

ous matter of this book. It has been kept to the last and given separate treatment because of its centrality. Sacrifice may in fact be said to have been the central fact in Aztec life.

### *The Origins of War*

The Aztecs were fascinated by the subject of war. It molded many, perhaps most, of their institutions. It pervaded the social forms of their daily living and influenced the iconography which surrounded them. It colored the education of their young. It defined manhood and, by consequence, virtue. This absorption of Aztec culture in an ambient of war is clearly pointed out in their mythology.

Put summarily, war was created by the gods and came down from above.<sup>2</sup> There are several versions of this divine act which we have briefly noted before. A song composed by the great ruler Axayacatl in the middle days of the empire expresses this fact poetically:

The flower death [war] came down to earth. It came here;  
It had been created in Tlapallan.<sup>3</sup>

The most sophisticated version of the myth of the origin of war tells how, in the beginning, the four creator gods paused before creating the sun, for they knew that such a supreme act would be vain and foolish if they did not give thought to what the sun might require to eat once he was created. And, because blood and hearts alone could satisfy such a hero as the sun, they decided to create war, which would provide that fare in abundance. Still, it took them two full years precedent to the creation of the sun to call forth such a mighty system as war. Where the Aztecs assigned the creation of war to a single god, that god is either Mixcoatl or Tezcatlipoca. In the case of the former we know that the war between the Five Mimixcoa and the Four Hundred was the first of all wars. And when we shift from the Chichimec mythology to that of the late Toltecs we find Tezcatlipoca acting in Tula in the person of his avatar the Enemy. As long as Queztalcoatl had been ruling in Tula, humans had not been sacrificed; by implication there had been no war, only a reign of peace. But Queztalcoatl's humiliation and exile at the hands of Tezcatlipoca gave free rein to the latter, who as the Enemy stirred men to fury and destruction. By the year 13 Reed, as the great capital of Tula was disintegrating, war had become an all-consuming activity.<sup>4</sup>

The three versions of the origin of war presented above are not

alike. The first one, wherein war predated the sun himself, is a mythic exercise which surely came out of the *calmecac*, for it has a strong bias toward rational understanding: it wishes to *explain* warfare, not merely to state its origin. It is in other words a contrived myth. The Chichimec myth was the possession of all the Aztec groups entering from the north and west, and it presents war as simply the condition to which they were all willy-nilly committed. The Toltec version treats war almost historically, assigning it to a known passage in the annals of Tula and presenting it as an inexplicable outburst of rage and fury incited by Tezcatlipoca. These attempts by the Aztecs to understand through myth the presence of war were necessarily piecemeal, but all the myths did agree on the divine authorship of war. It was incontestably a heavenly institution.

War gods in the societies of Central Mexico go back to Teotihuacan times, and we may ask whether any connection can be seen between such early militarism and the later Aztec warfare. The answer must be a tentative yes. In one instance the Aztecs did project their thoughts back to Teotihuacan in trying to explain warfare when they agreed to assign the origin of their two knightly orders to that city. They did this in a tale which was an obvious variant of the myth of the creation of the fifth sun.<sup>5</sup> This told how in that early time the eagle and the jaguar contended for the honor of being the sun. The eagle was the first to hurl himself into the pyre and thus became the sun. The jaguar followed and became the moon, the spots on his coat recalling the incompleteness of his immolation. No doubt this myth was the property of the eagle and jaguar orders and validated their exclusive standing in Aztec society.

All such mythological justifications for war and explanations of its origins help us understand the several historic levels involved in Aztec militarism: that of Teotihuacan, that of the Toltecs, and that of the Chichimecs. But, more important for our purposes, they point out the ineluctable quality of war for the Aztecs. While war was indeed an activity of men, it was still nothing men could choose to do or not to do. It was simply incumbent upon them.

### *Aztec Concepts of War*

The usual term for war among the Aztecs was *yaoyotl*, which means roughly "the warrior's business." There was, however, another and more revealing term which could be written as a glyph and which