CANNIBALS AND KINGS

The Origins of Cultures

Marvin Harris

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The Cannibal Kingdom

As well-trained, methodical butchers of the battlefield and as citizens of the land of the Inquisition, Cortés and his men, who arrived in Mexico in 1519, were inured to displays of cruelty and bloodshed. It must have come as no great surprise to them that the Aztecs methodically sacrificed human beings, inasmuch as the Spaniards and other Europeans methodically broke people's bones on the rack, pulled people's arms and legs off in tugs-of-war between horses, and disposed of women accused of witchcraft by burning them at the stake. Still, they were not quite prepared for what they found in Mexico.

Nowhere else in the world had there developed a state-sponsored religion whose art, architecture, and ritual were so thoroughly dominated by violence, decay, death, and disease. Nowhere else were walls and plazas of great temples and palaces reserved for such a concentrated display of jaws, fangs, claws, talons, bones, and gaping death heads. The eyewitness accounts of Cortés and his fellow conquistador, Bernal Díaz, leave no doubt concerning the ecclesiastical meaning of the dreadful visages portrayed in stone. The Aztec gods ate people. They ate human hearts and they drank human blood. And the declared function of the Aztec priesthood was to provide fresh human hearts and human blood in order to prevent the remorseless deities from becoming angry and crippling, sickening, withering, and burning the whole world.

The Spaniards first glimpsed the inside of a major Aztec temple as the invited guests of Moctezuma, the last of the Aztec kings. Moctezuma had not yet made up his mind concerning Cortés' intentions—an error which was shortly to prove fatal for him—when he invited the Spaniards up 114 steps to the twin temples of Uitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, which stood at the top of Tenochtitlán's tallest pyramid in the center of what is today Mexico

City. As they mounted the steps, wrote Bernal Díaz, other temples and shrines "all gleaming white" came into view. In the open space at the top of the pyramid "the great stones stood on which they placed the poor Indians for sacrifice." Here also was "a bulky image like a dragon, and other evil figures and much blood shed that very day." Then Moctezuma let them see the image of Uitzilopochtli, with its "very broad face and monstrous and terrible eyes," before which "they were burning the hearts of three Indians whom they had sacrificed that day." The walls and floor of the temple "were so splashed and encrusted with blood that they were black" and the "whole place stank vilely." In Tlaloc's temple, too, everything was covered with blood, "both walls and altar, and the stench was such that we could hardly wait for the moment to get out of it."

The main source of food for the Aztec gods was prisoners of war, who were marched up the steps of the pyramids to the temples, seized by four priests, spread-eagled backward over the stone altar, and slit open from one side of the chest to the other with an obsidian knife wielded by a fifth priest. The victim's heart—usually described as still beating—was then wrenched out and burned as an offering. The body was rolled down the pyramid steps, which were built deliberately steep to accommodate this function.

Occasionally some sacrificial victims—distinguished warriors, perhaps—were given the privilege of defending themselves for a while before they were killed. Bernardino De Sahagún, the greatest historian and ethnographer of the Aztecs, described these mock battles as follows:

> . . . they slew other captives, battling with them—these being tied, by the waist, with a rope which passed through the socket of a round stone, as of a mill; and [the rope] was long enough so that [the captive] might walk about the complete circumference of the stone. And they gave him arms with which he might do battle; and four warriors came against him with swords and shields, and one by one they exchanged sword blows with him until they vanquished him.

Apparently in the Aztec state of two or three centuries earlier the king himself was not beyond the task of dispatching a few victims with his own hands. Here is an account by Diego Durán of the legendary slaughter of prisoners captured among the Mixtecs:

> The five priests entered and claimed the prisoner who stood first in the line. . . . Each prisoner they took to the place where the king stood and, when they had forced him to stand upon the stone which was the figure and likeness of the sun, they threw him upon his back. One took him by the right arm, another by the left, one by his left foot, another by his right, while the fifth priest tied his neck with a cord and held him down so that he could not move.
>
> The king lifted the knife on high and made a gash in his breast. Having opened it he extracted the heart and raised it high with his hand as an offering to the sun. When the heart had cooled he tossed it into the circular depression, taking some of the blood in his hand and sprinkling it in the direction of the sun.

Not all the victims were prisoners of war. Substantial numbers of slaves were also sacrificed. In addition, certain youths and maidens were chosen to impersonate specific gods and goddesses. These were treated with great care and tenderness throughout the year preceding their execution. In the Florentine Codex, a sixteenth-century book written in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, there is this account of the death of a woman who played the role of the goddess Uixtociuatl:

> And after they had slain the captives, only [then] Uixtociuatl['s impersonator] followed; she came only at the last. They came to the end and finished only with her.
>
> And when this was done, thereupon they laid her down upon the offering stone. They stretched her out upon her back. They laid hold of her; they pulled and stretched out her arms and legs, bending [up] her breast greatly, bending [down] her back, and stretching down her head taut, toward the earth. And they bore down upon her neck with the tightly pressed snout of a sword fish, barbed, spiny; spined on either side.
>
> And the slayer stood there; he stood up. Thereupon he cut open her breast.
>
> And when he opened her breast, the blood gushed up high; it welled up far as it poured forth, as it boiled up.
>
> And when this was done, then he raised her heart as an offering [to the god] and placed it in the green jar, which was called the green stone jar.
>
> And as this was done, loudly were the trumpets blown. And when it was over, then they lowered the body and the heart of [the likeness of] Uixtociuatl, covered by a precious mantle.

But such displays of reverence were few and far between. The great majority of victims did not walk joyfully up the steps of the pyramid, soothed by the prospect that they were about to make some god happy. Many of them had to be dragged by the hair:

> When the masters of the captives took their slaves to the temple where they were to slay them, they took them by the hair. And when they took them up the steps of the pyramid, some of the captives swooned, and their masters pulled them up and dragged them by the hair to the sacrificial stone where they were to die.

The Aztecs were not the first Mesoamericans to sacrifice human beings. We know that the Toltec and the Maya engaged in the practice, and it is a reasonable inference that all steep-sided, flat-topped Mesoamerican pyramids were intended to serve as a stage for the spectacle in which human victims were fed to the gods. Nor was human sacrifice an invention of state-level religions. To judge from the evidence of band and village societies throughout the Americas and in many other parts of the world, human sacrifice long antedated the rise of state religions.

From Brazil to the Great Plains, American Indian societies ritually dispatched human victims in order to achieve certain kinds of benefits. Virtually every element of Aztec ritual was foreshadowed in the beliefs and practices of band and village peoples. Even the preoccupation with the surgical removal of the heart had its precedents. The Iroquois, for example, vied with each other for the privilege of eating the heart of a brave prisoner so that they could acquire some of his courage. Everywhere, male prisoners were the chief victims. Before being killed, they were made to run a gauntlet, or were beaten, stoned, burned, mutilated, or subjected to other forms of torture and abuse. Sometimes they were tied to stakes and given a club with which to defend themselves against their tormentors. Occasionally one or two prisoners were kept for extended periods and provided with good food and concubines.

The ritual sacrifice of prisoners of war among band and village peoples was usually followed by the eating of all or part of the victim's body. Thanks to the eyewitness accounts provided by Hans Städen, a German sailor who was shipwrecked on the coast of Brazil early in the sixteenth century, we have a vivid idea of how one group, the Tupinamba, combined ritual sacrifice with cannibalism.

On the day of the sacrifice the prisoner of war, trussed around the waist, was dragged into the plaza. He was surrounded by women who insulted and abused him, but he was allowed to give vent to his feelings by throwing fruits or broken pieces of pottery at them. Meanwhile old women painted black and red and wearing necklaces of human teeth brought out ornamented vases in which the victim's blood and entrails would be cooked. The ceremonial club that would be used to kill him was passed back and forth among the men in order to "acquire the power to catch a prisoner in the future." The actual executioner wore a long feather cloak and was followed by relatives singing and beating drums. The executioner and the prisoner derided each other. Enough liberty was allowed the prisoner so that he could dodge the blows, and sometimes a club was put in his hands for protecting himself without being able to strike back. When at last his skull was shattered, everyone "shouted and whistled." If the prisoner had been given a wife during his period of captivity, she was expected to shed tears over his body before joining in the feast that followed. Now the old women "rushed to drink the warm blood," and children dipped their hands into it. "Mothers would smear their nipples with blood so that even babies could have a taste of it." The body was cut into quarters and barbecued while "the old women who were the most eager for human flesh" licked the grease dripping from the sticks that formed the grill.

Ten thousand miles to the north, about two centuries later, Jesuit missionaries witnessed a similar ritual among the Hurons of Canada. The victim was an Iroquois man who had been captured along with several other companions while they were fishing on Lake Ontario. The Huron chief in charge of the ritual explained that the Sun and the God of War would be pleased by what they were about to do. It was important not to kill the victim before daybreak, so at first they should only burn his legs. Also, they ought not to have sexual intercourse during the night. The prisoner, his hands bound, alternately shrieking with pain and singing a song of defiance learned as a child for just this occasion, was brought indoors, where he was set upon by a crowd armed with brands of burning bark. As he reeled from one end of the room to the other, some people seized his hands, "breaking the bones thereof by sheer force; others pierced his ears with sticks they left in them." Whenever he seemed ready to expire, the chief intervened "and ordered them to cease tormenting him, saying it was important that he should see daylight." At dawn he was taken outside and forced to climb onto a platform built on a wooden scaffold so that the entire village could watch what was happening to him—the scaffold making do as a sacrificial platform in the absence of flat-topped pyramids reared for such purposes by the Mesoamerican states. Four men now took over the task of tormenting the captive. They burned his eyes, applied red-hot hatchets to his shoulders, and thrust burning brands down his throat and into his rectum. When it was apparent that he was about to die, one of the executioners "cut off a foot, another a hand, and almost at the same time a third severed the head from the shoulders, throwing it into the crowd where someone caught it" to carry to the chief, who later made "a feast therewith." The same day a feast was also made of the victim's trunk, and on their way home the missionaries encountered a man "who was carrying upon a skewer one of his half-roasted hands."

Let me pause here for a moment to discuss interpretations of these rituals which attribute them to innate human impulses. I am especially concerned with elaborate theories offered in the Freudian tradition which claim that torture, sacrifice, and cannibalism are intelligible as expressions of instincts for love and for aggression. Eli Sagan, for example, has recently argued that cannibalism is "the most fundamental form of human aggression" since it involves a compromise between loving the victim in the form of eating him and killing him because he frustrates you. Purportedly, this explains why the victims are sometimes treated with great kindness before their torture begins—the executioners are simply reenacting their love-hate relationship with their fathers. What this approach fails to make clear is

that the torture, sacrifice, and eating of prisoners of war cannot take place without prisoners of war, and prisoners of war cannot be captured unless there are wars. I pointed out earlier that theories tracing warfare to panhuman instincts are useless for explaining variations in the intensity and style of intergroup conflict and that they are dangerously misleading because they imply that war is inevitable. Attempts to understand why prisoners are sometimes pampered, then tortured, sacrificed, and eaten in terms of conflicting universal instincts of love and hate are useless and dangerous for the same reason. Prisoners are not always pampered, tortured, sacrificed, and eaten, and any theory purporting to explain why this complex occurs must also be able to explain why it also does not occur. Since the activities in question are part of the process of armed conflict, their explanation must be sought first and foremost in military costs and benefits—in variables which reflect the size, political status, armament technology, and logistics of the combatants. The taking of prisoners, for example, is itself an act which depends on the capacity of a raiding party to avoid counterattacks and ambushes on its return home while encumbered with reluctant enemy captives. When the raiding party is small, and when it must travel considerable distances through regions where the enemy can retaliate before safe territory is reached, the taking of prisoners may be forgone entirely. Under such circumstances only pieces of the enemy can be brought back to validate the body count essential for establishing a claim on the social and material rewards reserved for excellence and bravery in combat. From this we get the widespread custom of bringing back heads, scalps, fingers, and other body parts in lieu of the whole live captive.

Once the prisoner has been brought back to the village, the treatment he can expect is determined largely by the capacity of his hosts to absorb and regulate servile labor, the decisive difference being that between pre- and post-state political systems. When prisoners are few and far between, their temporary treatment as honored guests is not surprising. Whatever deep psychological ambivalences may exist in the minds of the captors, the prisoner is a valuable possession—one for whom his hosts have literally risked their lives. Yet there is usually no way to absorb him into the group; since he can't be sent back to the enemy, he must be killed. And torture has its own gruesome economy. If to be tortured is, as we say, to die a thousand deaths, then to torture one poor captive is to kill a thousand enemies. Torture is also a spectacle—an entertainment—which has been time-tested for audience approval down through the ages. I have no intention of asserting that it is part of human nature to enjoy seeing people bruised, burned, and dismembered. But it is part of human nature to pay rapt attention to unusual sights and sounds such as blood spurting from wounds and loud shrieking and howling. (And even then, many of us turn away in horror.)

The point once again is not that we instinctively enjoy watching another person suffer but that we have the capacity to learn to enjoy it. The realization of that capacity was important for societies such as the Tupinamba and Huron. These were societies that had to teach their youths to be remorselessly brutal toward their enemies on the battlefield. Such lessons are more readily learned when you realize that the enemy will do unto you what you have done to him should you fall into his hands. Add to the prisoner's value his living body, standing to warriors in training as cadavers to doctors in training. Next we come to the rituals of the killing—sacrifice to please the gods, executioners with their sacred equipment, abstention from sexual intercourse. To understand all this is to understand that warfare in band and village societies is ritual murder, regardless of whether the enemy is killed on the battlefield or at home. Before leaving for battle, the warriors paint and decorate themselves, invoke the ancestors, take hallucinogenic drugs to contact tutelary spirits, and strengthen their weapons with magical spells. Enemies slain on the field of battle are "sacrifices" in the sense that their deaths are said to please the ancestors or the war gods, just as the ancestors or the war gods are said to be pleased by the torture and death of a prisoner. Finally, there is the question of cannibalism—a question which, when asked, in itself reveals a profound misunderstanding on the part of the asker. People can learn to like or dislike the taste of human flesh, just as they can learn to be amused or horrified by torture. Obviously, there are many circumstances under which an acquired taste for human flesh can be integrated into the motivational system that inspires human societies to go to war. Moreover, to eat the enemy is literally to derive strength from his annihilation. What has to be explained, therefore, is why cultures that have no scruples about killing enemies should ever refrain from eating them. But that is a puzzle we are not yet ready to face.

If this digression into military cost-accounting as an explanation for the torture-sacrifice-cannibalism complex seems a bit too mechanical, let me point out that I do not deny the existence of ambivalent psychological motivations such as those engendered by the Oedipal situation in militaristic male-supremacist societies. I expect warfare to produce contradictory emotions and to mean many different things simultaneously to the participants. And I do not deny that cannibalism may express both affection and hatred toward the victim. What I definitely reject is the view that specific patterns of intergroup aggression can be explained by vague and contradictory psychic elements boldly abstracted from the specific ecological and reproductive pressures that induced people to make war in the first place.

Returning to the Aztecs, we can see that the unique contribution of their religion was not the introduction of human sacrifice but its elaboration along certain destructive pathways. Most notably, the Aztecs transformed human sacrifice from an occasional by-product of luck on the battlefield to a routine in which not a day went by when someone was not spread-eagled on the altars of the great temples such as Uitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. And

sacrifices also took place at dozens of lesser temples ranging down to what might be called neighborhood chapels. One such neighborhood facility—a low, circular, flat-topped structure about twenty feet in diameter was excavated during the construction of Mexico City's subway. It now stands, preserved behind glass, at one of the busiest stations. For the less-than-total enlightenment of the crowds of commuters who pass it every day, an accompanying plaque notes only that the ancient Mexicans were "very religious."

Since the Aztec armies were thousands of times bigger than those of the Huron or the Tupinamba, they could capture thousands of prisoners in a single battle. In addition to daily sacrifices of small numbers of prisoners and slaves at major and minor shrines, then, mass sacrifices involving hundreds and thousands of victims could be carried out to commemorate special events. The Spanish chroniclers were told, for example, that at the dedication in 1487, of the great pyramid of Tenochtitlán four lines of prisoners stretching for two miles each were sacrificed by a team of executioners who worked night and day for four days. Allotting two minutes per sacrifice, the demographer and historian Sherburne Cook estimated that the number of victims associated with that single event was 14,100. The scale of these rituals could be dismissed as exaggerations were it not for the encounters of Bernal Díaz and Andrés de Tápia with methodically racked and hence easily counted rows of human skulls in the plazas of the Aztec cities. Díaz writes that in the plaza of Xocotlan

> there were piles of human skulls so regularly arranged that one could count them, and I estimated them at more than a hundred thousand. I repeat again there were more than one hundred thousand of them.

Of his encounter with the great skull rack in the center of Tenochtitlán, Tápia wrote:

> The poles were separated from each other by a little less than a vara [approximately a yard's length], and were crowded with cross sticks from top to bottom, and on each cross stick there were five skulls impaled through the temples: and the writer and a certain Gonzalo de Umbría, counted the cross sticks and multiplying by five heads per cross stick from pole to pole, as I said, we found that there were 136 thousand heads.

But that was not all. Tápia also describes two tall towers made entirely out of skulls held together by lime in which there was an uncountable number of crania and jaws.

Traditional explanations of the vast scale of this slaughter depict the Aztecs as people obsessed with the idea that their gods needed to drink

human blood and who piously proceeded, therefore, to wage warfare in order to fulfill their sacred duty. In the words of Jacques Soustelle:

> Where then were more victims to come from? For they were essential to provide the gods with their nourishment. . . . Where could one find the precious blood without which the sun and the whole frame of the universe was condemned to annihilation? It was essential to remain in a state of war. . . . War was not merely a political instrument: it was above all a religious rite, a war of holiness.

But holy wars among states are a dime a dozen. The Jews, the Christians, the Moslems, the Hindus, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Romans—all went to war to please their gods or carry out god's will. Only the Aztecs felt it was saintly to go to war in order to supply vast numbers of human sacrifices. And while all of the other archaic and not so archaic states engaged in butchery and mass atrocities, none of them did so on the pretext that the heavenly rulers had an uncontrollable desire to drink human blood. (As we shall see, it is no accident that the gods of many Old World states drank mead or ambrosia, ate honeydew, or expressed no concern at all about where their next meal was coming from.) So intent were the Aztecs on bringing back prisoners to be sacrificed that they would frequently refrain from pressing a military advantage for fear that they would kill too many enemy troops before terms of surrender could be arranged. This tactic cost them dearly in their engagements with Cortés' troops, who from the Aztec point of view seemed to be irrationally intent upon killing everyone in sight.

Sherburne Cook was the first modern anthropologist to disavow a sentimentalist approach to the puzzle of Aztec sacrifice: "However powerful, no purely religious urge can maintain itself successfully for any material period of time counter to fundamental economic resistance." Cook proposed that Aztec war and sacrifice were part of a system for regulating population growth. He calculated that the combined effect of combat deaths and sacrifices produced an annual elevation of 25 percent in the death rate. Since "the population was reaching the maximum consistent with the means of subsistence . . . the effect of warfare and sacrifice would have been very effective in checking an undue increase in numbers." This theory was an improvement over its predecessors, but it is clearly defective at its central point. The Aztecs could not have controlled the population of the Valley of Mexico by warfare and human sacrifice. Since almost all the combat deaths and sacrificed victims were males, the 25 percent rise in death rates refers only to males and could easily be matched by a 25 percent rise in the birth rate. If the Aztecs were systemically intent upon cutting back on the rate of population growth, they would have concentrated on sacrificing maidens instead of grown men. Moreover, even if the function of their

sacrifices was population control, why didn't the Aztecs simply kill their enemies during battle as imperial armies in other parts of the world have always found it expedient to do? Cook's explanation fails to get at the particularity of the Mesoamerican practice—to explain why the slaughter had to be carried out on top of a pyramid instead of on the battlefield.

Conventional descriptions of the Aztec ritual of sacrifice end with the victim's body tumbling down the pyramid. Blinded by the image of a still-beating heart held aloft in the hands of the priest, one can easily forget to ask what happened to the body when it came to rest at the bottom of the steps. Michael Harner of the New School has pursued this question with greater intelligence and courage than anyone else. Throughout the rest of this chapter I shall draw heavily upon his work. He alone deserves the credit for solving the riddle of Aztec sacrifice.

As Harner points out, there really is no mystery concerning what happened to the bodies since all the eyewitness accounts are in fundamental agreement. Anyone with a knowledge of how the Tupinamba, the Huron, and other village societies disposed of their sacrificial victims should be able to come to the same conclusion: the victims were eaten. Bernardino De Sahagún's description leaves little room for doubt:

> After having torn their hearts from them and poured the blood into a gourd vessel, which the master of the slain man himself received, they started the body rolling down the pyramid steps. It came to rest upon a small square below. There some old men, whom they called Quaquacuiltin, laid hold of it and carried it to their tribal temple, where they dismembered it and divided it up in order to eat it.

De Sahagún makes the same points repeatedly:

> After they had slain them and torn out their hearts, they took them away gently, rolling them down the steps. When they had reached the bottom, they cut off their heads and inserted a rod through them, and they carried the bodies to the houses which they called *calpulli,* where they divided them up in order to eat them.
>
> . . . and they took out their hearts and struck off their heads. And later they divided up all the body among themselves and ate it. . . .

Diego Durán gives us a similar description:

> Once the heart had been wrenched out it was offered to the sun and blood sprinkled toward the solar deity. Imitating the descent of the sun in the west the corpse was toppled down the steps of the pyramid. After the sacrifice the warriors celebrated a great feast with much dancing, ceremonial and cannibalism.

These descriptions clarify a number of points about the Aztec warfare-sacrifice-cannibalism complex. Harner notes that each prisoner had an owner—probably the officer in charge of the soldiers who actually made the capture. When the prisoner was brought back to Tenochtitlán, he was housed in the owner's compound. We know little about how long he was kept there or how he was treated, but one can guess that he was fed enough tortillas to keep him from losing weight. It even seems likely that a powerful military commander would have kept several dozen prisoners on hand, fattening them up in preparation for special feast days or important family events such as births, deaths, or marriages. When the time for sacrifice approached, the prisoners may have been tortured for the instruction and amusement of the owner's family and neighbors. On the day of the sacrifice, the owner and his soldiers no doubt escorted the prisoner to the foot of the pyramid to watch the proceedings in the company of other dignitaries whose prisoners were being sacrificed on the same day. After the heart was removed, the body was not tumbled down the steps so much as pushed down by attendants, since the steps were not steep enough to keep the body moving all the way from top to bottom without getting stuck. The old men, whom De Sahagún refers to as Quaquacuiltin, claimed the body and took it back to the owner's compound, where they cut it up and prepared the limbs for cooking—the favorite recipe being a stew flavored with peppers and tomatoes. De Sahagún states that they put "squash blossoms" in the flesh. The victim's blood, as De Sahagún notes, was collected in a gourd vessel by the priests and delivered to the owner. We know the heart was put into a brazier and burned along with copal incense, but whether or not it was burned to ashes remains unclear. There is also some question concerning the fate of the trunk with its organs and the head with its brains. Eventually, the skull ended up on display on one of the racks described by Andrés Tápia and Bernal Díaz. But since most cannibals relish brains, we can assume that these were removed—perhaps by the priests or spectators—before the skulls ended up on exhibit. Similarly, although according to Díaz the trunk was tossed to the carnivorous mammals, birds, and snakes kept in the royal zoo, I suspect that the zoo keepers—Tápia says that there were large numbers of them—first removed most of the flesh.

I have been pursuing the fate of the victim's body in order to establish the point that Aztec cannibalism was not a perfunctory tasting of ceremonial tidbits. All edible parts were used in a manner strictly comparable to the consumption of the flesh of domesticated animals. The Aztec priests can legitimately be described as ritual slaughterers in a state-sponsored system geared to the production and redistribution of substantial amounts of animal protein in the form of human flesh. Of course, the priests had other duties, but none had greater practical significance than their butchery.

The conditions that gave rise to the Aztecs' cannibal kingdom deserve careful study. Elsewhere, the rise of states and empires contributed to a

withering away of the earlier patterns of human sacrifice and cannibalism. Unlike the Aztec gods, the high gods of the Old World tabooed the consumption of human flesh. Why in Mesoamerica alone did the gods encourage cannibalism? As Harner suggests, we must look for the answer both in the specific depletions of the Mesoamerican ecosystem under the impact of centuries of intensification and population growth and in the cost/benefits of using human flesh as a source of animal protein where cheaper options were available.

As I said earlier, Mesoamerica was left at the end of the ice age in a more depleted condition, as far as animal resources are concerned, than any other region. The steady growth of population and the intensification of production under the coercive managerial influence of the classic highland empires virtually eliminated animal flesh from the diet of ordinary people. The ruling class and their retainers naturally continued to enjoy such delicacies as dogs, turkeys, ducks, deer, rabbits, and fish. But, as Harner notes, the commoners—despite the expansion of the *chinampas*—were often reduced to eating the algae skimmed from the surface of Lake Texcoco. While corn and beans in sufficient quantity could provide all of the essential amino acids, recurrent production crises throughout the fifteenth century meant that protein rations were frequently depressed to levels which would have biologically justified a strong craving for meat. In addition, fats of all sorts were perennially in short supply.

Could the redistribution of meat from sacrificial victims actually have significantly improved the protein and fat content in the diet of the Aztec nation? If the population of the Valley of Mexico was 2 million and the number of prisoners available for redistribution per annum was only 15,000, the answer is no. But the question is ill-framed. The point should be not how much these cannibal redistributions contributed to the health and vigor of the average citizen but how much the cost/benefits of political control underwent a favorable shift as a result of using human flesh to reward selected groups at crucial periods. If an occasional finger or toe was all anyone could expect, the system would probably not have worked. But if the meat was supplied in concentrated packages to the nobility, soldiers, and their retainers, and if the supply was synchronized to compensate for deficits in the agricultural cycle, the payoff for Moctezuma and the ruling class might have been sufficient to stave off political collapse. If this analysis is correct, then we must consider its inverse implications, namely, that the availability of domesticated animal species played an important role in the prohibition of cannibalism and the development of religions of love and mercy in the states and empires of the Old World. Christianity, it may yet turn out, was more the gift of the lamb in the manger than the child who was born in it.

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The Lamb of Mercy