



The Aztecs

15 October 2020 to 22 June 2021

EVERYTHING FOR THE GODS?

Sacrificial rituals in the Aztec Empire

When the Spanish conquerors first saw Aztec art, they were shocked: they considered the depictions of skulls, limbs and apparent effigies indicative of barbaric habits and customs. Aztec culture is still associated with cruel sacrificial rites and cannibalism. The special exhibition *The Aztecs* gets to the bottom of this sacrificial culture and illuminates the topic in all its complexity and diversity.

Fantastic mediaeval tales about 'strange people in distant countries' meant that the conquerors and missionaries who followed Hernán Cortés' conquest in the sixteenth century were expecting to encounter despicable conditions. At the same time, they were under the influence of late mediaeval demonology and the witch craze. These prejudices clouded their perception and interpretation. Descriptions of human sacrifices that have been passed down are not eyewitness reports; they were based on hearsay or were made up in order to justify repression.

Pictorial depictions leave no doubt that humans were indeed killed in Mesoamerica. Although it was obviously not unusual for criminals and enemies to be killed, this occurred much more rarely than might be expected from the numbers provided by the colonial era chroniclers. It is moreover apparent that the conquerors and missionaries conflated these executions with the traditional self-sacrifice (by a drop of blood) and animal offerings, thereby placing them in the wrong context. Sacrifice in general was an essential part of the Aztec religion, which considered the universe a complex living landscape where every earthly thing contained something divine: plants, animals, even objects. The Aztecs believed that humans were subject to greater forces of nature: In exchange for the nourishment received from the divine powers, the people gave prayer and offerings. These included the first yields of the harvest, especially made meals or even valuables.

The interpretation of skull and bone depictions is also constrained by intercultural misconceptions. These images do not represent executions or macabre activities, but establish pictorial links to deceased ancestors, as we still know them today from the pictures used in Mexican celebrations for the Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos).