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Title

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Publication Date

2010-03-31

Peer reviewed

Games of Power: Spectacle in the Aztec and Roman Worlds

Colonial writers who came in contact with the Aztecs in the 16th century often refer to the combat spectacles they witnessed as *escaramuzas*, or skirmishes. In the Roman Imperial period, *spectacula* encompassed a wide variety of events, the term generally referring to “events seen by a public.”¹ Sponsored by the state, spectacles were often aggressive, violent and dangerous confrontations between individuals or large groups in a public space, and the death of one party was ultimately expected, and even often ensured. In *Juegos Aztecas Rituales*, López Austin argues that Aztec rituals cannot be equated with Greek athletics, and furthermore, they cannot be compared, as the first Europeans had attempted, to Roman gladiatorial games. However, the mock battles of the Aztec world and the arena games of the Romans both served key social roles and functioned as visual demonstrations of imperial strength and as a means of socially reinforcing hierarchical values. I will highlight the ways in which publicly staged mock battles – *taking place within the city’s boundaries* – formed an integral part of imperial strategy, serving as opportunities for each empire to make public displays of the authority they exerted and maintained over conquered peoples and lands.

In order to explore the role of mock battles in the Aztec and Roman realm, I will briefly describe some of the participants and some of the occasions on which the battles occurred, including a few of the principal Aztec feasts that featured this practice. These events played an important part within the larger event of the ritual itself, as recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún in Book II, *Ceremonies*, of the Florentine Codex from the 16th century.

There were four major seasonal festivals that took place throughout the Aztec ceremonial year, and I will focus on two of them: the feast of *Tlacaxipehualiztli* and that of *Panquetzaliztli*. While the First involves ceremonial hand-to-hand combat between individuals, the second includes large-scale street skirmishes between groups. In both types of battle, key participants sometimes varied, including captives purchased as slaves, or warriors that had been taken during war as prisoners.² It is of note that the act of taking a captive was a very significant event in the life of a warrior, dramatically elevating his position within the social hierarchy.³ One such example of mock battling as part of a ritual ceremony took place during the feast of *Tlacaxipehualiztli*. The second day of the festival is most relevant to this discussion as it features an interesting exchange between the captives and their captors. David Carrasco explains that “On the day before their ritual deaths, the captives were transformed into *xipeme* or *tototecti*, meaning skinned ones or “dead in the honor of Totec,” through dancing, an all-night vigil, and the cutting of hair from the crown of the heads by their captors.”⁴ Taking to the streets, these

¹ Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon. *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1999), 11.

² Women and children were also often taken as captives.

³ La captura de un enemigo transformaba por completo la vida de un guerrero azteca. Desde ese momento le era cortado el mechón de pelo lo que indicaba su calidad de bisoño, podía vestirse con prendas de algodón, calzarse, vivir en poligamia, quedaba libre de tributo, obtenía algunas veces puestos públicos de importancia y se veía honrado con un lugar en ciertos banquetes de palacio.” Alfredo López Austin. *Juegos Rituales Aztecas*. (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, 1967), 25.

⁴ David Carrasco. *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Empire*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 143.

transformed captives would visit the houses of various inhabitants in the city, collecting food for their captors. It is important to emphasize these street spectacles were by no means meant to be peaceful events, but rather were designed to be provocative displays, often inciting even bystanders to join the skirmish.⁵

“Then [the tototecti] set upon [the warriors] and took after them; they went on fighting them, seeking to seize and lay hands upon them, like holding those who had detained them by the leg. And [the warriors] went whirling around, circling back, fighting the others with pine staves. And if some were taken who had detained [the xipeme], these *xipeme* beat them; they struck [such an one] with their rattle sticks, showing their anger.”⁶

The sacrifice of the captive followed the events described above, continuing with a loud and unruly procession to the top of the temple of Yopitli and then back down again.

It should be emphasized that the role of the captive in the ceremony was vital, as he was *expected* not only to battle and fight his captor, but also to behave in a brave manner. Sahagún however, recorded that as sacrificial captives was brought to the temple they often behaved one of two ways. Either a captive fainted or became weak kneed, (in which case he was forcibly dragged to the top of the temple), or he “showed himself strong, not acting like a woman, he went with a man’s fortitude; he bore himself like a man; he went exerting himself; he went strong of heart and shouting...”⁷ Ideally, however, the captive would behave in manner befitting a warrior, fulfilling his role as a worthy sacrifice for the sake of maintaining cosmic order.

Unfortunately, a clear evolution of ceremonial practices among the Aztec cannot be easily traced since documentation of these events comes primarily from the time of the Spanish conquest and reflects only one moment in history. Such an evolution, however, is traceable in Roman spectacles. The *munus*, later associated with the “games” were initially presented on a private basis at funerals of high-ranking officials and was fundamentally at its inception, a Republican institution. It was the deceased’s family *munus*, or duty to ease this transition from life to death with gifts and/or ritualized combat performances. This rite became institutionalized and made public by the Roman state, specifically by the Julio-Claudians under Augustus and eventually come to stand as a celebration and symbol of Rome’s continued prosperity and relegated to the space of the amphitheater. Roman captives used in the various “games” were often, but not exclusively defeated enemies that had escaped slavery or execution. One only has to recall the 10,000 captives brought to fight in Rome following the conquest of Dacia.⁸ Additionally, the Roman warrior or gladiator often, but not always, received some kind of formal training before entering the arena. Generally, these men, (and even women) were relegated to servile status and decidedly marginalized from Roman society. Free men entering the arena lost their privileges as such, and were regarded as part of the same category of individuals as the captives of war and criminals that comprised gladiators. Although records exist of highborn individuals voluntarily switching career paths and becoming gladiators, such practices were rare.⁹ (Even more rarely, were the emperors who were tempted to join the arena on occasion. Not

⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸ See Dio Cassius.

⁹ “In historical narratives (too) instances of free persons, especially if they were senators or equestrians, who chose to appear as gladiators are overemphasized *precisely because they are unusual.*” (emphasis my own) Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 102.

surprisingly however, they were never defeated.)¹⁰ Though the Roman elite may have expected to see bravery embodied in the gladiator, they certainly did not idealize the lifestyle of the gladiator. Similarly in the Aztecs realm, *even if* the promise of a glorious afterlife may have been promised to sacrificial victims, it certainly did not inspire volunteerism, so much so, that the warrior's fate on the sacrificial stone was even lamented by Aztec elders.¹¹

The staging of these combats, whereby the victim transforms into a willing participant can be interpreted as a unique opportunity for social exchange between the members of the elite class, those "conquered" people, and the inhabitants of the city. One such illustration from the Florentine Codex allows us to see this alternate aspect to spectacles in the Aztec realm. Here, two warriors encounter each other during the feast of *Panquetzaliztli*. The text reads:

"...he slew four of those slaves in the ball court which was found in the courtyard which they called Teotlachtli. From there he departed and circled all the city, running; and in certain places he slew, in each one, a slave. And from that point [onward], two factions began a mock battle. Some died in the skirmishing."¹²

Violent and vigorous, the primary interaction occurs between the warriors and the captives; however, note how the warrior goes about the ritual. The importance of exchange and interaction is reiterated in the image accompanying this excerpt. The scene is divided in two parts, with the same two fighters shown twice, and is intended to be read in a "before" and "after" sequence. While both men are carrying staves and swinging them in combat, they are otherwise undifferentiated, wearing similar clothing and mantles. The outcome of the encounter is depicted at the bottom of the same panel, with one warrior shown slain by the other. We notice that the scribe illustrating the text has depicted speaking scrolls coming out from the mouths of each combatant. Presumably the two men are hurling insults at each other, and provoking one another, quite possibly to the enjoyment of the spectators who are present.

Interactive space becomes central to the ritual, as the warrior moves throughout the city, marking various points on his path with the slaying of captives. The warrior interacts with the space that surrounds him, entering into what is essentially a "dialogue" with the topography of the city. Since the death of captive warriors was fundamentally essential to Aztec existence and to the stability of Aztec cosmic order, sacrifices served as nourishment for the war god Huitzilopochtli and if such offerings were not made, "then the Mexicas, indeed, the entire universe, was threatened with annihilation."¹³

Although the religious ramifications of public rituals for the Romans never equaled those of the Aztecs, it is worth exploring some similarities between these cultures with respect to exchange and space in this context.¹⁴ Aztec ritual battling often took place in the streets, with the ritual itself spilling into the homes of the citizens of the city, so that private and public merged to create a fluid space. By allowing mock battles to take place publicly, the Aztecs

¹⁰ Ibid., 102.

¹¹ Inga Clendinnen. *Aztecs: An Interpretation*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 104.

¹² Sahagún, 27.

¹³ Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 172.

¹⁴ I would also mention that with any "ritual" or "custom" evolution is observed. The origins of the Roman arena combat seem to be linked to religion more explicitly prior to evolving into spectacle. Roland Auguet mentions the Roman historian Festus describing a custom involving the sacrifice of prisoners on the tombs of brave warriors. Eventually this practice was seen as cruel and gladiators were substituted and forced to fight before the tomb instead. See Ronald Auguet, 1994.

brought a form of ritualized warfare into the limits of the city. The power of Aztec domination and the ability to control the outcome of the most volatile of human clashes – that of war – was made public, as they conducted these events within the space of the city, in its very neighborhoods. David Carrasco elucidates the point further: “The Aztecs had constructed a dramatically controlled environment in which spectators could perceive the perfect power of their warriors in a condensation of Aztec warfare.”¹⁵ This significance was first noted by the Spanish chronicler, *Diego Durán* in his account of the many foreign enemy rulers who, invited to these Aztec sacrifices, were brought to witness the deaths of some of the most formidable warriors from the outlying regions, invariably leaving the scene overwhelmed by “dread and fear.”¹⁶

Superficial consideration suggests that the later Roman localization of spectacle to the space of the amphitheater functioned as a separation between social spaces, relegating the area of the spectacle and that of the spectator to a particular sphere, viewed as separate from the urban space. In fact, spectacle was very much a part of Roman life, but this idea is not a new one. Barbara Kellum notes that “the gladiatorial combats in the amphitheater, the circus games, and theatrical performances were not spectacles that existed apart from and in opposition to the quotidian world of the streets, but rather ritualized extensions of a spectacular culture that pervaded all aspects of Roman life.”¹⁷ Aztec and Roman festivals and rituals surrounding the spectacles of combat were collective experiences that involved the whole community, so that the process of sacrificing was not simply an act of priestly obligation. The Aztec laity for example, was involved in the events leading up to the festivals and was wholly responsible for the care of captive warriors. “All participated in the care of victims in life, and in their dismemberment and processing in death. Warrior captives who were to die in major ceremonies were kept close by the local temples...and their care was a charge on the local people.”¹⁸ Although Roman inhabitants had no such direct contact with the fighters themselves, they participated in turn by mocking and cheering not only the combatants but often the emperors as well.¹⁹

To control the behavior of the fighters as well as the outcome of the battles was no simple task. For Aztec society, ensuring the cooperation of captives set loose in a public space as well as the ability to command such obedient participation from these men, reveals that these events demanded tight control. For the Aztecs, this control exerted over the captive began many days before the event, and concluded with the drinking of *pulche*, an inebriatory drink prior to the event, ensuring a predisposition for combat.²⁰ Roman captives forced into the arena found themselves in a similarly controlled environment and so oppressive was the knowledge of the fighter’s fate that in some cases, suicide was sought as a more favorable option than dying in the arena. Seneca mentions three such instances: one concerning a man who commits suicide after choking himself on a latrine sponge, another killing himself on the spokes of wheel, and a third, turning the very spear he was given to use during a mock sea battle on himself.

¹⁵ Carrasco, 152.

¹⁶ Austin, 8; Carrasco, 143.

¹⁷ “Barbara Kellum. “The Spectacle of the Street” in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*. Eds. Bergmann, B. and Kondoleon, C. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1999), 291.

¹⁸ Clendinnen, 89.

¹⁹ Richard Lim, “In the Temple of Laughter” Visual and Literary Representations of Spectators at Roman Games” in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*. Eds. Bergmann, B. and Kondoleon, C. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1999), 343.

²⁰ Clendinnen, 103.

As mentioned, later Roman imperial games carried a different, if not “lighter” religious importance than Aztec spectacles did, though they too were connected to yearly feasts and festivals. The death of the warrior was not explicitly necessitated for universal salvation as it was for the Aztecs, whose gods required constant nourishment. Rather they served to validate Roman power in more earthly terms. Unlike the sacrificial victims of the Aztecs, Roman combatants were occasionally given the chance of winning back their lives.²¹ In an act emphasizing this aspect of social exchange, participants in the arena were sometimes granted clemency on the basis of merit and performance by the emperor himself. One such early example is found on a fragmented relief from the 1st C. BCE.

The image, similar to the example from the Florentine Codex shows two warriors in mid combat. The warrior who has gained the upper hand and the warrior who seems to be defeated are superimposed in low relief. The viewer’s attention is called to the sword that is about to come down over the defeated man’s head, who seems to look up anxiously at his opponent. However, the two men’s gazes are both in fact directed to the left of the scene. Here, two figures are visibly heralding with trumpets while a third figure (the game’s official), signals with his left hand saving the fallen warrior’s life with a gesture of reprieve.

The act, in many ways like the scene from the Florentine Codex, can be read as both public and highly interactive. Here, trumpets and the suspended sword heighten the theatrical nature of the event, but the scene also serves to capture the importance of this particular form of communication between elite and non-elite. The figures are shown not only shown inhabiting the same physical space regardless of their status but they are also not shown as simply passive viewers. The arena thus continued to serve not only as opportunities for spectator exchange (who jeered or applauded as the case happened to be), but also for the game’s sponsor – and later the emperor – who displayed his power and generosity to the public by acts of clemency. In sum, both societies necessitated the combats to be public and collective activities that worked in turn to stabilize social order and reaffirm political power and cosmic order within their respective social groups.

While the afore mentioned examples serve to illustrate how imperial power could manifest itself before its citizens in very concrete terms, the theatrical act of arming an already defeated individual adds yet another dimension to an already unabashed display of imperial authority. This aspect of controlled theatricality can be detected once more during the combat proper, because the captive is not given the freedom to determine what weapons he will use. During the feast of *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, for example, the captive tied to the millstone is given the advantage of height – but not of weapons – as his club is covered in feathers, and not obsidian points like those of his opponents, who also happen to outnumber him.²² Roman fighters too, were given weapons and matched according to their armor, so that each might offer certain advantages over the other, thereby yielding a more interesting fight. A good example of this can be seen in 4th century Roman mosaics housed in the Villa Borghese.

Finally, it almost goes without saying that a mock battle could not manifest itself as such, that is, as a battle, without the use of weapons. However, the arming of already defeated captives carried with it an even deeper meaning to those witnessing the event. With the captive once again armed, he is transformed for his audience into a potential public threat – *a symbolic enemy*

²¹ Although Aztec captives were armed in these mock battles, the match was not an even one, and as an example from the feast of *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, where the captive is tied about the waist to a mill stone and pitted against three or four warriors at a time until he was defeated. Sahagún, 4.

²² Clendinnen, 95.

to be defeated and therefore considered a threat to social stability. This threat is of a different kind, however, because it had been legitimized by the state and then immediately and publicly neutralized. In this scenario, the threat posed by the armed combatant is ultimately a contrivance – *it has become a mock threat*. The very act of bestowing the captive with weapons becomes both a necessary act and a symbolic one, so that the subjugated individual's controlled re-arming can be read as a central for both societies for whom military prowess was a key factor in maintaining interior civic stability and control over peripheral lands.

While to our modern eye, these *spectacula* may resemble wild and spontaneous exhibitions. They were in fact, largely orchestrated and theatrical events. Not only sanctioned by their respective elite power groups, the staging of mock battles in the ancient world served as one vehicle for ideological promotion and power display. They served as a tangible means of displaying the empire's vast reach, its dominion over ever-expanding territories, and its ability to control the outcomes of combat. The space in which these events were held, the participants who were forced to take part, as well as the audience who witnessed it all functioned to demonstrate the power and influence of what it meant to be an empire.

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