

Civilization 55

Chapter 55 Pre-battle Sacrificial Rite

The Lerma River flows from the highlands in the East, winding its way westward. The rainy season made the river surge, and here lies its natural crossing point, where the river is only two or three hundred meters wide.

The Tarasco and Mexica's canoe fleets were docked on opposite banks. At this moment, the naval forces from both sides, along with a hundred thousand warriors, were intently watching the Tarasco's pre-battle sacrificial rites.

Xiulote watched with great interest as his Tarasco companions carried out their morale-boosting performances.

The priests wore feather crowns on their heads that spread out like fan palms, with a preference for indigo blue feathers. Around their necks, each wore a string of necklaces, at the center of which was one or several clay round containers shaped somewhat like gourds. The youth was curious what these "clay gourds" were for.

The priests gradually placed sacrificial items on the newly constructed altars.

The first altar symbolized the Tarasco's Chief Divine of the Sun, Curicaveri, who controlled the heavens of the universe and was the most important god. So, on their altar, the priests placed a golden sun with a diameter of several meters, reflecting dazzling golden light under the sun.

The second altar symbolized the Tarasco's Earth Mother Goddess, Velavaperi, who controlled the earth of the universe and was also the deity that bestowed harvests and minerals. The priests then brought a huge piece of copper ore to place on her altar, its vein-patterned surface flowing like water ripples in the sunlight.

"Where do these strange Tarasco people get their beliefs?" Xiulote was somewhat curious. "They neither worship the War God nor the Feathered Serpent Divine, completely different from the other Mexica tribes."

"Their beliefs likely come from the Bajío and the Michoacán people they conquered hundreds of years ago—it is the native belief of the Patzcuaro Lake region. They think the Patzcuaro Basin is the center of the universe, providing the force that drives the world's rotation. And the universe consists of three parts: the heavens, the earth, and the Land of the Dead beneath."

"So the Tarasco have their own language, culture, and beliefs, living in seclusion from the rest of the world?"

"Yes! That's also why the Tarasco people have no allies in the world," Aweit nodded.

"But we Mexica people also have no allies," Xiulote responded.

"The strongest don't need allies." The two laughed and continued to watch the ritual across the river.

The last altar symbolized the Tarasco's Moon Goddess, Xaratanga, who was the daughter of the Chief Divine of the Sun and the Earth Mother Goddess, and who controlled the underground world of the

universe, the Land of the Dead. The Tarasco people hold special veneration for the God of Death and had invented the "Day of the Dead" for "Xaratanga."

Shortly after, dozens of priests carried over an exceptionally large clay jar filled with many yellow chunks. This was a symbol of the Moon Goddess.

"What's in that clay jar?" Xiulote asked curiously.

"That's the Stone of the Dead, collected from the fissures of the world, from the underground world of the dead, capable of communicating between the living and the Land of the Dead," Aweit said seriously, relaying the intelligence he knew.

"???" The young man's head was a bit muddled. He knew about the world's fissures, probably referring to the volcanoes in the West. The underground world must mean beneath the ground. But what were these Stones of the Dead, capable of communication between life and death?... Could this be a fantastical plane?

With seventy percent curiosity and thirty percent bewilderment, Xiulote continued watching.

The Tarasco priests quickly finished placing the symbolic items. Then, in front of the three altars, laborers brought over large quantities of wood and thatch, piling them into a huge bonfire.

Afterward, an exceptionally dignified old man with a splendid feather crown raised a torch high to ignite the bonfire, bestowing the "Divine Flame."

The priests then borrowed the "Divine Flame" from the bonfire with a stick, gently touched it to the clay gourds, and then brought the gourds to their noses, obliviously inhaling the smoke that drifted out.

"Is this divine smoke?" Xiulote asked, astonished.

"Yes, unlike our own War Priests, the priests of Tarasco carry with them 'Divine Smoke.' They infuse it with many strange plants and minerals, which is said to make it easier for them to communicate with the gods."

The youth fell silent for a moment. Soon, the smoking priests descended into a world of fantasy as they began to dance violently on the divine platform, crafting a mysterious atmosphere with their bizarre gestures.

The dance quickened, flames ascended, thick smoke rose into the sky, taking on peculiar shapes. The priests, both on and off the platform, chanted loudly together. The ancient and desolate spell echoed across the heavens, praying for the descent of the Heavenly Divines.

Aweit provided a simple translation of the prayer on the side. First, it was a blessing for the Chief Divine of the Sun, followed by gratitude for the Earth Mother Goddess. Lastly, they communicated with the Moon God of the underworld, requesting Him to allow all warriors fallen in battle to be resurrected, to forever enjoy wealth and peace beneath the earth.

Under the reverent gaze of warriors on both banks, the sacrificial rite on the divine platform finally reached its climax. The frenzied dancing priests took out Obsidian Daggers and without hesitation, they cut their own cheeks, allowing the blood to trace mysterious patterns. Then, the high-pitched prayer spread across both banks of the great river, calling out the name of 'Xaratanga.'

The exceptionally dignified elder appeared once again. He directed dozens of priests to lift a gigantic clay pot from the Moon God's platform and hurl it into the burning pyre. The pot shattered instantly, yellow chunks scattered about, and then quickly ignited in the flames.

Immediately after, an extraordinarily spectacular blue flame rose from the pyre, like a ghostly fire from the underworld, carrying a strangeness and beauty not of this world, imprinting itself wildly in the eyes of every onlooker.

At the moment the blue fire rose, all the people of Tarasco fell into an ecstatic trance. Whether samurai or militia, all eighty thousand warriors knelt down, collectively shouting 'Xaratanga.'

This time, the shouting was like the thunder of the rainy season, splitting the clouds in the sky and blasting the fields on the ground, and it also shook the Mexica warriors on the opposite bank. Many warriors, in alarm, bowed down to the blue flames. Even the fierce and proud Jaguar warriors lost their color, showing fear of the foreign deity.

At that moment, Aweit stood up abruptly, staring intently at the command flag on the opposite side. There was the only Tarascan who had not knelt down. Aweit could not see the person's face but was determined to remember him forever in his heart.

Seeing the blue flame, Xiulote exclaimed in shock: "Good heavens! The Stone of the Dead, it's actually sulfur!"

The youth estimated the size of the large clay pot that had just been broken, his face revealing contemplation.

That the Tarascans of the early Bronze Age could easily produce a thousand pounds of sulfur indicated that there must be an enormous natural sulfur reserve within their controlled territory. And with an adequate supply of bat guano stones as a source of saltpetre along the western coastline and the islands of lower California, added to the ubiquitous timber for charcoal, gunpowder production in Central America was incredibly favored.

The youth stared dreamily at the brilliant blue fire, its crystal-clear beauty almost like a blessing from the heavens: "As long as the bottleneck of the Iron Age is overcome, the era of gunpowder will promptly follow. The future is always full of hope!"

Thus, Xiulote couldn't help but smile involuntarily, caught off guard as his teacher and friend suddenly pinched his cheek.

Aweit asked seriously, "Xiulote, looking at that blue flame, do you believe the Tarascans just summoned the God of Death?"

Xiulote was amused by his friend's seriousness: "That's just the color of a particular mineral when it burns. If we have sulfur, we too can produce blue fire."

Aweit also breathed a sigh of relief, although he didn't believe it, he had been a little nervous.

"You need to quickly organize a sacrificial rite to pray to the War God with the War Priests, to restore the morale of the Mexica warriors."

After hearing this, Xiulote observed the warriors behind him and indeed saw that they were shaken and pale. These battle-hardened warriors, unafraid of death, were actually terrified by the myths and blue fire, their morale significantly lowered.

The youth couldn't help but shake his head: "These heretics playing god!" Then he quickly directed the accompanying priests to start their own god-playing.

The pre-war sacrificial rite on the opposite bank soon came to an end. The priests shouted loudly in a language the youth didn't understand, likely some promise in the name of divinity. Then, they saw thousands of warriors cheering loudly, their morale high as a rainbow.

Inspired by the high morale, the first batch of five thousand Tarascan spearmen boarded their canoes, heading towards the North Coast with high spirits.