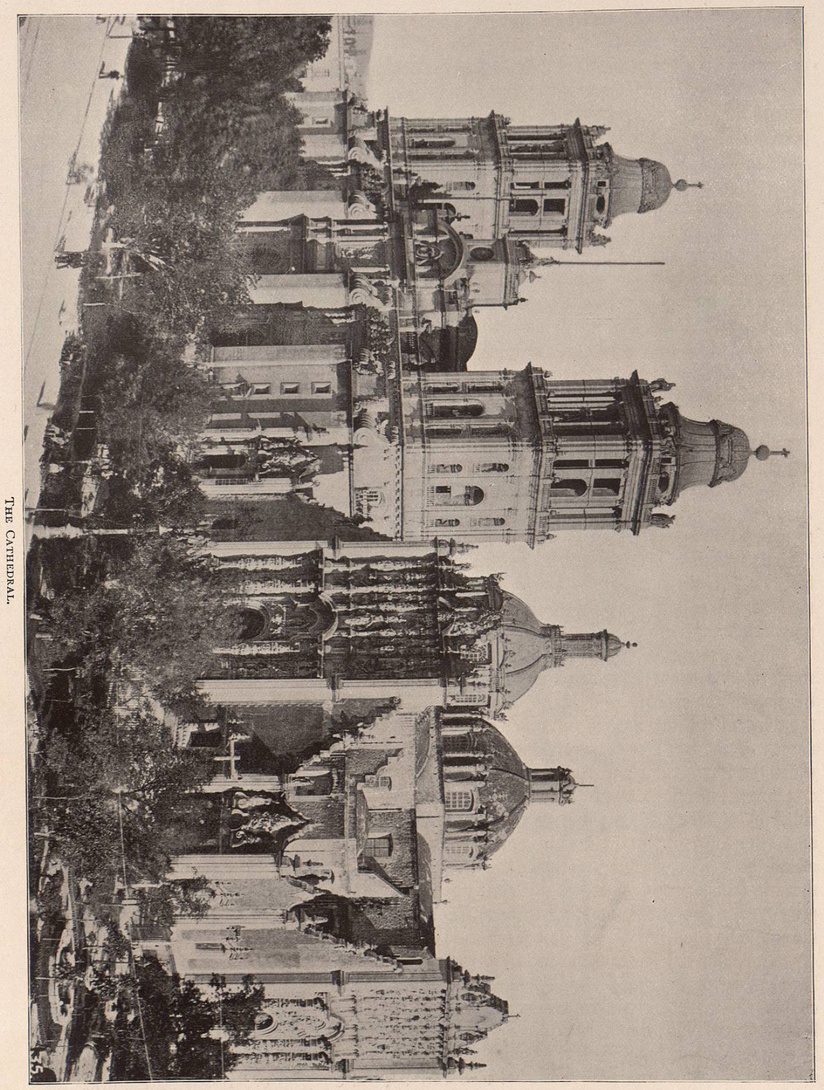
CHAPTER II

THE AZTEC CIVILIZATION

WE often hear it said—and spoken as an argument against the beauty and romance of the Western Hemisphere—that America is a land without traditions, without poetry, and without castles. Ignorance is the only excuse for those who utter this heresy; for in Mexico are ancient ruins of buildings that were hoary with age when the famous castles of the Rhine and the comparatively young strongholds of England were in process of erection. Away back in the middle ages, whence we imagine the romance of Europe to have emanated, there was a civilization in Mexico that was even then historic. It is an ignorance, perhaps, that may be pardoned, since even our wisest archæologists and deepest scientific students of modern times cannot yet determine the age or origin of the most ancient of these landmarks.

No more interesting people for the modern student ever existed than the Aztecs, who seem to have been the equal in intelligence and advancement of any tribe in the world at that time. The Aztecs were most sincere in the practice of their religious rites. They believed in a supreme creator, invisible yet omnipresent, but requiring numerous assistants to perform his will, each of whom presided over some special natural phenomenon or phase of human existence. They had thirteen principal and several hundred inferior deities. The dread Huitzilopochtli, the war god of the Aztecs, was the patron divinity of the race, and myriads of human victims were sacrificed to him yearly in countless pyramidal temples throughout the realm. Quetzalcoatl, a more beneficent deity, was described by the natives as a tall white man, with a large forehead and flowing beard, who taught his favored people the art of government and the various arts of peace, especially those of the husbandman and silversmith, forbade bloody sacrifices and permitted only those of bread, roses, and perfumes, and warned against robbery and all violence. This god of the air, as he was named, having incurred the displeasure of one of the other chief deities, was compelled to leave the country; but on quitting the shores of the gulf he promised to return, and the Mexicans always looked forward to the auspicious day.

After his departure from the capital he tarried at Cholula, where a magnificent temple was dedicated to him, the ruins of which are among the most curious remains of Mexican antiquities. All these divinities were represented by images of clay, wood, stone, or precious metals and gems, but of most fantastic forms, coarse and hideous; and of the minor gods of every degree hosts of images were to be found in the dwellings of both great and small. The Mexicans, with all the other polished natives of Anahuac, regarded the souls of both man and brutes as immortal. The number of priests corresponded with the number of gods and temples; ancient historians affirm that five thousand were attached to the great temple of the capital, on the site of which now stands the cathedral. There were several different orders among the priests, the



THE CATHEDRAL.

chief of all being the two high priests, whose dignity was conferred by election. The high priests anointed the king, and were the oracles consulted by him on all important state concerns.

The sacerdotal hierarchies of the several gods were quite separate, and had each a gradation of their own. The temples (teocallis) were of two kinds,—low and circular, and high and pyramidal,—on the tops of which the sacrifices took place. Torquemada estimates that there were upward of forty thousand throughout the empire, and other historians estimate their number much higher. There were hundreds in each principal city, besides the great temple with several smaller ones within its precincts. In each outlying quarter of the city were other small courts with as many as six temples, and there were temples on the mountains and at intervals along the high-roads. They were solid pyramidal masses of earth cased with brick or stone, many of them more than one hundred feet square, and of a still greater height. The ascent was by flights of steps on the outside, and on the broad, flat summits were sanctuaries containing the images of the deities and altars on which fires were continually burning. Human sacrifices, which they made on the most trivial occasions, formed the chief religious ceremony of the Mexicans and the most important duty of the priesthood.

In later days the repetition of these sacrifices became mournfully frequent: some Franciscan monks computed that about twenty-five hundred persons were annually slaughtered on the altars of Tenochtitlan and some of the adjacent towns; and "days had been observed," writes Herrera, "on which above twenty thousand had thus perished, reckoning all the sacrifices in several parts." Within the temples were schools, colleges, and apartments for the priests. A few of the priestesses took vows of perpetual celibacy. Some of the priests were permitted to marry; those of whom chastity was required were punished with death for the slightest deviation from it. When a child of two years was dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, a priest with a knife made a slight cut on its breast, to confirm the dedication. Piercing the lips and nose for the insertion of various ornaments, and plucking the hairs of the nascent beard, were common practices among the Mexicans.

For purposes of record and communication they had a species of picture-writing bearing some relation to the Egyptian hieroglyphics. They had five books written in this way: the first treating of the seasons and years; the second, of the days and festivals throughout the year; the third, of dreams, omens, and other superstitious observances; the fourth, of baptism and the names of children (for they celebrated a baptismal ceremony much like the Christian rite, in which the infant's lips and breasts were sprinkled with water); and the fifth, of the ceremonies and prognostications used at marriages. Historical knowledge was preserved by tradition aided by picture-writings; and there were, besides the multitude of regular chronicles, certain men who kept important events, genealogies, etc., in their memory, and recited them when called upon. Translations of elaborate prose productions seem to show that eloquence and rhetorical effect were aimed at by Aztec scholars; but no original compositions have been preserved. Songs perpetuating their traditions, recited at the great festivals, formed one of the foremost branches of temple education.

Their musical instruments included various kinds of trumpets, whistles of bone and clay, horns of large sea-shells, bamboo flutes, many varieties of drums, and a few stringed instruments. Theatrical performances were given on open terraces in the market-places, the stage being covered with branches of trees; masks were indispensable, and the performances were inseparably connected with the religion. The plays were partly pantomimic and partly recitative. The art of prestidigitation was highly developed. Farces and masquerades were

frequently given at the temples by the merchants, disguised as frogs, beetles, birds, butterflies, etc., the entertainment ending with dancing.

The Mexicans had a simple system of arithmetical notation, in which the first twenty numbers were expressed by a corresponding number of dots. The number twenty was expressed by a flag, and larger sums were reckoned by twenties, and expressed by repeating the number of flags. The square of twenty, four hundred, was denoted by a plume; and eight thousand, the cube of twenty, by a purse or sack. The year was divided into eighteen months of twenty days each, and both months and days were expressed by peculiar hieroglyphics. Five complementary days were added to make up the three hundred and sixty-five; and for the fraction over of nearly six hours, required to make the full year, they added thirteen days at the end of every fifty-two years, or cycle, which they called xiuhmolpilli, "the tying up of years." A month was divided into four weeks of five days each. The epoch from which the Mexicans computed their chronology corresponded with the year 1091 of the Christian era. They had no astronomical instruments except the dial, but their skill in the science of

Sacrificial Stone.

astronomy is shown by their knowledge of the true length of the year, of the cause of eclipses, of the periods of the solstices and equinoxes, and of the transit of the sun across the zenith of Mexico. Most of their astronomical knowledge was derived from the Toltecs. The physicians were skilful; they had knowledge of several thousand plants and of hundreds of species of birds, quadrupeds, fishes, insects, reptiles, and minerals; but they mystified their cures with superstitious ceremonies. The Spanish conquerors attest the dexterity and success of the native surgeons in dressing wounds and in bloodletting.

The merchants and military officers had a fair notion of geography; maps and charts of certain regions, of rivers, and of the whole coast, were accurately drawn or painted on cloth. Agriculture was in tolerable advancement, the want of ploughs, oxen, and other animals being supplied by simple instruments and assiduous labor. Irrigation by means of canals was very efficient. Of the various Mexican implements, almost the only ones described are an axe of copper or bronze, with just the amount of tin alloy to give it the greatest hardness attainable, and knives and swords, razors, and arrow- and spear-heads of itztli, or obsidian. They were extremely skilful in the cultivation of gardens, in which they planted fruit-trees, medicinal