

END OF AN EMPIRE:
THE SPANISH CONQUEST OF MEXICO

Ben Hulse

With the quincentennial of Columbus's "discovery" of America upon us, it now is, perhaps more than ever, an appropriate time to reevaluate the actions of the European explorers who subjugated the Native American peoples and their civilizations. Undoubtedly the most glorified and heroically portrayed of these figures of the European conquest of the New World were the conquistadores, the Spanish conquerors of Mexico and Peru in the 16th century. These men, under leaders such as Hernan Cortes and Francisco Pizarro, nearly eliminated the Aztec and Inca peoples. Surely many of these soldiers were extremely cruel and intolerant of the native populations. But it is important to consider, with the push of both sides toward territorial expansion, how these groups (European and American) could remain isolated from each other. Furthermore, with the meeting of these two imperialist cultures, it must be considered whether it would be possible for the two to peacefully coexist.

Ben Hulse is at Harvard College. He wrote this paper for Mr. Mark Vance's World History Honors course at Oak Park and River Forest High School in Oak Park, Illinois, during his Freshman Year, 1991/1992.

This paper focuses specifically on the expansionist policies of both the Aztec and Spanish empires and on Cortes's expedition, which brought the two powerful cultures together in a final confrontation.

The Aztecs

According to their first records, the Aztecs, or Mexica, originally lived to the north of the Valley of Mexico, partially under the control of the Toltec empire.¹ Driven to leave by the pressure of their Toltec oppressors, who demanded huge tributes from the farming Aztecs, the Aztecs fled from their home city of Aztlan. After settling in and being evicted from various different areas, the Aztecs settled in Tizapan at the relative center of present-day Mexico. These lands were then under the yoke of the Culhuacan, and the Aztecs were allowed to stay on the land only if they became tributaries, the equivalent of European vassals.

Shortly after, war broke out between the Aztecs and Culhuacan, and the Aztecs were routed. Fleeing once again, they eventually settled in the land of the Tepanec and became King Tezozomoc's vassals. The land on which they were allowed to settle was a group of islands in the center of Lake Texcoco. On one of these islands the Aztecs founded the sacred city of Tenochtitlan and immediately built an altar to their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, God of War. As the city grew, a splinter group broke off and settled on a neighboring island, founding the city of Tlatelolco. The two cities eventually merged with Tlatelolco becoming the trading center and Tenochtitlan becoming the political and religious capital.

The Mexican nation steadily rose in power but remained under the yoke of the Tepanec until the king Itzcoatl (reigned 1427-1440) formed a military alliance with nearby Texcoco and other neighboring groups and forced the Tepanec out. Under the rule of Itzcoatl, and for eighty years afterwards, the Aztecs pro-

ceeded to subjugate the remainder of the Valley of Mexico and then further beyond—from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the Gulf coast in the east and from central Mexico in the north to present-day Guatemala in the south. The military victories of the expanding empire were celebrated by ritual human sacrifices. At times after a great military success, thousands of enemy soldiers were marched up the steps of the great pyramid of Huitzilopochtli and sacrificed to the god. The flesh of the victims was often eaten as a form of communion with the Aztec deities who had blessed their campaigns.²

Moctezuma II, the last Aztec emperor (also known as Montezuma or Motecuhzoma), became king in 1502 at the apex of Aztec power. In the words of Ignacio Bernal, Director of the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico:

When Moctezuma was chosen emperor in 1502, he had the reputation of a valiant captain who had ably led his armies; but he was especially recognized as a profound expert in religious matters, a kind of simple and humble mystic. This situation rapidly changed as he became a despot at the center of highly intricate court ceremonies. No one was permitted to look upon him. One had to come before him with eyes lowered. No one could touch him. The few who had the right to visit him had to enter barefoot, performing a series of genuflections and calling him Lord, “My Lord, My Great Lord.”³

Throughout the first seventeen years of Moctezuma’s reign, the empire was plagued with constant uprisings of peoples who had been harshly subjugated by the Aztecs and wished to escape the tributes required of them. Moctezuma left the consolidation of his empire up to his generals while he devoted his time to worldly pleasures and religious duties in Tenochtitlan.

The Spanish

Across the Atlantic Ocean, another great empire had recently accomplished a consolidation of its own. Spain had

successfully completed the Reconquista. Finding a solid Muslim wall to the south in Northern Africa and the powerful French kingdom to the north, the only direction that the Spanish saw in which to expand was to the west. The popes had intentionally given sovereignty over any new lands discovered to the Portuguese; but with the advent of Columbus's discovery, the Spanish wished to end this legacy of Portuguese favoritism in the Vatican. Papal bulls of the 1450s had declared that the Portuguese had rights to any lands "as far as the Indies,"⁴ which actually gave Portugal the rights to the discovery of America.

In 1493, after Columbus's first voyage, Spain sent envoys to the pope demanding that he give Spain the rights to Columbus's discoveries, as the past popes had given the Portuguese the rights to Africa and lands to the east. The new pope, Alexander VI (pope from 1492 to 1503), being a Spanish Borgia himself, acknowledged these previous "injustices" and issued a series of four bulls that established the papacy as an adamantly pro-Spanish power. The first two gave the Spanish title to Columbus's discoveries and any other non-Christian western lands discovered as long as the native populations were converted to Christianity. The third limited this "western" area to all the lands beginning one hundred leagues west of the Cape Verde and Azores islands. This bull actually gave the Spanish rights to the far East by western circumnavigation. The fourth bull, the *Dudum Siguidem*, which was issued later on August 26, 1493, nullified any previous papal orders that had favored the Portuguese.

With Spanish control of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico assured, Spain proceeded to colonize the islands in the area (Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba), converting the islanders as they went and often massacring whole populations purposely or accidentally killing them by transmitting European diseases. The main goals in the expansion were to Christianize the Indians (as dictated by the pope), to gain trading power, and of course, to "acquire" the great mineral wealth of the Americas. This mineral wealth included vast amounts of gold and silver ore. The reports of opulent Mexican empires brought back by explorers on

Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba's and Juan de Grijalba's coastal journeys caused the Spanish government to look inland.

Cortes

Hernan (also Hernando or Fernando) Cortes was born in Medellin, Estramadura, in Spain in 1485 to a family of minor nobility. Cortes was sent to study law at the University of Salamanca in 1499. After intermittent studying for two years, he left school to fight in a military expedition in Italy but became ill and was forced to stay behind. In 1504 he left to seek his fortune in the West Indies, arriving in Hispaniola and fighting in various battles against the Arawak. Cortes later participated in the conquest of Cuba with Diego Velazquez, the future governor, and gained the latter's respect.

After the reports from the coastal expeditions of Cordoba and Grijalba reached Velazquez in 1517 and 1518, the governor became determined to make full contact with the mainland empire and gain riches for Spain, converts for the Church, and fame for himself. The man he chose for the mission was his old ally, Cortes.

According to William H. Prescott's history of the conquest, Velazquez chose Cortes because "[he] came of an ancient, respectable family; his courage and prowess won him favor with Velazquez as much as his good humor, cordial manners, and wit made him a favorite with the soldier."⁵ This pleased Cortes as well because he had been waiting for a time to prove himself in an independent adventure.

Cortes quickly contributed all his cash resources to the project and mortgaged all of his estates in Cuba. Velazquez agreed to contribute one-third of the funds needed. Cortes purchased six vessels and commissioned 110 mariners and 553 soldiers (including thirty-two crossbowmen and thirteen arquebusiers). He brought along 200 Cuban soldiers and also a few Cuban women for cooking and other menial jobs. Anticipating the terror that they could

strike in the Mexicans, Cortes brought fourteen cannons (four light falconets and ten heavy guns) and sixteen horses.

Shortly before Cortes's expedition was to leave, Velazquez turned on the Captain General and tried to stop the mission. Bernal Diaz proposes that there was some plot among Velazquez's relatives against Cortes and they convinced the governor that Cortes would betray him or become too powerful.⁶ Disobeying the governor's orders and dissociating himself from Velazquez's sponsorship, Cortes and his fleet departed for the coast of the Yucatan on February 18, 1519.

Cozumel and the Yucatan

Shortly after the fleet embarked, hurricane winds forced them far to the south of their intended destination, to the island of Cozumel. Cortes's ship was the last to arrive and he found upon landing that one of his commanders, Pedro de Alvarado, had rashly removed the ornaments from the local temples and forced the Cozumelans to flee to the center of the small island. Cortes publicly reprimanded Alvarado and spoke with two of the Cozumelans regarding the peaceful nature of his visit. Trading relations were established between the two sides, and the Spanish exchanged a few trinkets for gold ornaments.

Missionaries from Cortes's contingent attempted to peacefully convert the Cozumelans, but when this failed, Cortes, who was particularly militant in converting the Native Americans, had the temple's idols taken down and constructed an altar with the image of the Virgin and Child above it. They reluctantly agreed to convert.

A canoe from the mainland approached the fleet and one of the passengers, Jeronimo de Aguilar, explained that he was a Spaniard who had been marooned on the island for eight years and asked to join the mission. Aguilar's knowledge of the Mayan dialect caused the Captain-General to realize how important the addition of an interpreter would be in further dealings with the Mesoamericans.

Next, the fleet moved towards the mainland, eager to make contact, but were threatened by Mayan soldiers on the shore brandishing spears. After a few brief conflicts, the Spaniards managed to land at Tabasco and prepared for a Tabascan assault. From best accounts, the Tabascans numbered 40,000.⁷ After the cannon failed to deter the attackers, who ignored their losses and came on in repeated waves, the Spanish cavalry, led by Cortes, charged at the back of the Tabascan army. In the words of Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a participant in the voyage:

Just at this moment we caught sight of our horsemen. But the great host of Indians was so crazed by their attack that they did not at once see them approaching behind their backs. As the plain was bare and the horsemen were good riders, and some of the horses were very swift and nimble, they came quickly upon them and speared them as they chose. As soon as we saw the horsemen we fell on the enemy so vigorously that, caught between the horsemen and ourselves, they soon turned tail. The Indians thought at the time that the horse and rider were one creature, for they had never seen a horse before.⁸

The idea that the Native Americans thought horse and rider were one was frequently used throughout Spanish literature concerning the conquest, but this may very well be a rumor among the soldiers turned into “fact.”

Cortes released two captured chiefs with a message urging the Tabascans to surrender and saying he would “overlook the past.”⁹

The Tabascans agreed and traded with the Spaniards, giving them twenty slave girls along with food, cotton, and gold. The Spanish then forced conversion upon the Tabascans with little resistance and departed for Mexico on Palm Sunday.

One of the slave girls given to Cortes was actually a Mexican but had been sold into slavery in the Yucatan; thus she was able to speak both Nahuatl (Aztec) and Mayan. She quickly learned Castillian and became Cortes’s official interpreter (and mistress). She was called “Marina” among the Spanish and is known as “La

Malinche” in Mexico today. With the help of Marina, Cortes first learned of the powerful and affluent Aztec king, Moctezuma, from a group of Mexicans the Spaniards made contact with at San Juan de Ulua.

Path To Conquest

Just as Cortes learned of Moctezuma, Moctezuma learned of the coming of the Europeans. According to later Aztec accounts, eight omens appeared to the people of Tenochtitlan foretelling the coming of the Spaniards: 1) A great column of fire burned in the night over Tenochtitlan. 2) The temple of Huitzilopochtli burned down mysteriously. 3) The temple of Xiuhtecuhtli was hit by lightning. 4) Fire, in three parts, streamed through the sky during the day. 5) Lake Texcoco boiled and flooded, destroying residences around the water. 6) A weeping woman was heard during the night, crying for the Aztecs to flee from the city. 7) A strange ashen crane appeared. Through a mirror in its head Moctezuma saw the stars, and when he looked again, he saw a land where men rode on the backs of animals and fought against each other. 8) Large, deformed men with two heads ran through the streets, but disappeared when they were brought to Moctezuma.¹⁰

These stories, while maybe not factual, show the Aztecs’ strong belief in omens and warnings from the gods. So when reports of the Spanish first reached Moctezuma in 1519, the king, who based quite a few of his decisions on his interpretations of “omens,” believed that they might possibly be Quetzalcoatl and other deities returning to Mexico as ancient Mexican prophecies had foretold.

Cortes’s fleet landed at what is now Vera Cruz on April 21, 1519. The native inhabitants, vassals of the Aztecs, were cordial and brought gifts. When the local cacique (chief) arrived, the Spanish performed Easter Mass, the two leaders exchanged gifts, and Cortes sent presents (including the first glass in the Americas).

Moctezuma, still unsure whether the visitors were divine or mortal, sent magnificent gifts of gold and silver back to the Captain-General but at the same time forbade the Spaniards from approaching Tenochtitlan. There was dissension among the troops between those loyal to Cortes and those loyal to Velazquez. Some wanted to strike the center of the empire immediately and take possession of the land for themselves. Others thought it would be more prudent to return to Cuba and report their findings to the governor.

In the meantime, messengers from the Totonac nation, who had been recently conquered by the Aztecs, urged Cortes to ally with them against the Aztecs. Realizing the importance of dissension within the empire, Cortes ordered his fleet to sail north to the Totonac capital at Cempoalla. The cacique of Cempoalla offered to provide Totonac troops to assist the Spanish in defeating Moctezuma and explained that many of the subjugated peoples under the Aztecs would most likely also wish to ally with Cortes. Before Cortes left, he established the first Spanish colony (Villa Rica) on the mainland at Cempoalla to be used as a launching point for future expeditions.

Cortes's army continued on to Chiahuitztlá where the cacique provided them with four hundred bearers to carry supplies. The army continued on to another town where they encountered five of Moctezuma's tribute collectors. Cortes ordered the Totonacs to imprison the Aztecs, and then, after harassing them, released two with a message of respect toward the king. This insult to the Aztecs further encouraged other nearby communities to join the Spaniards.

Hearing of a plot by some soldiers to take a ship and sail back to Cuba, Cortes had all but one of the vessels sunk and gave a dramatic speech to his soldiers by which he won back most of their support. The army left the Totonac capital on August 16, 1519, with 400 soldiers, fifteen horses, seven artillery pieces, 1,300 Totonac warriors, and 1,000 porters.

After marching through the Cordilleras and into the Mexican plateau, the army reached the Tlascalán republic, which

was the one nation in central Mexico that had managed to resist Aztec control. After a brief skirmish with the Tlascalans, Cortes was assured of passage through the republic. Ten miles into Tlascalan land though, Cortes's army encountered a hostile force of around 30,000 Tlascalans. Despite the tremendous size of the army, the Spanish managed to fend them off. On September 5, Cortes's army faced an even larger Tlascalan host which they again managed to fend off. The Tlascalan council then decided on a night attack against the Spaniards and their allies, but they found to their surprise that Cortes's troops were ready for them and reversed the ambush. Without energy left to fight once again, the Tlascalans agreed to let Cortes's army pass through their lands and furnish any necessary provisions. The army marched on to the Tlascalan capital where they erected a cross and performed mass and were given 500 porters and 1,000 soldiers. This change from hostility to neutrality to alliance was brought on by Cortes's claims that he was opposed only to the Aztec empire and that there would be a place for Tlascala in Spanish-dominated Mexico.

From there Cortes decided to march through Cholula despite the urging of the Tlascalans who warned that the Cholulans were pawns of Moctezuma. As the army approached the Cholulan capital, they were greeted by the caciques and Cortes was allowed to select 6,000 soldiers from the ranks of the Cholulan army. The chiefs also agreed to supply the Captain-General with porters. Here Diaz's account and the Aztec account totally diverge. Diaz's account tells of a Cholulan conspiracy sponsored by Moctezuma to ambush and slaughter the Spaniards.¹¹ Cortes apparently learned of this plan from Marina and intended to ambush the Cholula first. According to the Aztec account, it was the Spaniards who were treacherous and who planned a show of strength by massacring the Cholulans.¹² Whatever the reason, when the caciques brought the porters to Cortes, the Spanish and their allies set upon the Cholulans and completely massacred them. Then the Cholulan army assembled and counter-attacked the Spanish. After two hours of fighting, the two sides agreed to end the fighting and the Cholulans returned to their homes and Cortes's army marched on but not before erecting a cross.

Cortes's army then descended into the Valley of Mexico, for the first time witnessing in the distance the splendor of Tenochtitlan. On the road to the capital, the army passed through hamlets where they were offered generous bribes from Moctezuma's emissaries to turn back. When Cortes failed to accept the bribes, Moctezuma sent his nephew to welcome the Spaniards and their entourage of 7,000 Mexican soldiers to Tenochtitlan.

Tenochtitlan

The army reached the Aztec capital on November 8, 1519, and were greeted by several hundred emissaries from the king. The Spaniards were overwhelmed by the wealth and architectural precision of the city and likened it to cities in their homeland. In Cortes's second letter to his sovereign, he described the great capital:

This great city of Temixtitan is built on the salt lake, and no matter by what road you travel there are two leagues from the main body of the city to the mainland. There are four artificial causeways leading to it, and each is as wide as two cavalry lances. The city is as big as Seville or Cordoba. The main streets are very straight. Some of these are on the land, but the smaller ones are half on land, half canals where they paddle their canoes. All the streets have openings in places so that the water may pass from one canal to another. Over all these openings, and some of them are very wide, there are bridges made of long and wide beams joined together very firmly and so well made that on some of them ten horsemen may ride abreast.¹³

Moctezuma arrived at the gates and welcomed Cortes. He gave the army the palaces of his father, Axayacatl, to be used as a barracks. To prevent the Aztecs from attacking the Spaniards in a less than advantageous position, Cortes took the king prisoner and brought Moctezuma to the barracks. He persuaded the king to dispatch messengers to the surrounding communities and collect

gold and silver, part of which was sent to the Spanish monarch in the name of Moctezuma and part of which was divided among Cortes's troops.

At this time tensions increased between the two sides, and they escalated further when Cortes left to return to Vera Cruz with 266 of the Spaniards. The governor of Cuba had sent soldiers under Panfilo de Narvaez to arrest the Captain-General for insubordination. Cortes left his troops under the command of Captain Pedro de Alvarado (who had shown his tendencies toward foolish behavior before in Cozumel), and this proved to be a costly error.

Cortes and his small army defeated Narvaez in battle, a stunning victory, for Narvaez's troops numbered three times greater than the Captain-General's. After their defeat, most of Narvaez's troops joined Cortes who promised them a share of the spoils when Tenochtitlan was brought under Spanish control.

The army returned to the Aztec capital to find the city in arms. Alvarado had massacred 600 Aztecs during the Feast of Huitzilopochtli and seized all the gold in the city. Fighting quickly broke out in full force the day after Cortes returned, and the sheer numbers of the Aztec army overwhelmed the Captain-General's army, which numbered only 1,250 Spaniards and 8,000 Mexican warriors. His army was forced to retreat back into the barracks but set hundreds of homes on fire before doing so. They manned the walls of the palace during the night, but the Aztecs did not attack.

The next day Cortes brought out Moctezuma to speak to his people, urging them to end the fighting; but the Aztecs taunted him for his weakness. In the midst of this Moctezuma was killed, and the accounts of his death vary. He may have died from sling wounds inflicted by his own people or may have been assassinated by the Spaniards.¹⁴ Despite the seeming contempt for the king, the body was delivered to the people of Tenochtitlan and mourned over. That night the fighting commenced once again, and the Spaniards managed to destroy the temple of Huitzilopochtli and around 300 homes during a brief period in which they held the advantage. But this did not hurt the morale of the Aztecs, and they forced the Spaniards and their allies back into the barracks.

Realizing the hopelessness of their situation, Cortes attempted to retreat on the night of July 1, 1520 (commonly referred to in Mexico today as the “Night of Sorrows”). While he was crossing the bridge leaving the city, the Aztecs fell upon the army and inflicted heavy damage. In the disorder, Spanish soldiers who had been too greedy and filled their pockets with gold were pushed into Lake Texcoco and drowned. The army managed to attain a place of relative safety on a hill past the nearby town of Tlacopan but not without losing about 450 Spanish and 2,000 Mexican soldiers from their ranks.

Return To Tenochtitlan

Plagued by hunger, disease, and the pursuing Aztecs, Cortes’s army fled to Tlascala to obtain reinforcements. On the 8th of July, the army came upon a legion of nearly 200,000 Aztecs sent by Cuitlahuac, Moctezuma’s brother and successor. There, at the battle of Otumba, the Spanish managed a smashing victory that dissuaded the Aztecs from pursuing the Spaniards and their allies any farther. In Tlascala, Cortes gained great power over the council and began to form a huge new army to attack Tenochtitlan once again. Reinforcements arrived from Vera Cruz to assist in the campaign. With his army of 600 Spanish soldiers and between 110,000 and 150,000 Mexican warriors, Cortes intended to occupy the city of Texcoco and blockade Tenochtitlan from there. With the city sufficiently weakened, his army would cross the lake on thirteen brigantines constructed for this purpose by the Spaniards.

The Captain-General’s army left Tlascala in late December of 1520 on its march to the Aztec capital. The occupation of Texcoco was done without conflict, and from there the army destroyed the town of Iztapalapan and massacred its residents, which sent shockwaves throughout the surrounding area. Many of the formerly opposed caciques joined their forces with Cortes’s army.

Beginning in the spring of the next year, and for the next few weeks afterwards, the army systematically conquered most of the Aztec-inhabited towns around the river, all the while receiving more reinforcements from both the Mexican side and from Villa Rica. At the time of the assault on Tenochtitlan, Cortes had gained an additional 200 Spanish soldiers and 50,000 Tlascalans.

At the same time in the Aztec capital, a smallpox epidemic began that killed Cuitlahuac and immobilized much of the population. To replace the king, the caciques of Tenochtitlan chose Cuahtemoc, a nephew of Moctezuma and a brilliant military leader who fiercely believed that his Aztec army, with the help of Huitzilopochtli, could defeat the invaders.

The Assault On The City

In preparation for the attack, the Captain-General destroyed the aqueducts that supplied water to the capital with only ineffectual Aztec resistance. Two of the three divisions of the army attempted to attack the city across the causeway but met strong Aztec forces and were forced back. The third division, under Cortes, boarded the brigantines and patrolled the water, completely overwhelming the Aztecs' canoes and temporarily gaining control of Lake Texcoco.

The fighting raged back and forth as the Spaniards and their allies (now joined by 50,000 Texcocoans and later 150,000 of the Aztecs themselves) attempted to break the Aztec defense from both land and sea. They did so a few times but were steadily pushed back by the now starving inhabitants of Tenochtitlan. Cortes was increasingly distressed at his army's inability to break the Aztec spirit.

After nearly three months of such fighting, the Captain-General ordered a full-scale assault on Tenochtitlan. All three divisions crossed the causeway backed up by the brigantines and a fleet of Mexican canoes. Each division marched down one of the principal boulevards that all converged in Tlatelolco Square. They

steadily pushed the Aztecs backwards; and when the Aztec king sounded the retreat, the captains pushed on towards their fleeing prey. When Cuahtemoc's horn sounded again, the Aztecs turned around and fell on the Spaniards, capturing sixty-two of them and sacrificing them in front of the Spaniards in an attempt to destroy their morale. Cortes ordered the retreat.

Five days passed, and famine and disease had devastated the Aztecs. Cortes knew this and appealed to Cuahtemoc to surrender, but the king felt that dying for one's country would be better than being enslaved by the Spaniards. He answered in the form of an attack on the entrenched army. The Aztecs charged from the walls of the city to meet their enemy, but were quickly forced into a retreat by the firing of artillery and musketry. Cortes's army charged after the Aztecs, forcing them back, until the Spaniards and their allies controlled around three-quarters of the city. Everywhere they went they left a trail of destruction—burned or pulled-down homes and temples—regardless of whether or not there were wounded men, women, or children inside.

Still, the Aztec king refused to surrender. Cortes proposed a banquet at which the two sides could meet to negotiate, but the king sent his nobles and didn't come himself.

The next morning, Cuahtemoc agreed to meet the Captain-General at the marketplace; but when Cortes and his entourage arrived, they found the Aztec soldiers waiting for them. An enormous battle ensued; and both sides took heavy losses, the total number of deaths in that individual battle numbering more than 40,000.¹⁵

The Last Battle

The next morning, August 13, 1521, Cortes's army once again marched into the city. Another battle began, similar in scale to the one the day before, but Cortes ordered a cease-fire as three canoes were sighted fleeing across the lake. Cuahtemoc, who was riding

in one of the canoes, was apprehended and brought to the Captain-General. Upon meeting his enemy, he said, "Lord Malinche, I have assuredly done my duty in the defense of my city and my vassals, and I can do no more. I am brought by force as a prisoner into your presence and beneath your power. Take the dagger that you have in your belt, and strike me dead immediately."¹⁶ Cortes, admiring the king's valor and dignity, pardoned Cuahtemoc. What he did not realize was that Cuahtemoc was, as a prisoner of war, demanding to be sacrificed as the Aztec custom demanded (and Cuahtemoc lived on afterwards in shame for this insult).

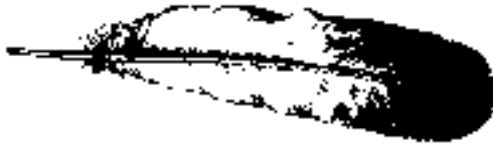
This lack of understanding for each other's culture is one sign that there would have been no way for the two empires to have an equal existence. The Spaniards' disgust with the "barbaric" rites of the Aztecs gave them an excuse to force the Aztecs (and later the rest of the Mexicans) down into the lowest echelons of the new Hispanic society. But it should be considered that while human sacrifice is surely barbaric, enslaving peoples is hardly a sign of being civilized.

The conquerors banished the Aztecs from their city and began to clear the city. According to Prescott, between 120,000 and 240,000 may have lain dead in the streets. The Aztec homes, now in shambles, were torn down and new homes for the conquistadors were built by reluctant Mexican laborers. It is ironic that very little gold was found in the city as compared to what was expected.

Over the next four years, Hernan Cortes was appointed Governor, Captain-General, and Chief Justice of the province of New Spain. He passed his time presiding over the reconstruction of Tenochtitlan, which he renamed Mexico (later Mexico City in the present-day country of Mexico), and bringing colonists from Spain to make their homes there.

The key to the Spanish conquest of Mexico was the dissension among the different peoples of the Aztecs' empire. The Indian overlords made no attempts to assimilate the other cultures

to their own and thus provided the basis for a full scale revolt against them which Cortes incited. While the Aztecs were really unable to unify their empire, the Spanish managed to succeed where their predecessors in the area had failed. With diligent work by missionaries and Cortes himself, the Spaniards tried to bring together the people of present-day Mexico and the southwestern United States by converting them to Christianity. The resulting extension of the Spanish empire, New Spain, was the most strongly united of the American empires for years to come.



Flowers and Songs of Sorrows

(Written by a post-Conquest Aztec poet)

Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco, where once we saw warriors and wise men.

We know it is true that we must perish, for we are mortal men. You, the Giver of Life, you have ordained it.

We wander here and there in our desolate poverty. We are mortal men. We have seen bloodshed and pain where once we saw beauty and valor.

We are crushed to the ground; we lie in ruins. There is nothing but grief and suffering in Mexico and Tlatelolco, where once we saw beauty and valor.

Have you grown weary of your servants? Are you angry with your servants, O Giver of Life?¹⁷

- ¹ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, The Aztecs (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1989) p. 31
- ² Ibid., p. 31
- ³ Ignacio Bernal, Mexico Before Cortez: Art, History, and Legend (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963) pp. 122-123
- ⁴ Charles Gibson, Spain in America (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966) p. 15
- ⁵ William H. Prescott, The Conquest of Mexico Beatrice Berler, ed. (San Antonio, Texas: Corona Publishing Company, 1988) p. 13
- ⁶ Bernal Diaz, The Conquest of New Spain (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1963) p. 51
- ⁷ Prescott, p. 17
- ⁸ Diaz, p. 76
- ⁹ Prescott, p. 17
- ¹⁰ Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed. The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1962) pp. 3-6
- ¹¹ Diaz, pp. 193-199
- ¹² Leon-Portilla, pp. 40-41
- ¹³ Hernan Cortes, Letters from Mexico (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971) pp. 102-103
- ¹⁴ Moctezuma, p. 18
- ¹⁵ Prescott, p. 127
- ¹⁶ Diaz, p. 403
- ¹⁷ Leon-Portilla, p. 149