

protected the body from head to foot and could be rolled up when not in use.

Long-range weapons were the javelin, bow, and sling. The javelin was a lightweight throwing-spear with a fire-hardened tip or a point made of chipped obsidian, and it was propelled by means of an *atlatl* (spear-thrower), a device which gave added range by artificially lengthening the thrower's arm (93). The spear-thrower consisted of a flat piece of wood, between one and two feet in length, with a groove down the centre in which the shaft of the javelin rested. One end of the *atlatl* was provided with a peg which engaged with the butt of the spear, and at the other end were finger-grips, sometimes in the form of loops made out of pieces of shell (94). Some javelins had more than one point and were occasionally provided with cords for retrieval.

Bows were rarely more than five feet long, and arrows were, either fire-hardened at the ends or else were tipped with bone or obsidian points.

Slings made of plaited cotton threw stones the size of eggs, and were the favourite weapon of the Matlatzinca who wore them tied around their heads when not required.

At close quarters the most deadly weapon was a kind of two-handed sword, consisting of a massive hardwood blade about a yard long with razor-sharp blades of obsidian set in grooves along the edges (77). This sword-club inflicted terrible wounds. It could decapitate a horse, and Díaz comments that it cut better than Spanish swords and was so sharp that an Indian could shave his head with it. The edge was soon lost, however, and the obsidian blades needed frequent replacement.

Lances, or thrusting spears, were anything from six to ten feet long, and in extreme cases the business end was a five-foot blade set with fragments of obsidian along the edges. Other examples were of more normal proportions and had heads of chipped obsidian or flint.

Less common weapons were heavy, knob-headed wooden clubs, and a kind of hatchet with a copper blade set into a thick shaft shaped like a policeman's truncheon.

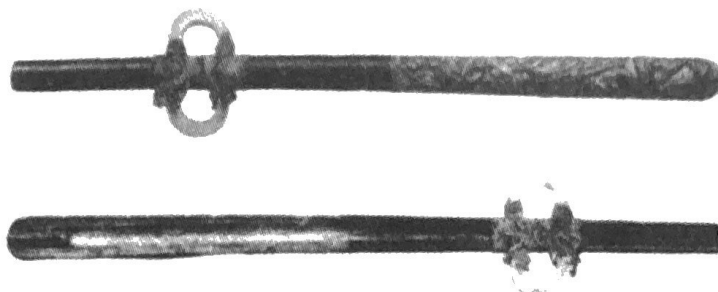
The conduct of war

The Aztecs used war as the main instrument of their foreign policy, both defensive and offensive. The Empire was held together by

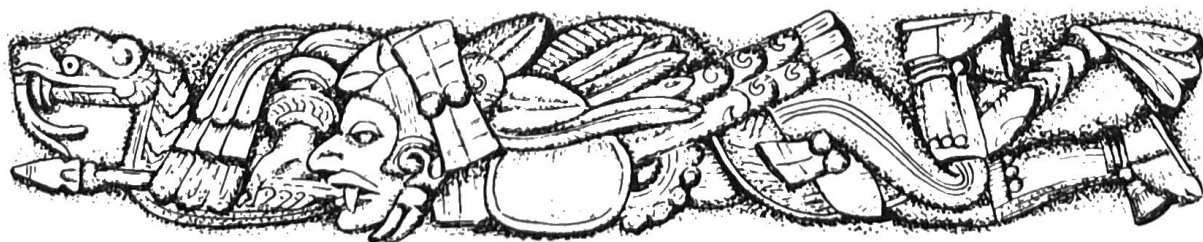
force, and troops were sent to any city which failed to send its tribute or which attempted to leave the confederation. Outside the Empire, refusal to trade with the Mexicans, or maltreatment of Aztec merchants, were con-

sidered acts of war, and, as we have seen, traders were sometimes encouraged to behave provocatively in the hope of causing an incident which might serve as a pretext for invasion. When the Aztecs had designs against a friendly state they became extraordinarily sensitive, taking offence where none was intended and looking for an insult which they could use as an excuse to declare war.

Attempts were made to frighten weaker states into submission. The Aztecs realized that a destroyed city could not be expected to yield much tribute, and their aim was therefore to achieve the political objectives without having to fight. The talks were conducted with politeness and ceremony. First of all the ambassadors of Tenochtitlán spoke to the council of the 'enemy' city, inviting it to join the Mexican confederation and to share in the benefits of Mexican 'protection'. It was requested that Huitzilopochtli should be admitted to the temple on the same terms as the principal local god, and that normal commercial relations should be allowed. 'Of course', the envoys said, 'the city would keep its own chief and its own gods and customs. All that was required was a "treaty of friendship" [i.e. an acknowledgment of Mexican supremacy and the abandonment of an independent foreign policy], an assurance of free trade and, purely as a token of goodwill, a



94 Wooden spear-thrower with finger-grips made of shell. The back is carved in relief (see fig. 95)



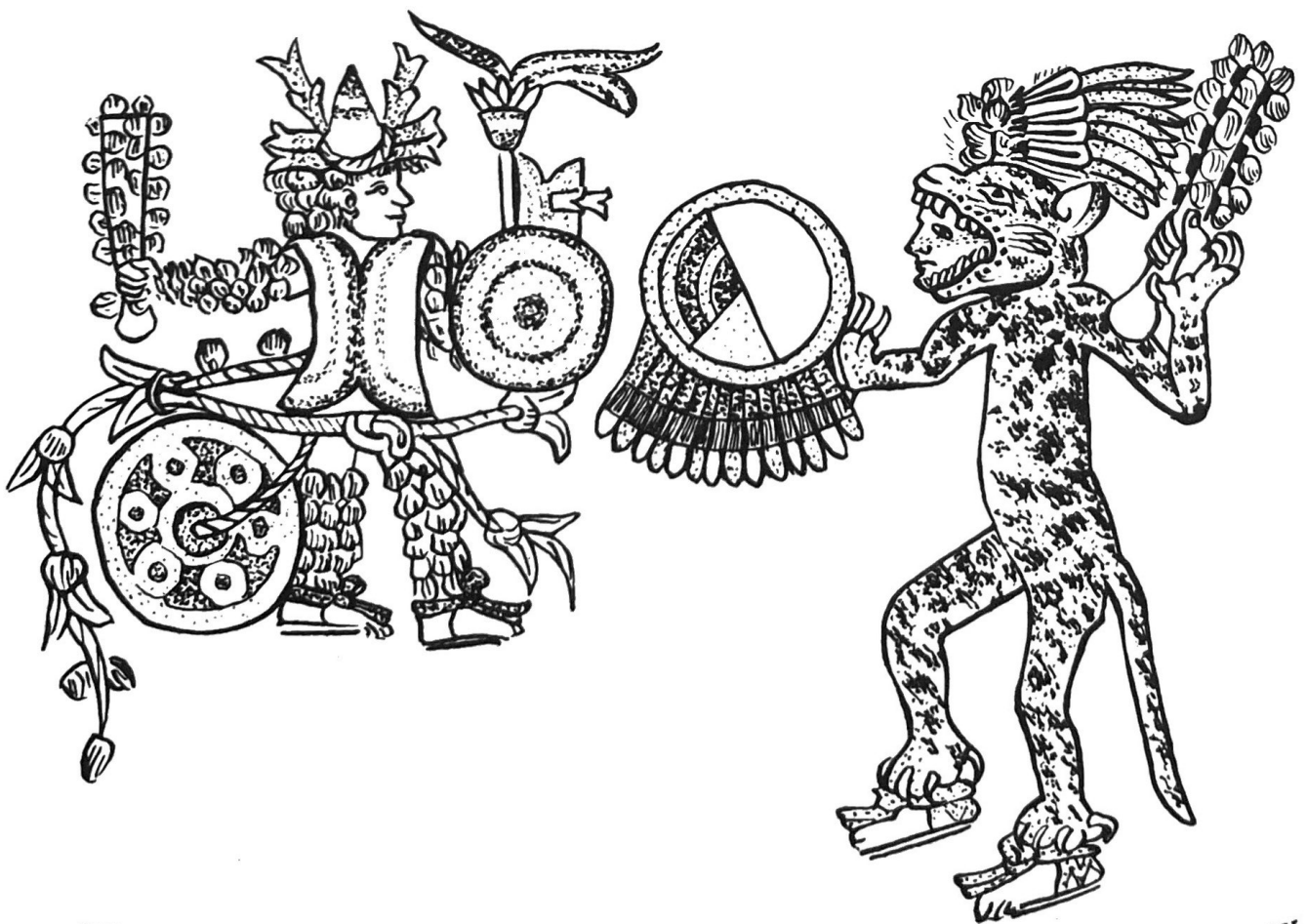
95 Carved and gilt design on the back of a wooden spear-thrower

gifts. By the end of this period, so Sahagún's informants told him, the people wearing the skins 'stank like dead dogs'.

Another important god was Quetzalcoatl's rival, Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), an all-powerful deity who both gave and took away life. He was eternally young, invisible 'like the darkness, like the mind', and in his obsidian mirror he could see everything that happened in the world. He was the god of the night sky, and hence the patron of sorcerers and robbers, and was also a war god, the 'warrior of the north' and the protector of the *telpochcalli* schools where the young warriors were trained. His disguise was a jaguar, and his fetish was a knife of flint or obsidian.

In the manuscripts the god is shown with his face painted black as befits a night god and with horizontal stripes on his cheeks to mark him as one of the four sons of the creator couple. As a war god, his hair is cut in the warrior style, and he carries a shield and weapons. His mirror is worn at his temple or in place of one of his feet (78).

The most dramatic piece of Aztec sculpture to come down to us is a statue of Coatlicue (Lady of the Serpent Skirt), the Earth



77 The Gladiatorial Sacrifice. The victim, armed with dummy weapons, is tethered to a large stone and made to fight a succession of warriors armed with real weapons (Codex Magliabecchiano)