nobility could wear sandals. Only the nobility were allowed to wear a mantle that reached below the knee. Exception was made for warriors of commoner origin who had been wounded in the leg; these were allowed to wear longer mantles as a sign of respect for the valiant leg until the wound healed.

Anawalt (1980:43) had argued that these sumptuary laws were principally applied to the ritualistic and official side of Aztec life; everyday dress may not have been
as strictly regulated: “the vaunted sumptuary laws did not dictate what people wore every day but rather provided a set of rules governing clothing used for ceremonial and ritual occasions.” However, on important official occasions these sumptuary rules served to publicly affirm the political and social order in three ways. They reinforced the political status of elite goods and formalized these goods as visible markers of the underlying sociopolitical hierarchy. They limited the display of exotic prestige items to the nobility, whether of birth or of achievement. And they effectively raised the value of status achieved through military service to that of inherited positions at the heads of noble houses.

**Control over Redistribution**

Motecuhzoma I is also credited with formally linking the distribution of elite goods to achievement in warfare. Near the end of Motecuhzoma's reign, Tlacaehlel reportedly ordered that great warriors were to fight in a “military market place” where honor and glory would be bought with their blood and their lives:

“When you go to the market place and see a precious ear-plug or nose- pendant, Or when you see splendid and beautiful feathers Or a rich gilded shield, or weapons done in feather work, Do you not covet then, do you not pay the price that is asked? Know now that the king, who is present, has willed that lip-plugs, Golden garlands, many-colored feathers, ear-plugs, arm-bands, Shields, weapons, insignia, mantles, and loin cloths Are not to be bought in the market any longer by brave men. From now on the sovereign will deliver them as payment For memorable deeds. Each one of you, when he goes to war to fight, Must think that he has journeyed to a market place Where he will find precious stones” (Durán 1964:141-142).

Those not participating in imperial military campaigns were excluded from these honors; they were destined to wear the clothing of the common man, even if they were of high-ranking noble birth, as a symbol of their cowardice. They were forbidden to wear cotton garments and to adorn themselves with feathers and flowers.

Tlacaehlel's decree had several important effects. First, it formalized the redistribution of elite goods as symbols of the political order and reinforced the political
status of elite goods. Second, it explicitly tied the right to display such goods to achievement in warfare, not merely to the capacity to purchase such goods in the market place. Finally, and most importantly, the decree effectively institutionalized the imperial ruler as the sole distributor of these goods, and hence as the sole source of power and prestige within society. As Anawalt (1980:40) notes, Motecuhzoma's decree turned feathered warrior costumes and decorated cotton cloaks into the most highly visible and supremely sought after status symbols in Aztec society. Small wonder that the ruler reserved the right of dispensing these prestigious status symbols. Although this decree ostensibly affected only the military, achievement in warfare was the most important and the most fluid social arena, and Tlacaeelel's decree indicates that this area was becoming an increasingly formalized system for gaining status.

**Avenues of Acquisition and Circulation**

With the institutionalization of their political value, exotic luxury goods became “necessary luxuries” for the Aztec state (Davies 1987:100, 135). Imperial controls over acquisition and circulation of these goods were directed at two systems: the tribute system and long-distance exchange.

**Tribute Flows.** Imperial patronage and elite participation in the consumption and exchange of luxury goods was financed by the tribute system. Tribute flows were organized through two distinct systems: a provincial system focused on the individual Triple Alliance capitals and an imperial system (Hassig 1985:105). These distinct tribute systems led to multiple tribute obligations, as commoners gave tribute through different channels to different lords. The dual systems also led to overlapping and interdigitated tribute jurisdictions, with the result that city-states no longer functioned as politically isolable or cohesive units.

At the provincial level, each of the Triple Alliance members (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan) controlled a sizable area close to its capital. Torquemada (1969, Vol. I:175) describes the division of the Valley among the three members
following the formation of the Triple Alliance. Roughly speaking, Texcoco gained control of the NE quarter, Tlacopan controlled the NW quarter, while the whole of the southern half of the Valley went to Tenochtitlan. Within their respective territories, the Triple Alliance rulers received tribute in goods and services from subordinate rulers and from dependent towns in the capital's rural hinterland, and rents in produce from commoners who cultivated parcels of land for the lord (Hicks 1984; Carrasco 1991). The rulers also received income from their own patrimonial lands (worked by attached serfs), as well as from lands set aside for the support of their office (tlatocatlalli) and for the palace (tecpantlalli).

In addition to their individual tribute revenues, an imperial-level tribute system developed in which Triple Alliance capitals shared the revenues from conquered regions, according to a variety of arrangements (Gibson 1971:391; Carrasco 1991). The most frequently cited division was a 2:2:1 split going to Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, respectively (Zorita 1963:89). This tribute was delivered first to Tenochtitlan and there divided among the Triple Alliance rulers (Berdan 1975:119; Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1952, Vol. II:198). Thirty-eight provinces that were geographically distinct from traditional native political units and bases of power were established for the collection of this imperial tribute (Barlow 1949). The Codex Mendoza and associated Matrícula de Tributos have traditionally been interpreted as recording the imperial tribute shared among Triple Alliance members (Berdan 1975:82; cf. Carrasco 1991, who suggests that this represents only Tenochtitlan's share). By the mid-fifteenth century, this imperial tribute system was overseen by a well-defined hierarchy of tribute stewards and officials (Brumfiel 1983).

Tributary receipts at both the provincial and imperial levels included both subsistence items (foodstuffs and utilitarian craft items) and prestige goods. Cotton mantas (plain and decorated) and warrior costumes and regalia were major tribute items, along with jewelry of gold and semi-precious stones. It is noteworthy that most prestige
items were received as finished goods (Berdan 1975:112); only limited amounts of exotic raw materials for the manufacture of these items are listed on tribute rolls.

**Long-Distance Exchange.** Exotic raw materials for the manufacture of elite prestige goods were largely supplied through long-distance exchange conducted by a class of professional merchants (*pochteca*) who trafficked between the Valley of Mexico and the tropical lowlands. The merchants involved in this foreign trade were exclusively members of specific merchant guilds which received the “foreign trade monopoly” by virtue of their relationship with the state (Berdan 1975:188; van Zantwijk 1985:134). The professional merchants dealt in relatively large lots (wholesale) and specialized in luxury goods, conducting trade both within and outside of the empire (Berdan 1987b).

Outside of the Valley, the merchants are best known for their role in state-sponsored trading activities. In one famous case reported by Sahagún, merchants of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco were given 1600 cotton mantas by the Aztec ruler Ahuitzotl, with which they purchased luxury goods in the Tlatelolco market (including embroidered mantas, breech cloths, and skirts) for foreign exchange (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 9:7-8; Davies 1973:136-137; Berdan 1975:175).  The property of the Aztec ruler was then traded abroad for brightly colored tropical feathers, jade, turquoise, and shells of many kinds. Upon their return home, the merchants were rewarded by the ruler for facilitating this transaction. It is clear that in this context, the goods remained state property and the merchants acted as emissaries for the state in carrying state goods to extra-empire trading centers (Berdan 1975:178; Carrasco 1978:59).

The *pochteca* also actively participated in entrepreneurial exchange (Carrasco 1978:58-59). In addition to state-owned goods, the merchants carried their own goods (including jewelry of gold, rock crystal, copper and obsidian) for trade in distant (extra-imperial) markets, returning with cacao and other goods. Within the empire, the professional merchants circulated exotic goods among major markets in the provinces as well as within the Valley (Berdan 1975:167-8). Durán (1971:138) comments that these
merchants traveled to “...all the markets of the land, bartering cloth for jewels, jewels for feathers, feathers for stones, and stones for slaves, always dealing in things of importance, of renown, and of high value.” Similarly, other ethnohistoric accounts record that the merchants circulated from market to market throughout all the imperial provinces (Clavijero 1945, Vol. II:280-281, trans. Berdan 1975:168; Motolinía 1971:375). This entrepreneurial trade appears to have been the basis of the merchants' famed wealth, since rewards given by the ruler appear small in comparison to the great distances traveled.

Goods carried by the pochteca on their outbound trips were almost exclusively manufactured luxury items. This included both state and private merchant goods. These goods were exchanged almost entirely for exotic and precious raw materials. The direction of this exchange was apparently essential, since relatively small amounts of exotic raw materials were received through tribute (Berdan 1975:188, 269-70, 1987b). The merchants undoubtedly maintained close relations with craftsmen within the Valley; craftsmen would have had to depend on the merchants to obtain non-local raw materials, such as feathers, precious stones, and metals (Berdan 1975:270; Calnek 1978a).

Twelve Valley of Mexico cities had professional merchant guild organizations: Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Cuauhtitlan, Azcapotzalco, Huitzilopochtco, Mixcoac, Texcoco, Huexotla, Coatlinchan, Otumba, Xochimilco, and Chalco. Berdan (1986:284) suggests that these merchant guilds were responsible to the Triple Alliance capital in whose provincial territory they resided, and that the imperial capitals operated rather independently in their economic deployment of these merchants. For example, only the merchants from Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco were entrusted with the Tenochca ruler's goods on state-sponsored trading ventures outside the empire, while the merchants from three other cities (Cuauhtitlan, Azcapotzalco, and Huitzilopochtco) travelled as their companions (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 9:17). These latter cities were under Tepanec control and, although not stated, their merchants may have carried the property of the
ruler of Tlacopan in these ventures (Berdan 1986:284). Similarly, those guilds located in Acolhua territory, while restricted from the lucrative Gulf Coast trade (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 9:48-49), may well have served elsewhere as extra-empire emissaries for the ruler of Texcoco (Berdan 1986:284).

**Increasing Controls over Acquisition and Circulation of Luxury Goods**

**Centralization of Tribute Flows.** Centralized control over the imperial tribute system was apparently achieved during the reign of Motecuhzoma I (Brumfiel 1983:276). Initially, the tribute collectors were selected by and were responsible to the local rulers (Berdan 1975:113). By 1458, Motecuhzoma had assumed personal responsibility for naming imperial tribute officials. In addition, he instituted the system of 2 *calpixque* per imperial tributary province: one stationed at the site of the tribute collection, the other in Tenochtitlan, the site of tribute receipt. By 1462, the office of *petlacalcatl* or chief steward had been instituted to supervise the tribute assessments and collections, serving as a middle-level administrative post between Motecuhzoma and provincial tribute stewards. These actions removed tribute collection from local authorities and placed it in the hands of a well-defined hierarchy of tribute officials directly responsible to the ruler of Tenochtitlan.

**Control over Acquisition of Exotic Raw Materials.** With growth of the empire came an increase in both direct control and indirect influences exerted by the state on acquisition of exotic luxury goods (Berdan 1975:265). These controls took two forms: (1) increasing intervention in foreign trade, and (2) the replacement of long-distance trade with tribute.

During the earliest phase of the Triple Alliance empire (1428-1450), the merchant guilds apparently operated independently of state interests (Berdan 1975:291). The growing importance of the merchants, however, is underscored by the conquest of the merchant center and main market at Tlatelolco in 1473 (Davies 1973:132; Carrasco
1978:63; Berdan 1985:345). Following this conquest, the merchant guild increasingly came under direct state control; thereafter they were employed as spies and trading agents of the state (Berdan 1975:291; Davies 1987:134). The documents further report that these merchants were greatly esteemed by the ruler, presumably both for their commercial activities and for the role they played in spying out enemy territory.

The merchants gained from this new relationship, as well. Only merchants sanctioned by the imperial ruler were allowed to trade in certain provinces outside the empire. Entrance to the profession was also restricted. Membership was by birth or by permission of the ruler only (Berdan 1975:149; Zorita 1963b:181). By the time of the Spanish conquest, the professional merchants appear to have enjoyed a virtual monopoly in trading of status-linked luxury goods (Berdan 1975:159, 1978:82; Calnek 1978a:105).

The imperial government benefitted from this relationship in several ways. Through state-sponsored trade, the imperial rulers could receive a considerable flow of essential exotic goods. The state could amass and direct significant capital into foreign trading enterprises and it had the ability to conduct such expeditions on a grand scale (Berdan 1975:271). In addition to gains through state-sponsored trade, the state received exotic and precious goods through taxes paid in kind by the merchant guilds, and from gifts to ruler as part of special guild celebrations.

Through time and with imperial expansion, however, the means of state control shifted from state-sponsored trade to tribute from conquered provinces (Berdan 1975:265-73; Carrasco 1978:58-59). As Berdan (1975:273) notes, long-distance trade was apparently not the most stable nor profitable strategy for obtaining exotic luxury goods for the Aztec state. The merchants could be attacked and supplies cut off; trade in distant provinces could be redirected so that sufficient amounts of desired goods were not available to Valley of Mexico merchants. At home, inflation in imperial patronage would have been increasingly dependent on the availability of exotic goods, and in increasingly large quantities. Although this increased demand might have been met by
an expanded volume of trade, such an increase would jeopardize the ruler's position as chief dispenser of power and prestige. If these goods increasingly circulated through the market system, control over their production and distribution would have been diffused (Berdan 1975:253).

These strategic considerations dictated that the Aztec rulers follow a dual policy that jointly limited foreign trade and attempted to centralize direct control of goods through tribute. Thus, time after time, long-distance exchange was followed by conquest and the imposition of tribute in goods previously obtained through trading (Berdan 1975:273, 1985:357; Davies 1987:152). In fact, much later imperial expansion appears to have been motivated by the desire to directly control the flows of exotic luxury goods and to obtain a more direct and reliable supply of these strategic items (Berdan 1978:87-91; Hassig 1985:87; Davies 1987:133).

In summary, the strategic value of exotic prestige goods in achieving political integration is underscored by imperial attempts to consolidate control over and limit access to these key resources. These controls included monopoly rights on foreign exchange and increasingly centralized imperial tribute flows.

**The Inversion of Political Dependency**

The foregoing suggests that an important component of Aztec political economy was the manipulation of two classes of strategic goods (land and labor on one hand, and exotic prestige goods, on the other) to engage the cooperation of conquered elite and absorb them into the political and economic fabric of the empire. Of these, land and labor constituted the more traditional basis of wealth, and imperial elite were politically constrained by established systems of land-ownership. Only following an outright conquest were imperial elite able to redistribute land-holding and tribute rights, and it is in this context that imperial attempts to redirect land resources to meet political ends are most apparent.
The wealth system of exotic prestige goods, in contrast, seems to have been more open to manipulation, and the documents report an increasingly formalized system of control over these luxury items. Rights to acquisition and display of status goods were regulated by sumptuary laws that formalized the valuation of prestige goods and tied this system of relative statuses to the political hierarchy. Imperial legislation also explicitly limited promotion within the political hierarchy to individuals demonstrating achievement in imperial warfare and service to the state. Rights to redistribution established the state as the source of status and prestige and legitimized the apical role of the imperial ruler as the chief dispenser of prestigious status symbols. The empire thus achieved centralized and direct controls over critical flows of exotic prestige goods.

In essence, then, controls over strategic goods created an elite incentive plan that (when backed up by the threat of military reprisal) strengthened vertical ties with the imperial core while simultaneously undermining the formation of horizontal alliances among nobles that might foment rebellion. Political and economic interests tied elite loyalty to the continuance of the state, and made their own position and status dependent on participation in the expansion of empire. In short, the traditional elite generally stood to gain more through compliance than resistance.

Through controlling access to strategic goods, the elite incentive plan effectively inverted relations of political and economic dependency between traditional and imperial elite, thereby contributing to political consolidation and to the resolution of the endemic problem of early empire. The result was a loosely organized, hegemonic empire. Yet the degree of political and economic integration was sufficient to generate a rapid expansion of empire and to capture temporary control of resources over a vast area.
The New Dependency

Urbanization in the Imperial Core

The successful consolidation of imperial control generated a new, if more mundane problem: the rapid demographic growth of the imperial core. During the 14th and 15th centuries, cities in the Valley of Mexico experienced an enormous urban growth. With an estimated population of 150,000-200,000, Tenochtitlan was arguably the largest city in the western hemisphere at the time of the Spanish conquest (Gibson 1964:377; Calnek 1972). Texcoco, the empire's second city, had a nucleated urban population estimated at 20,000-30,000 (Parsons 1971:120), while its suburban area may have encompassed up to 100,000 (Hicks 1982b). Below these primary cities were large city-state centers with urban populations of 10-15,000. Overall, the Valley's population appears to have doubled from pre-imperial times (Parsons 1974).

In addition to the explosive increase in population, the proportion of the urban population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits also increased, reflecting the expansion of the imperial bureaucracy (Calnek 1972; Sanders 1956:121; Sanders and Price 1968:151). As Berdan (1975:251) has noted, “The Triple Alliance capitals experienced a proliferation of political and religious positions, filled primarily by members of the expanding nobility class...The rapidly increasing nobility class required greater amounts of prestige goods; the urban population as a whole required additional subsistence goods.”

The major spurt in urban growth appears to correspond temporally with the consolidation and expansion of Aztec imperial control. Increasing social differentiation and rapid growth of the administrative sector were initially both supported and stimulated by conquest and the incorporation of tribute networks that funneled elite goods, utilitarian commodities, and foodstuffs into the imperial core (Calnek 1972, 1976; Brumfiel 1980:466). Thus, the growth of empire emerges as a major causal factor driving the transition from an essentially rural to a highly urbanized economy.
Cities as Food-Deficient Sites

Several social historians have pointed out the vulnerability of such urban development to problems of food scarcity and supply (Tilly 1975; Hassig 1985:5; Parsons 1991). They argue that no population aggregate of any size can exist as an independent entity. Urban centers are food deficient points in a rural landscape where food production is in excess of local consumption, thus cities are dependent on rural food producers for their basic sustenance. However, this urban-rural relationship is essentially asymmetrical: while urban areas are always dependent upon rural areas, rural areas are not necessarily dependent upon urban centers. Thus, there may be relatively little economic incentive for rural agriculturalists to produce food surpluses for urban consumers. To ensure the flow of necessary foodstuffs, cities seek to redress this imbalance, forcing the rural hinterland into a position of dependency on the urban center through economic and political measures (Hassig 1985:5).

For the Aztec, the successful resolution of the endemic problem of empire generated a new dependency -- that of the urban core on the agricultural products of the rural hinterland. Supported initially by the influx of imperial tribute, the growth of Tenochtitlan and other cities soon exceeded the support capacities of those tribute revenues (Berdan 1975:264; Calnek 1978a). As a result, imperial economic goals were reformulated away from initial and more narrow support needs of imperial infrastructure to consider the urban supply problems of the expanding imperial core.

**Imperial Responses to Problems of Urban Supply**

The Aztec developed both coercive and remunerative solutions to the problem of urban supply. Tenochtitlan (and other major urban centers) received foodstuffs through tribute from conquered areas and rents from expropriated lands, through the creation of new agricultural lands (in the form of *chinampas* and terraces), and through trade in the regional market system. As Price (1979:300) comments, this mixed strategy balanced political costs against anticipated returns: “For the elite the question is essentially one of
strategy: Which combination of force and benefits (both of which, of course, cost something) will have the highest payoff and under what circumstances?"

**Tribute and Rents in Foodstuffs**

As discussed above, the Triple Alliance capitals received tribute in foodstuffs through both imperial and provincial systems. Imperial tribute assessments were made following conquest (based on degree of resistance), but were doubled if that tributary later attempted to rebel (Berdan 1975:246). There is also some evidence that tribute levies increased generally through time to meet the growing demand for both subsistence and prestige goods. However, this rise in tribute receipts may reflect the growth of the tribute-paying population, rather than a per capita increase (Berdan 1975:247).

Berdan's analysis (1975:120-30) of the distribution of imperial tribute indicates that imperial interests and causes (including royal palaces and personnel, administrative and military activities, and gifts and rewards distributed through royal patronage) were the primary recipients of income from imperial tribute stores. But there is some evidence that tribute from conquered provinces contributed to the subsistence support of urban populations residing in the Triple Alliance capitals as well.

In addition, imperial and local administrators received foodstuffs produced on their own patrimonial lands through agricultural labor service and as rent from parcels of land attached to the administrative office and worked by rural tenants. The office of *tlatoani*, for example, was supported by fields called *tlatocatlalli* or *tlatocamilli* (ruler's land or ruler's fields), that were reportedly a standard size (400 brazas per side, approximately 2,500 m²) and were rented to commoners for the maintenance of the ruler (Gibson 1964:259; Hodge 1991:129). Lesser officials received rents from smaller plots of land (Gibson 1964:260). These plots were attached to a specific administrative office, and were distinct from the personal landed property of the incumbent office holder.
State-Sponsored Land Reclamation and Agriculture

The state also directed and/or sponsored large-scale projects that generated extensive areas of highly productive *chinampas* (raised fields) in Lakes Chalco-Xochimilco, the agricultural produce from which could be funneled into Tenochtitlan (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979:176-77). Ethnohistoric and archaeological data indicate that the principal period of swamp drainage and *chinampa* construction in the southern lakebed dates to ca. A.D. 1426-1467, that is, within the reigns of Itzcoatl and Motecuhzuma I (Armillas 1971; Calnek 1975; Parsons 1976:236, 1991). The earliness of these projects suggests that the stress of urban food needs was felt or anticipated early-on during the period of initial imperial consolidation. At its maximum extent, approximately 9500 ha of *chinampa* land were cultivated, with an estimated maximum annual surplus capacity of ca. 20,000 metric tons of maize (Armillas 1971; Parsons 1976:246, Table 12.4).

In addition to the *chinampas*, stone-walled terraces were constructed on the piedmont slopes of the Tenango subvalley and within the Texcocan piedmont to increase the productivity of these areas under Aztec rule (Parsons et al. 1982:356-58; Parsons 1971:221). Although it is not clear that these represent state-directed or state-sponsored activities, their construction coincides with the period of rapid urban growth in the Valley and may reflect attempts by the Triple Alliance capitals to increase productivity within their hinterlands. Foodstuffs from these areas of intensive agriculture could have been obtained by the capital centers through tribute, rents, and sales of surpluses.

A related category may include the establishment of new communities to increase the food supply of urban centers. Hicks (1984:159), for example, names several communities that were settled, at least in part, by colonists from Texcoco sent there originally by Nezahualcoyotl to raise food for that city (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1952, II:199). In the archeological record, dispersed rural settlements in the Texcocan piedmont and
elsewhere may represent communities of renters directed by the state (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979:178-179; cf. Williams 1991:206).

**Markets**

The market system in the Valley of Mexico consisted of a series of primary and secondary markets. Markets in the major cities such as Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco and Texcoco met daily, while markets in secondary urban centers generally met on a 5-day cycle (Berdan 1975:197; Motolinía 1971:375; M. Smith 1979). The occurrence and periodicity of markets in smaller communities remains in question.⁹

Early descriptions of the great market at Tlatelolco report a broad range of foodstuffs organized by type of commodity. Raw foods included grains, beans, vegetables, fruits, and herbs; meat (including turkeys, cottontail rabbits, hares, deer, mallards, young dogs, fish, and lake products); honey, maguey syrup, and other dainties like nut paste; and salt. In addition, women sold a variety of cooked foods (including tortillas and tamales) and prepared maize dough. Most food vendors were apparently small-scale producer-sellers or retailers (*tlanecuilo*) specializing in a specific commodity.¹⁰ Sahagún (1950-1982, Book 10:65), for example, notes that the seller of maize is “a worker of the fields, a worker of the land, or a retailer.” Similarly, the meat seller is characterized as “an owner, a possessor of meat -- a meat owner, an animal owner. He hunts; he pursues game. Or he is a meat dealer. He keeps [animals] -- raises them” (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 10:80).

Once in the urban center, market produce circulated through two levels to meet urban supply needs. First, market vendors were taxed in kind at a rate up to 20%, with the revenues going to the local *tlatoani* (Cortés 1928:93; Torquemada 1969, Vol. II:560). Berdan (1975:209) suggests that market taxes may have been a significant factor contributing to the support of royal and noble households and their attached clientele. More generally, produce was available for purchase by the urban populace.
Relative Contribution of These Sources

A quantitative assessment of the relative contribution from these sources to the total subsistence requirements of Tenochtitlan has been presented by Parsons (1976). This analysis argues that with a maximum population of 150,000-200,000, Tenochtitlan required 30,000-40,000 metric tons of foodstuffs per year to support its urban population. Assuming that Tenochtitlan had very limited local agricultural capacity, nearly all this produce must have come from outside the capital itself (Calnek 1972). According to the Codex Mendoza, Tenochtitlan's received 86 trojes (16,000 metric tons) of grain annually as tribute. Rents are more difficult to estimate, but Parsons suggests that the population of tenant farmers of the Lake Chalco-Xochimilco chinampas was capable of producing the equivalent of about 2535 metric tons of surplus maize annually in rent; the volume of foodstuffs appropriated in rents from other areas is not estimated. The balance of Tenochtitlan's total subsistence requirements, some 10,000-20,000 metric tons (40-50% of the total) is assumed to have been obtained through mechanisms other than rent or tribute -- that is, through the market system.

Within Parsons' (1976) model, then, the market institution assumes an especially critical role, for it provided at least 40% of Tenochtitlan's total food supply. Although the actual statistics reported are tentative, they are consonant with ethnohistoric statements that virtually all the basic foodstuffs consumed in the city were imported, and that of these, more were obtained through the market system than were received as tribute or rent (Durán 1951, I:61,64,66, cited in Calnek 1978a:100).

There are theoretical reasons to assume that the market played a critical role in the procurement of foodstuffs, as well. An increase in tribute assessments does not necessarily increase available quantities of foodstuffs; in times of food stress, peasant households feed themselves first. Attempts at heavy exaction increase the potential for revolt and hence increase administrative and military costs. As Brumfiel (1980:475) has commented in response to the query as to why Triple Alliance rulers didn't simply force
local peoples to give them food as tribute: “Perhaps the potential costs of a tax revolt in the Triple Alliance heartland led by disaffected local elites but manned by oppressed commoners were great enough to discourage implementation of this rather straightforward option.” Similar considerations of cost-effectiveness may have limited the contribution of land reclamation and intensive agriculture. *Chinampas* were very costly and labor intensive to build and maintain, and were spatially restricted to areas of shallow, fresh lakes within the Valley. In contrast, market participation that relied on economic incentives and self-interest was a relatively inexpensive means of promoting increased agricultural production.

**Urban Market Dependency and the Balance of Payments**

The apparent significance of market institutions in supplying urban populations in the Valley, and the dependency of urban systems on those markets, is at the core of a long-standing question: If the emerging urban populations and imperial interests were dependent on market exchange to tap rural agricultural production, with what did the urban populations balance the incoming trade in foodstuffs? How did urban consumers motivate rural production and market system participation? As discussed in Chapter 2, the magnitude of this problem had led a number of studies to focus exclusively on the role of urban supply problems in structuring Aztec imperial economy.

To recapitulate briefly, several researchers (Sanders 1956; Calnek 1972; Hassig 1985; Santley 1986) have proposed that Aztec urbanism represents an urban-rural symbiosis consisting of more intensive food production in rural areas and more intensive craft production in the urban sector, coupled with the exchange of complementary goods within a market setting. In contrast, Brumfiel's (1980, 1983) early analyses concluded that urban food needs were met not by the sale of urban craft products, but by the urban-based market resale of craft goods (both utilitarian and elite) received in tribute. In either case, the centralized availability of craft goods in urban markets is seen as a
primary stimulus directing the flow of agricultural produce into the centers and as a major factor undercutting rural craft production.

Both of these mechanisms operated to some extent in balancing urban accounts. Obviously some level of core-periphery symbiosis exists in the production of higher-level goods in all urban situations, and tributary influxes may well have dampened rural production of some classes of goods as well. With respect to the first model, however, growing evidence seems to indicate that secondary production was not situated primarily in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, nor was it an urban monopoly in any sense (Blanton 1994). Craft production apparently remained dispersed throughout the hinterland, even as evidence for agricultural intensification increased.

Given the emerging picture of dispersed craft production, it seems unlikely that the political elite were able to sufficiently control tribute flows of utilitarian craft goods or to corner the market in those goods, as a means of promoting rural agricultural production and market participation. The political elite were, however, consolidating their control over a more strategic class of goods, that of exotic raw materials and prestige items, through processes described earlier in this chapter. This control suggests an alternative solution, in which urban supply problems were bound up with problems of imperial political control.

**The Transformation of Prestige Goods**

Two frequently cited characteristics of Aztec tribute assessments are the predominance of finished goods over raw materials, and the necessity to procure non-local raw materials to produce the manufactured goods required in tribute. Several authors have suggested that tribute requirements in manufactured goods were a significant factor stimulating market participation since tribute-payers were dependent on the market to obtain materials from non-local sources (Berdan 1975:215-54, 1985; Brumfiel 1987b; Hicks 1987:99). In fact, the growing tribute demand for items
manufactured from non-local goods would be feasible only in areas with an extensive market system.

Following their lead, it is suggested here that the transformation of exotic raw materials into the prestige items demanded in tribute also helped to alleviate the problems of urban supply by generating flows of desired foodstuffs into urban markets. Briefly, the structure of imperial tribute payments meant that non-local goods had to be procured through the market system by tributaries to rework into the manufactured goods necessary to meet tribute requirements (Hicks 1987:99; Berdan 1975:27). The need to procure exotic raw materials stimulated rural agricultural production as a medium of exchange, while urban control over non-local goods provided the balance of payments. By directing flows of exotic raw materials, imperial rulers were able to concentrate exchanges of agricultural produce in major urban centers where these foodstuffs could be tapped by urban populations. Thus, imperial tribute requirements, consciously or unconsciously, were critical for resolving domestic problems of urban supply.

**Imperial Tribute Requirements**

For tributaries in the Central Highlands, two major classes of tribute goods typify the pattern in which the acquisition of exotic raw materials was required to meet tribute assessments. These were cotton cloth and feathered warrior costumes, both of which depended on obtaining lowland tropical raw materials.

Loads of cotton cloth were demanded in tribute by both local rulers and imperial tribute stewards on a regular schedule of once, twice, or four times per year (Berdan 1975:105-108). Cotton cloth was given as mantas (both plain and decorated, large and small), as well as tunics, skirts, and loincloths. Garments received as tribute were worn by nobles or circulated as gifts, while plain cotton mantas (*quachtli*) served as a medium of exchange. According to the Codex Mendoza and *Matrícula de Tributos*, imperial
tribute in cotton cloth delivered to Tenochtitlan totaled over 280,000 garments annually (Berdan 1975, Appendix C).

A second major category of prestige items required in imperial tribute was the feathered warrior suits awarded for meritorious conduct in battle. These suits were made of tropical bird feathers sewn to a fabric backing, and were worn over quilted cotton armor (Hassig 1988:85-90). The Matrícula de Tributos records that a total of 683 feathered warrior costumes and shields were delivered annually to Tenochtitlan (Barlow 1949).

Communities in the Valley of Mexico supplied both classes of tribute items, although their contribution to the total assessment of these goods differed. All but four of the 38 imperial tribute provinces gave some amount of cotton cloth in tribute (Barlow 1949). With the exception of the Huaxtepec province (contributing 14% of garments received), tribute assessments were relatively evenly distributed, with each province paying from 1-5% of the total assessment (Table 4.2). Imperial tribute provinces encompassing the Valley of Mexico (Acolhuacan, Tlatelolco, and Petlacalco) contributed only 12% of the cotton garments delivered in tribute to Tenochtitlan (Table 4.3).

In contrast, although most provinces also paid tribute in warrior costumes, the majority of these suits were produced in the central highlands (Berdan 1987b:172). The three tribute provinces encompassing the Valley of Mexico contributed nearly 40% of all warrior suits, while the nine provinces closest to the imperial core contributed 85% of the costumes received in tribute (Table 4.3). Most other provinces contributed only 1 or 2 warrior suits per year.

Organization of Production for Tribute

Cotton cloth was produced as part of the domestic mode of production. In native documents, the production of cloth is portrayed as an integral part of female labor and a symbol of femininity (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 8:49; Berdan 1987a; Hicks 1994). Cloth-making for women was perceived as the counterpart of agriculture and food
Table 4.2
Imperial Tribute Assessment in Cotton Garments by Province

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aData from Barlow (1949).

bNumber and % of total mantas (of the specified type) received by Tenochtitlan.
Table 4.3
Annual Tribute Assessment in Feathered Warrior Suits by Province

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<th>#</th>
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aData from Barlow (1949) and Berdan (1975:Appendix A).

bPercent and cumulative percent of total warrior costumes received by Tenochtitlan. Tribute provinces are arranged in descending order, with provinces contributing the most warrior suits listed first.
production for men (Durán 1971:232-33). The implication is that all women were involved in the production of cloth; thus cloth production affected the economy of every household.

Hicks (1994) argues that the dispersed, household production of cotton cloth was the most economically efficient way to organize the production of large numbers of tribute textiles given the nature of the technology and labor requirements.

In contrast, the production of feathered warrior suits and shields was clearly the work of specialists. Sahagún (1950-1982, Book 9:91-92) describes in detail the specialized skills required for featherworkers (*amanteca*); in addition, this specialty required a knowledge of designated designs or types of warrior costumes specified by the tribute rolls. The more concentrated production of warrior suits in the central highlands may correspond to the distribution of knowledgeable specialists near the imperial core.

Featherworking specialists attached to the palace of Motecuhzoma II were responsible for crafting that ruler's “array” and precious mantles; to that end, the royal storehouse was open to them (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 9:91-92; Díaz del Castillo 1964:157; 213-14). There were also independent featherworkers, organized in wards, similar to other specialized craftsmen. Featherworkers are reported for the major urban centers, including Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Xochimilco (Díaz del Castillo 1964:318-319; Hodge 1984:81; Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 9:91). To meet tribute assessments, it is probable that a tribute-paying community would have had to purchase the materials and commission one of these independent specialists to produce the required suits.

**Acquisition of Raw Materials by Tributaries**

The raw materials for these tribute goods entered the Valley of Mexico through one of three channels (Berdan 1975, 1985). These are (1) state-sponsored long-distance trade utilizing the professional merchants (*pochteca*) as executors; (2) tribute from tropical provinces or provinces having contacts with tropical areas; and (3) non-state
commercial exchanges, through the entrepreneurial activities of *pochteca* as well as through pre-existing exchange networks, the latter probably on a very small scale.

The acquisition of these raw materials by the tribute-paying commoners for the production of tribute goods remains an area in which we have very limited information. The division of control over these resources between the state (through tribute or state-sponsored exchange) and commercial enterprises (via the *pochteca*) suggests two major mechanisms: through the recycling of tribute raw materials and through market exchange. In the former case, the production of items for tribute involved only the labor of the tributaries; in the second case, the tribute assessments also required the output of resources to purchase the raw materials for the production of tribute goods.

**Recycling of Tribute.** Davies (1987) has argued that the manufacture of tribute goods from non-local materials depended on the recycling of non-local materials received in tribute; that is, raw materials received in tribute were handed out to tributaries for the manufacture of other tribute goods. We do know that rulers sometimes provided their subjects with the raw cotton to meet their tribute requirements (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1952, Vol I:146-147; 1975-7, Vol. I:327; Zorita 1963:187), but it is unclear whether this was commonplace.¹³ For example, Zorita (1963:187) claims that:

> “The Indians had fields planted to cotton for tribute in those areas where cotton was grown. Some towns, which did not grow it themselves, gave cotton as tribute because they had subject to them places where it was cultivated. The ruler in turn handed this cotton over to other towns which did not grow cotton but worked it into a very good cloth. This excellent cloth was made by the people of the *tierra fría*, who are better workers than those of the *tierra caliente*. Thus some towns gave cotton, and other turned in into cloth.”

It is unlikely, however, that this was the predominant pattern, since an insufficient amount of raw material was received in imperial tribute to account for the volume of manufactured goods paid back in tribute. Only four provinces gave raw cotton, for a total of 4000 bales (Berdan 1975:313). Similarly, only five provinces gave tropical bird feathers, for a total of roughly 30,000 feathers (Berdan 1975:315). It is
more probable that most of the exotic raw materials received in tribute were reserved for the use of attached specialists (including both weavers and featherworkers) who served the royal palaces.

**Market Purchase of Raw Materials.** Alternatively, the purchase of non-local raw materials was the responsibility of the tribute-paying unit (i.e. the community, the *calpulli*, or the individual household). In this more likely case, raw materials had to be procured through the market system by tributaries to rework into goods to meet tribute requirements (Berdan 1975:27, 114-16; Broda 1978; Hicks 1987:99).

Although a considerable gap existed between professional long-distance trade in exotic goods and local market exchange, a full complement of merchants served to articulate trade between the elite *pochteca* and the local producer-seller (Calnek 1978a:106; Hassig 1985:117-118). An important component of this system were the professional merchants that did traffic primarily in cotton and other extralocal goods, who apparently served as middle-men by circulating among the major markets and carrying goods from one area to another (Motolinía 1971:375; Durán 1971:138; Berdan 1975:167, 1985). For instance, Sahagún (1950-1982, Book 10:75) records that the seller of cotton is “a planter of cotton, or an importer, or a retailer.” While it is unlikely that the growers themselves traveled the great distances to sell at the Tlatelolco market, professional merchants could expect to make significant profits from transporting and retailing these goods (Berdan 1976:205).

As a result of merchant activities, exotic raw materials were common in the markets of major cities. Raw and spun cotton were available for sale in the great market of Tlatelolco in such profusion that this section of the market reportedly rivalled the silk markets of Spain (Zorita 1963:158, quoting Cortés). Early reports of the Tlatelolco market also consistently mention tropical feathers for the manufacture of devices and shields (Berdan 1975:199; Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 8:67; Anonymous Conqueror 1858:392-393). Major city-state centers and provincial markets also carried non-local...
goods. The consistent availability of cotton in the city-state center markets is indicated by the fact that this commodity was classed as a necessity in markets of this type (including Ecatepec, Xochimilco, and Acolman) at a time when the Spaniards permitted only the sale of articles necessary for Indian sustenance in town markets (Gibson 1964:355-56).

Exotic goods were not necessarily widely available in markets outside the major urban centers. Berdan (1975:202, 1985:350) reports that statements abound concerning the great distances required to obtain cotton. Berdan's (1975, Appendix D) analysis of early colonial tax records for the Coyoacan market (a city-state center less than ten miles from Tlatelolco) reveals no vendors specializing in cotton products. However, the presence of professional merchants in the smaller markets may have made exotics more generally available, if only on a periodic basis (Berdan 1975:201).

**Purchase of Finished Goods.** The purchase of finished mantas or other cotton cloth from the market has been proposed as an alternative means of meeting tribute requirements. Brumfiel (1987b:109), for example, suggests that “Hinterland commoners selling subsistence goods in the marketplace in exchange for cloth and cacao were able to acquire the quantities they needed for tribute payment.” Although cotton mantas and cloth of all forms were obviously available in the market for purchase, it seems unlikely that the purchase of mantas to meet tribute requirements was an affordable alternative for individual households. For the calpulli or town, the collective purchase of tribute mantas may well have been an option if expendable resources were more available than labor.¹⁴

Alternatively, cloth producers may have been balancing demands on their labor and resources through the purchase of spun cotton fiber rather than raw cotton for the production of tribute cloth. Both raw cotton and spun cotton fibers were available for purchase in the market (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 10:75; Zorita 1963:158). The dramatic increase in the cotton spinning industry reported for Morelos (Smith and Hirth 1988; M. Smith 1994; Smith and Berdan 1992) may have made spun cotton fibers more generally available in the Valley. Importers of cotton into the Valley would have had an
incentive to import cotton in a partially processed form, since they could increase their profits relative to their transportation costs per unit of weight by transporting the value-added spun cotton rather than raw cotton. For women in the Valley, pressure to produce cotton cloth to meet rising tribute requirements may have placed considerable stress on their time, creating a demand for products that shortened the production process. By purchasing spun cotton, women could produce substantially more cotton cloth per unit of available time.  

In contrast to cotton cloth, completed feathered warrior costumes are not among the luxury goods listed in the great market of Tlatelolco, although many accounts cite the brightly colored feathers from which they were made. For example, Sahagún (1950-1982, Book 8:67) lists “quetzal feathers, and those of the blue cotinga, and the red spoonbill, and all the various precious feathers of birds, which were needed for devices and shields”, but makes no mention of completed warrior costumes and devices. Similarly, the Anonymous Conqueror (1971:392-393) records the presence of “plumas y penachos de todos colores para adornar las ropas que usan en la guerra y en sus fiestas” [feathers and plumes of all colors for adorning the clothing that they use in war and in their celebrations].

Although warrior suits were apparently not available for purchase through market exchange, price equivalencies are given in terms of mantas. Berdan (1975:211-214, after Scholes and Adams [1957] Información of 1554) lists one warrior costume as equal to 25, 30, 40, 60, 100, 200, or 240 mantas, depending on the type, and one shield as equal to 10, 15, 25, or 80 mantas, again depending on the type. These figures probably represent the price of commissioning a specialist to complete a warrior suit of the specified design.

In summary, both the raw materials for manufacturing elite tribute items and sometimes the finished goods themselves were available for purchase in the market. In both cases, however, their availability seems to have been limited to the larger urban
markets, where their occurrence was due to the presence of the professional merchants who circulated among these markets. Smaller, provincial markets may have only occasionally carried exotic wares and luxury goods (Berdan 1985:356).

**Market Transactions Involving Foodstuffs for Exotic Raw Materials**

To obtain exotic raw materials, it is suggested that commoners intensified production in areas available to them and for which there was a steady market: agricultural produce and subsistence goods. Exchanges involving foodstuffs for exotic raw materials appear to have occurred through two main avenues: by pulling in marketable surpluses from primary producers and through the sale of excess tribute in foodstuffs in exchange for other tribute goods needed.

The most prevalent type of exchange presumably involved the individual tributary or *calpulli* utilizing surplus foodstuffs to purchase the raw materials necessary to meet tribute quotas. Given the limited purchasing power of commoners, it is likely that these exchanges primarily involved raw or spun cotton to produce the cotton cloth required of most (if not all) households. At a higher level, raw materials and finished goods required for tribute were purchased collectively by the *calpulli* *tequitlato* or by imperial *calpixque* out of the stores of other goods received in tribute. For example, the *Relación Geográfico de Texcoco* reports that “los mayordomos que en cada pueblo había... [éstos] tenían cuidado de buscar y comprar, de las rentas que entraban en su poder, de las piedras ricas que podían hacer...[y] enviabanlas a su rey por la cosa más principal que le podían enviar” [the stewards of each city ... were in charge of seeking out and buying (from the rents that came into their control) the most precious stones ... and conveying these to their king as the most valued thing they could send] (Pomar 1941:53). The reference to “rents” indicates that agricultural produce was involved in these exchanges. Similarly, Alva Ixtlilxochitl records that in Texcoco, the *calpixque* conferred with the leading merchants about the distribution of royal tribute as a means of procuring other desired goods: “El cuarto [Consejo] era de Hacienda, en donde se
A related type of exchange may have involved the sale of excess tribute in the market place, a practice that was common in early colonial times (Gibson 1964:199-200). Gibson (1964:94) reports that recipients of Indian tribute payments had a distinct commercial advantage in that they were able to speculate in certain commodities and control markets -- hinting at the degree to which the controls of tribute flows may have affected market participation in the preconquest situation as well. Gibson's analysis (1964:199-200) also highlights the role that tribute potentially played in the market system. Following the Spanish conquest, excess tribute goods initially were marketed to consumers through sale or auction. Since a variety of goods were received in tribute, a broad range of goods were introduced into the market in this way. When tribute assessments were later regularized to payments in maize or money, the shift to a single commodity operated as a deterrent to the production and exchange of goods.

**Administrative Mechanisms to Increase Market Participation**

The concentration of non-local raw materials that were needed to meet tribute requirements was a major factor pulling foodstuffs into urban markets. The centripetal force of this circuit was further strengthened, however, by political and economic measures that increased market participation.

One such measure was the regulation that prohibited the sale of goods outside the markets. This regulation was enforced with penalties and supernatural sanctions (Durán 1971:276-277 [Ch. 20]; Berdan 1975:206-207). Although Motolinía (1971:368) claims that exchange transactions were restricted to the marketplace to
reduce theft, the regulation may have equally attempted to reduce problems of forestalling (that would have prevented produce from reaching the urban center) or attempts at market tax evasion, since “the planting of this awe and nonsense in these people brought a certain income from all that which was sold in the markets [in the form of taxes], which was divided between the lord and the community” (Durán 1971:277).

A related supernatural sanction enforced regular market attendance. Durán (1971:273-274), for example, states that the gods of the market place “threatened terrible ills and made evil omens and auguries” to the people of neighboring villages who did not attend their market. This sanction was buttressed by a law requiring people to attend the market, not only out of respect for the market place gods, but also “so that provisions would be on hand for the villages” (Durán 1971:274).16

A second strategy involved attempts to increase the attractiveness of markets in terms of the quality and variety of goods offered. Markets were a source of pride to local rulers, who attempted to attract artisans of higher class goods (Carrasco 1978:56, 1983:75) -- a concentration that in turn served to attract long-distance merchants to these market centers as well. Hicks (1982b, 1987:96-97) notes, for example, that the rulers of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco brought many skilled makers of luxury goods to their capitals, for the purpose of increasing the renown of those cities. These artisans produced both for tribute and for the market, but only for the ruler's own market (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975-77, I:444, II:101; Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 9:Ch. 18). The variety of luxury goods served a dual economic function, by generating market taxes (vendors were taxed in kind) and by promoting critical flows of foodstuffs into the city.

A more extreme measure was the creation of specialty markets through administrative decree (Durán 1971:277-78). The most famous of these included the slave markets at Azcapotzalco and Itzocan, the dog market at Acolman, and the turkey markets at Otumba, Tepepulco, and other sites (Hicks 1987:102; Motolinía 1971:375-
Although these markets specialized in one commodity, they offered a wide range of other goods as well. Hicks (1982a, 1987) argues that specialty markets were devices to artificially concentrate both the supply of and demand for particular goods at selected points, as a means of increasing general market traffic: “A market known for a particular specialty would...attract long-distance merchants seeking that product, and they would bring goods not available everywhere. The resulting heavier market traffic would provide a clientele for food and other mundane items, and the market would grow” (Hicks 1987:102). The overall effect of such a decree would have been to increase the volume of all types of goods, including foodstuffs, moving into a specific market where they could be tapped for the use of urban populations.

Some administrative controls, however, extended over other major markets as well, not just those noted for specialty attractions (Carrasco 1978:55-56, 1983:75; Hassig 1985:112-113; Hicks 1981). According to Carrasco (1983:75), “The creation of the market was one of various ways to strengthen the political power of the city that established it”, and there are numerous historical examples in which the right to hold a market depended on the balance of power relations between rival states. For example, when Azcapotzalco conquered Cuauhtitlan in the early fifteenth century, the conqueror sowed the marketplace of the defeated town with maguey, and removed its market trade to his own city (Anales de Cuauhtitlan 1945:43-44; Hassig 1985:111). Conversely, following the conquest of Tepeaca, a regional “gateway” market was established in that city by administrative decree in order to promote interregional trade: “The king...wishes that a great market place be built in Tepeaca so that all the merchants of the land may trade there on an appointed day. In this market there will be sold rich cloth, stones, jewels, featherwork of different colors, gold, silver and other metals...” (Durán 1964:102-105; Berdan 1985:352).

Hassig (1985:112-113) contends that what was controlled was not the existence of a market, but the right (overseen by the Aztec) to traffic in certain types of commodities.
As noted in the case of Tepeaca, above, these commodities were not the more mundane goods of the ordinary markets but the elite goods produced within that region and those brought in from elsewhere by professional merchants. Since the state and the pochteca achieved near monopolistic control over the influxes of foreign goods into the Valley of Mexico, control over their entry into the market system could have been readily maintained through granting or removing the rights to sponsor market trade in luxury goods. In this view, then, the major urban markets were sites that had the social and political right to traffic in elite goods, with all the attendant benefits such commerce entailed (Hicks 1981).

**Impact on Markets**

What then was the impact of these measures on the functioning of urban markets? One obvious effect was to concentrate the availability of higher status goods at politically sanctioned points in the landscape. As such these markets not only served as suppliers and consumers of elite products, but also as bulking points that facilitated the dissemination of exotic goods circulating via the pochteca-controlled interregional trade (Hassig 1985:113).

An equally essential benefit, however, was the powerful impact that concentrated luxury trade had on flows of subsistence goods. As noted above, commoners were dependent on the market place to meet their tribute obligations. To obtain exotic raw materials, commoners intensified production in areas available to them and for which there was a steady market: i.e. agricultural and subsistence goods (Berdan 1985:351). The result was the stimulation of agricultural produce and increased flows of these goods into the urban centers via the market system in exchange for goods only available in urban centers.

The centripetal pull of a major market on foodstuffs was recognized by native rulers. Following the conquest of the Chalcan League in 1465, for example, the Tlalcochcalca were required to provide the army of Motecuhzoma I with rations, including tamales and enchiladas. Apparently anticipating the volume of foodstuffs required to meet that tribute, the people of Tlalmanalco requested that the regional market be moved to
their city, supporting their request with the claim that historically their ancestors had had
the right to hold such a market (Chimalpahin 1965:205). The perceived benefit of a
regional market for the task of feeding an advancing army may reflect, in part, the role that
the market vendors played in the preparations of marching rations. Sahagún (1950-1982,
Book 9:69) records, for example, that it was the duty of the “market place folk” of the
Tlatelolco market to make the war provisions. Alternatively, the Tlalcochcalca's request
represents an explicit recognition of the efficiency of a regional market for drawing large
volumes of foodstuffs into a central place.

In summary, then, the market system appears to have played a critical role in
alleviating the problem of urban supply, in part through coordinating the exchange of
rurally produced agricultural surpluses for exotic raw materials needed to produce
prestige items demanded in tribute. Oligopolistic controls over supplies of exotic goods
coupled with administrative controls over rights to traffic in these goods enabled imperial
elite to manipulate commodity availability in order to increase, direct, or concentrate the
flows of foodstuffs to market locales where they could be utilized by urban populations.
Because this exchange was central to both imperial and urban interests, the market system
experienced regional growth and expansion under Aztec rule. But this role also
potentially structured the nature of market commerce. As Brumfiel (1987b:116) has
commented, “much of the expansion in regional exchange seems to have consisted of
rural producers marketing food to acquire products needed for tribute assessments. This
did not involve the exchange of goods between specialist producers, simply the flow of
tribute wealth into the center as payment of taxes and out from the center in exchange for
food.”

The New Dilemma

Blanton's (1994) insightful analyses have suggested that the resolution of the
urban supply problem within the domestic economy may well have given rise to a new
political problem: the unintentional fostering in the market system of an alternative
source of power and wealth outside the established political channels for the acquisition of prestige goods. On the one hand, emergent urban and imperial interests depended on the market system to motivate rural production to fund urban growth and political centralization. Yet market traffic and vendor taxes in luxury goods were an important source of wealth and prestige for local rulers (Hicks 1981, 1982a; Alvarado Tezozómoc 1975:396) and thus a potential threat to imperial attempts to distribute those goods according to their own political ends. Imperial efforts to stimulate market participation and spur food production potentially exacerbated this situation, inadvertently generating alternative sources of wealth for the local elite that decreased their reliance on imperial mechanisms of wealth distribution. Thus, the empire was faced with the challenge of encouraging market system growth while “disconnecting” this growth from the power bases of rival elites (Blanton 1994).

Imperial attempts to control and regulate access to market revenues as a source of politically important wealth are evident in a number of regulations regarding the type and location of market traffic. These administrative controls, however, reflect a balance of economic and political considerations. On the economic side, market locations reflect the need for a decentralized system that could efficiently disseminate non-local raw materials to tributaries while simultaneously tapping rural agricultural and subsistence production. Hicks (1987:102) suggests that an important component of such a system would have been rural bulking centers, where rurally produced goods could be obtained in large quantities for movement to Tenochtitlan (Hicks 1987:102). Yet political considerations dictated that these rural commercial centers by-pass traditional bases of power.

Hicks (1987) and Blanton (1994) suggest that two types of market centers were established to meet these dual needs: specialty markets and markets in calpixque centers. As discussed above, specialty markets served to spatially concentrate both the demand for and supply of specific commodities -- a tactic that greatly increased the volume, reliability, and efficiency of bulk transactions in these goods. The establishment of
“monopoly” slave markets at Azcapotzalco and Itzocan may reflect more of a concern for centralizing this lucrative traffic for purposes of taxation. However, it is interesting to note that the other famous specialty markets (including the dog market at Acolman, and the turkey markets at Otumba, Tepeaca, and Tepepulco) involved Mexico's only domestic animals, perhaps reflecting a concern on the part of Tenochtitlan for securing reliable supplies of meat for the city.

Motolinía (1971:378) confirms the role of these specialty markets as rural bulking centers from which goods were transshipped to Tenochtitlan. With reference to the bird markets at Otumba, Tepeaca, and Tepepulco he comments that “de todos éstos [mercados] llevan muchas aves a vender a la ciudad grande de México que allí se gastan y van más caras, según por los otros mercados valen muy barato, ganan los mercaderes algo en México” [from all these markets they carry many birds to sell in the great city of Mexico where they go for a good price, and as the birds are very cheap to buy in the other markets, the merchants make a profit in Mexico City]. Markets located in calpixque centers may have functioned somewhat differently. The juxtaposition of tribute and market structures facilitated the bulk exchange of rurally produced goods for items required in tribute or the conversion of excess tribute by the calpixque into other tribute goods needed to fulfill the tribute assessment.

There were few of these markets, however. While they may have served important economic functions, their political role in separating traditional elite from economic bases of power would appear to have been limited. The administration accordingly developed more overt political controls over market revenues, by converting the rights to market taxes into a mechanism to ensure compliance.

Markets could be removed or granted through administrative decree, as discussed above. Throughout the late prehispanic period, such an action was taken to achieve two political ends: either to undermine the powerbase of competing rulers or to reward meritorious military service. In the former case, the loss of a market or market revenues
resulted from political subjugation, as symbolized by the planting of maguey in the marketplace following the conquest of Cuauhtitlan (Analects of Cuauhtitlan 1945:43-44). In the latter, rights to market revenues were granted as war prizes. In the dispute mentioned above between Tlalmanalco and Amecameca, Tlalmanalco's request to relocate the regional market was denied, because the people of Amecameca had earned the rights to the revenues of that market through their valor in the war against Tollantzingo (Chimalpahin 1965:205). Similarly, when Tenochtitlan's ruler conquered Tlatelolco in 1473, the revenues of the Tlatelolco market were divided among his nobles, a prize said to have been worth a hundred towns (Alvarado Tezozómoc 1975:396; Berdan 1985:344-345; Hicks 1987:96). Under the Triple Alliance, markets were clearly recognized as sources of political power and imperial controls over market locations potentially provided one more component of an incentive plan designed to ensure the cooperation of dependent rulers.19

Summary

The foregoing synthesis delineates the salient features of Aztec political economy as these are known from current research on the Aztec empire and illustrates the complex interactions between the political and market spheres of the imperial economy. It focuses on two major kinds of dependency experienced by the expanding empire: first, the dependency of Aztec imperial elite on local rulers for control over and tribute flows from their subject populations, and second, the dependency of the imperial core's urban sector on the rural hinterland for agricultural produce. Attempts on the part of imperial elite to invert these dual dependencies are visible in the imperial strategies and policies that structured major aspects of the political economy.

It is argued here that the problems of imperial integration and urban supply were directly linked through the movement of certain classes of goods: the transformation of exotic raw materials into elite prestige goods. Exotic prestige items and cotton clothing were displayed and consumed by the elite to establish and symbolize their political
power. The state institutionalized the rights to display such goods and established the military framework through which such rights could be achieved, while concurrently consolidating state controls over the avenues through which these prestige goods circulated. The effect was the inversion of dependency relationships between traditional elite and empire, and the channeling elite energies into the imperial goals of military expansion and resource control.

But imperial consolidation set in motion a positive feedback loop driven by military expansion (Davies 1973:202-204; Demarest and Conrad 1983). As Hassig (1988:20) has noted, “War was the empire.” Military achievement as the primary means of increasing status and power may have generated incentive to participate in imperial campaigns, but it also created an inflationary cycle in the consumption of prestige goods. The need for more reliable controls over luxury prestige goods led to further expansion as tribute replaced long-distance trade in exotic raw materials. Imperial expansion thus increased both the demand for and supply of exotic prestige items, while simultaneously increasing the size of the non-producing population and the problems of urban-rural dependency.

The increasing demand on the part of the growing elite class for cotton cloth and feathered warrior costumes was passed on to the commoners in the form of tribute requirements and this sector of the population came under increasing stress to obtain the exotic raw materials in order to produce the finished goods required as tribute payments. The primary source for these raw materials was through the urban market system, and the need to exchange for these raw materials provided a major incentive to increase local production as a medium of exchange. Although both primary and secondary production may have been affected, the problems of urban supply created a high and constant demand for foodstuffs and therefore favored the market in consumable subsistence goods.

The interactions between Aztec political economy and market economy thus hinged on the articulation of two flows of goods: (1) the transformation of exotic raw
materials into prestige items via tribute assessments, and (2) the market exchange of foodstuffs for the raw materials needed to meet tribute demands in manufactured goods. The former alleviated the endemic problem of empire, while the latter addressed the problem of urban supply in the imperial core. Because of the central role that market exchange played in areas of vital political and economic concern to the empire, the market system experienced regional growth and expansion during the period of Aztec rule. This growth was in part, however, structured by the administrative strategies for political consolidation and economic integration of which it was a key component. As a result, it may be more appropriate to regard the expansion of the market system as “evidence of a reorganized system of elite extraction or finance” (Brumfiel 1987b:116), rather than as the reflection of increased economic specialization and efficiency marking the rise of a market integrated economy.

The preceding synthesis has outlined some key components of Aztec imperial economy and presented the general theoretical orientation that will be followed here. The following chapter explores the implications of the imperial economy as delineated above for the market system structure and hence for the production and exchange of utilitarian craft goods or commodities.
Notes to Chapter 4

1 Davies (1987:122) argues that the distribution of land grants for military service was based both on merit and elite status; only meritorious warriors of noble birth (the tetecuhtin) were rewarded with grants of land. In contrast, chief warriors of commoner status (the tequihuas) were generally not landowners. Berdan (1975:67-68) suggests that only the most distinguished commoners, recognized by the title cuauhpilli, were supported on lands granted to them by the tlatoani.

Davies (1987:163-165, following Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 8: Ch. 20-21) mentions other ways in which noble and commoner warriors were distinguished by the ruler and by society, including the right to use red ochre and quetzal feathers by the former, in contrast with yellow ochre and eagle feathers by the latter.

2 The nobility held inalienable rights to land (Davies 1987:124). The political incorrectness of alienating elite landholdings except through conquest is reflected in a transfer commented on by Hicks (1982a), who notes that:

“According to the Crónica X histories, the Mexica ruler Moteuczoma I (r. 1440-1469) asked Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco for some of his lands. Nezahualcoyotl agreed, but to legitimate the transfer, the Mexica insisted on a ritual war between Tenochtitlan and Texcoco, which the latter was to lose (Durán 1967, II: Ch. 15; Alvarado Tezozómoc 1975: Ch. 19-20).”

Following this ritual war, the Mexica received from Texcoco not whole towns, but individual parcels of land from several communities within Texcoco's domain. Although other sources give different versions of what transpired between Motecuhzoma I and Nezahualcoyotl, the important point here is that even the dominant power in the Valley was expected to respect the inalienable rights of noble landholdings.

Hodge (1991:128-129) reports a rather different situation for Cuauhtitlan, in which the local ruler was capable of appropriating lands from his dependents for his own support following that polity's conquest by Tenochtitlan. Hodge (1991:129) comments, “Perhaps this tlatoani had gained support from Tenochtitlan's rulers that allowed him to do this without local repercussions.”

3 For a similar case of “category shifts”, see Edens (1992).

4 Carrasco (1991) reports that the tribute roles of Tlacopan and Texcoco distinguish three distinct classes of tributaries; data are less complete for Tenochtitlan, but tributaries appear to have been organized similarly under this capital as well. The classes of tributaries responsible to an individual capital were:

First, a series of subordinate towns with their own kings who were subject to the great king of their capital city. These subordinate rulers were often related by marriage to the huey tlatoani and they served as advisors on that ruler's council and gave military service. In addition, they had limited tributary obligations, primarily in labor to repair or build the temples and palaces, or in supplying firewood to the palace. Each of these dependent towns had their own rural districts that supported the local rulers and elite.

The second class of tributaries consisted of the immediate rural area surrounding each capital. This area had a steward in charge of collecting the revenue of foodstuffs and craft goods sufficient to support the palace for a portion of the year, and collected at
varying intervals: daily, weekly, every 15 days, and three or four times per year. Daily and weekly tribute most often consisted of food or other perishable goods, while the collection of manufactured goods occurred at less frequent intervals (Hodge 1991:125).

A third category comprised villages of renters, without rulers of their own, that were administered by stewards. These villages cultivated lands for the lord, while also supplying some goods (such as firewood) in tribute; the products of their labor were collected on an annual or semi-annual basis (Hodge 1991). Villages of renters were generally relatively close to the capital, but beyond its immediate rural area (Carrasco 1991). There was, however, considerable interdigitation of these subject communities (Gibson 1964:45-47; Hicks 1982a; Hodge 1991:129) and by 1519 both Tenochtitlan and Texcoco received tributes from lands in each other's administrative territories (Borah and Cook 1963:75-76; Gibson 1971; Hodge 1984:29). Carrasco (1991:111) notes that these parcels were also spread across a variety of environments, giving the capitals “access to the resources of different areas and facilitating the organization of a supply system based on direct prestations in kind and labor basically separate from the commercial sector of the economy.”

Hicks (1984:156), however, argues that although places are listed as towns, the rosters “probably do not mean that the whole town, and all of its inhabitants, was obligated in the way specified” since the same town often appears on different lists as having different obligations. Rather, the lists refer to certain landholdings within the boundaries of these towns, and/or certain barrios of macehualtin, that were set aside for the purposes dictated; the amount of land and/or macehualtin in each place may have been relatively small.

The highest imperial tribute official was the chief steward or petlacalcatl, who was responsible directly to the ruler at Tenochtitlan and who supervised the provincial tributary stewards or calpixque. Within each tributary province, one community was designated as the head town or collection point for the entire province and there tribute was collected for transhipment to Tenochtitlan or stored in imperial warehouses until it was requested (Zorita 1963:192-3; Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1952, Vol. II:416; Durán 1967, Vol. II:242, 333). At the local community level within each province, tribute assessment and collection was organized at the level of the calpulli or tlaxilacalli and supervised by the fiscal officer of that group (the tequitlato), who was directly in charge of the tribute paying commoners (Zorita 1963; Berdan 1975:117-118; Hicks 1982b:239). Thus, the upward flow of imperial tribute was from individual commoner to the tequitlato who delivered the goods to the imperial tax stewards at the provincial collection center, who in turn transferred the goods to the control of the chief steward in Tenochtitlan.

Several authors (including Calnek [1978a:107-108] and Isaac [1986:331-333] warn against over generalizing from this one account to assume that all or even most pochteca trade was state-sponsored.

The professional long-distance traders were intermediate in status between commoners and nobility, but capable of accumulating considerable wealth (Berdan 1975:145). These merchants were allowed to attend the calmecac (traditionally the prerogative of the nobility), allowed to sacrifice slaves, and to wear certain symbols of noble status at special annual festivals, but paid tribute as well as gave gifts to the ruler. They participated in a guild organization characterized by exclusive residence, control over membership, specific laws and codes, and a system of internal ranking (Acosta Saignes 1945; Berdan 1975:148; van Zantwijk 1985).
Davies (1987:100, 152-57) argues that Tenochtitlan suffered from an imbalance of payments owing to its poor performance as an exporter. Other than skilled artisanry, central Mexico had little to offer in exchange for exotic goods. Since imports could not be paid for with exports, the Aztecs resorted to obtaining the desired goods by force, through conquest and the imposition of tribute. Davies cites Tehuantepec as a case in point. When the merchants of that province complained about the poor value of goods offered by the Valley of Mexico merchants in exchange for cacao, gold, feathers, and precious stones, their lack of compliance served as a pretext for Aztec conquest (Durán 1967, Vol. II:357).

For example, Hassig (1982) suggests that markets occurring at longer periodicities (following a 9-, 13-, or 20-day sequence) were not functional markets serving smaller communities, but rather were ritual markets. As such they were held of the first day of their respective ritual cycle only in those towns with whose market day they coincided, making its regular market slightly more important than it would ordinarily be.

Berdan (1985:345) interprets the tlanecuilo as “regional merchants” who specialized primarily in non-luxury goods, including maize, amaranth seeds, chili, tortillas, wheat, sandals, palm fiber cloaks, gourd bowls, cane baskets, turkey, and salt. However, they are also mentioned in connection with two exotics: cotton and cacao. Berdan (1985:345-346, 361) seems to suggest that the cacao and cotton were imported by guild merchants and then retailed by tlanecuilo, since numerous references indicate that the purchasers of these products traveled to the sources of production rather than the producer marketing his goods in highland towns.

As J. Parsons admits, modifications of the parameters of this model could drastically alter its predictions. On the one hand, the model underestimates food supplies available to Tenochtitlan by not including rents from parcels of land attached to administrative offices. Conversely, the model may overestimate tribute flows by assuming that the Codex Mendoza represents Tenochtitlan's share alone of annual grain tribute.

Brumfiel (1991d), however, has questioned whether this picture represents a cultural ideal instead of the actual organization of labor. She cites evidence of a significant decline in spinning (and presumably weaving) of both cotton and maguey during the Late Aztec period at three major sites, and suggests that cloth production played a less central role in the allocation of women's time and energy.

There also appears to have been regional variability in the relative effort invested in the spinning of cotton vs. maguey, based on the distribution of small and large spindle whorls within the Valley (M. Parsons 1972, 1975). A reexamination of the spatial distribution of cotton and maguey whorls within the Chalco-Xochimilco survey regions shows that 86% of maguey whorls were found in upland areas, with only 15% of this type occurring within the lakebed. In contrast, 64% of cotton whorls were found in the lakebed, primarily associated with Late Aztec chinampa settlements, while only 34% of cotton whorls were found on upland sites. The differential distribution of maguey whorls represents an environmentally based specialization in maguey fibers. The higher number of cotton whorls in the lakebed, in contrast, may reflect a higher standard of living and/or the greater purchasing power of settlements in the chinampa zone.

Ethnohistoric evidence similarly suggests that not every region nor every household was involved in the production of cotton cloth. For example, Zorita (1963:241) comments that: “To ask the Indians for tribute in reales is also a great injury to them. Unless an Indian lives in a town not far from a Spanish town, or on a main
traveled road, or raises cacao or cotton, or makes cotton cloth, or raises fruit, he does not
receive money.” Also, “there is always cloth available in those areas where the Indians
are accustomed to make cloth; they make it for themselves and also take it to sell in
places where it is not made. There are many cloth merchants, both Indians and
Spaniards” (Zorita 1963:252-3). The implication is that not everyone made cotton cloth.

The situation recorded by Alva Ixtlilxochitl is clearly one of political manipulation and
may therefore not be typical. Twice Tezozomoc sends cotton to Ixtlilxochitl and asks
(out of friendship) that Ixtlilxochitl request his subjects to make the cotton into fine
mantas, “como se sabían hacer en aquel tiempo en esta ciudad” [such as they knew how
to make at that time in this city]. Ixtlilxochitl complies, calling for aid on his subject
lords from Huexotla, Coatlinchan, Coatepec, and Ixtapaluca, to distribute the work
among their subjects. The third time Tezozomoc tries this ploy, Ixtlilxochitl rebels and
orders his subjects to make the cotton into warrior costumes instead, much to the
consternation of Tezozomoc. Zorita apparently records a more generalized situation.

The cost or affordability of a tribute manta has been difficult to estimate. But assuming,
as Berdan has argued (1975:217), that the relative value of goods did not change
drastically in spite of the general price inflation following the Spanish conquest, price
equivalencies from the early colonial period provide some insight here. For example,
according to the Información of 1554, 1 manta was equivalent in price to 8 fanegas of
maize (valued at 4 pesos per manta and 1/2 peso [4 reales] per fanega of maize) (Scholes
and Adams 1957; Keen 1963:77). Yet Zorita (1963:240) reports that the 1/2 fanega of
maize taken in tribute per household per harvest was considered a hardship; at the price
equivalent quoted above, a single manta would represent 16 times that hardship. This is
consistent with Zorita's (1963:252) claim that “each piece of [tribute] cloth is worth much
more than the tribute ordinarily required of Indians.”

Because cotton cloth could be traded for virtually anything offered on the market, a
woman would have a strong incentive to maximize her production of cloth (Hicks 1994)
above and beyond meeting her tribute assessment. The use of spun cotton may have
represented a more cost-effective strategy both for meeting tribute requirements and
producing cloth for exchange. If this were the case, we might well expect a decline in the
evidence of spinning within the Valley such as has been recorded for Huexotla (Brumfiel
Thus, Zorita's (1963:187) statement to the effect that people of the tierra caliente
produced the cotton while the people of the tierra fría turned it into cloth may reflect a
regional specialization within the industry based not on primary vs. secondary production,
but on different steps of the production process.

Durán's (1971:274) claim here may partially reflect postconquest concerns with the
provisioning of Mexico City. For example, Gibson (1964:354-355) reports that the
Spanish state became actively concerned in matters of native marketing after the plague
of 1545-48, which created the first crisis in Mexico City's food supply. In 1551, a
viceregal order sharply restricted all Indian markets in the Valley except in Mexico City
and Texcoco in order to concentrate foodstuffs in these centers. Later, the Audencia ruled
that all towns within a 20 league radius of the Mexico City were to bring to that city's
markets every Saturday, 100 turkeys, 400 chickens, 2,800 eggs, and all available firewood
and fodder.

The relevant passage in full states that:
After the arrows, bows, and shields had been put aside, it fell to the Tlacochcalcas [formerly of Chalco Atenco, latterly of Tlalmanalco] to follow in the footsteps of the great Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina to provide his sustenance, his cooked tamales wrapped in a dry maize leaf and his enchiladas. Because of this it happened that the people of Tlalmanalco gathered before him to ask that the regional market that is held take place in Tlalmanalco, because as they said, our ancestors had arranged that the right to establish a market day fell upon the Totolimpas, and to the settlers at the edges of the Sierras [Nevadas, next to Tlalmanalco]. But even though the Tlalmanalca supported this [claim], the truth is that the people of Amecameca, as is well known, had the option by which a market is celebrated in the city of Amecameca, since this right was the source of revenues of the Nonohualcas, Poyauhtecas, Panohuayas, the same populations that had earned it in the war against the city of Tollantzingo, whose inhabitants they had robbed of the right to celebrate a market, because these people of Panohuayan were people very strong and valiant in ancient times (Chimalpahin 1965:205; translation: LDM).

18"It was the duty of the market place folk to make the war provisions -- biscuits, and finely ground, dried maize and chia seeds, and dried maize dough, and dried, lime-treated maize dough. With these was the market place charged, and the market place directors, the men and women thus appointed, were charged with assigning the tribute” (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 9:69).

19Examples of the recognized role of markets in augmenting political power can be found in a broad range of other societies, as well. For example, among the Tiv, Bohannon and Bohannon (1968:242) claim that “the political aspects of market places were of immeasurable importance .... Markets were -- and to some extent still are -- political plums” (emphasis added). Thus Tiv markets were founded and controlled by Tiv chiefs who used the centralizing and economic power of a market to underwrite their own local control of people (C. Smith 1976a:41). Similarly, in late 19th century Zinder province, the local ruler invited a number of immigrant artisans to set up their households and workshops near the palace, and to exercise their crafts under his patronage as a means of increasing trade to the ruler's market; these crafts added to the ruler's revenues and to the economic importance of Zinder (Arnould 1982:168).