

Summer Project 2021 Report

During the months of July and August of 2021, I was fortunate to participate in the Merton Summer Projects scheme researching the Mexica (Aztec) Empire in 15th and early 16th century Mesoamerica, as the basis for my undergraduate History thesis.

When I decided to write a thesis on a period I had not engaged with before in an academic context, I was warned that this would involve a considerable amount of additional research to situate myself in the literature and historiography; as such, I am very grateful to the summer projects scheme for affording me the time and concerted space to dedicate to this endeavor, which has allowed me to engage with a topic that I am truly passionate about. Being in Oxford over the summer was essential not only to allow me to partake in a focused space and an academic community, but was also particularly important as much of the secondary literature and the most recent translations of primary sources I was working with were not available online, but stored physically offsite, and so had to be consulted in the reading rooms.

After spending the first few weeks on secondary literature on the different polities and cycles of state formation in preconquest Mesoamerica, primarily from the Epiclassic to Postclassic periods, I felt confident to move on to the primary literature.

This was the most rewarding part of my research, in which I was able to engage with the sources more deeply through closer reading than is usually possible in the tight schedule of a tutorial essay during term. Reading facsimiles of the Codex Mendoza while in the Bodleian, knowing that the original was just a stone's-throw away, was certainly an unforgettable experience!

One of the greatest joys and surprises of my directed reading was the unexpected directions in which my research took me. My interest in looking at state formation in the Basin of Mexico and beyond quickly developed into a desire to look more deeply into the ideologies and rhetoric of rulership and elite legitimation in the Mexica Empire itself. It also helped me develop further questions about the relationship between gender and the burden of empire, as well as on Nahua conceptions of the body, that I hope to pursue in further study.

Developing my knowledge and interests in the summer project also brought me other opportunities, such as writing an internship blogpost for a craft chocolate company on the 'Aztecs and drinking chocolate'.

This project has been very rewarding, both academically and personally. It has allowed me to experience historical research for myself, work on my thesis in a supportive environment, as well as develop and expand my ideas through in-depth primary source work. I am very grateful for this opportunity, and highly recommend it to other students who would like to delve deeper into their subjects and have an invaluable experience of structured, independent research.