

## Introduction

On November 8, 1519, the Spanish conquistadors first entered the great city of Mexico, the metropolis the Aztecs had built on a lake island. Don Hernando Cortes, who was accompanied by six hundred Spaniards and a great many native allies, at last could see for himself the temples and palaces about which he had heard so many marvels. The Spaniards arrived from the direction of Tlalpan, to the south of the city, passing across one of the wide causeways that connected the island with the mainland. When they reached a locality known as Xoloco, they were welcomed by the last of the Motecuhzomas,<sup>1</sup> who had come out to meet them in the belief that the white men must be Quetzalcoatl and other gods, returning at last from across the waters now known as the Gulf of Mexico. Thus Cortes and his men entered the city, not only as guests, but also as gods coming home. It was the first direct encounter between one of the most extraordinary pre-Columbian cultures and the strangers who would eventually destroy it.

Cortes landed on the coast at Veracruz on Good Friday, April 22, 1519; the Aztec capital surrendered to him on August 13, 1521. The events that took place between these two dates have been recounted in a number of chronicles and other writings, of which the best known are the letters Cortes wrote to King Charles V and the *True History of the Conquest of Mexico* by Bernal Diaz del Castillo. These two works, along with a few others also written by Spaniards, until now have been almost the only basis on which historians have judged the conquest of one of the greatest civilizations in pre-Columbian America.

But these chronicles present only one side of the story, that of the conquerors. For some reason—scorn, perhaps—historians have failed to consider that the conquered might have set down their own version in their own language. This book is the first to offer a selection from those indigenous accounts, some of them written



## *Chapter One*

# Omens Foretelling the Arrival of the Spaniards

### *Introduction*

The documents presented in the first thirteen chapters relate the events that began a few years before the arrival of the Spaniards on the east coast of Mexico and ended with the fall of Tenochtitlan to the conquistadors. The last two chapters offer, by way of conclusion, a somewhat different account of the Conquest written in 1528 by the anonymous informants of Tlatelolco, and three of the *icnocuicatl* (threnodies, or songs of sorrow) lamenting the defeat and destruction of the Aztec capital.

The texts have been arranged to give a chronological narrative of the Conquest, and they contain a number of obvious

*three*

discrepancies and contradictions. We have not attempted to solve all of the problems which these discrepancies pose for the historian. Our fundamental concern is with the human interest of the accounts, which reveal how the Nahuas interpreted the downfall of their civilization.

This first chapter begins with a passage from the *Codex Florentino*; the original text is in the Nahuatl of Sahagun's native informants. It is followed by two selections from the *Historia de Tlaxcala* by Diego Munoz Camargo, who married into the nobility of Tlaxcala. The Tlaxcaltecas allied themselves with Cortes, and Munoz Camargo wrote from their point of view, but his description of the omens which appeared in Mexico agrees quite closely with that of Sahagun's informants.

### *The Omens as Described by Sahagun's Informants*

*The first bad omen:* Ten years before the Spaniards first came here, a bad omen appeared in the sky. It was like a flaming ear of corn, or a fiery signal, or the blaze of daybreak; it seemed to bleed fire, drop by drop, like a wound in the sky. It was wide at the base and narrow at the peak, and it shone in the very heart of the heavens.

This is how it appeared: it shone in the eastern sky in the middle of the night. It appeared at midnight and burned till the break of day, but it vanished at the rising of the sun. The time during which it appeared to us was a full year, beginning in the year 12-House.

When it first appeared, there was great outcry and confusion. The people clapped their hands against their mouths; they were amazed and frightened, and asked themselves what it could mean.

*The second bad omen:* The temple of Huitzilopochtli<sup>1</sup>

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burst into flames. It is thought that no one set it afire, that it burned down of its own accord. The name of its divine site was Tlacateccan [House of Authority].

And now it is burning, the wooden columns are burning! The flames, the tongues of fire shoot out, the bursts of fire shoot up into the sky!

The flames swiftly destroyed all the woodwork of the temple. When the fire was first seen, the people shouted: "Mexicanos, come running! We can put it out! Bring your water jars . . . !" But when they threw water on the blaze it only flamed higher. They could not put it out, and the temple burned to the ground.

*The third bad omen:* A temple was damaged by a lightning-bolt. This was the temple of Xiuhtecuhtli,<sup>2</sup> which was built of straw, in the place known as Tzonmolco.<sup>3</sup> It was raining that day, but it was only a light rain or a drizzle, and no thunder was heard. Therefore the lightning-bolt was taken as an omen. The people said: "The temple was struck by a blow from the sun."

*The fourth bad omen:* Fire streamed through the sky while the sun was still shining. It was divided into three parts. It flashed out from where the sun sets and raced straight to where the sun rises, giving off a shower of sparks like a red-hot coal. When the people saw its long train streaming through the heavens, there was a great outcry and confusion, as if they were shaking a thousand little bells.

*The fifth bad omen:* The wind lashed the water until it boiled. It was as if it were boiling with rage, as if it were shattering itself in its frenzy. It began from far off, rose high in the air and dashed against the walls of the houses. The flooded houses collapsed into the water. This was in the lake that is next to us.

*The sixth bad omen:* The people heard a weeping woman night after night. She passed by in the middle of the night, wailing and crying out in a loud voice: "My children, we must flee far away from this city!" At other times she cried: "My children, where shall I take you?"<sup>4</sup>

*The seventh bad omen:* A strange creature was captured in the nets. The men who fish the lakes caught a bird the color of ashes, a bird resembling a crane. They brought it to Motecuhzoma in the Black House.<sup>5</sup>

This bird wore a strange mirror in the crown of its head. The mirror was pierced in the center like a spindle whorl, and the night sky could be seen in its face. The hour was noon, but the stars and the *mamalhuaztli*<sup>6</sup> could be seen in the face of that mirror. Motecuhzoma took it as a great and bad omen when he saw the stars and the *mamalhuaztli*.

But when he looked at the mirror a second time, he saw a distant plain. People were moving across it, spread out in ranks and coming forward in great haste. They made war against each other and rode on the backs of animals resembling deer.

Motecuhzoma called for his magicians and wise men and asked them: "Can you explain what I have seen? Creatures like human beings, running and fighting . . . !" But when they looked into the mirror to answer him, all had vanished away, and they saw nothing.

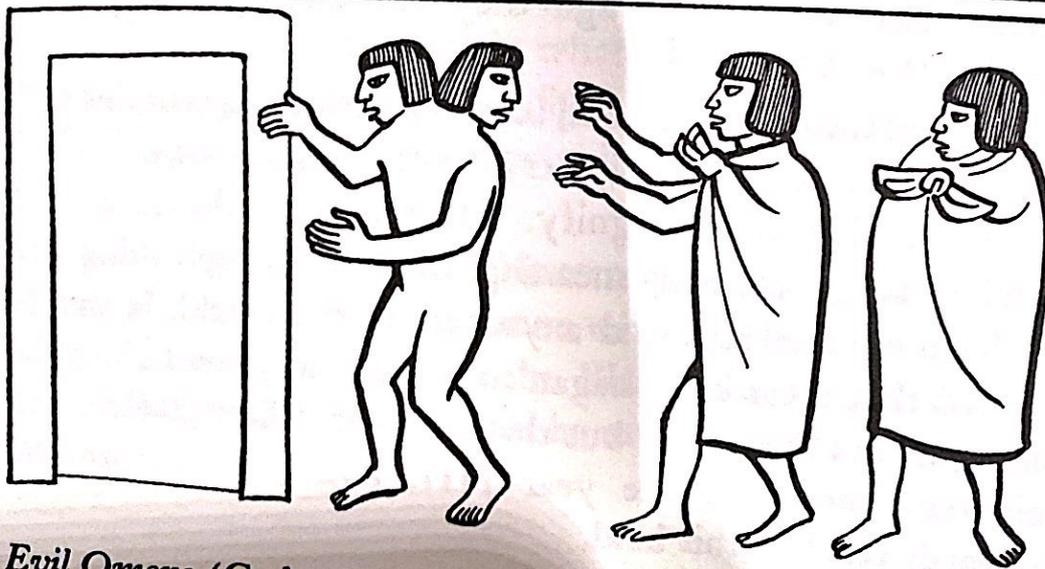
*The eighth bad omen:* Monstrous beings appeared in the streets of the city: deformed men with two heads but only one body. They were taken to the Black House and shown to Motecuhzoma; but the moment he saw them, they all vanished away.

## *The Omens as Described by Munoz Camargo<sup>7</sup>*

Ten years before the Spaniards came to this land, the people saw a strange wonder and took it to be an evil sign and portent. This wonder was a great column of flame which burned in the night, shooting out such brilliant sparks and flashes that it seemed to rain fire on the earth and to blaze like daybreak. It seemed to be fastened against the sky in the shape of a pyramid, its base set against the ground, where it was of vast width, and its bulk narrowing to a peak that reached up and touched the heavens. It appeared at midnight and could still be seen at dawn, but in the daytime it was quelled by the force and brilliance of the sun. This portent burned for a year, beginning in the year which the natives called 12-House—that is, 1517 in our Spanish reckoning.

When this sign and portent was first seen, the natives were overcome with terror, weeping and shouting and crying out, and beating the palms of their hands against their mouths, as is their custom. These shouts and cries were accompanied by sacrifices of blood and of human beings, for this was their practice whenever they thought they were endangered by some calamity.

This great marvel caused so much dread and wonder that they spoke of it constantly, trying to imagine what such a strange novelty could signify. They begged the seers and magicians to interpret its meaning, because no such thing had ever been seen or reported anywhere in the world. It should be noted that these signs began to appear ten years before the coming of the Spaniards, but that the year called 12-House in their reckoning was the year 1517, two years before the Spaniards reached this land.



*Evil Omens (Codex Florentino)*

eight

*The second wonder*, sign or omen which the natives beheld was this: the temple of the demon Huitzilopochtli, in the sector named Tlacateco, caught fire and burned, though no one had set it afire. The blaze was so great and sudden that wings of flame rushed out of the doors and seemed to touch the sky. When this occurred, there was great confusion and much loud shouting and wailing. The people cried: "Mexicanos! Come as quickly as you can! Bring your water jars to put it out!" Everyone within hearing ran to help, but when they threw water on the fire, it leaped up with even greater violence, and thus the whole temple burned down.

*The third wonder* and sign was this: a lightning-bolt fell on a temple of idolatry whose roof was made of straw. The name of this temple was Tzonmolco, and it was dedicated to their idol Xiuhtecuhtli. The bolt fell on the temple with neither flash nor thunder, when there was only a light rain, like a dew. It was taken as an omen and miracle which boded evil, and all burned down.

*The fourth wonder* was this: comets flashed through the sky in the daytime while the sun was shining. They raced by threes from the west to the east with great haste and violence, shooting off bright coals and sparks of fire, and trailing such long tails that their splendor filled the sky. When these portents were seen, the people were terrified, wailing and crying aloud.

*The fifth wonder* was this: the Lake of Mexico rose when there was no wind. It boiled, and boiled again, and foamed until it reached a great height, until it washed against half the houses in the city. House after house collapsed and was destroyed by the waters.

*The sixth wonder* was this: the people heard in the night the voice of a weeping woman, who sobbed and sighed and drowned herself in her tears. This woman cried: "O my sons,

we are lost . . . !” Or she cried: “O my sons, where can I hide you . . . ?”

*The seventh wonder* was this: the men whose work is in the Lake of Mexico—the fishermen and other boatmen, or the fowlers in their canoes—trapped a dark-feathered bird resembling a crane and took it to Motecuhzoma so that he might see it. He was in the palace of the Black Hall; the sun was already in the west. This bird was so unique and marvelous that no one could exaggerate its strangeness or describe it well. A round diadem was set in its head in the form of a clear and transparent mirror, in which could be seen the heavens, the three stars in Taurus and the stars in the sign of the Gemini. When Motecuhzoma saw this, he was filled with dread and wonder, for he believed it was a bad omen to see the stars of heaven in the diadem of that bird.

When Motecuhzoma looked into the mirror a second time, he saw a host of people, all armed like warriors, coming forward in well-ordered ranks. They skirmished and fought with each other, and were accompanied by strange deer and other creatures.

Therefore, he called for his magicians and fortune-tellers, whose wisdom he trusted, and asked them what these unnatural visions meant: “My dear and learned friends, I have witnessed great signs in the diadem of a bird, which was brought to me as something new and marvelous that had never been seen before. What I witnessed in that diadem, which is pellucid like a mirror, was a strange host of people rushing toward me across a plain. Now look yourselves, and see what I have seen.”

But when they wished to advise their lord on what seemed to them so wondrous a thing, and to give him their judgments, divinations and predictions, the bird suddenly disappeared; and thus they could not offer him any sure opinion.

*The eighth wonder* and sign that appeared in Mexico: the natives saw two men merged into one body—these they called *tlacantzolli* (“men-squeezed-together”)—and others who had two heads but only one body. They were brought to the palace of the Black Hall to be shown to the great Motecuhzoma, but they vanished as soon as he had seen them, and all these signs and others became invisible. To the natives, these marvels augured their death and ruin, signifying that the end of the world was coming and that other peoples would be created to inhabit the earth. They were so frightened and grief-stricken that they could form no judgment about these things, so new and strange and never before seen or reported.

### *The Wonders and Signs Observed in Tlaxcala*

Other signs appeared here in this province of Tlaxcala, a little before the arrival of the Spaniards. The first sign was a radiance that shone in the east every morning three hours before sunrise. This radiance was in the form of a brilliant white cloud which rose to the sky, and the people were filled with dread and wonder, not knowing what it could be.

They also saw another marvelous sign: a whirlwind of dust that rose like a sleeve from the top of the Matlalcueye, now called the Sierra de Tlaxcala.<sup>8</sup> This sleeve rose so high that it seemed to touch the sky. The sign appeared many times throughout a whole year and caused the people great dread and wonder, emotions which are contrary to their bent and to that of their nation. They could only believe that the gods had descended from heaven, and the news flew through the province to the smallest villages. But however this may have

*eleven*

been, the arrival of a strange new people was at last reported and confirmed, especially in Mexico, the head of this empire and monarchy.

<sup>1</sup> Sun god and god of war.

<sup>2</sup> Fire god.

<sup>3</sup> Part of the main temple of Tenochtitlan.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently a reference to Cihuacoatl, an ancient earth goddess, who wept and cried out in the night. She is one of the antecedents of the *llorona* (weeping woman), who is still heard in rural Mexico.

<sup>5</sup> The house of magical studies. Motecuhzoma, the king, was a devoted amateur wizard.

<sup>6</sup> Three stars in the constellation Taurus. They were extremely important in the Nahuatl religion: the Nahuas performed various ceremonies in their honor and offered them copal incense three times each night.

<sup>7</sup> This selection from the *Historia de Tlaxcala* obviously is based on the account by Sahagun's informants.

<sup>8</sup> Its present name is La Malinche.





## Chapter Two

# First Reports of the Spaniards' Arrival

### Introduction

The *Cronica mexicana*<sup>1</sup> by Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc relates how Motecuhzoma consulted various seers and magicians to learn whether the omens meant an approaching war or some other crisis. They could not give him a satisfactory answer. However, a poor *macehual* (common man) arrived shortly afterward from the Gulf coast, bringing the first word of the appearance of "towers or small mountains floating on the waves of the sea." A later report said that the mountains bore a strange people who "have very light skin, much lighter than ours. They all have long beards, and their hair comes only to their ears."

Motecuhzoma was even more distressed by this news than he had been by the omens. Therefore, he sent messengers and gifts to the strangers, believing that they might be Quetzalcoatl<sup>2</sup> and

*thirteen*

other divinities returning to Mexico, as the codices and traditions promised they would.

### *Motecuhzoma Questions the Magicians*

Motecuhzoma summoned the chief officials of all the villages. He told them to search their villages for magicians and to bring him any they found. The officials returned with a number of these wizards, who were announced and then brought in to the king's presence. They knelt before him, with one knee on the floor, and did him the greatest reverence. He asked them: "Have you not seen strange omens in the sky or on the earth? In the caves under the earth, or in the lakes and streams? A weeping woman, or strange men? Visions, or phantasms, or other such things?"

But the magicians had not seen any of the omens that Motecuhzoma sought to understand, and therefore could not advise him. He said to his *petlacatl* [head steward]: "Take these villains away, and lock them up in the Cuauhcalco prison. They shall tell me against their will." The next day he called for his *petlacatl* and said to him: "Tell the magicians to say what they believe: whether sickness is going to strike, or hunger, or locusts, or storms on the lake, or droughts, and whether it will rain or not. If war is threatening Mexico, or if there will be sudden deaths, or deaths caused by wild beasts, they are not to hide it from me. They must also tell me if they have heard the voice of Cihuacoatl,<sup>3</sup> for when something is to happen, she is the first to predict it, even long before it takes place."

The magicians answered: "What can we say? The future has already been determined and decreed in heaven, and Mote-

*cuhzoma* will behold and suffer a great mystery which must come to pass in his land. If our king wishes to know more about it, he will know soon enough, for it comes swiftly. This is what we predict, since he demands that we speak, and since it must surely take place, he can only wait for it."

The *petlacatl* returned to Motecuhzoma and told him openly what they had said, that what was to come would come swiftly. Motecuhzoma was astonished to find that this agreed with the prediction made by Nezahualpilli, king of Tezcoco.<sup>4</sup> He said to the *petlacatl*: "Question them again about this mystery. Ask them if it will come from the sky or the earth, and from what direction or place it will come, and when this will happen."

The *petlacatl* went back to the prison to question them, but when he entered and unlocked the doors, he was terrified to discover that they were not there. He returned to Motecuhzoma and said to him: "My lord, command that I be cut to pieces, or whatever else you wish: for you must know, my lord, that when I arrived and opened the doors, no one was there. I have special guards at the prison, trustworthy men who have served me for years, but none of them heard them escape. I myself believe that they flew away, for they know how to make themselves invisible, which they do every night, and can fly to the ends of the earth. This is what they must have done."

Motecuhzoma said: "Let the villains go. Call the chiefs together, and tell them to go to the villages where the magicians live. Tell them to kill their wives and all their children, and to destroy their houses." He also ordered many servants to go with them to ransack the houses. When the chiefs arrived, they killed the women by hanging them with ropes, and the children by dashing them to pieces against the walls. Then they tore down the houses and even rooted out their foundations.

## *A Macehual Arrives from the Gulf Coast*

A few days later a *macehual* [common man] came to the city from Mictlancuauhtla. No one had sent him, none of the officials; he came of his own accord. He went directly to the palace of Motecuhzoma and said to him: "Our lord and king, forgive my boldness. I am from Mictlancuauhtla. When I went to the shores of the great sea, there was a mountain range or small mountain floating in the midst of the water, and moving here and there without touching the shore. My lord, we have never seen the like of this, although we guard the coast and are always on watch."

Motecuhzoma thanked him and said: "You may rest now." The man who brought this news had no ears, for they had been cut off, and no toes, for they had also been cut off.

Motecuhzoma said to his *petlacalcatl*: "Take him to the prison, and guard him well." Then he called for a *teuctlama-cazqui* [priest] and appointed him his grand emissary. He said to him: "Go to Cuetlaxtlan, and tell the official in charge of the village that it is true, strange things have appeared on the great sea. Tell him to investigate these things himself, so as to learn what they may signify. Tell him to do this as quickly as he can, and take the ambassador Cuitlalpitoc with you."

When they arrived in Cuetlaxtlan, the envoys spoke with the official in charge there, a man named Pinotl. He listened to them with great attention and then said: "My lords, rest here with me, and send your attendants out to the shore." The attendants went out and came back in great haste to report that it was true: they had seen two towers or small mountains floating on the waves of the sea. The grand emissary said to Pinotl: "I wish to see these things in person, in order to learn what they are, for I must testify to our lord as an eyewitness. I

will be satisfied with this and will report to him exactly what I see." Therefore he went out to the shore with Cuitlalpitoc, and they saw what was floating there, beyond the edge of the water. They also saw that seven or eight of the strangers had left it in a small boat and were fishing with hooks and lines.

The grand emissary and Cuitlalpitoc climbed up into a broad-limbed tree. From there they saw how the strangers were catching fish and how, when they were done, they returned to the ship in their small boat. The grand emissary said: "Come, Cuitlalpitoc." They climbed down from the tree and went back to the village, where they took hasty leave of Pinotl. They returned as swiftly as possible to the great city of Tenochtitlan, to report to Motecuhzoma what they had observed.

When they reached the city, they went directly to the king's palace and spoke to him with all due reverence and humility: "Our lord and king, it is true that strange people have come to the shores of the great sea. They were fishing from a small boat, some with rods and others with a net. They fished until late and then they went back to their two great towers and climbed up into them. There were about fifteen of these people, some with blue jackets, others with red, others with black or green, and still others with jackets of a soiled color, very ugly, like our *ichtilmatli*.<sup>5</sup> There were also a few without jackets. On their heads they wore red kerchiefs, or bonnets of a fine scarlet color, and some wore large round hats like small *comales*,<sup>6</sup> which must have been sunshades. They have very light skin, much lighter than ours. They all have long beards, and their hair comes only to their ears."

Motecuhzoma was downcast when he heard this report, and did not speak a word.

## Preparations Ordered by Motecuhzoma

After a long silence, Motecuhzoma finally spoke: "You are the chiefs of my own house and palace and I can place more faith and credit in you than in anyone else because you have always told me the truth. Go with the *petlacacatl* and bring me the man who is locked up in the jail, the *macehual* who came as a messenger from the coast." They went to the jail, but when they opened the doors, they could not find him anywhere. They hurried back to tell Motecuhzoma, who was even more astonished and terrified than they were. He said: "It is a natural thing, for almost everyone is a magician. But hear what I tell you now, and if you reveal anything of what I am about to command, I will bury you under my halls, and your wives and children will be killed, and your property seized. Your houses will be destroyed to the bottom of their foundations, until the water seeps up, and your parents and all your kin will be put to death. Now bring me in secret two of the best artists among the silversmiths, and two lapidaries who are skillful at working emeralds."

They went and returned and said to him: "Our lord, here are the craftsmen you commanded us to bring you." Motecuhzoma said: "Tell them to enter." They entered, and he said to them: "Come here to me, my fathers. You are to know that I have called for you to have you make certain objects. But take care that you do not reveal this to anyone, for if you do, it will mean the ruin of your houses to their foundations, and the loss of your goods, and death to yourselves, your wives, your children and your kin, for all shall die. Each of you is to make two objects, and you are to make them in my presence, here in secret in this palace."

He told one craftsman: "Make a throat-band or chain of  
eighteen

gold, with links four fingers wide and very thin, and let each piece and medallion bear rich emeralds in the center and at the sides, like earrings, two by two. Then make a pair of gold bracelets, with chains of gold hanging from them. And do this with all the haste in the world."

He ordered the other craftsman to make two great fans with rich feathers, in the center of one side a half-moon of gold, on the other a gold sun, both well burnished so that they would shine from far away. He also told him to make two gold armlets rich with feathers. And he ordered each of the lapidaries to make two double bracelets—that is, for both wrists and both ankles—of gold set with fine emeralds.

Then he ordered his *petlacatli* to bring in secret many *canutos*<sup>8</sup> of gold, and plumage of the noblest sort, and many emeralds and other rich stones of the finest quality. All of this was given to the artisans and in a few days they had finished their work. One morning, after the king had risen, they sent a palace hunchback to the king Motecuhzoma, to beg him to come to their workroom.

When he entered, they showed him great reverence and said: "Our lord, the work is finished. Please inspect it." Motecuhzoma saw that the work was excellent, and he told them that all had been done to his satisfaction and pleasure. He called for his *petlacatli* and said: "Give each of these, my grandfathers, a portion of various rich cloths; and huipiles<sup>9</sup> and skirts for my grandmothers; and cotton, chiles, corn, squash seeds and beans, the same amount to each." And with this the craftsmen returned to their homes contented. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Written about 1598; the only surviving text is in Spanish. The same author also wrote the *Cronica mexicayotl* in Nahuatl.

<sup>2</sup> God of learning and of the wind.

<sup>3</sup> The weeping goddess. See Chapter 1, note 4.

<sup>4</sup> Not long before the first omen was seen, Nezahualpilli told Motecuhzoma

that, according to his fortune-tellers, Mexico would soon be ruled by strangers. Motecuhzoma replied that his own fortune-tellers had predicted otherwise. Nezahualpilli then suggested that they settle the matter by playing a series of ritual ball games, with the outcome to decide who was right; he also offered to wager his whole kingdom against three turkey cocks. Motecuhzoma agreed and won the first two games, but Nezahualpilli won the last three in succession.

<sup>5</sup> A cloak made from maguey fibers, worn by fastening a knot at the shoulder.

<sup>6</sup> The *comal*, still used in Mexico, is a wide, flat pottery dish on which *tortillas* are baked.

<sup>7</sup> The Aztecs imported emeralds from the Muzo region of present-day Colombia, in South America, the only source then available.

<sup>8</sup> Small tubes, often quills, in which gold dust was kept.

<sup>9</sup> The *huipil*, still worn in some parts of Mexico, is a woman's long, sleeveless blouse.

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### *Chapter Three*

## **The Messengers' Journeys**

### *Introduction*

The native documents—principally those by Sahagun's informants—describe the various journeys made by Motecuhzoma's messengers to the Gulf coasts where the strangers had appeared. The texts describing the instructions that Motecuhzoma gave to his envoys are presented first. These show clearly how the Nahuas attempted to explain the coming of the Spaniards by a projection of earlier ideas: they assumed that the new arrivals were Quetzalcoatl and other deities.

Then the documents relate how the messengers reached the coast and were received by the Spaniards, to whom they brought gifts from Motecuhzoma. The descriptions of the gifts offered to

*twenty-one*

Cortes, and of his successful attempt to frighten the messengers by firing an arquebus in front of them, are especially interesting.

The third part of this chapter deals with the messengers' return to Tenochtitlan and the information they brought back to Motecuhzoma about the Spaniards, their firearms, the animals they rode (a species of huge "deer," but without horns), their mastiff dogs and so on.

All the texts in this chapter are from the *Codex Florentino*.

### *Motecuhzoma Instructs His Messengers*

Motecuhzoma then gave orders to Pinotl of Cuetlaxtlan and to other officials. He said to them: "Give out this order: a watch is to be kept along all the shores at Nauhtla, Tuztlan, Mictlancuauhtla, wherever the strangers appear." The officials left at once and gave orders for the watch to be kept.

Motecuhzoma now called his chiefs together: Tlilpotonque, the serpent woman,<sup>1</sup> Cuappiatzin, the chief of the house of arrows,<sup>2</sup> Quetzalaztatzin, the keeper of the chalk,<sup>3</sup> and Hecateupatiltzin, the chief of the refugees from the south. He told them the news that had been brought to him and showed them the objects he had ordered made. He said: "We all admire these blue turquoises, and they must be guarded well. The whole treasure must be guarded well. If anything is lost, your houses will be destroyed and your children killed, even those who are still in the womb."

The year 13-Rabbit now approached its end. And when it was about to end, they appeared, they were seen again. The report of their coming was brought to Motecuhzoma, who immediately sent out messengers. It was as if he thought the new arrival was our prince Quetzalcoatl.

This is what he felt in his heart: *He has appeared! He has come back! He will come here, to the place of his throne and canopy, for that is what he promised when he departed!*

Motecuhzoma sent five messengers to greet the strangers and to bring them gifts. They were led by the priest in charge of the sanctuary of Yohualichan. The second was from Tepoztlan; the third, from Tizatlan; the fourth, from Huehuetlan; and the fifth, from Mictlan the Great.<sup>4</sup> He said to them: "Come forward, my Jaguar Knights, come forward. It is said that our lord has returned to this land. Go to meet him. Go to hear him. Listen well to what he tells you; listen and remember."

### *The Gifts Sent to the New Arrivals*

Motecuhzoma also said to the messengers: "Here is what you are to bring our lord. This is the treasure of Quetzalcoatl." This treasure was the god's finery: a serpent mask inlaid with turquoise, a decoration for the breast made of quetzal<sup>5</sup> feathers, a collar woven in the petatillo style<sup>6</sup> with a gold disk in the center, and a shield decorated with gold and mother-of-pearl and bordered with quetzal feathers with a pendant of the same feathers.

There was also a mirror like those which the ritual dancers wore on their buttocks. The reverse of this mirror was a turquoise mosaic: it was encrusted and adorned with turquoises. And there was a spear-thrower inlaid with turquoise, a bracelet of chalchihuites<sup>7</sup> hung with little gold bells and a pair of sandals as black as obsidian.

Motecuhzoma also gave them the finery of Tezcatlipoca.<sup>8</sup> This finery was: a helmet in the shape of a cone, yellow with gold and set with many stars, a number of earrings adorned

*twenty-three*

with little gold bells, a fringed and painted vest with feathers as delicate as foam and a blue cloak known as "the ringing bell," which reached to the ears and was fastened with a knot.

There was also a collar of fine shells to cover the breast. This collar was adorned with the finest snail shells, which seemed to escape from the edges. And there was a mirror to be hung in back, a set of little gold bells and a pair of white sandals.

Then Motecuhzoma gave them the finery of Tlaloc.<sup>9</sup> This finery was: a headdress made of quetzal feathers, as green as if it were growing, with an ornament of gold and mother-of-pearl, earrings in the form of serpents, made of *chalchihuites*, a vest adorned with *chalchihuites* and a collar also of *chalchihuites*, woven in the petatillo style, with a disk of gold.

There was also a serpent wand inlaid with turquoise, a mirror to be hung in back, with little bells, and a cloak bordered with red rings.

Then Motecuhzoma gave them the finery of Quetzalcoatl. This finery was: a diadem made of jaguar skin and pheasant feathers and adorned with a large green stone, round turquoise earrings with curved pendants of shell and gold, a collar of *chalchihuites* in the petatillo style with a disk of gold in the center, a cloak with red borders, and little gold bells for the feet.

There was also a golden shield, pierced in the middle, with quetzal feathers around the rim and a pendant of the same feathers, the crooked staff of Ehecatl<sup>10</sup> with a cluster of white stones at the crook, and his sandals of fine soft rubber.

These were the many kinds of adornments that were known as "divine adornments." They were placed in the possession of the messengers to be taken as gifts of welcome along with many other objects, such as a golden snail shell and a golden diadem. All these objects were packed into great baskets; they were loaded into panniers for the long journey.

Then Motecuhzoma gave the messengers his final orders. He said to them: "Go now, without delay. Do reverence to our lord the god. Say to him: 'Your deputy, Motecuhzoma, has sent us to you. Here are the presents with which he welcomes you home to Mexico.' "

### *The Messengers Contact the Spaniards*

When they arrived at the shore of the sea, they were taken in canoes to Xicalanco. They placed the baskets in the same canoes in which they rode, in order to keep them under their personal vigilance. From Xicalanco they followed the coast until they sighted the ships of the strangers.

When they came up to the ships, the strangers asked them: "Who are you? Where are you from?"

"We have come from the City of Mexico."<sup>11</sup>

The strangers said: "You may have come from there, or you may not have. Perhaps you are only inventing it. Perhaps you are mocking us." But their hearts were convinced; they were satisfied in their hearts. They lowered a hook from the bow of the ship, and then a ladder, and the messengers came aboard.

One by one they did reverence to Cortes by touching the ground before him with their lips. They said to him: "If the god will deign to hear us, your deputy Motecuhzoma has sent us to render you homage. He has the City of Mexico in his care. He says: 'The god is weary.' "

Then they arrayed the Captain in the finery they had brought him as presents. With great care they fastened the turquoise mask in place, the mask of the god with its crossband

of quetzal feathers. A golden earring hung down on either side of this mask. They dressed him in the decorated vest and the collar woven in the petatillo style—the collar of *chalchibuites*, with a disk of gold in the center.

Next they fastened the mirror to his hips, dressed him in the cloak known as “the ringing bell” and adorned his feet with the greaves used by the Huastecas,<sup>12</sup> which were set with *chalchibuites* and hung with little gold bells. In his hand they placed the shield with its fringe and pendant of quetzal feathers, its ornaments of gold and mother-of-pearl. Finally they set before him the pair of black sandals. As for the other objects of divine finery, they only laid them out for him to see.

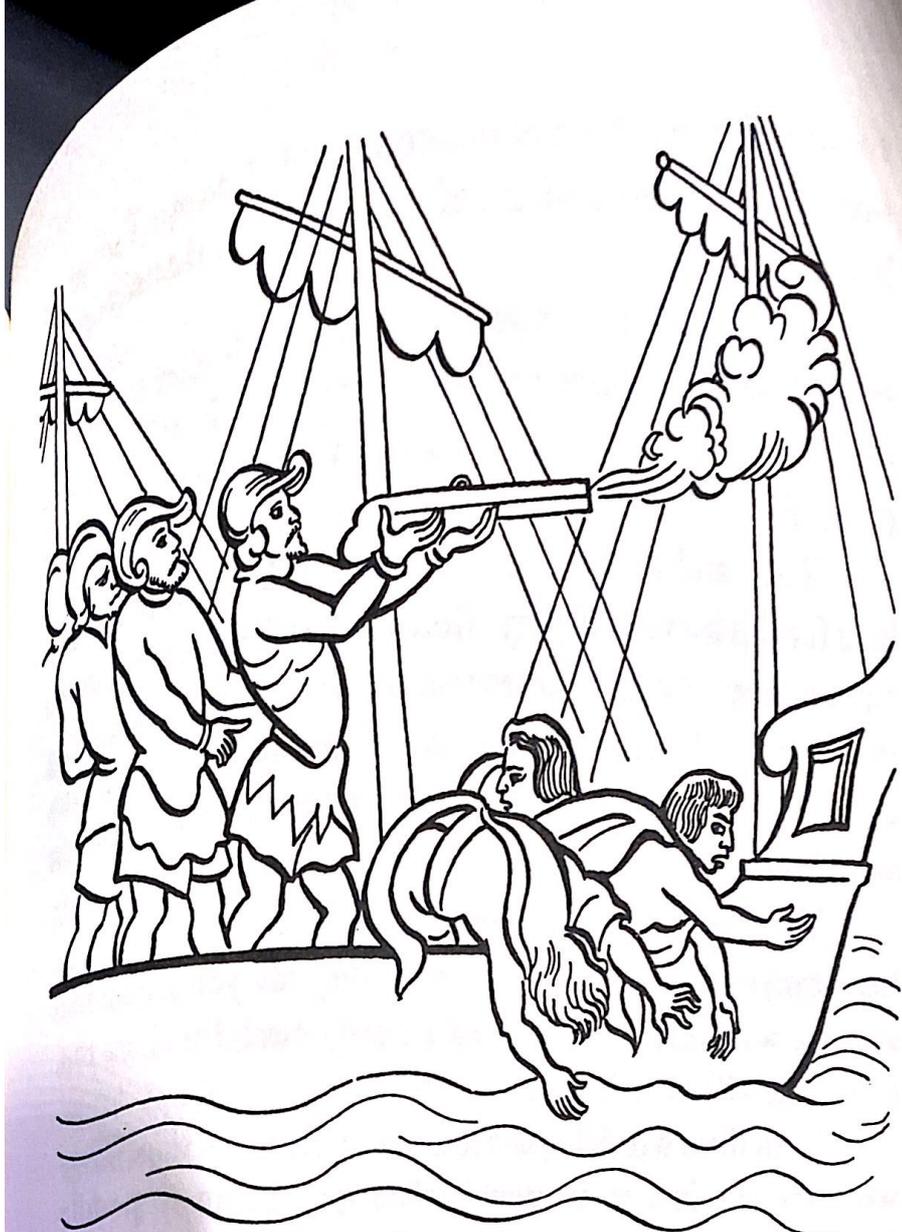
The Captain asked them: “And is this all? Is this your gift of welcome? Is this how you greet people?”

They replied: “This is all, our lord. This is what we have brought you.”

### *Cortes Frightens the Messengers*

Then the Captain gave orders, and the messengers were chained by the feet and by the neck. When this had been done, the great cannon was fired off. The messengers lost their senses and fainted away. They fell down side by side and lay where they had fallen. But the Spaniards quickly revived them: they lifted them up, gave them wine to drink and then offered them food.

The Captain said to them: “I have heard that the Mexicans are very great warriors, very brave and terrible. If a Mexican is fighting alone, he knows how to retreat, turn back, rush forward and conquer, even if his opponents are ten or even



*The Spaniards and Motecuhzoma's Messengers  
(Codex Florentino)*

*twenty-seven*

twenty. But my heart is not convinced. I want to see it for myself. I want to find out if you are truly that strong and brave."

Then he gave them swords, spears and leather shields. He said: "It will take place very early, at daybreak. We are going to fight each other in pairs, and in this way we will learn the truth. We will see who falls to the ground!"

They said to the Captain: "Our lord, we were not sent here for this by your deputy Motecuhzoma! We have come on an exclusive mission, to offer you rest and repose and to bring you presents. What the lord desires is not within our warrant. If we were to do this, it might anger Motecuhzoma, and he would surely put us to death."

The Captain replied: "No, it must take place. I want to see for myself, because even in Castile they say you are famous as brave warriors. Therefore, eat an early meal. I will eat too. Good cheer!"

With these words he sent them away from the ship. They were scarcely into their canoes when they began to paddle furiously. Some of them even paddled with their hands, so fierce was the anxiety burning in their souls. They said to each other: "My captains, paddle with all your might! Faster, faster! Nothing must happen to us here! Nothing must happen . . .!"

They arrived in great haste at Xicalanco, took a hurried meal there, and then pressed on until they came to Tecpantlayacac. From there they rushed ahead and arrived in Cuextlaxtlan. As on the previous journey, they stopped there to rest. When they were about to depart, the village official said to them: "Rest for at least a day! At least catch your breath!"

They said: "No, we must keep on! We must report to our king, Motecuhzoma. We will tell him what we have seen, and it is a terrifying thing. Nothing like it has ever been seen

before!" Then they left in great haste and continued to the City of Mexico. They entered the city at night, in the middle of the night.

### *Motecuhzoma Awaits Word from the Messengers*

While the messengers were away, Motecuhzoma could neither sleep nor eat, and no one could speak with him. He thought that everything he did was in vain, and he sighed almost every moment. He was lost in despair, in the deepest gloom and sorrow. Nothing could comfort him, nothing could calm him, nothing could give him any pleasure.

He said: "What will happen to us? Who will outlive it? Ah, in other times I was contented, but now I have death in my heart! My heart burns and suffers, as if it were drowned in spices . . .! But will our lord come here?"

Then he gave orders to the watchmen, to the men who guarded the palace: "Tell me, even if I am sleeping: 'The messengers have come back from the sea.'" But when they went to tell him, he immediately said: "They are not to report to me here. I will receive them in the House of the Serpent. Tell them to go there." And he gave this order: "Two captives are to be painted with chalk."

The messengers went to the House of the Serpent, and Motecuhzoma arrived. The two captives were then sacrificed before his eyes: their breasts were torn open, and the messengers were sprinkled with their blood. This was done because the messengers had completed a difficult mission: they had seen the gods, their eyes had looked on their faces. They had even conversed with the gods!

## *The Messengers' Report*

When the sacrifice was finished, the messengers reported to the king. They told him how they had made the journey, and what they had seen, and what food the strangers ate. Motecuhzoma was astonished and terrified by their report, and the description of the strangers' food astonished him above all else.

He was also terrified to learn how the cannon roared, how its noise resounded, how it caused one to faint and grow deaf. The messengers told him: "A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its entrails: it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire. The smoke that comes out with it has a pestilent odor, like that of rotten mud. This odor penetrates even to the brain and causes the greatest discomfort. If the cannon is aimed against a mountain, the mountain splits and cracks open. If it is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. This is a most unnatural sight, as if the tree had exploded from within."

The messengers also said: "Their trappings and arms are all made of iron. They dress in iron and wear iron casques on their heads. Their swords are iron; their bows are iron; their shields are iron; their spears are iron. Their deer carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go. These deer, our lord, are as tall as the roof of a house.

"The strangers' bodies are completely covered, so that only their faces can be seen. Their skin is white, as if it were made of lime. They have yellow hair, though some of them have black. Their beards are long and yellow, and their moustaches are also yellow. Their hair is curly, with very fine strands.

"As for their food, it is like human food. It is large and white, and not heavy. It is something like straw, but with the

taste of a cornstalk, of the pith of a cornstalk. It is a little sweet, as if it were flavored with honey; it tastes of honey, it is sweet-tasting food.

"Their dogs are enormous, with flat ears and long, dangling tongues. The color of their eyes is a burning yellow; their eyes flash fire and shoot off sparks. Their bellies are hollow, their flanks long and narrow. They are tireless and very powerful. They bound here and there, panting, with their tongues hanging out. And they are spotted like an ocelot."

When Motecuhzoma heard this report, he was filled with terror. It was as if his heart had fainted, as if it had shriveled. It was as if he were conquered by despair.

<sup>1</sup> The king's chief counselor was traditionally given this title, which was the name of an earth goddess with masculine as well as feminine attributes. The word *coatl*, "serpent," also means "twin."

<sup>2</sup> The suffix *-tzin* indicates high rank or influence.

<sup>3</sup> Official in charge of the colors with which the priests painted their bodies before performing certain rituals.

<sup>4</sup> Mitla, in the Oaxaca region.

<sup>5</sup> A tropical bird of Central America.

<sup>6</sup> Like a *petate* (rush mat), but with a finer weave.

<sup>7</sup> Green stones: jade and jadeite.

<sup>8</sup> Chief god of the pantheon, with solar attributes.

<sup>9</sup> God of the rain.

<sup>10</sup> God of the wind, a frequent guise of Quetzalcoatl.

<sup>11</sup> The Spaniards and the messengers could communicate because Cortes had brought with him La Malinche and Jeronimo de Aguilar. La Malinche was a native of the Gulf coast who spoke both Nahuatl and Mayan. She joined the Spaniards (who called her Dona Marina) of her own free will and served them faithfully as interpreter throughout the Conquest. Aguilar was a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked in Yucatan in 1511 during a voyage from Darien to Hispaniola. By the time Cortes ransomed him from the natives eight years later, he spoke Mayan fluently. La Malinche translated the Nahuatl of the messengers into Mayan for Aguilar, who then translated it into Spanish for the conquistadors.

<sup>12</sup> Indians of eastern Mexico.



## *Chapter Four*

# Motecuhzoma's Terror and Apathy

## *Introduction*

When Motecuhzoma heard the messengers' report, with its description of strange animals and other marvels, his thoughts were even more disturbed. Sahagun's informants tell us how he sent out his magicians and warlocks in the hope that they could harm the Spaniards with their magic, or at least prevent them from approaching Tenochtitlan. In his uncertainty about the nature of the strangers—he still thought they might be gods—he also sent out captives to be sacrificed in their presence. The informants give us a vivid account of the Spaniards' reactions to this rite.

The magicians failed completely in their attempts either to harm the Spaniards or to drive them away. The messengers reported

*thirty-two*

all this to Motecuhzoma in Tenochtitlan. Both he and his people lived through days of intense fear, because it was now certain that the "gods" intended to march on the Aztec capital. The informants offer what could almost be called a psychological portrait of Motecuhzoma as he struggled with his fears and uncertainties. Finally we see how the grand *tlatoani* (king) resigned himself and waited for the inevitable.

The texts in this chapter are from the *Codex Florentino*.

### *Motecuhzoma Sends Out Wizards and Magicians*

It was at this time that Motecuhzoma sent out a deputation. He sent out his most gifted men, his prophets and wizards, as many as he could gather. He also sent out his noblest and bravest warriors. They had to take their provisions with them on the journey: live hens<sup>1</sup> and hens' eggs and tortillas. They also took whatever the strangers might request, or whatever might please them.

Motecuhzoma also sent captives to be sacrificed, because the strangers might wish to drink their blood. The envoys sacrificed these captives in the presence of the strangers, but when the white men saw this done, they were filled with disgust and loathing. They spat on the ground, or wiped away their tears, or closed their eyes and shook their heads in abhorrence. They refused to eat the food that was sprinkled with blood, because it reeked of it; it sickened them, as if the blood had rotted.

Motecuhzoma ordered the sacrifice because he took the Spaniards to be gods; he believed in them and worshiped them as deities. That is why they were called "Gods who have come

from heaven." As for the Negroes,<sup>2</sup> they were called "soiled gods."

Then the strangers ate the tortillas, the eggs and the hens, and fruit of every variety: guavas, avocados, prickly pears and the many other kinds that grow here. There was food for the "deer" also: reed shoots and green grasses.

Motecuhzoma had sent the magicians to learn what sort of people the strangers might be, but they were also to see if they could work some charm against them, or do them some mischief. They might be able to direct a harmful wind against them, or cause them to break out in sores, or injure them in some way. Or they might be able to repeat some enchanted word, over and over, that would cause them to fall sick, or die, or return to their own land.

The magicians carried out their mission against the Spaniards, but they failed completely. They could not harm them in any way whatever.

### *Motecuhzoma Learns of the Magicians' Failure*

Therefore they hastened back to the city, to tell Motecuhzoma what the strangers were like and how invulnerable they were. They said to him: "Our lord, we are no match for them: we are mere nothings!" Motecuhzoma at once gave out orders: he commanded the officials and all the chiefs and captains, under the threat of death, to take the utmost pains to learn what the strangers needed and to provide it.

When the Spaniards left their ships and began to march here and were at last on the way, they were served and attended as they came and great honors were done them. They marched forward under protection, and everything possible was done to please them.

## *The Anxiety of Motecuhzoma and His People*

Motecuhzoma was distraught and bewildered; he was filled with terror, not knowing what would happen to the city. The people were also terrified, debating the news among themselves. There were meetings and arguments and gossip in the street; there was weeping and lamenting. The people were downcast: they went about with their heads bowed down and greeted each other with tears.

But there were some who attempted to encourage their neighbors, and the children were caressed and comforted by their fathers and mothers. The chiefs said to Motecuhzoma, to fortify his heart: "The strangers are accompanied by a woman from this land, who speaks our Nahuatl tongue. She is called La Malinche, and she is from Teticpac. They found her there on the coast. . . ."

It was also at this time that the Spaniards asked so many questions about Motecuhzoma. They asked the villagers: "Is he a young man, or mature, or in his old age? Is he still vigorous, or does he feel himself to be growing old? Is he an old man now, with white hair?" The villagers replied: "He is a mature man, slender rather than stout, or even thin. Or not thin but lean, with a fine straight figure."

### *Motecuhzoma Thinks of Fleeing*

When Motecuhzoma heard that they were inquiring about his person, and when he learned that the "gods" wished to see him face to face, his heart shrank within him and he was filled with anguish. He wanted to run away and hide; he thought of evading the "gods," of escaping to hide in a cave.

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He spoke of this to certain trusted counselors who were not faint-hearted, whose hearts were still firm and resolute. They said: "There is the Place of the Dead, the House of the Sun, the Land of Tlaloc, or the Temple of Cintli.<sup>3</sup> You should go to one or another, to whichever you prefer." Motecuhzoma knew what he desired: to go to the Temple of Cintli. And his desire was made known; it was revealed to the people.

But he could not do it. He could not run away, could not go into hiding. He had lost his strength and his spirit, and could do nothing. The magicians' words had overwhelmed his heart; they had vanquished his heart and thrown him into confusion, so that now he was weak and listless and too uncertain to make a decision.

Therefore he did nothing but wait. He did nothing but resign himself and wait for them to come. He mastered his heart at last, and waited for whatever was to happen.

<sup>1</sup> Small native fowl, which the Spaniards called "chickens of the land,"—that is, of Mexico. There were no true domesticated chickens in America until they were introduced from Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Who attended the Spaniards.

<sup>3</sup> Corn goddess.



## *Chapter Five*

# The Spaniards March on Tlaxcala and Cholula

### *Introduction*

Despite the efforts of Motecuhzoma's envoys to keep the Spaniards from approaching Tenochtitlan, Cortes decided to march inland. The two indigenous accounts presented in this chapter—the first by Sahagun's informants, the second by the mestizo Munoz Camargo—describe the arrival of the Spaniards in Tlaxcala and Cholula. The account by the informants mentions the first battle between Spaniards and Indians (a group of Otomi Indians from Tecoac), after which the Tlaxcaltecas decided to receive the strangers in peace. As soon as the Spaniards arrived, the Tlaxcaltecas began to intrigue against nearby Cholula and the Aztecs.

There are two separate versions of what led the Spaniards to massacre the Indians in Cholula. According to Sahagun's inform-

*thirty-seven*

ants, the massacre was inspired by the intrigues of the Tlaxcaltecas, whose "souls burned with hatred for the people of Cholula." According to Munoz Camargo, the Cholultecas brought their own destruction on themselves by not surrendering to Cortes and by treacherously murdering the envoy from Tlaxcala, Patlahuatzin, who advised them to form an alliance with the Spaniards. This second version may have been invented by the Tlaxcaltecas to excuse their part in the massacre; at least, there is no corroboration for it in either the *Historia* of Bernal Diaz del Castillo or the *Cartas de relacion* of Cortes.

### *The Spaniards March Inland*

(From the *Codex Florentino* by Sahagun's informants)

At last they came. At last they began to march toward us.

A man from Cempoala, who was known as the Tlacoche-calcatl [Chief of the House of Arrows], was the first official to welcome them as they entered our lands and cities. This man spoke Nahuatl. He showed them the best routes and the shortest ways; he guided and advised them, traveling at the head of the party.

When they came to Tecoac, in the land of the Tlaxcaltecas, they found it was inhabited by Otomies.<sup>1</sup> The Otomies came out to meet them in battle array; they greeted the strangers with their shields.

But the strangers conquered the Otomies of Tecoac; they utterly destroyed them. They divided their ranks, fired the cannons at them, attacked them with their swords and shot them with their crossbows. Not just a few, but all of them, perished in the battle.

And when Tecoac had been defeated, the Tlaxcaltecas

*thirty-eight*

soon heard the news; they learned what had taken place there. They felt premonitions of death: terror overwhelmed them, and they were filled with foreboding.

Therefore the chiefs assembled; the captains met together in a council. They talked about what had happened, and said: "What shall we do? Shall we go out to meet them? The Otomi is a brave warrior, but he was helpless against them: they scorned him as a mere nothing! They destroyed the poor *macehual* with a look, with a glance of their eyes! We should go over to their side: we should make friends with them and be their allies. If not, they will destroy us too. . . ."

### *The Arrival at Tlaxcala*

Therefore the lords of Tlaxcala went out to meet them, bringing many things to eat: hens and hens' eggs and the finest tortillas. They said to the strangers: "Our lords, you are weary."

The strangers replied: "Where do you live? Where are you from?"

They said: "We are from Tlaxcala. You have come here, you have entered our land. We are from Tlaxcala; our city is the City of the Eagle, Tlaxcala." (For in ancient times it was called Texcala, and its people were known as Texcaltecas.<sup>2</sup>)

Then they guided them to the city; they brought them there and invited them to enter. They paid them great honors, attended to their every want, joined with them as allies and even gave them their daughters.

The Spaniards asked: "Where is the City of Mexico? Is it far from here?"

*thirty-nine*

They said: "No, it is not far, it is only a three-day march. And it is a great city. The Aztecs are very brave. They are great warriors and conquerors and have defeated their neighbors on every side."

### *Intrigues Against Cholula*

At this time the Tlaxcaltecas were enemies of Cholula. They feared the Cholultecas; they envied and cursed them; their souls burned with hatred for the people of Cholula. This is why they brought certain rumors to Cortes, so that he would destroy them. They said to him: "Cholula is our enemy. It is an evil city. The people are as brave as the Aztecs and they are the Aztecs' friends."

When the Spaniards heard this, they marched against Cholula. They were guided and accompanied by the Tlaxcaltecas and the chiefs from Cempoala, and they all marched in battle array.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Massacre at Cholula*

When they arrived, the Tlaxcaltecas and the men of Cholula called to each other and shouted greetings. An assembly was held in the courtyard of the god, but when they had all gathered together, the entrances were closed, so that there was no way of escaping.

Then the sudden slaughter began: knife strokes, and sword strokes, and death. The people of Cholula had not fore-

forty

seen it, had not suspected it. They faced the Spaniards without weapons, without their swords or their shields. The cause of the slaughter was treachery. They died blindly, without knowing why, because of the lies of the Tlaxcaltecas.

And when this had taken place, word of it was brought to Motecuhzoma. The messengers came and departed, journeying back and forth between Tenochtitlan and Cholula. The common people were terrified by the news; they could do nothing but tremble with fright. It was as if the earth trembled beneath them, or as if the world were spinning before their eyes, as it spins during a fit of vertigo. . . .

When the massacre at Cholula was complete, the strangers set out again toward the City of Mexico. They came in battle array, as conquerors, and the dust rose in whirlwinds on the roads. Their spears glinted in the sun, and their pennons fluttered like bats. They made a loud clamor as they marched, for their coats of mail and their weapons clashed and rattled. Some of them were dressed in glistening iron from head to foot; they terrified everyone who saw them.

Their dogs came with them, running ahead of the column. They raised their muzzles high; they lifted their muzzles to the wind. They raced on before with saliva dripping from their jaws.

### *Negotiations Before the Battle*

(From the *Historia de Tlaxcala* by Diego Munoz Camargo)

From this time forward, the Spaniards had no other purpose than to raise soldiers against the Culhuas Mexicanos.<sup>4</sup> They

*forty-one*



Cholollá

*The Massacre at Cholula (Lienzo de Tlaxcala)*

forty-two

did this within a very short time, so as to give them no opportunity to form an alliance with the Tlaxcaltecas. And to avoid bad thoughts, as well as other new incidents and proposals, Cortes saw to it that his new friends and confederates did not leave his side, using his wits as always, as an astute leader, to take advantage of a favorable situation.

When the ranks were formed, the Spanish troops and the Tlaxcaltecas marched out in good military order, with enough supplies for their great undertaking and with many important and famous captains, all skilled in warfare according to their ancient customs and practices. These captains were Piltecuhtli, Acxoxecatli, Tecpanecatli, Cahuecahua, Cocomitecuhtli, Quauhtotohua, Textlipitl and many others; but because they were so many, with such a variety of names, the others are not set down here, only the most outstanding, who were always loyal to Cortes until the end of his conquest.

The first invasion took place at Cholula, which was governed and ruled by two lords, Tlaquiach and Tlalchiac (for the lords who succeeded to that command were always known by those names, which mean "Lord of what is above" and "Lord of what is below").

Once they entered the province of Cholula, the Spaniards quickly destroyed that city because of the great provocations given by its inhabitants. So many Cholultecas were killed in this invasion that the news raced through the land as far as the City of Mexico. There it caused the most horrible fright and consternation, for it was also known that the Tlaxcaltecas had allied themselves with the "gods" (as the Spaniards were called in all parts of this New World, for want of another name).

The Cholultecas had placed such confidence in their idol Quetzalcoatli that they believed no human power could defeat or harm them. They thought they would be able to vanquish us

*forty-three*

in a very short time—first, because the Spaniards were so few, and second, because the Tlaxcaltecas had brought them against Cholula by deceit. Their faith in the idol was so complete that they believed it would ravage their enemies with the fire and thunder of heaven, and drown them in a vast flood of water.

This is what they believed, and they proclaimed it in loud voices: "Let the strangers come! We will see if they are so powerful! Our god Quetzalcoatl is here with us, and they can never defeat him. Let them come, the weaklings: we are waiting to see them, and we laugh at their stupid delusions. They are fools or madmen if they trust in these sodomites from Tlaxcala, who are nothing but their women. And let the hirelings come, too: they have sold themselves in their terror. Look at the scum of Tlaxcala, the cowards of Tlaxcala, the guilty ones! They were conquered by the City of Mexico, and now they bring strangers to defend them! How could you change so soon? How could you put yourselves into the hands of these foreign savages? Oh, you frightened beggars, you have lost the immortal glory that was won by your heroes, who sprang from the pure blood of the ancient Teochichimecas, the founders of your nation. What will become of you, you traitors? We are waiting, and you will see how our god Quetzalcoatl punishes his foes!"

They shouted these and other similar insults, because they believed that the enemy would surely be consumed by bolts of fire which would fall from heaven, and that great rivers of water would pour from the temples of their idols to drown both the Tlaxcaltecas and the Spanish soldiers. This caused the Tlaxcaltecas no little fear and concern, for they believed that all would happen as the Cholultecas predicted, and the priests of the temple of Quetzalcoatl proclaimed it at the top of their voices.

But when the Tlaxcaltecas heard the Spaniards call out to St. James, and saw them burn the temples and hurl the idols to the ground, profaning them with great zeal and determination, and when they also saw that the idols were powerless, that no flames fell and no rivers poured out—then they understood the deception and knew it was all falsehoods and lies.

Thus encouraged, they grew so brave that the slaughter and havoc increased beyond imagining. Our friends also became well aware of the Spaniards' courage; they never again plotted any crimes, but were guided by the divine order, which was to serve Our Lord by conquering this land and rescuing it from the power of the devil.

Before the battle began, the city of Tlaxcala sent messengers and ambassadors to Cholula to ask for peace and to say that they were marching not against the Cholultecas but against the Culhuas, or Culhuacanenses Mexicanos. (They were called Culhuas, it is said, because they had come from the region of Culhuacan in the West; and Mexicanos, because the city which they founded and made supreme was called Mexico.) The envoys told the Cholultecas that they were marching under the command of Cortes and that they came desiring peace. They said that the people of Cholula should fear no harm from the bearded strangers, for these were a very great and noble people who only sought their friendship. Thus they begged the Cholultecas as friends to receive the strangers in peace, because they would be well used by them and suffer no ill treatment, but they also warned them not to anger the white men, for they were a very warlike, daring and valiant people, who carried superior weapons made of white metal. They said this because there was no iron among the natives, only copper.

They also said that the strangers brought arms which could shoot fire, and wild animals on leashes; that they were

dressed and shod in iron, and had powerful crossbows, and lions and ounces so ferocious that they ate people (meaning the fierce greyhounds and mastiffs which the Spaniards had brought with them); and that against this might the Spaniards could not prevail, or even defend themselves, if they angered the "gods" and did not surrender peacefully, as they should do to avoid greater harm. And they counseled them as friends to act in this manner.

### *Death of the Envoy from Tlaxcala*

But the Cholultecas paid no attention to these words, preferring to die rather than surrender. Rejecting the good counsel of the Tlaxcaltecas, they flayed the face of Patlahuatzin, the ambassador, a man of great repute and valor. They did the same to his arms, which they flayed to the elbows, and they cut his hands at the wrists so that they dangled. In this cruel fashion they sent him away, saying: "Go back, and tell the Tlaxcaltecas and those other beggars, or gods, or whatever they are, that this is how we invite them to come. This is the answer we send them."

The ambassador returned in great agony, victim of an outrage that caused much horror and grief in the republic, because he was one of the worthiest and most handsome men of this land. He died in the service of his homeland and republic, where his fame is eternal among his people, who keep his memory alive in their songs and sayings.

The Tlaxcaltecas were enraged at this inhuman treatment of Patlahuatzin. They took such unthinkable cruelty as a great affront, since all ambassadors were traditionally respected and honored by foreign kings and lords, to whom they reported

the treaties, wars and other events that took place in these provinces and kingdoms. Therefore they said to Cortes: "Most valiant lord, we wish to accompany you, in order to seek vengeance against Cholula for its insolent wickedness, and to conquer and destroy that city and its province. A people so obstinate and vicious, so evil and tyrannous, should not remain alive. And if there were no other cause than this, they would deserve eternal punishment, for they have not thanked us for our good counsel, but have scorned and despised us because of our love for you."

The valiant Cortes answered them with a stern face: "Have no fear. I promise you revenge." And he kept this promise, waging a cruel war in which vast multitudes were slaughtered, as is recorded in the chronicles.

The Cholultecas said that their foes would all be drowned by their idol Quetzalcoatl. This was the most venerated idol among the many that were worshipped in this land, and its temple at Cholula was considered a shrine of the gods. They said that when the crust was scraped from a portion of the limed surface of the temple, water gushed out. To save themselves from drowning, they sacrificed children of two or three years of age and mixed their blood with lime to make a kind of cement with which to stop up the springs and founts. They said that if they were ever in danger during a war with the white gods and the Tlaxcaltecas, they would break open all the mortared surfaces, from which a flood of water would pour forth to drown their enemies. And when they saw how hard pressed they were, they set to work.

### *The Destruction of Cholula*

But none of their expectations was fulfilled, and they lost all hope. Of those who died in the battle of Cholula, the greater

*forty-seven*

number hurled themselves from the temple pyramid in their despair and they also hurled the idol of Quetzalcoatl headfirst from the pyramid, for this form of suicide had always been a custom among them. They were as rebellious and contemptuous as any stiff-necked, ungovernable people, and it was their custom to die in a manner contrary to that of other nations—that is, to die headlong. In the end, the greater part of them died in despair, by killing themselves.

When the battle of Cholula was finished, the Cholultecas understood and believed that the God of the white men, who were His most powerful sons, was more potent than their own. Our friends the Tlaxcaltecas, seeing themselves in the very thick of that battle and massacre, called upon St. James the Apostle, shouting his name in loud voices: "Santiago!" And from that day to this, when they are in some difficulty or danger, the Tlaxcaltecas invoke the saint.

They made use of a very good counsel given them by Cortes, so that they could be distinguished and would not die among the enemy by mistake. Since their weapons and emblems and those of the enemy were almost the same, with only the slightest differences, and since there was such a great multitude of people on both sides, some means of identification was a necessity. Otherwise, in the press of battle, they would have killed their own warriors without knowing it. Therefore they wore plaited garlands of feather-grass on their heads, in order to recognize each other; and the counsel proved to be of considerable value.

When Cholula had been stormed and destroyed, and a great host of people killed and plundered, our armies marched forward again, causing terror wherever they went, until the news of the destruction spread through the whole land. The people were astonished to hear such strange reports, and to

learn how the Cholultecas were defeated and slain in so short a time, and how their idol Quetzalcoatl had not served them in any way.

<sup>1</sup> One of the tribes that had settled in the Valley of Mexico (and elsewhere) long before the arrival of the Aztecs.

<sup>2</sup> Texcala: "Where there are many rocks." The Aztecs explained the origin of the word Tlaxcala in this way, but to the Tlaxcaltecas it means "where there are corn tortillas."

<sup>3</sup> This was customary and therefore roused no suspicion among the Cholultecas.

<sup>4</sup> The Aztecs. (The term is explained later in the text.)





## *Chapter Six*

# The Gifts of Gold: The God Tezcatlipoca Appears

## *Introduction*

After the destruction of Cholula, the Spaniards continued to march toward the Valley of Mexico, accompanied by their allies from Tlaxcala. The texts by Sahagun's informants, from which the passages in this chapter are taken, describe two incidents of particular interest.

When the army was among the volcanoes, in what the Indians called the Eagle Pass, it was met by new envoys from Motecuhzoma, headed by Tzihuacpopocatzin. The envoys presented many objects of gold to the strangers, and then observed their reactions

*fifty*

to the gifts: "The Spaniards burst into smiles. . . . They hungered like pigs for that gold. . . ."

Second, the texts report the deceit of Tzihuacpopocatzin, who attempted—apparently on Motecuhzoma's orders—to pass himself off as Motecuhzoma. This effort failed, and another series of envoys was sent out—magicians again—in the hope of stopping the conquistadors. But the wizards retired before the mysterious presence of a pretended drunkard, who foretold the ruin of Mexico and showed them portents. They thought the god Tezcatlipoca had appeared to them, and they hurried back to Tenochtitlan to tell Motecuhzoma. The great Aztec *tlatoani* was even more depressed than before and waited fatalistically for what was to come.

### *The Spaniards See the Objects of Gold*

Then Motecuhzoma dispatched various chiefs. Tzihuacpopocatzin was at their head, and he took with him a great many of his representatives. They went out to meet the Spaniards in the vicinity of Popocatepetl and Iztactepetl, there in the Eagle Pass.

They gave the "gods" ensigns of gold, and ensigns of quetzal feathers, and golden necklaces. And when they were given these presents, the Spaniards burst into smiles; their eyes shone with pleasure; they were delighted by them. They picked up the gold and fingered it like monkeys; they seemed to be transported by joy, as if their hearts were illumined and made new.

The truth is that they longed and lusted for gold. Their bodies swelled with greed, and their hunger was ravenous; they hungered like pigs for that gold. They snatched at the golden ensigns, waved them from side to side and examined every inch

of them. They were like one who speaks a barbarous tongue:  
everything they said was in a barbarous tongue.

### *Tzihuacpopocatzin Pretends to Be Motecuhzoma*

When they saw Tzihuacpopocatzin, they asked: "Is this Motecuhzoma, by any chance?" They asked this of their allies, the liars from Tlaxcala and Cempoala, their shrewd and deceitful confederates.

They replied: "He is not Motecuhzoma, our lords. He is his envoy Tzihuacpopocatzin."

The Spaniards asked him: "Are you Motecuhzoma, by any chance?"

"Yes," he said, "I am your servant. I am Motecuhzoma."

But the allies said: "You fool! Why try to deceive us? Who do you think we are?" And they said:

"You cannot deceive us; you cannot make fools of us.  
You cannot frighten us; you cannot blind our eyes.  
You cannot stare us down; we will not look away.  
You cannot bewitch our eyes or turn them aside.  
You cannot dim our eyes or make them swoon.  
You cannot fill them with dust or shut them with slime.

"You are not Motecuhzoma: he is there in his city.  
He cannot hide from us. Where can he go?  
Can he fly away like a bird? Can he tunnel the earth?  
Can he burrow into a mountain, to hide inside it?  
We are coming to see him, to meet him face to face.  
We are coming to hear his words from his own lips."

They taunted and threatened the envoys in this fashion, and the gifts of welcome and the greetings were another failure. Therefore the envoys hastened back to the city.

### *The Apparition of Tezcatlipoca*

But then there was another series of envoys: magicians, wizards and priests. They also left the city and went out to meet the strangers, but they were completely helpless: they could not blind their eyes or overcome them in any way.

They even failed to meet and speak with the "gods," because a certain drunkard blundered across their path. He used the gestures that are used by the people of Chalco, and he was dressed like a Chalca, with eight cords of couch-grass across his breast. He seemed to be very drunk; he feigned drunkenness; he pretended to be a drunkard.

He came up to them while they were about to meet the Spaniards. He rushed up to the Mexicanos and cried: "Why have you come here? For what purpose? What is it you want? What is Motecuhzoma trying to do? Has he still not recovered his wits? Does he still tremble and beg? He has committed many errors and destroyed a multitude of people. Some have been beaten and others wrapped in shrouds; some have been betrayed and others mocked and derided."

When the magicians heard these words, they tried in vain to approach him. They wanted to ask his help, and they hurriedly built him a small temple and altar and a seat made of couch-grass. But for a while they could not see him.

They labored in vain, they prepared his temple in vain, for he spoke to them only in oracles. He terrified them with his

*fifty-three*

harsh reproofs and spoke to them as if from a great distance: "Why have you come here? It is useless. Mexico will be destroyed! Mexico will be left in ruins!" He said: "Go back, go back! Turn your eyes toward the city. What was fated to happen has already taken place!"

They looked in the direction of Tenochtitlan. The temples were in flames, and so were the communal halls, the religious schools and all the houses. It was as if a great battle were raging in the city.

When the magicians saw this, they lost heart. They could not speak clearly, but talked as if they were drunk: "It was not proper for us to have seen this vision. Motecuhzoma himself should have beheld it! This was not a mere mortal. This was the young Tezcatlipoca!"

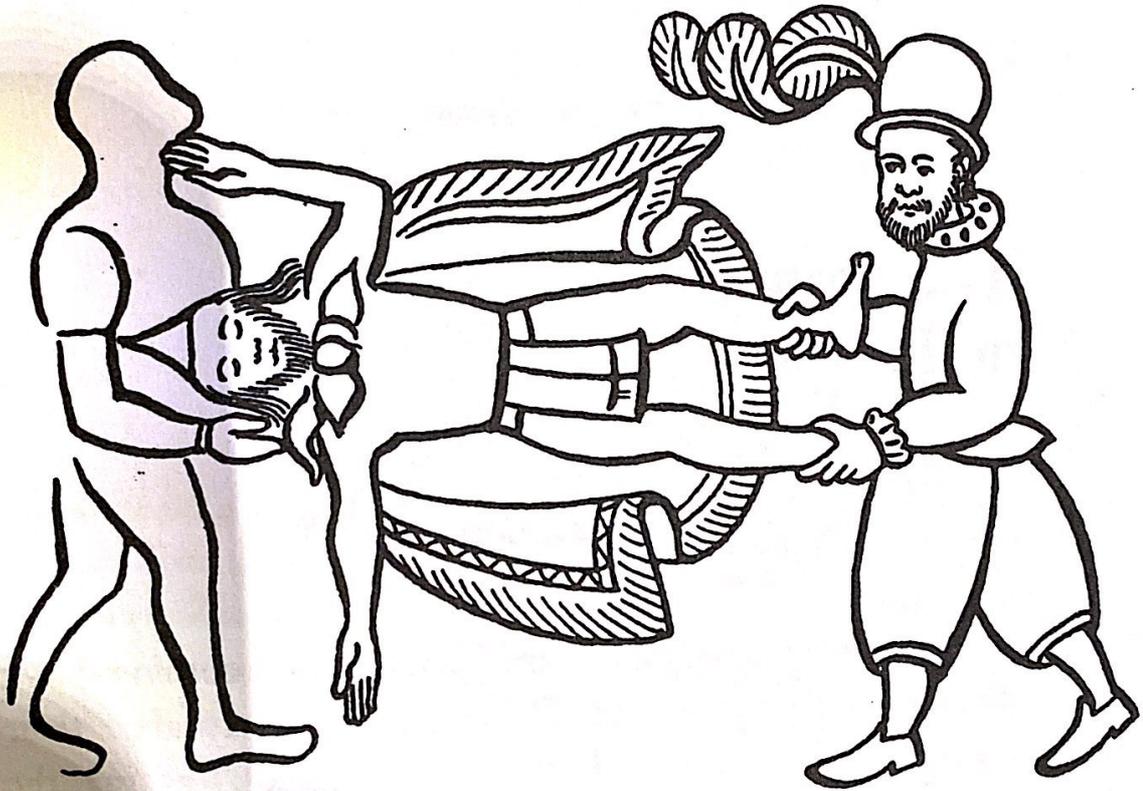
Suddenly the god disappeared, and they saw him no longer. The envoys did not go forward to meet the Spaniards; they did not speak with them. The priests and magicians turned and went back to report to Motecuhzoma.

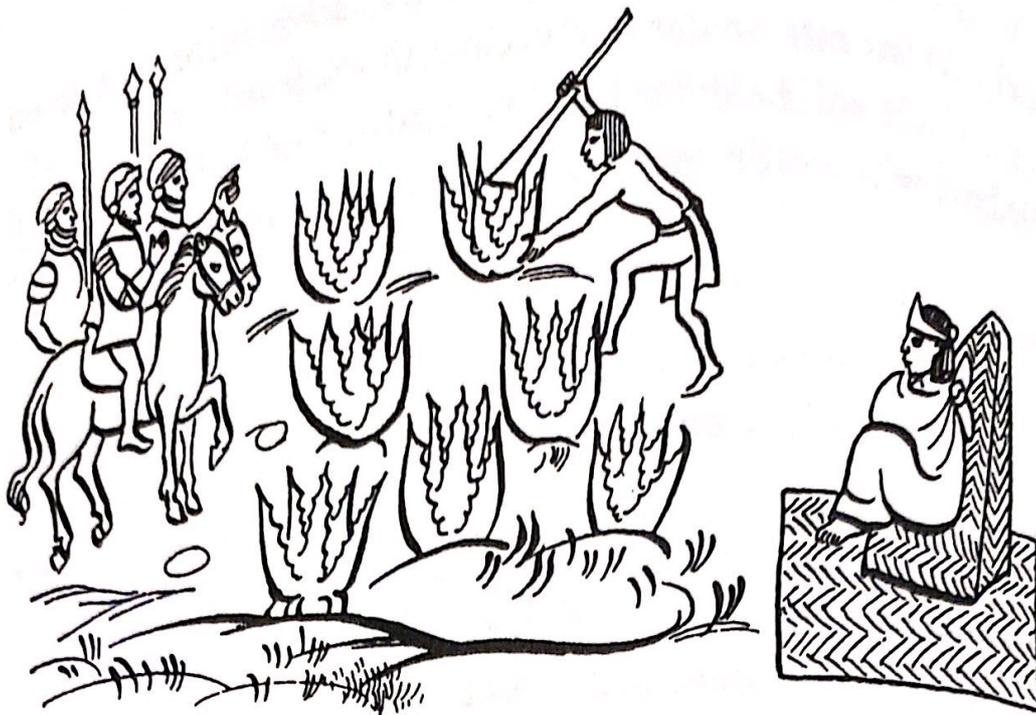
### *Motecuhzoma's Despair*

When the envoys arrived in the city, they told Motecuhzoma what had happened and what they had seen. Motecuhzoma listened to their report and then bowed his head without speaking a word. For a long time he remained thus, with his head bent down. And when he spoke at last, it was only to say: "What help is there now, my friends? Is there a mountain for us to climb? Should we run away? We are Mexicanos: would this bring any glory to the Mexican nation?"

"Pity the old men, and the old women, and the innocent

little children. How can they save themselves? But there is no help. What can we do? Is there nothing left us?  
“We will be judged and punished. And however it may be, and whenever it may be, we can do nothing but wait.”





## *Chapter Seven*

# The Spaniards Are Welcomed in Tezcoco

### *Introduction*

The Spaniards pushed on toward Tenochtitlan, coming down out of the mountains by way of Tlalmanalco. Shortly after their descent, Prince Ixtlilxochitl of Tezcoco (brother of Cacama, the lord of Tezcoco) left his city with a group of followers to greet Cortes in peace.

The *Codex Ramirez* preserves a few fragments in Spanish of an older, indigenous account of this episode, of which the Nahuatl original has been lost. According to this account, it was Prince Ixtlilxochitl who persuaded the people of Tezcoco, resentful of Aztec domination, to join forces with the conquistadors. The same

*fifty-six*

account states that Cortes then visited the city of Tezcoco, but this statement is not corroborated in any other source. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, Sahagun's informants and Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl do not mention such a visit; they say only that the Spaniards marched to Ixtapalapa and from there to the Aztec capital.

The *Codex Ramirez* contains several anecdotes of interest and importance, especially the reaction of Yacotzin, the prince's mother, when her son asked her to change her religion. It also describes how Motecuhzoma responded to the news that the Spaniards were approaching Tezcoco. He ordered a last meeting of his chiefs, to discuss whether the strangers should be welcomed or repulsed when they arrived at Tenochtitlan. Despite Cuitlahuac's gloomy predictions, he finally decided to receive them in peace.

### *The March to Tezcoco*

When the Spaniards looked down from the mountain heights, they were delighted to see so many villages and towns. Some suggested that they should return to Tlaxcala until they could increase their forces, but Cortes urged them on, and the march to Tezcoco was begun.

They spent that night in the mountains and set out again the next day. After they had marched a few miles, they were met by Ixtlilxochitl and his brothers with a large company of followers. Cortes distrusted them at first; but when he learned, through signs and translations, that they had come out to meet the Spaniards as friends, he was greatly pleased. The Christians pointed to their Captain, and Ixtlilxochitl approached him and greeted him with smiles and obeisances, to which Cortes responded in the Spanish fashion. The prince was astonished to see a man with such white skin and with a beard and with so

much courage and majesty, while Cortes, in turn, was astonished by the prince and his brothers—especially by Tecocoltzin, who was as white as any of the Spaniards.

At last, with La Malinche and Aguilar as interpreters, Ixtlilxochitl begged Cortes to accompany him to Tezcoco, so that he and his people might serve him. Cortes thanked the prince and accepted his invitation.

### *The Arrival at the City*

At the request of Ixtlilxochitl, Cortes and his men ate the gifts of food that had been brought out from Tezcoco. Then they walked to the city with their new friends, and all the people came out to cheer and welcome them. The Indians knelt down and adored them as sons of the Sun, their gods, believing that the time had come of which their dear king Nezahualpilli<sup>1</sup> had so often spoken. The Spaniards entered the city and were lodged in the royal palace.

Word of these events was brought to the king, Motecuhzoma, who was pleased by the reception his nephews had given Cortes. He was also pleased by what Coahuamacotzin and Ixtlilxochitl had said to the Captain, because he believed that Ixtlilxochitl would call in the garrisons stationed on the frontiers. But God ordered it otherwise.

Cortes was very grateful for the attentions shown him by Ixtlilxochitl and his brothers; he wished to repay their kindness by teaching them the law of God, with the help of his interpreter Aguilar. The brothers and a number of the other lords gathered to hear him, and he told them that the emperor of the Christians had sent him here, so far away, in order that

he might instruct them in the law of Christ. He explained the mystery of the Creation and the Fall, the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation and the mystery of the Resurrection. Then he drew out a crucifix and held it up. The Christians all knelt, and Ixtlilxochitl and the other lords knelt with them.

Cortes also explained the mystery of Baptism. He concluded the lesson by telling them how the Emperor Charles grieved that they were not in God's grace, and how the emperor had sent him among them only to save their souls. He begged them to become willing vassals of the emperor, because that was the will of the pope, in whose name he spoke.

### *Ixtlilxochitl Becomes a Christian*

When Cortes asked for their reply, Ixtlilxochitl burst into tears and answered that he and his brothers understood the mysteries very well. Giving thanks to God that his soul had been illumined, he said that he wished to become a Christian and to serve the emperor. He begged for the crucifix, so that he and his brothers might worship it, and the Spaniards wept with joy to see their devotion.

The princes then asked to be baptized. Cortes and the priest accompanying him said that first they must learn more of the Christian religion, but that persons would be sent to instruct them. Ixtlilxochitl expressed his gratitude, but begged to receive the sacrament at once because he now hated all idolatry and revered the mysteries of the true faith.

Although a few of the Spaniards objected, Cortes decided that Ixtlilxochitl should be baptized immediately. Cortes him-

self served as godfather, and the prince was given the name Hernando, because that was his sponsor's name. His brother Cohuamacotzin was named Pedro because his godfather was Pedro de Alvarado, and Tecocoltzin was named Fernando, with Cortes sponsoring him also. The other Christians became godfathers to the other princes, and the baptisms were performed with the greatest solemnity. If it had been possible, more than twenty thousand persons would have been baptized that very day, and a great number of them did receive the sacrament.

### *The Reactions of Yacotzin*

Ixtlilxochitl went to his mother, Yacotzin, to tell her what had happened and to bring her out to be baptized. She replied that he must have lost his mind to let himself be won over so easily by that handful of barbarians, the conquistadors. Don Hernando said that if she were not his mother, he would answer her by cutting off her head. He told her that she would receive the sacrament, even against her will, because nothing was important except the life of the soul.

Yacotzin asked her son to leave her alone for the time being. She said she would think about what he had told her and make her decision the next day. He left the palace and ordered her rooms to be set on fire (though others say that he found her in a temple of idolatry).

Finally she came out, saying that she wanted to become a Christian. She went to Cortes and was baptized with a great many others. Cortes himself was her godfather, naming her Dona Maria because she was the first woman in Tezcoco to

become a Christian. Her four daughters, the princesses, were also baptized, along with many other women. And during the three or four days they were in the city, the Spaniards baptized a great multitude of people.

### *Motecuhzoma's Final Decision*

When Motecuhzoma learned what had happened in Tezucoco, he called together his nephew Cacama, his brother Cuitlahuac and the other lords. He proposed a long discussion in order to decide whether they should welcome the Christians when they arrived, and if so, in what manner. Cuitlahuac replied that they should not welcome them in any manner, but Cacama disagreed, saying that it would show a want of courage to deny them entrance once they were at the gates. He added that it was not proper for a great lord like his uncle to turn away the ambassadors of another great prince. If the visitors made any demands which displeased Motecuhzoma, he could punish their insolence by sending his hosts of brave warriors against them.

Before any one else could speak, Motecuhzoma announced that he agreed with his nephew. Cuitlahuac warned him: "I pray to our gods that you will not let the strangers into your house. They will cast you out of it and overthrow your rule, and when you try to recover what you have lost, it will be too late." With this the council came to an end. The other lords all showed by their gestures that they approved of this last opinion, but Motecuhzoma was resolved to welcome the Christians as friends. He told his nephew Cacama to go out to meet them and sent his brother Cuitlahuac to wait for them in the palace at Ixtapalapa.

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 2, note 4.



## *Chapter Eight*

# The Spaniards Arrive in Tenochtitlan

## *Introduction*

The Spaniards continued their march toward the Aztec capital, accompanied by all the allies they had brought with them from the Tlaxcala region. The account given in the texts by Sahagun's informants, from which the passages in this chapter are drawn, begins with a description of the order in which the various sections of the army made their appearance. They approached the island city from the south, by way of Ixtapalapa, and arrived in Xoloco (later called San Anton and now part of the Avenue of San Antonio Abad) on November 8, 1519. The precise date is recorded in the *XIII relacion* of Fernando de Alva Ixtilxochitl.

*sixty-two*

When Cortes and Motecuhzoma finally met at Huitzillan, on the same avenue, they greeted each other in speeches that have been carefully preserved by Sahagun's informants. The texts then describe the stay of the conquistadors in Tenochtitlan and their greed for the gold objects stored in the treasure houses.

### *Motecuhzoma Goes Out to Meet Cortes*

The Spaniards arrived in Xoloco, near the entrance to Tenochtitlan. That was the end of the march, for they had reached their goal.

Motecuhzoma now arrayed himself in his finery, preparing to go out to meet them. The other great princes also adorned their persons, as did the nobles and their chieftains and knights. They all went out together to meet the strangers.

They brought trays heaped with the finest flowers—the flower that resembles a shield; the flower shaped like a heart; in the center, the flower with the sweetest aroma; and the fragrant yellow flower, the most precious of all. They also brought garlands of flowers, and ornaments for the breast, and necklaces of gold, necklaces hung with rich stones, necklaces fashioned in the petatillo style.

Thus Motecuhzoma went out to meet them, there in Huitzillan. He presented many gifts to the Captain and his commanders, those who had come to make war. He showered gifts upon them and hung flowers around their necks; he gave them necklaces of flowers and bands of flowers to adorn their breasts; he set garlands of flowers upon their heads. Then he hung the gold necklaces around their necks and gave them presents of every sort as gifts of welcome.

*sixty-three*

## *Speeches of Motecuhzoma and Cortes*

When Motecuhzoma had given necklaces to each one, Cortes asked him: "Are you Motecuhzoma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Motecuhzoma?"

And the king said: "Yes, I am Motecuhzoma." Then he stood up to welcome Cortes; he came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him in these words: "Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy.

"The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming. The kings Itzcoatl, Motecuhzoma the Elder, Axayacatl, Tizoc and Ahuitzol ruled for you in the City of Mexico. The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields.

"Do the kings know the destiny of those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see!

"No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams. . . . I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

"This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords!"

When Motecuhzoma had finished, La Malinche translated his address into Spanish so that the Captain could understand it. Cortes replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first

to La Malinche: "Tell Motecuhzoma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear. We have wanted to see him for a long time, and now we have seen his face and heard his words. Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented."

Then he said to Motecuhzoma: "We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear."

La Malinche translated this speech and the Spaniards grasped Motecuhzoma's hands and patted his back to show their affection for him.

### *Attitudes of the Spaniards and the Native Lords*

The Spaniards examined everything they saw. They dismounted from their horses, and mounted them again, and dismounted again, so as not to miss anything of interest.

The chiefs who accompanied Motecuhzoma were: Cacama, king of Tezcoco; Tetelepanquetzaltzin, king of Tlaco-pan; Itzcuahtzin the Tlacochealcatl, lord of Tlatelolco; and Topantemoc, Motecuhzoma's treasurer in Tlatelolco. These four chiefs were standing in a file.

The other princes were: Atlixcatzin [chief who has taken captives]<sup>1</sup>; Tepeoatzin, The Tlacochealcatl; Quetzalatzin, the keeper of the chalk; Totomotzin; Hecateupatiltzin; and Cuappiatzin.

When Motecuhzoma was imprisoned, they all went into hiding. They ran away to hide and treacherously abandoned him!

### *The Spaniards Take Possession of the City*

When the Spaniards entered the Royal House, they placed Motecuhzoma under guard and kept him under their

vigilance. They also placed a guard over Itzcuauhtzin, but the other lords were permitted to depart.

Then the Spaniards fired one of their cannons, and this caused great confusion in the city. The people scattered in every direction; they fled without rhyme or reason; they ran off as if they were being pursued. It was as if they had eaten the mushrooms that confuse the mind, or had seen some dreadful apparition. They were all overcome by terror, as if their hearts had fainted. And when night fell, the panic spread through the city and their fears would not let them sleep.

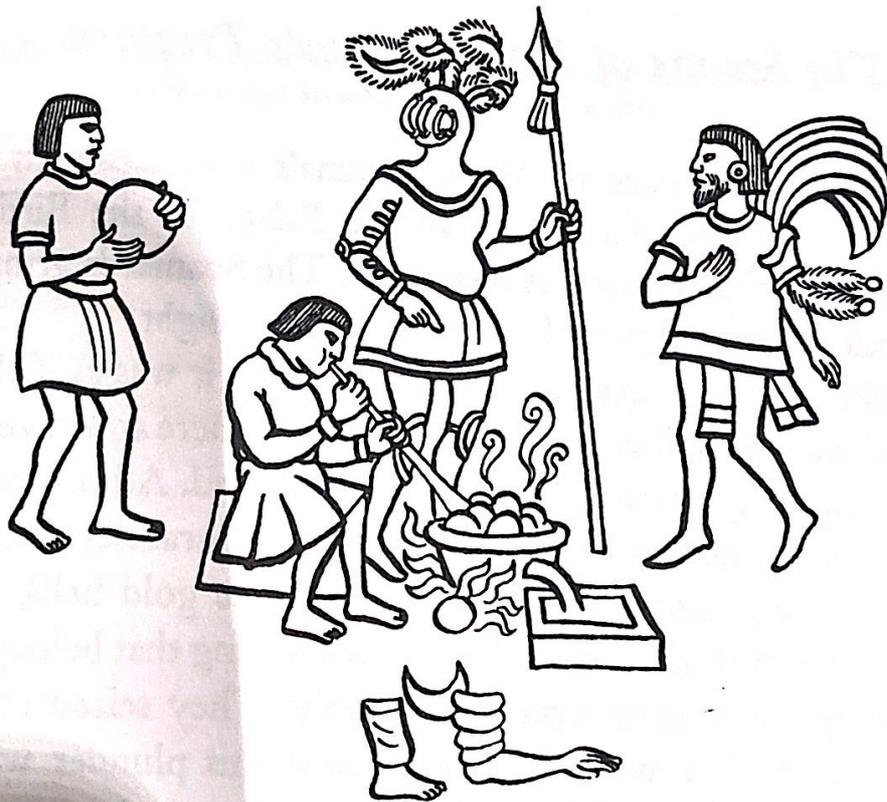
In the morning the Spaniards told Motecuhzoma what they needed in the way of supplies: tortillas, fried chickens, hens' eggs, pure water, firewood and charcoal. Also: large, clean cooking pots, water jars, pitchers, dishes and other pottery. Motecuhzoma ordered that it be sent to them. The chiefs who received this order were angry with the king and no longer revered or respected him. But they furnished the Spaniards with all the provisions they needed—food, beverages and water, and fodder for the horses.

### *The Spaniards Reveal Their Greed*

When the Spaniards were installed in the palace, they asked Motecuhzoma about the city's resources and reserves and about the warriors' ensigns and shields. They questioned him closely and then demanded gold.

Motecuhzoma guided them to it. They surrounded him and crowded close with their weapons. He walked in the center, while they formed a circle around him.

When they arrived at the treasure house called Teucalco,



*The Spaniards Melting Gold Objects (Codex Florentino)*

*sixty-seven*

the riches of gold and feathers were brought out to them: ornaments made of quetzal feathers, richly worked shields, disks of gold, the necklaces of the idols, gold nose plugs, gold greaves and bracelets and crowns.

The Spaniards immediately stripped the feathers from the gold shields and ensigns. They gathered all the gold into a great mound and set fire to everything else, regardless of its value. Then they melted down the gold into ingots. As for the precious green stones, they took only the best of them; the rest were snatched up by the Tlaxcaltecas. The Spaniards searched through the whole treasure house, questioning and quarreling, and seized every object they thought was beautiful.

### *The Seizure of Motecuhzoma's Treasures*

Next they went to Motecuhzoma's storehouse, in the place called Totocalco [Place of the Palace of the Birds],<sup>2</sup> where his personal treasures were kept. The Spaniards grinned like little beasts and patted each other with delight.

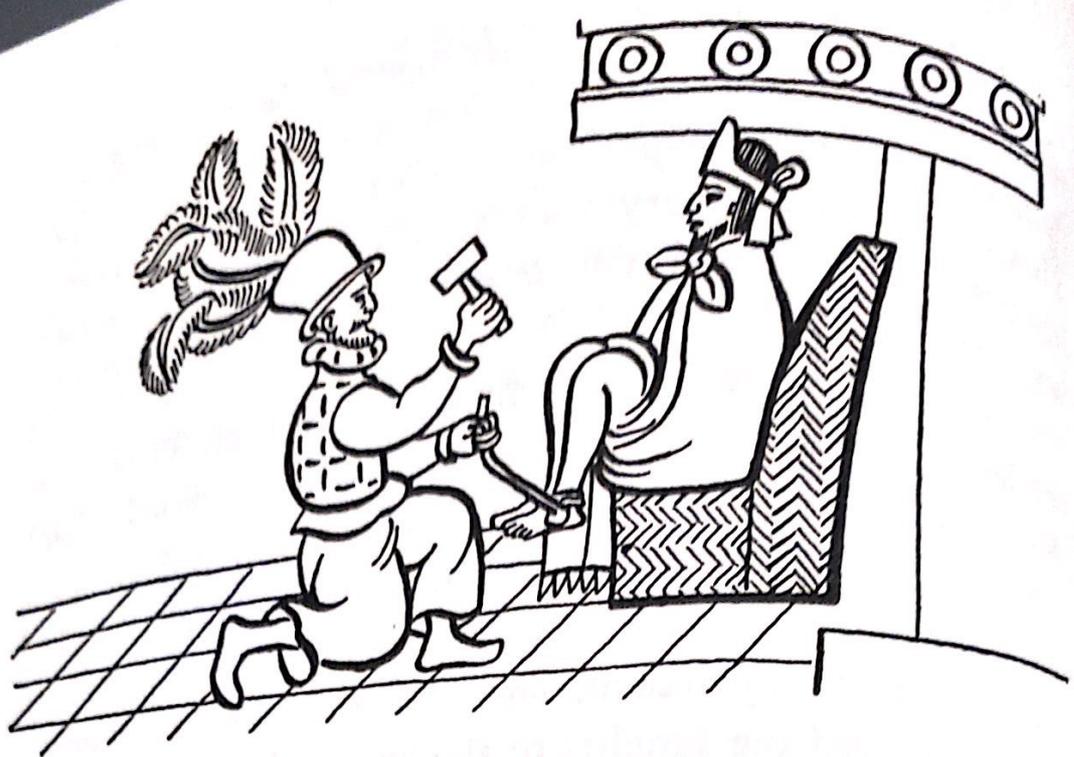
When they entered the hall of treasures, it was as if they had arrived in Paradise. They searched everywhere and coveted everything; they were slaves to their own greed. All of Motecuhzoma's possessions were brought out: fine bracelets, necklaces with large stones, ankle rings with little gold bells, the royal crowns and all the royal finery—everything that belonged to the king and was reserved to him only. They seized these treasures as if they were their own, as if this plunder were merely a stroke of good luck. And when they had taken all the gold, they heaped up everything else in the middle of the patio.

La Malinche called the nobles together. She climbed up to the palace roof and cried: "Mexicanos, come forward! The Spaniards need your help! Bring them food and pure water. They are tired and hungry; they are almost fainting from exhaustion! Why do you not come forward? Are you angry with them?"

The Mexicans were too frightened to approach. They were crushed by terror and would not risk coming forward. They shied away as if the Spaniards were wild beasts, as if the hour were midnight on the blackest night of the year. Yet they did not abandon the Spaniards to hunger and thirst. They brought them whatever they needed, but shook with fear as they did so. They delivered the supplies to the Spaniards with trembling hands, then turned and hurried away.

<sup>1</sup> Military title given to a warrior who had captured four enemies.

<sup>2</sup> The zoological garden attached to the royal palaces.



## *Chapter Nine*

# The Massacre in the Main Temple During the Fiesta of Toxcatl

## *Introduction*

Several indigenous texts—the *Codex Ramirez*, the *XIII relacion* of Alva Ixtlilxochitl and the *Codex Aubin*—describe the massacre perpetrated during the fiesta of Toxcatl, which the Aztecs celebrated in honor of the god Huitzilopochtli. “This was the most important of their fiestas,” wrote Sahagun. “It was like our Easter and fell at almost the same time.”

Cortes had been absent from the city for twenty days when the massacre took place; he had gone out to fight Panfilo de Narvaez, who was coming to arrest him by order of Diego Velazques, governor of Cuba. Cortes’ deputy, Pedro de Alvarado,

*seventy*

treacherously murdered the celebrants when the festival was at its height.

We have chosen two different accounts of the massacre, both written originally in Nahuatl. They describe it with a realism comparable to that of the great epic poems of classical antiquity.

The first account, by Sahagun's native informants, tells of the preparations for the fiesta, the sudden attack by the Spaniards in the midst of the ceremonies and the retaliation by the Indians, who besieged the Spaniards when they took refuge in Motecuhzoma's palace.

The second brief account is by the native author of the *Codex Aubin*. "From a literary standpoint," says Dr. Garibay, "the passage is of extraordinary merit. It shows us the living, suffering people of Tenochtitlan as they faced the attack of the Tonatiuh (Alvarado), who was as handsome as he was wicked."

### *The Preparations for the Fiesta*

The Aztecs begged permission of their king to hold the fiesta of Huitzilopochtli. The Spaniards wanted to see this fiesta to learn how it was celebrated. A delegation of the celebrants came to the palace where Motecuhzoma was a prisoner, and when their spokesman asked his permission, he granted it to them.

As soon as the delegation returned, the women began to grind seeds of the chicalote.<sup>1</sup> These women had fasted for a whole year. They ground the seeds in the patio of the temple.

The Spaniards came out of the palace together, dressed in armor and carrying their weapons with them. They stalked among the women and looked at them one by one; they stared into the faces of the women who were grinding seeds. After

this cold inspection, they went back into the palace. It is said that they planned to kill the celebrants if the men entered the patio.

### *The Statue of Huitzilopochtli*

On the evening before the fiesta of Toxcatl, the celebrants began to model a statue of Huitzilopochtli. They gave it such a human appearance that it seemed the body of a living man. Yet they made the statue with nothing but a paste made of the ground seeds of the chicalote, which they shaped over an armature of sticks.

When the statue was finished, they dressed it in rich feathers, and they painted crossbars over and under its eyes. They also clipped on its earrings of turquoise mosaic; these were in the shape of serpents, with gold rings hanging from them. Its nose plug, in the shape of an arrow, was made of gold and was inlaid with fine stones.

They placed the magic headdress of hummingbird feathers on its head. They also adorned it with an *anecuyotl*, which was a belt made of feathers, with a cone at the back. Then they hung around its neck an ornament of yellow parrot feathers, fringed like the locks of a young boy. Over this they put its nettle-leaf cape, which was painted black and decorated with five clusters of eagle feathers.

Next they wrapped it in its cloak, which was painted with skulls and bones, and over this they fastened its vest. The vest was painted with dismembered human parts: skulls, ears, hearts, intestines, torsos, breasts, hands and feet. They also put on its *maxtlatl*, or loincloth,<sup>2</sup> which was decorated with images of

dissevered limbs and fringed with amate paper.<sup>3</sup> This *maxtlatl* was painted with vertical stripes of bright blue.

They fastened a red paper flag at its shoulder and placed on its head what looked like a sacrificial flint knife. This too was made of red paper; it seemed to have been steeped in blood.

The statue carried a *tehuehuelli*, a bamboo shield decorated with four clusters of fine eagle feathers. The pendant of this shield was blood-red, like the knife and the shoulder flag. The statue also carried four arrows.

Finally, they put the wristbands on its arms. These bands, made of coyote skin, were fringed with paper cut into little strips.

### *The Beginning of the Fiesta*

Early the next morning, the statue's face was uncovered by those who had been chosen for that ceremony. They gathered in front of the idol in single file and offered it gifts of food, such as round seedcakes or perhaps human flesh. But they did not carry it up to its temple on top of the pyramid.

All the young warriors were eager for the fiesta to begin. They had sworn to dance and sing with all their hearts, so that the Spaniards would marvel at the beauty of the rituals.

The procession began, and the celebrants filed into the temple patio to dance the Dance of the Serpent. When they were all together in the patio, the songs and the dance began. Those who had fasted for twenty days and those who had fasted for a year were in command of the others; they kept the dancers in file with their pine wands. (If anyone wished to urinate, he did not stop dancing, but simply opened his clothing at the hips and separated his clusters of heron feathers.)

If anyone disobeyed the leaders or was not in his proper place they struck him on the hips and shoulders. Then they drove him out of the patio, beating him and shoving him from behind. They pushed him so hard that he sprawled to the ground, and they dragged him outside by the ears. No one dared to say a word about this punishment, for those who had fasted during the year were feared and venerated; they had earned the exclusive title "Brothers of Huitzilopochtli."

The great captains, the bravest warriors, danced at the head of the files to guide the others. The youths followed at a slight distance. Some of the youths wore their hair gathered into large locks, a sign that they had never taken any captives. Others carried their headdresses on their shoulders; they had taken captives, but only with help.

Then came the recruits, who were called "the young warriors." They had each captured an enemy or two. The others called to them: "Come, comrades, show us how brave you are! Dance with all your hearts!"

### *The Spaniards Attack the Celebrants*

At this moment in the fiesta, when the dance was loveliest and when song was linked to song, the Spaniards were siezed with an urge to kill the celebrants. They all ran forward, armed as if for battle. They closed the entrances and passageways, all the gates of the patio: the Eagle Gate in the lesser palace, the Gate of the Canestalk and the Gate of the Serpent of Mirrors. They posted guards so that no one could escape, and then rushed into the Sacred Patio to slaughter the celebrants. They came on foot, carrying their swords and their wooden or metal shields.

They ran in among the dancers, forcing their way to the



*The Massacre in the Main Temple (Codex Duran)*

*seventy-five*

place where the drums were played. They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor.

They attacked all the celebrants, stabbing them, spearing them, striking them with their swords. They attacked some of them from behind, and these fell instantly to the ground with their entrails hanging out. Others they beheaded: they cut off their heads, or split their heads to pieces.

They struck others in the shoulders, and their arms were torn from their bodies. They wounded some in the thigh and some in the calf. They slashed others in the abdomen, and their entrails all spilled to the ground. Some attempted to run away, but their intestines dragged as they ran; they seemed to tangle their feet in their own entrails. No matter how they tried to save themselves, they could find no escape.

Some attempted to force their way out, but the Spaniards murdered them at the gates. Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves. Those who ran into the communal houses were safe there for a while; so were those who lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. But if they stood up again, the Spaniards saw them and killed them.

The blood of the warriors flowed like water and gathered into pools. The pools widened, and the stench of blood and entrails filled the air. The Spaniards ran into the communal houses to kill those who were hiding. They ran everywhere and searched everywhere; they invaded every room, hunting and killing.

### *The Aztecs Retaliate*

When the news of this massacre was heard outside the Sacred Patio, a great cry went up: "Mexicanos, come running!"

*seventy-six*

Bring your spears and shields! The strangers have murdered our warriors!”

This cry was answered with a roar of grief and anger: the people shouted and wailed and beat their palms against their mouths. The captains assembled at once, as if the hour had been determined in advance. They all carried their spears and shields.

Then the battle began. The Aztecs attacked with javelins and arrows, even with the light spears that are used for hunting birds. They hurled their javelins with all their strength, and the cloud of missiles spread out over the Spaniards like a yellow cloak.

The Spaniards immediately took refuge in the palace. They began to shoot at the Mexicans with their iron arrows and to fire their cannons and arquebuses. And they shackled Motecuhzoma in chains.

### *The Lament for the Dead*

The Mexicans who had died in the massacre were taken out of the patio one by one and inquiries were made to discover their names. The fathers and mothers of the dead wept and lamented.

Each victim was taken first to his own home and then to the Sacred Patio, where all the dead were brought together. Some of the bodies were later burned in the place called the Eagle Urn, and others in the House of the Young Men.

### *Motecuhzoma's Message*

At sunset, Itzcuahtzin climbed onto the roof of the palace and shouted this proclamation: “Mexicanos! Tlatelolcas!

*seventy-seven*

Your king, the lord Motecuhzoma, has sent me to speak for him. Mexicanos, hear me, for these are his words to you: 'We must not fight them. We are not their equals in battle. Put down your shields and arrows.'

"He tells you this because it is the aged who will suffer most, and they deserve your pity. The humblest classes will also suffer, and so will the innocent children who still crawl on all fours, who still sleep in their cradles.

"Therefore your king says: 'We are not strong enough to defeat them. Stop fighting, and return to your homes.' Mexicanos, they have put your king in chains; his feet are bound with chains."

When Itzcuahtzin had finished speaking, there was a great uproar among the people. They shouted insults at him in their fury, and cried: "Who is Motecuhzoma to give us orders? We are no longer his slaves!" They shouted war cries and fired arrows at the rooftop. The Spaniards quickly hid Motecuhzoma and Itzcuahtzin behind their shields so that the arrows would not find them.

The Mexicans were enraged because the attack on the captains had been so treacherous: their warriors had been killed without the slightest warning. Now they refused to go away or to put down their arms.

### *The Spaniards Are Besieged*

The royal palace was placed under siege. The Mexicans kept a close watch to prevent anyone from stealing in with food for the Spaniards. They also stopped delivering supplies: they brought them absolutely nothing, and waited for them to die of hunger.

*seventy-eight*

A few people attempted to communicate with the Spaniards. They hoped to win their favor by giving them advice and information or by secretly bringing them food. But the guards found them and killed them on the spot: they broke their necks or stoned them to death.

Once a group of porters was discovered bringing rabbit skins<sup>4</sup> into the city. They let slip the fact that other persons had been hiding in their midst. Therefore strict orders were issued to maintain a watch over all the roads and causeways leading to the city. The porters themselves had been sent by the chiefs of Ayotzintepc and Chinantlan. They were only performing their duties, but the guards seized them and put them to death for no reason. They would shout: "Here is another one!" and then kill him. And if they happened to see one of Motecuhzoma's servants with his glass lip plug, they slaughtered him at once, claiming: "He was bringing food to Motecuhzoma."

They seized anyone who was dressed like a porter or any other servant. "Here is another traitor," they would say. "He is bringing news to Motecuhzoma." The prisoner would try to save his life by pleading with them: "What are you doing, Mexicanos? I am not a traitor!" But they would answer: "Yes, you are. We know you are one of his servants." And they would immediately put him to death.

They stopped and examined everyone in the same way, studying each man's face and questioning him about his work. No one could walk out of doors without being arrested and accused. They sentenced a great many people for imaginary crimes; the victims were executed for acts they had never committed. The other servants, therefore, went home and hid themselves. They were afraid to be seen in public: they knew what would happen to them if they fell into the hands of the guards or the other warriors.

After they had trapped the Spaniards in the palace, the Mexicans kept them under attack for seven days, and for twenty-three days they foiled all their attempts to break out. During this time all the causeways were closed off. The Mexicans tore up the bridges, opened great gaps in the pavement and built a whole series of barricades; they did everything they could to make the causeways impassable. They also closed off the roads by building walls and roadblocks; they obstructed all the roads and streets of the city.

### *The Massacre According to the Codex Aubin*

Motecuhzoma said to La Malinche: "Please ask the god to hear me. It is almost time to celebrate the fiesta of Toxcatl. It will last for only ten days, and we beg his permission to hold it. We merely burn some incense and dance our dances. There will be a little noise because of the music, but that is all."

The Captain said: "Very well, tell him they may hold it." Then he left the city to meet another force of Spaniards who were marching in this direction. Pedro de Alvarado, called The Sun, was in command during his absence.

When the day of the fiesta arrived, Motecuhzoma said to The Sun: "Please hear me, my lord. We beg your permission to begin the fiesta of our god."

The Sun replied: "Let it begin. We shall be here to watch it."

The Aztec captains then called for their elder brothers, who were given this order: "You must celebrate the fiesta as grandly as possible."

The elder brothers replied: "We will dance with all our might."

eighty

Then Tecatzin, the chief of the armory, said: "Please remind the lord that he is here, not in Cholula. You know how they trapped the Cholultecas in their patio! They have already caused us enough trouble. We should hide our weapons close at hand!"

But Motecuhzoma said: "Are we at war with them? I tell you, we can trust them."

Tecatzin said: "Very well."

Then the songs and dances began. A young captain wearing a lip plug guided the dancers; he was Cuatlazol, from Tolnahuac.

But the songs had hardly begun when the Christians came out of the palace. They entered the patio and stationed four guards at each entrance. Then they attacked the captain who was guiding the dance. One of the Spaniards struck the idol in the face, and others attacked the three men who were playing the drums. After that there was a general slaughter until the patio was heaped with corpses.

A priest from the Place of the Canefields<sup>5</sup> cried out in a loud voice: "Mexicanos! Who said we are not at war? Who said we could trust them?"

The Mexicans could only fight back with sticks of wood; they were cut to pieces by the swords. Finally the Spaniards retired to the palace where they were lodged.

<sup>1</sup> *Argemone mexicana*, an edible plant, also used in medicines.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Soustelle, in *La Vie quotidienne des Aztèques* (Paris: Hachette, 1955), describes the maxtlatl as "a cloth that was wrapped around the waist, passed between the legs and then tied in front, with the two ends hanging down in front and in back. These ends often had decorative borders or fringes. The maxtlatl was known to the Olmecs and Mayas during the earliest period of which we have any record. At the time of the Conquest, it was worn by all the civilized peoples of Mexico except the Tarascos in the West and the Huastecas in the Northeast, who were considered rather scandalous by the inhabitants of the central valley."

<sup>3</sup> A paper made from the inner bark of several different trees of the genus *Ficus*.  
<sup>4</sup> The Aztecs had no cows, horses, pigs or other large domesticated animals. For leather and skins, therefore, they used the hides of deer and of such smaller creatures as the rabbit.  
<sup>5</sup> A part of the main temple.





## *Chapter Ten*

# The Night of Sorrows

### *Introduction*

After disposing of Panfilo de Narvaez, Cortes returned to the city, his ranks increased by troops from the defeated army. According to Sahagun's informants (from whose writings this chapter is drawn), the Aztecs planned to fall on him from ambush; but he reached the garrison in Tenochtitlan without hindrance and immediately ordered the cannons to be fired. The Aztecs responded by renewing their attack on the palace. The battle raged for four days. During a lull in the fighting, the Spaniards dragged the dead bodies of Motecuhzoma and Itzcuahtzin to the water's edge. No one knows for certain how Motecuhzoma died.

It soon became obvious to Cortes that he would have to

*eighty-three*

abandon Tenochtitlan. He withdrew at night, but the retreat was discovered, and the Aztecs avenged themselves for the massacre in the temple patio. They attacked as the Spaniards were fleeing down the Tlacopan (now Tacuba) causeway, and the rout was so disastrous that it has been known ever since as "la noche triste," the Night of Sorrows. Those who escaped the disaster found refuge in the nearby village of Teocahueyacan, where they were welcomed as friends; but three-fourths of the army had perished in the retreat and in the siege that preceded it.

The chapter concludes with a brief selection from the the *XIII relacion* by Alva Ixtilxochitl.

### *The Spaniards Abandon the City*

At midnight the Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecas came out in closed ranks, the Spaniards going first and the Tlaxcaltecas following. The allies kept very close behind, as if they were crowding up against a wall. The sky was overcast and rain fell all night in the darkness, but it was a gentle rain, more like a drizzle or a heavy dew.

The Spaniards carried portable wooden bridges to cross the canals.<sup>1</sup> They set them in place, crossed over and raised them again. They were able to pass the first three canals—the Tecpantzinco, the Tzapotlan and the Atenchicalco—without being seen. But when they reached the fourth, the Mixcoatechialtitlan, their retreat was discovered.

### *The Battle Begins*

The first alarm was raised by a woman who was drawing water at the edge of the canal. She cried: "Mexicanos, come  
eighty-four

running! They are crossing the canal! Our enemies are escaping!"

Then a priest of Huitzilopochtli shouted the call to arms from the temple pyramid. His voice rang out over the city: "Captains, warriors, Mexicanos! Our enemies are escaping! Follow them in your boats.<sup>2</sup> Cut them off, and destroy them!"

When they heard this cry, the warriors leaped into the boats and set out in pursuit. These boats were from the garrisons of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco,<sup>3</sup> and were protected by the warriors' shields. The boatmen paddled with all their might; they lashed the water of the lake until it boiled.

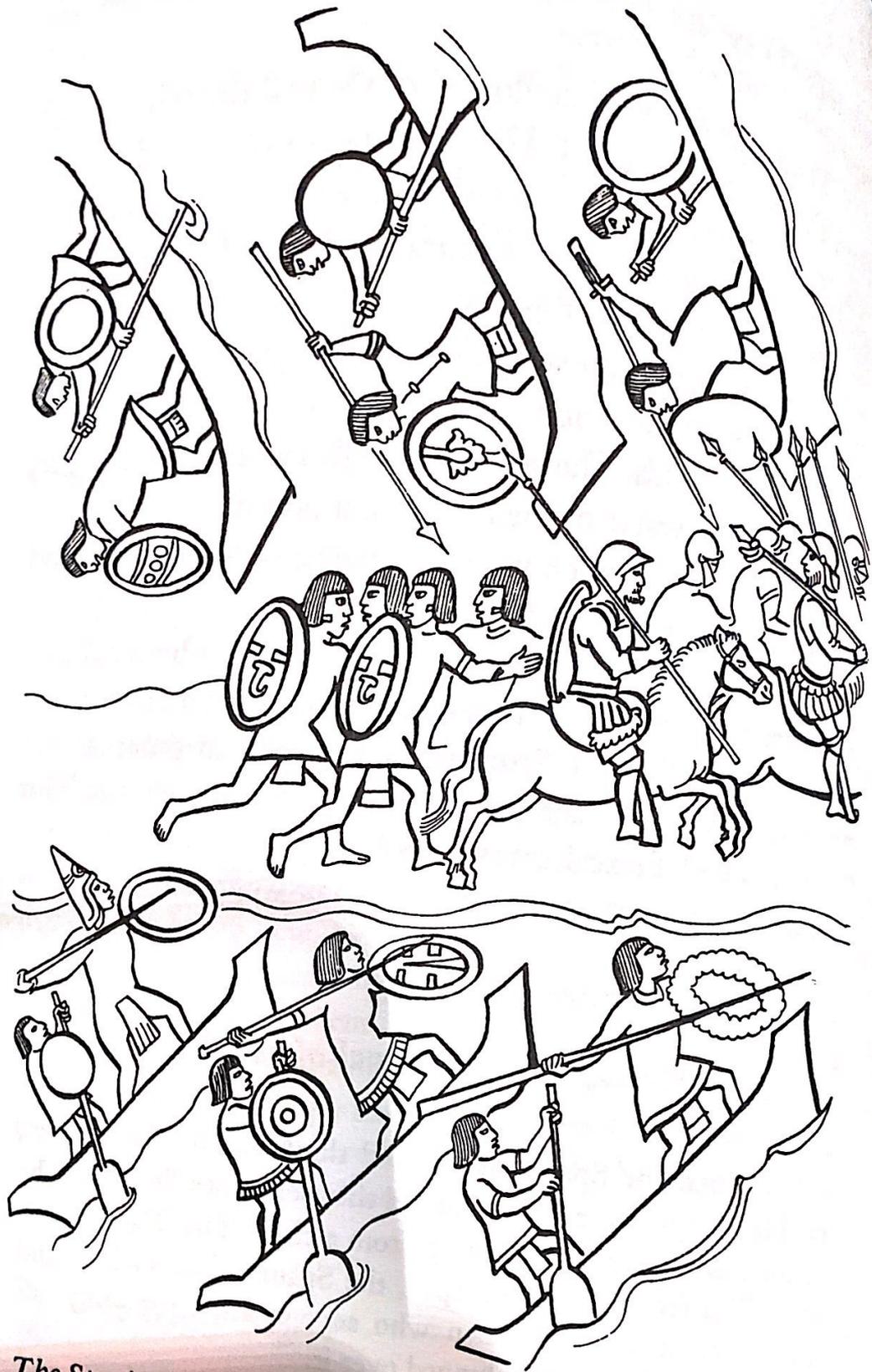
Other warriors set out on foot, racing to Nonohualco and then to Tlacopan to cut off the retreat.

The boats converged on the Spaniards from both sides of the causeway, and the warriors loosed a storm of arrows at the fleeing army. But the Spaniards also turned to shoot at the Aztecs; they fired their crossbows and their arquebuses. The Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecas suffered many casualties, but many of the Aztec warriors were also killed or wounded.

### *The Massacre at the Canal of the Toltecs*

When the Spaniards reached the Canal of the Toltecs, in Tlatēcayohuacan, they hurled themselves headlong into the water, as if they were leaping from a cliff.<sup>4</sup> The Tlaxcaltecas, the allies from Tlilihquitepec, the Spanish foot soldiers and horsemen, the few women who accompanied the army—all came to the brink and plunged over it.

The canal was soon choked with the bodies of men and horses; they filled the gap in the causeway with their own



*The Spaniards and Their Allies Flee Down the Tlacopan  
(Tacuba) Causeway (Codex Florentino)*

eighty-six

drowned bodies. Those who followed crossed to the other side by walking on the corpses.

When they reached Petlalco, where there was another canal, they crossed over on their portable bridge without being attacked by the Aztecs.<sup>5</sup> They stopped and rested there for a short while, and began to feel more like men again. Then they marched on to Popotla.

Dawn was breaking as they entered the village. Their hearts were cheered by the brightening light of this new day: they thought the horrors of the retreat by night were all behind them. But suddenly they heard war cries and the Aztecs swarmed through the streets and surrounded them. They had come to capture Tlaxcaltecas for their sacrifices. They also wanted to complete their revenge against the Spaniards.

The Aztecs harried the army all the way to Tlacopan. Chimalpopoca, the son of Motecuhzoma, was killed in the action at Tlilyuhcan by an arrow from the crossbows. Tlaltecatzin, the Tepanec<sup>6</sup> prince, was wounded in the same action and died shortly after. He had served the Spaniards as a guide and advisor, pointing out the best roads and short cuts.

### *The Spaniards Take Refuge in Teocalhueyacan*

Then the Spaniards forded a small river called the Tepzolatl. Next they crossed two rivers, the Tepzolac and the Acueco, and stopped in Otoncalpulco, where the temple patio was surrounded by a wooden wall. They rested there in safety, catching their breath and recovering their strength.

While they were resting, the lord of Teocalhueyacan paid them a visit. He was known as The Otomi, a title reserved for

*eighty-seven*

the nobility. He greeted them and offered them the gifts of food his servants had brought: tortillas, eggs, roast chickens, a few live hens and various kinds of fruit. He placed these offerings in front of the Captain and said: "My lords, you are weary. You have suffered many heartaches. We beg the gods to rest now and enjoy these gifts."

La Malinche said: "My lord, the Captain wishes to know where you are from."

He answered: "Tell our lord that we are from Teocahuacan. Tell him that we hope he will visit us."

La Malinche said: "The Captain thanks you. We shall arrive tomorrow or the day after."

### *The Aztecs Recover the Spoils*

As soon as it was daylight, the Aztecs cleared the dead Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecas out of the canals and stripped them of everything they wore. They loaded the bodies of the Tlaxcaltecas into canoes and took them out to where the rushes grow; they threw them among the rushes without burying them, without giving them another glance.

They also threw out the corpses of the women who had been killed in the retreat. The naked bodies of these women were the color of ripe corn, for they had painted themselves with yellow paint.

But they laid out the corpses of the Spaniards apart from the others; they lined them up in rows in a separate place. Their bodies were as white as the new buds of the canestalk, as white as the buds of the maguey. They also removed the dead "stags" that had carried the "gods" on their shoulders.

*eighty-eight*

Then they gathered up everything the Spaniards had abandoned in their terror. When a man saw something he wanted, he took it, and it became his property; he hefted it onto his shoulders and carried it home. They also collected all the weapons that had been left behind or had fallen into the canal—the cannons, arquebuses, swords, spears, bows and arrows—along with all the steel helmets, coats of mail and breastplates, and the shields of metal, wood and hide. They recovered the gold ingots, the gold disks, the tubes of gold dust and the *chalchihuite* collars with their gold pendants.

They gathered up everything they could find and searched the waters of the canal with the greatest care. Some of them groped with their hands and others felt about with their feet. Those who went first were able to keep their balance but those who came along behind them all fell into the water.

### *The Account by Alva Ixtlilxochitl*

Cortes turned in the direction of Tenochtitlan and entered the city of Tezcoco. He was received only by a group of knights, because the legitimate sons of King Nezahualpilli had been hidden by their servants, and the other lords were being held by the Aztecs as hostages. He entered Tenochtitlan with his army of Spaniards and allies on the day of St. John the Baptist, without being molested in any way.

The Mexicans gave them everything they needed, but when they saw that Cortes had no intention of leaving the city or of freeing their leaders, they rallied their warriors and attacked the Spaniards. This attack began on the day after Cortes entered the city and lasted for seven days.

On the third day, Motecuhzoma climbed onto the rooftop and tried to admonish his people, but they cursed him and shouted that he was a coward and a traitor to his country. They even threatened him with their weapons. It is said that an Indian killed him with a stone from his sling, but the palace servants declared that the Spaniards put him to death by stabbing him in the abdomen with their swords.

On the seventh day, the Spaniards abandoned the city along with the Tlaxcaltecas, the Huexotzincas and their other allies. They fled down the causeway that leads out to Tlacopan. But before they left, they murdered King Cacama of Tezcoco, his three sisters and two of his brothers.

There are several accounts by Indians who took part in the fighting that ensued. They tell how their warriors killed a great many of the Spaniards and their allies, and how the army took refuge on a mountain near Tlacopan and then marched to Tlaxcala.

<sup>1</sup> According to Bernal Diaz the Spaniards built only one bridge.

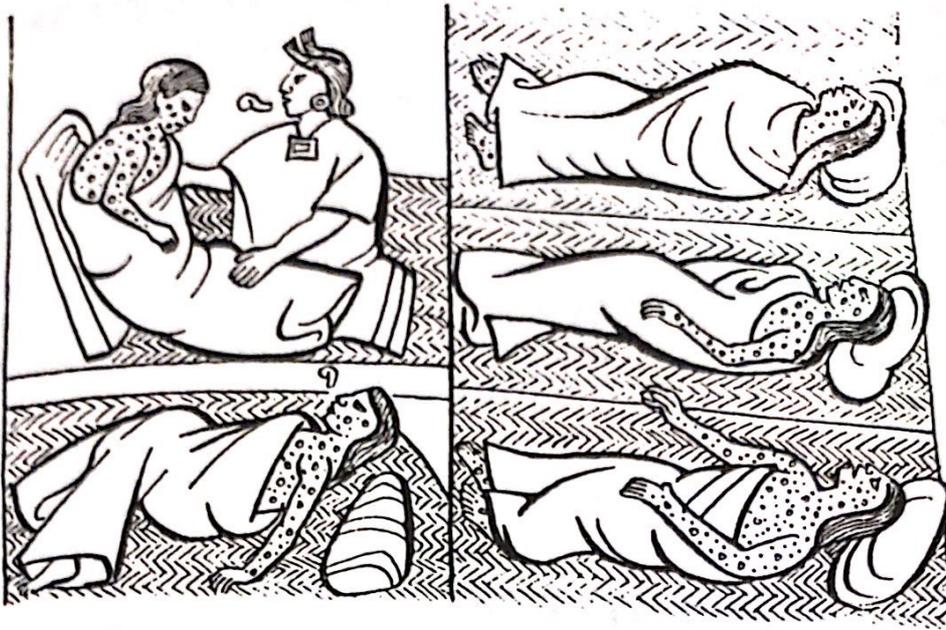
<sup>2</sup> Dugout canoes. The Aztecs had no vessels larger than the trees that could be carried down from the forests.

<sup>3</sup> A section of the island city. Tenochtitlan was the main section and gave the city its name.

<sup>4</sup> The portable bridge was left behind when the fury of the Aztec assault turned the Spanish retreat into a headlong flight.

<sup>5</sup> An obvious contradiction. The bridge had already been abandoned before the Spaniards reached the Canal of the Toltecs.

<sup>6</sup> The Tepanecas had been the dominant tribe in the Valley of Mexico about a hundred years before the Conquest, but they had been conquered by an alliance among the cities of Tenochtitlan, Tlacopan and Tezcoco, and had never regained any of their former power.



## *Chapter Eleven*

# The Siege of Tenochtitlan

## *Introduction*

The Aztecs, convinced that the Spaniards would never return to Tenochtitlan, celebrated their fiestas again in the traditional manner, and Cuitlahuac was elected king to succeed his brother Motecuhzoma. The Aztec kings were chosen by a council of four lords, representing the four quarters, or phratries, into which the twenty clans of the city were evenly grouped. The council attempted to choose the wisest and bravest man among the brothers, sons and nephews of the previous ruler. Their choice of Cuitlahuac may have been influenced by the fact that he had warned against allowing the Spaniards to enter Tenochtitlan (Chapter 7).

This period of normalcy was soon ended by the terrible

*ninety-one*

plague that quickly spread through the city. The plague seems to have been an epidemic of smallpox, which was previously unknown among the Indians. One of its victims was the new king himself. Shortly afterward, the Spaniards reappeared. They had rebuilt their army in Tlaxcala and marched to Tlacopan by way of Tezcoco.

A number of indigenous documents describe the siege of the Aztec capital. We have chosen the account given by Sahagun's native informants in the *Codex Florentino*.

### *Tenochtitlan After the Departure of Cortes*

When the Spaniards left Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs thought they had departed for good and would never return. Therefore they repaired and decorated the temple of their god, sweeping it clean and throwing out all the dirt and wreckage.

Then the eighth month<sup>1</sup> arrived, and the Aztecs celebrated it as always.<sup>2</sup> They adorned the impersonators of the gods, all those who played the part of gods in the ceremonies, decking them with necklaces and turquoise masks and dressing them in the sacred clothing. This clothing was made of quetzal feathers, eagle feathers and yellow parrot feathers. The finery of the gods was in the care of the great princes.

### *The Plague Ravages the City*

While the Spaniards were in Tlaxcala, a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan. It began to spread during the thirteenth month<sup>3</sup> and lasted for seventy days, striking every-

*ninety-two*

where in the city and killing a vast number of our people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot.

The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads. They could not lie face down or roll from one side to the other. If they did move their bodies, they screamed with pain.

A great many died from this plague, and many others died of hunger. They could not get up to search for food, and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved to death in their beds.

Some people came down with a milder form of the disease; they suffered less than the others and made a good recovery. But they could not escape entirely. Their looks were ravaged, for wherever a sore broke out, it gouged an ugly pockmark in the skin. And a few of the survivors were left completely blind.

The first cases were reported in Cuatlan. By the time the danger was recognized, the plague was so well established that nothing could halt it, and eventually it spread all the way to Chalco. Then its virulence diminished considerably, though there were isolated cases for many months after. The first victims were stricken during the fiesta of Teotlecco,<sup>4</sup> and the faces of our warriors were not clean and free of sores until the fiesta of Panquetzaliztli.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Spaniards Return*

And now the Spaniards came back again. They marched here by way of Tezcoco, set up headquarters in Tlacopan and

*ninety-three*

then divided their forces. Pedro de Alvarado was assigned the road to the Tlatelolco quarter as his personal responsibility, while Cortes himself took charge of the Coyoacan area and the road from Acachinanco to Tenochtitlan proper. Cortes knew that the captain of Tenochtitlan was extremely brave.

The first battle began outside Tlatelolco, either at the ash pits or at the place called the Point of the Alders, and then shifted to Nonohualco. Our warriors put the enemy to flight and not a single Aztec was killed. The Spaniards tried a second advance but our warriors attacked them from their boats, loosing such a storm of arrows that the Spaniards were forced to retreat again.

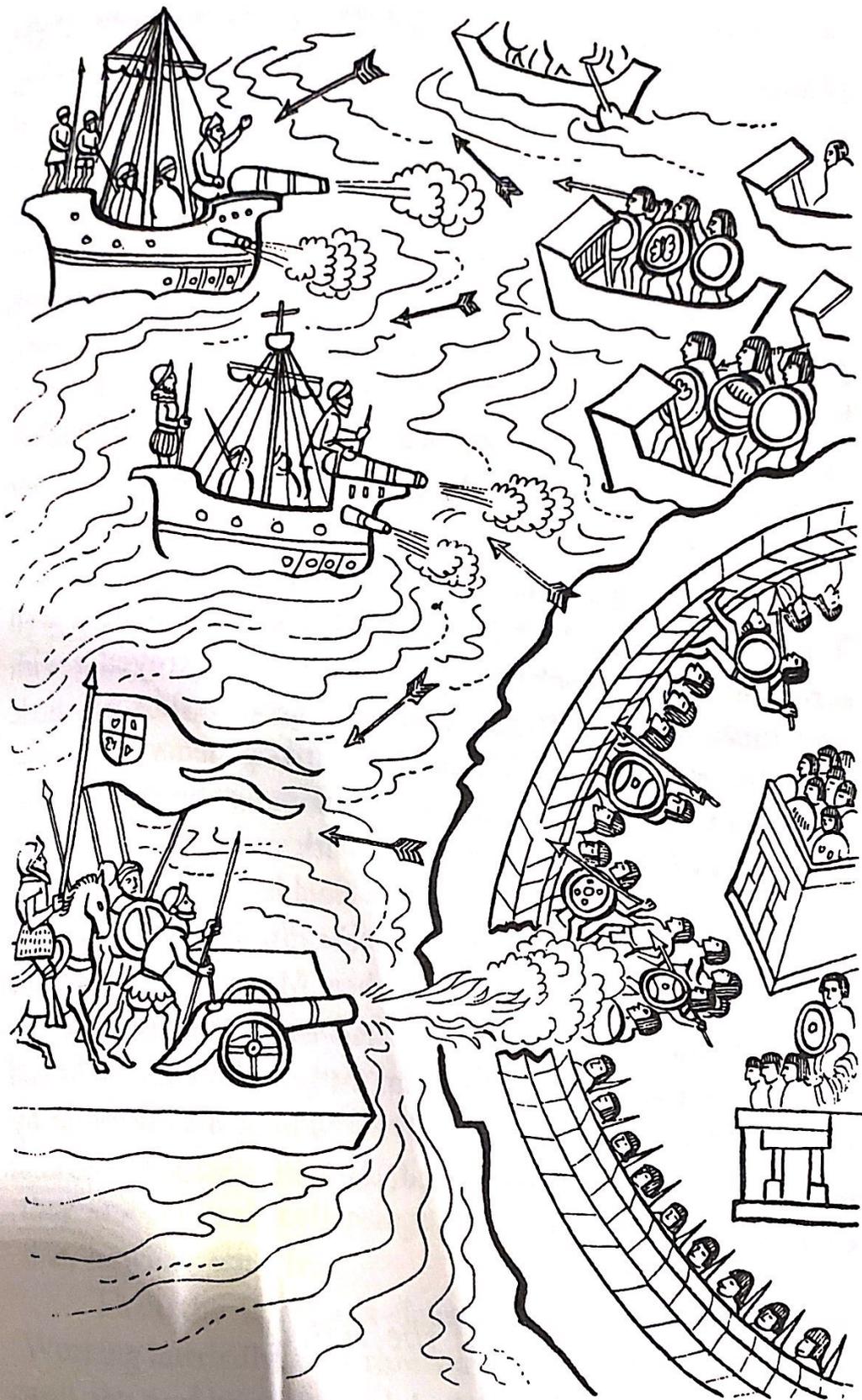
Cortes, however, set out for Acachinanco and reached his goal. He moved his headquarters there, just outside the city. Heavy fighting ensued, but the Aztecs could not dislodge him.

### *The Spaniards Launch Their Brigantines*

Finally the ships, a dozen in all, came from Tezcoco<sup>6</sup> and anchored near Acachinanco. Cortes went out to inspect the canals that traversed the causeways, to discover the best passages for his fleet. He wanted to know which were the nearest, the shortest, the deepest, the straightest, so that none of his ships would run aground or be trapped inside. One of the canals across the Xoloco thoroughfare was so twisted and narrow that only two of the smaller ships were able to pass through it.

The Spaniards now decided to attack Tenochtitlan and destroy its people. The cannons were mounted in the ships, the sails were raised and the fleet moved out onto the lake. The flagship led the way, flying a great linen standard with Cortes' coat of arms. The soldiers beat their drums and blew their trumpets; they played their flutes and chirimias<sup>7</sup> and whistles.

*ninety-four*



*Spanish Brigantines Besiege the City (Codex Florentino)*

*ninety-five*

When the ships approached the Zoquiapan quarter,<sup>8</sup> the common people were terrified at the sight. They gathered their children into the canoes and fled helter-skelter across the lake, moaning with fear and paddling as swiftly as they could. They left all their possessions behind them and abandoned their little farms without looking back.

Our enemies seized all our possessions. They gathered up everything they could find and loaded it into the ships in great bundles. They stole our cloaks and blankets, our battle dress, our tabors and drums, and carried them all away. The Tlatelolcas followed and attacked the Spaniards from their boats but could not save any of the plunder.

When the Spaniards reached Xoloco, near the entrance to Tenochtitlan, they found that the Indians had built a wall across the road to block their progress. They destroyed it with four shots from the largest cannon. The first shot did little harm, but the second split it and the third opened a great hole. With the fourth shot, the wall lay in ruins on the ground.

Two of the brigantines, both with cannons mounted in their bows, attacked a flotilla of our shielded canoes. The cannons were fired into the thick of the flotilla, wherever the canoes were crowded closest together. Many of our warriors were killed outright; others drowned because they were too crippled by their wounds to swim away. The water was red with the blood of the dead and dying. Those who were hit by the steel arrows were also doomed; they died instantly and sank to the bottom of the lake.

### *Defensive Tactics of the Aztecs*

When the Aztecs discovered that the shots from the arquebuses and cannons always flew in a straight line, they no

*ninety-six*

longer ran away in the line of fire. They ran to the right or left or in zigzags, not in front of the guns. If they saw that a cannon was about to be fired and they could not escape by running, they threw themselves to the ground and lay flat until the shot had passed over them. The warriors also took cover among the houses, darting into the spaces between them. The road was suddenly as empty as if it passed through a desert.

Then the Spaniards arrived in Huitzillan,<sup>9</sup> where they found another wall blocking the road. A great crowd of our warriors was hiding behind it to escape the gunfire.

### *The Spaniards Debar*

The brigantines came up and anchored nearby. They had been pursuing our war canoes in the open lake, but when they had almost run them down, they suddenly turned and sailed toward the causeway. Now they anchored a short distance from the houses. As soon as the cannons in their bows were loaded again, the soldiers aimed and fired them at the new wall.

The first shot cracked it in a dozen places, but it remained standing. They fired again: this time it cracked from one end to the other and crumpled to the ground. A moment later the road was completely empty. The warriors had all fled when they saw the wall collapsing; they ran blindly, this way and that, howling with fear.

Then the Spaniards debarked and filled in the canal. Working hurriedly, they threw in the stones from the shattered wall, the roof beams and adobe bricks from the nearest houses, anything they could find, until the surface of the fill was level

with the causeway. Then a squad of about ten horsemen crossed over it. They galloped to and fro, scouting both sides of the road; they raced and wheeled and clattered back and forth. Soon they were joined by another squad that rode up to support them.

A number of Tlatelolcas had rushed into the palace where Motecuhzoma lived before he was slain. When they came out again, they unexpectedly met the Spanish cavalry. The lead horseman stabbed one of the Tlatelolcas, but the wounded man was able to clutch the lance and cling to it. His friends ran to his aid and twisted it from the Spaniard's hands. They knocked the horseman from his saddle, beat and kicked him as he lay on his back on the ground, and then cut off his head.

The Spaniards now joined all their forces into one unit and marched together as far as the Eagle Gate, where they set up the cannons they had brought with them. It was called the Eagle Gate because it was decorated with an enormous eagle carved of stone. The eagle was flanked on one side by a stone jaguar; on the other side there was a large honey bear, also of carved stone.

Two rows of tall columns led into the city from this gate. Some of the Aztecs hid behind the columns when they saw the Spaniards and their guns; others climbed onto the roofs of the communal houses. None of the warriors dared to show his face openly.

The Spaniards wasted no time as they loaded and fired the cannons. The smoke belched out in black clouds that darkened the sky, as if night were falling. The warriors hidden behind the columns broke from cover and fled; those on the rooftops climbed down and ran after them. When the smoke cleared away, the Spaniards could not see a single Aztec.

## *The Spaniards Advance to the Heart of the City*

Then the Spaniards brought forward the largest cannon and set it up on the sacrificial stone. The priests of Huitzilopochtli immediately began to beat their great ritual drums from the top of the pyramid. The deep throbbing of the drums resounded over the city, calling the warriors to defend the shrine of their god. But two of the Spanish soldiers climbed the shrine way to the temple platform, cut the priests down with their swords and pitched them headlong over the brink.

The great captains and warriors who had been fighting from their canoes now returned and landed. The canoes were paddled by the younger warriors and the recruits. As soon as the warriors landed, they ran through the streets, hunting the enemy and shouting: "Mexicanos, come find them!"

The Spaniards, seeing that an attack was imminent, tightened their ranks and clenched the hilts of their swords. The next moment, all was noise and confusion. The Aztecs charged into the plaza from every direction, and the air was black with arrows and gunsmoke.

The battle was so furious that both sides had to pull back. The Aztecs withdrew to Xoloco to catch their breath and dress their wounds, while the Spaniards retreated to their camp in Acachinanco, abandoning the cannon they had set up on the sacrificial stone. Later the warriors dragged this cannon to the edge of the canal and toppled it in. It sank at a place called the Stone Toad.

## *The Aztecs Take Refuge*

During this time the Aztecs took refuge in the Tlatelolco quarter. They deserted the Tenochtitlan quarters all in one

day, weeping and lamenting like women. Husbands searched for their wives, and fathers carried their small children on their shoulders. Tears of grief and despair streamed down their cheeks.

The Tlatelolcas, however, refused to give up.<sup>10</sup> They raced into Tenochtitlan to continue the fight and the Spaniards soon learned how brave they were. Pedro de Alvarado launched an attack against the Point of the Alders, in the direction of Nonohualco, but his troops were shattered as if he had sent them against a stone cliff. The battle was fought both on dry land and on the water, where the Indians shot at the Spaniards from their shielded canoes. Alvarado was routed and had to draw back to Tlacopan.

On the following day, two brigantines came up loaded with troops, and the Spaniards united all their forces on the outskirts of Nonohualco. The soldiers in the brigantines came ashore and the whole army marched into the very heart of Tenochtitlan. Wherever they went, they found the streets empty, with no Indians anywhere in sight.

### *The Last Stand*

Then the great captain Tzilacatzin arrived, bringing with him three large, round stones of the kind used for building walls. He carried one of them in his hand; the other two hung from his shield. When he hurled these stones at the Spaniards, they turned and fled the city.

Tzilacatzin's military rank was that of Otomi, and he clipped his hair in the style of the Otomies.<sup>11</sup> He scorned his enemies, Spaniards as well as Indians; they all shook with terror at the mere sight of him.

*one hundred*

When the Spaniards found out how dangerous he was, they tried desperately to kill him. They attacked him with their swords and spears, fired at him with their crossbows and arquebuses, and tried every other means they could think of to kill or cripple him. Therefore he wore various disguises to prevent them from recognizing him.

Sometimes he wore his lip plug, his gold earrings and all the rest of his full regalia, but left his head uncovered to show that he was an Otomi. At other times he wore only his cotton armor, with a thin kerchief wrapped around his head. At still other times, he put on the finery of the priests who cast the victims into the fire:<sup>12</sup> a plumed headdress with the eagle symbol on its crest, and gleaming gold bracelets on both arms, and circular bands of gleaming gold on both ankles.

The Spaniards came back again the next day. They brought their ships to a point just off Nonohualco, close to the place called the House of Mist. Their other troops arrived on foot, along with the Tlaxcaltecas. As soon as they had formed ranks, they charged the Aztec warriors.

The heaviest fighting began when they entered Nonohualco. None of our enemies and none of our own warriors escaped harm. Everyone was wounded, and the toll of the dead was grievous on both sides. The struggle continued all day and all night.

Only three captains never retreated. They were contemptuous of their enemies and gave no thought whatever to their own safety. The first of these heroes was Tzoyectzin; the second, Temoctzin; and the third, the great Tzilacatzin.

At last the Spaniards were too exhausted to keep on fighting. After one final attempt to break the Aztec ranks, they withdrew to their camp to rest and recover, with their allies trailing behind.

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding to June 22–July 11 in our calendar. The Aztec year was divided into eighteen months (group of twenty days) plus five unlucky days called *nemontemi*.

<sup>2</sup> The first day of the eighth month was the fiesta of Huixtocihuatl, goddess of salt.

<sup>3</sup> September 30–October 19.

<sup>4</sup> The twelfth month, September 10–29.

<sup>5</sup> The fifteenth month, November 9–28.

<sup>6</sup> These vessels were built in Tlaxcala, dismantled, carried piece by piece to Lake Tezcoco, then put together again and launched. The sails, rigging and ironwork were brought from the Gulf coast, where they had been stored since the march inland. Cortes ordered the fleet built because the disastrous Night of Sorrows had taught him the danger of using the causeways without having domination of the lake.

<sup>7</sup> Double-reed woodwinds, similar to shepherd's pipes; precursors of the modern oboe.

<sup>8</sup> In the southwestern section of the island city.

<sup>9</sup> Closer to Tenochtitlan than Xoloco, on the same avenue.

<sup>10</sup> Although Tlatelolco had become a part of Tenochtitlan by the time of the Conquest, it had once been an independent city and still retained its name and its local pride. The majority of Sahagun's informants were Tlatelolcas, and in this passage they may be glorifying their home quarter at the expense of Tenochtitlan proper.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 5, note 1.

<sup>12</sup> In the ceremony honoring the fire god, Huehueteotl, bound captives were hurled into a great bonfire. Before they could die, the priests dragged them out with hooks, cut open their chests and tore out their hearts.



## *Chapter Twelve*

# Spanish Raids into the Besieged City

### *Introduction*

The native documents describing the long siege of Tenochtitlan present a number of vivid and dramatic scenes. We have selected the account by Sahagun's informants preserved in the *Codex Florentino*.

During one of the first attacks by the Spaniards, the Aztecs took fifteen prisoners and then sacrificed them within sight of their comrades, who were watching helplessly from the barkentines. The text also describes the tragic suffering of the besieged inhabitants, the Spanish raid on the Tlatelolco market place, the burning of the temple, and the almost incredible courage with which the Aztecs again and again drove back the invaders.

The narrative continues with a description of how the  
*one hundred and three*

Spaniards set up a catapult on the platform of the small temple in the Tlatelolco market, and concludes with the final efforts of the Aztecs to save their capital. Cuauhtemoc, who had succeeded his uncle Cuitlahuac when the latter died of the plague, decided to dress a captain named Opochtzin in the regalia of King Ahuitzotl, Motecuhzoma's predecessor. It was believed that this regalia invested its wearer with the attributes of the war god Huitzilopochtli, and that if Opochtzin could wound a Spaniard with the sacred arrow called "the fire-serpent," victory was still possible. The attempt was unsuccessful and was followed by a brief period of calm that ended with the final agonies of the dying city.

### *Fifteen Spaniards Are Captured and Sacrificed*

The warriors advanced to the sound of flutes. They shouted their war cries and beat their shields like drums. They pursued the Spaniards, harried and terrified them, and at last took fifteen of them prisoners. The rest of the Spaniards retreated to their ships and sailed out into the middle of the lake.

The prisoners were sacrificed in the place called Tlacoachcalco [House of the Arsenal]. Their captors quickly plundered them, seizing their weapons, their cotton armor and everything else, until they stood naked. Then they were sacrificed to the god, while their comrades on the lake watched them being put to death.

Two of the barkentines sailed to Xocotitlan again. They anchored there, and the Spaniards began attacking the houses along the shore. But when Tzilacatzin and other warriors saw what was happening, they ran to the defense and drove the invaders into the water.

On another occasion, the barkentines approached Coyo-

*one hundred and four*

nacazco to attack the houses. As the ships closed in, a few Spaniards jumped out, ready for battle. They were led by Castaneda and by Xicotencatl, who was wearing his headdress of quetzal feathers.

Then Castaneda shot the catapult.<sup>1</sup> It struck one of the Aztecs in the forehead and he fell dead where he was standing. The warriors charged the Spaniards, driving them into the water, and then loosed a hail of stones from their slings. Castaneda would have been killed in this action if a barkentine had not taken him aboard and sailed away toward Xocotitlan.

Another barkentine was anchored near the turn in the wall, and still another near Teotlecco, where the road runs straight to Tepetzinco. They were stationed as guards in order to control the lake. They sailed away that night, but after a few days they came back again to their stations.

The Spaniards advanced from the direction of Cuahuacatlan. Their allies from Tlaxcala, Acolhuacan and Chalco filled up the canal<sup>2</sup> so that the army could pass. They threw in adobe bricks and all the woodwork of the nearby houses: the lintels, the doorjambs, the beams and pillars. They even threw canestalks and rushes into the water.

### *The Spaniards Attack Again*

When the canal had been filled up, the Spaniards marched over it. They advanced cautiously, with their standard-bearer in the lead, and they beat their drums and played their chirimias as they came. The Tlaxcaltecas and the other allies followed close behind. The Tlaxcaltecas held their heads high and pounded their breasts with their hands, hoping to frighten us

*one hundred and five*

with their arrogance and courage. They sang songs as they marched, but the Aztecs were also singing. It was as if both sides were challenging each other with their songs. They sang whatever they happened to remember and the music strengthened their hearts.

The Aztec warriors hid when the enemy reached solid ground. They crouched down to make themselves as small as possible and waited for the signal, the shout that told them it was the moment to stand up and attack. Suddenly they heard it: "Mexicanos, now is the time!"

The captain Hecatzin leaped up and raced toward the Spaniards, shouting: "Warriors of Tlatelolco, now is the time! Who are these barbarians? Let them come ahead!" He attacked one of the Spaniards and knocked him to the ground, but the Spaniard also managed to knock Hecatzin down. The captain got up and clubbed the Spaniard again, and other warriors rushed forward to drag him away.

Then all the Aztecs sprang up and charged into battle. The Spaniards were so astonished that they blundered here and there like drunkards; they ran through the streets with the warriors in pursuit. This was when the taking of captives began. A great many of the allies from Tlaxcala, Acolhuacan, Chalco and Xochimilco were overpowered by the Aztecs, and there was a great harvesting of prisoners, a great reaping of victims to be sacrificed.

The Spaniards and their allies waded into the lake because the road had become too slippery for them. The mud was so slick that they sprawled and floundered and could not stand up to fight. The Aztecs seized them as captives and dragged them across the mud.

The Spanish standard was taken and carried off during this encounter. The warriors from Tlatelolco captured it in

*one hundred and six*

the place known today as San Martin, but they were scornful of their prize and considered it of little importance.

Some of the Spaniards were able to escape with their lives. They retreated in the direction of Culhuacan, on the edge of the canal, and gathered there to recover their strength.

### *Fifty-three Spaniards Are Sacrificed*

The Aztecs took their prisoners to Yacacolco, hurrying them along the road under the strictest guard. Some of the captives were weeping, some were keening, and others were beating their palms against their mouths.

When they arrived in Yacacolco, they were lined up in long rows. One by one they were forced to climb to the temple platform, where they were sacrificed by the priests. The Spaniards went first, then their allies, and all were put to death.

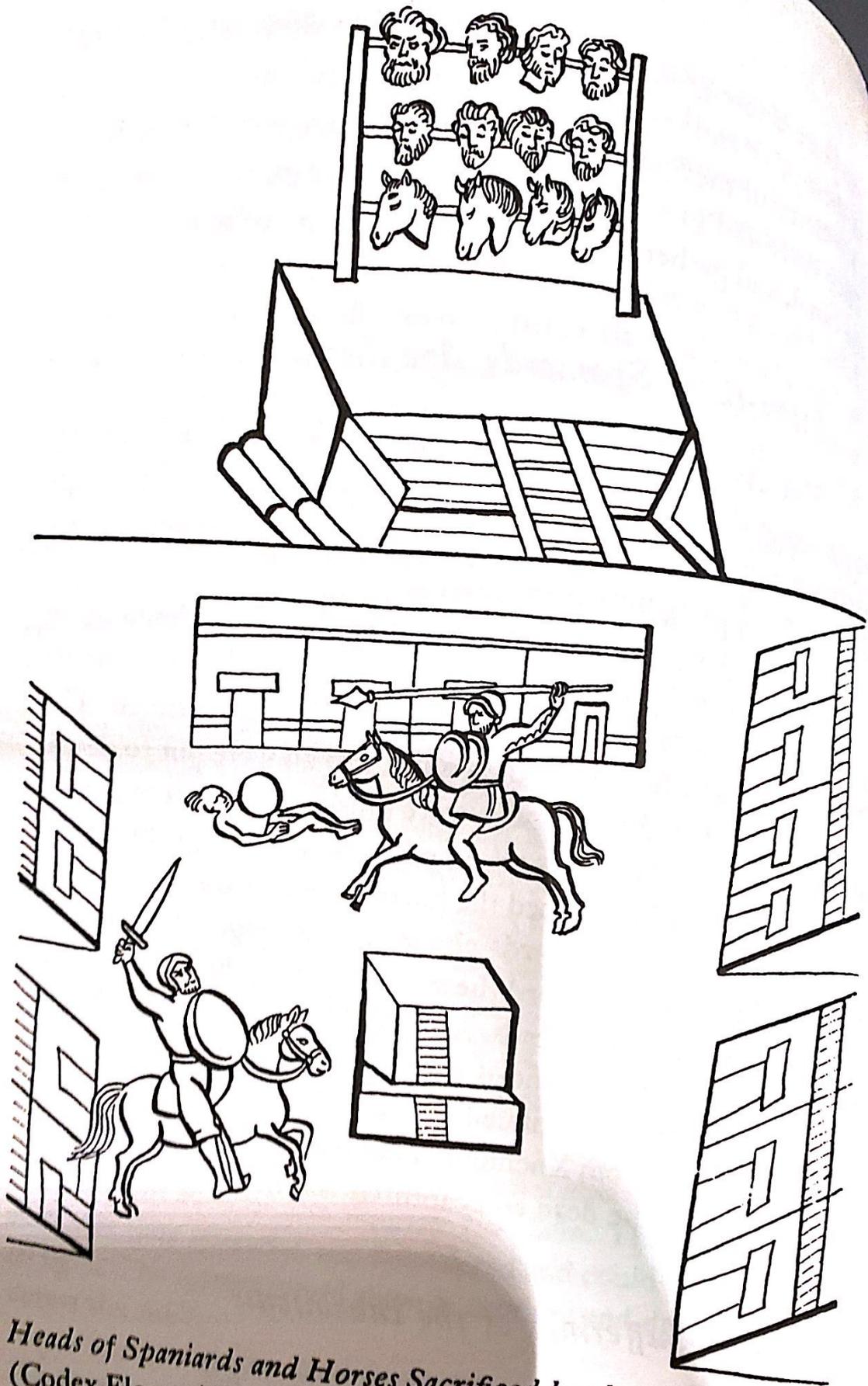
As soon as the sacrifices were finished, the Aztecs ranged the Spaniards' heads in rows on pikes. They also lined up their horses' heads. They placed the horses' heads at the bottom and the heads of the Spaniards above, and arranged them all so that the faces were toward the sun. However, they did not display any of the allies' heads. All told, fifty-three Spaniards and four horses were sacrificed there in Yacacolco.

The fighting continued in many different places. At one point, the allies from Xochimilco surrounded us in their canoes, and the toll of the dead and captured was heavy on both sides.

### *The Sufferings of the Inhabitants*

The Spanish blockade caused great anguish in the city. The people were tormented by hunger, and many starved to

*one hundred and seven*



*Heads of Spaniards and Horses Sacrificed by the Aztecs  
(Codex Florentino)*

*one hundred and eight*

death. There was no fresh water to drink,<sup>3</sup> only stagnant water and the brine of the lake,<sup>4</sup> and many people died of dysentery.

The only food was lizards, swallows, corncocks and the salt grasses of the lake. The people also ate water lilies and the seeds of the colorin,<sup>5</sup> and chewed on deerhides and pieces of leather. They roasted and seared and scorched whatever they could find and then ate it. They ate the bitterest weeds and even dirt.

Nothing can compare with the horrors of that siege and the agonies of the starving. We were so weakened by hunger that, little by little, the enemy forced us to retreat. Little by little they forced us to the wall.

### *The Battle in the Market Place*

On one occasion, four Spanish cavalymen entered the market place. They rode through it in a great circle, stabbing and killing many of our warriors and trampling everything under their horses' hooves. This was the first time the Spaniards had entered the market place, and our warriors were taken by surprise. But when the horsemen withdrew, the warriors recovered their wits and ran in pursuit.

It was at this same time that the Spaniards set fire to the temple and burned it to the ground. The flames and smoke leaped high into the air with a terrible roar. The people wept when they saw their temple on fire; they wept and cried out, fearing that afterward it would be plundered.

The battle lasted for many hours and extended to almost every corner of the market place. There was no action along the wall where the vendors sold lime, but the fighting raged among the flower stalls, and the stalls offering snails, and all the passageways between them.

*one hundred and nine*

Some of our warriors stationed themselves on the roof-tops of the Quecholan district, which is near the entrance to the market place, and from there they hurled stones and fired arrows at the enemy. Others broke holes in the rear walls of all the houses of Quecholan, holes just big enough for a man's body to pass through. When the cavalry attacked and were about to spear our warriors, or trample them, or cut off their retreat, they slipped through the holes and the mounted men could not follow.

### *Other Battles*

On another occasion the Spaniards entered Atliyacapan. They ransacked the houses and captured a number of prisoners, but when the warriors saw what was happening, they loosed their arrows and rushed forward to attack. The leader of this attack, a valiant chief named Axoquentzin, pressed the enemy so hard that they were forced to release their prisoners and drop all their spoils. But this great chief died when a Spanish sword entered his breast and found his heart.

There were other battles in Yacacolco, where the enemy killed many of the Aztecs with their crossbows. The warriors drew back and tried to waylay the rear guard, but a few of the allies saw them and climbed to the rooftops. They cried: "Warriors of Tlaxcala, come here! Your enemies are here!" The Tlaxcaltecas shot so many arrows at the men in ambush that they had to break and run.

Later in the day, the Aztecs put up a much stronger resistance, and the Spaniards and their allies could not break their ranks. The Tlatelolcas took up positions on the opposite

*one hundred and ten*

side of the canal, hurling stones and shooting arrows across it. The enemy could not advance or capture any of the bridges.

### *The Catapult Is Set Up in the Market Place*

During this time, the Spaniards mounted a wooden catapult on the temple platform to fling stones at the Indians. While it was being set up, the Indians who had gathered in Amaxac came out to stare at it. They pointed at the machine and asked each other what it could be. When the Spaniards had finished their preparations and were ready to shoot it at the crowd, they wound it up until the wooden beams stood erect. Then they released it like a great sling.

But the stone did not fall among the Indians. It flew over their heads and crashed into a corner of the market place. This seemed to cause an argument among the Spaniards: they gestured toward the Indians and shouted at each other. But still they could not aim the machine correctly. It threw out its stones in every direction.

Finally the Indians were able to see how it worked: it had a sling inside it, worked by a heavy rope. The Indians named it "the wooden sling."

The Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecas retreated again, marching back to Yacacolco and Tecpancaltitlan in closed ranks. Their leader was directing the campaign against us from his headquarters in Acocolecan.

### *The Aztec Defense*

Our warriors rallied to defend the city. Their spirits and courage were high; not one of them showed any fear or be-

*one hundred and eleven*

haved like a woman. They cried: "Mexicanos, come here and join us! Who are these savages? A mere rabble from the south!"<sup>6</sup> They did not move in a direct line; they moved in a zigzag course, never in a straight line.

The Spanish soldiers often disguised themselves so that they would not be recognized. They wore cloaks like those of the Aztecs and put on the same battle dress and adornments, hoping to deceive our warriors into thinking they were not Spaniards.

Whenever the Aztecs saw the enemy notching their arrows, they either dispersed or flattened themselves on the ground. The warriors of Tlatelolco were very alert; they were very cautious and vigilant, and watched intently to see where the shots were coming from.

But step by step the Spaniards gained more ground and captured more houses. They forced us backward along the Amaxac road with their spears and shields.

### *The Quetzal-Owl*

Cuauhtemoc consulted with a group of his captains and then called in a great captain named Opochtzin, who was a dyer by trade. They dressed him in the finery of the Quetzal-Owl, which had belonged to King Ahuitzotl.<sup>7</sup> Then Cuauhtemoc said to him: "This regalia belonged to my father, the great warrior Ahuitzotl. Terrify our enemies with it. Annihilate our enemies with it. Let them behold it and tremble."

The king ordered four captains to go with Opochtzin as a rear guard. He placed in the captain's hands the magic object that was the most important part of the regalia. This was an arrow with a long shaft and an obsidian tip.

*one hundred and twelve*

The captain Tlacotzin said: "Mexicanos, the power of Huitzilopochtli resides in this finery. Loose the sacred arrow at our enemies, for it is the Serpent of Fire, the Arrow that Pierces the Fire. Loose it at the invaders; drive them away with the power of Huitzilopochtli. But shoot it straight and well, for it must not fall to earth. And if it should wound one or two of our foes, then we shall still have a little time left and a chance to conquer them. Now, let us see what the god's will may be!"

The Quetzal-Owl departed with the four captains, and the quetzal feathers seemed to open out, making him appear even greater and more terrifying. When our enemies saw him approach, they quaked as if they thought a mountain were about to fall on them. They trembled with dread, as if they knew the finery could work magic.

The Quetzal-Owl climbed up onto a rooftop. When our enemies saw him, they came forward and prepared to attack him, but he succeeded in driving them away. Then he came down from the rooftop with his quetzal feathers and his gold ornaments. He was not killed in this action and our enemies could not capture the feathers or the gold. Three of the enemy soldiers were taken prisoner.

Suddenly the battle ended. Neither side moved against the other; the night was calm and silent, with no incidents of any kind. On the following day, absolutely nothing took place, and neither the Spaniards nor the Indians spoke a word. The Indians waited in their defense works, and the Spaniards waited in their positions. Each side watched the other closely but made no plans for launching an attack. Both sides passed the whole day in this fashion, merely watching and waiting.

<sup>1</sup> Described later in the following text.

<sup>2</sup> Which intersected the causeway.

<sup>3</sup> The Spaniards had broken the aqueduct that brought fresh water to the city from Chapultepec on the mainland.

' The lake water was saline except at the extreme south, around Xochimilco and Chalco.

' *Erythrina americana*.

' In Aztec religious geography, the south was sometimes the region of disorder.

' Motecuhzoma's uncle and predecessor.



### *Chapter Thirteen*

## The Surrender of Tenochtitlan

### *Introduction*

The texts in this chapter have been taken from three different indigenous sources. The first selection, by Sahagun's native informants, describes a final omen that presaged the imminent destruction of the Aztec capital. According to this account, it was Cuauhtemoc himself who surrendered Tenochtitlan to the Spaniards. The informants also give an eloquent description of the tragic scenes that accompanied the taking of the city.

The second selection is from the *XII relacion* by Alva Ixtlilxochitl. Its most memorable passage is the moment when Cuauhtemoc was brought face to face with Cortes. The king placed his hand on the conquistador's dagger and begged him to kill him with it, since he had already destroyed the kingdom.

*one hundred and fifteen*

The last selection is from the *VII relacion* by Chimalpain, and was translated from Nahuatl to Spanish by Miguel Leon-Portilla. It describes how Cortes bullied and even tortured the Aztec lords in order to obtain the gold and other valuables that the Indians had treasured since ancient times.

### *The Final Omen*

(From the *Codex Florentino* by Sahagun's informants)

At nightfall it began to rain, but it was more like a heavy dew than a rain. Suddenly the omen appeared, blazing like a great bonfire in the sky. It wheeled in enormous spirals like a whirlwind and gave off a shower of sparks and red-hot coals, some great and some little. It also made loud noises, rumbling and hissing like a metal tube placed over a fire. It circled the wall nearest the lakeshore and then hovered for a while above Coyoacazco. From there it moved out into the middle of the lake, where it suddenly disappeared. No one cried out when this omen came into view: the people knew what it meant and they watched it in silence.

Nothing whatever occurred on the following day. Our warriors and the Spanish soldiers merely waited in their positions. Cortes kept a constant watch, standing under a many-colored canopy on the roof of the lord Aztautzin's house, which is near Amaxac. His officers stood around him, talking among themselves.

### *Cuahtemoc's Surrender*

The Aztec leaders gathered in Tolmayecan to discuss what they should do. Cuahtemoc and the other nobles tried  
one hundred and sixteen

to determine how much tribute they would have to pay and how best to surrender to the strangers. Then the nobles put Cuauhtemoc into a war canoe, with only three men to accompany him: a captain named Teputztitloloc, a servant named Iaztachimal and a boatman named Cenyautl. When the people saw their chief departing, they wept and cried out: "Our youngest prince is leaving us! He is going to surrender to the Spaniards! He is going to surrender to the 'gods'!"

The Spaniards came out to meet him. They took him by the hand, led him up to the rooftop and brought him into the presence of Cortes. The Captain stared at him for a moment and then patted him on the head. Then he gestured toward a chair and the two leaders sat down side by side.

The Spaniards began to shoot off their cannons, but they were not trying to hit anyone. They merely loaded and fired, and the cannonballs flew over the Indians' heads. Later they put one of the cannons into a boat and took it to the house of Coyohuehuetzin, where they hoisted it to the rooftop.

### *The Flight from the City*

Once again the Spaniards started killing and a great many Indians died. The flight from the city began and with this the war came to an end. The people cried: "We have suffered enough! Let us leave the city! Let us go live on weeds!" Some fled across the lake, others along the causeways, and even then there were many killings. The Spaniards were angry because our warriors still carried their shields and *macanas*.<sup>1</sup>

Those who lived in the center of the city went straight toward Amaxac, to the fork in the road. From there they fled

*one hundred and seventeen*

in various directions, some toward Tepeyacac, others toward Xoxohuititlan and Nonohualco; but no one went toward Xocoloco or Mazatzintamalco. Those who lived in boats or on the wooden rafts anchored in the lake fled by water, as did the inhabitants of Tolmayecan. Some of them waded in water up to their chests and even up to their necks. Others drowned when they reached water above their heads.

The grownups carried their young children on their shoulders. Many of the children were weeping with terror, but a few of them laughed and smiled, thinking it was great sport to be carried like that along the road.

Some of the people who owned canoes departed in the daytime, but the others, the majority, left by night. They almost crashed into each other in their haste as they paddled away from the city.

### *The Spaniards Humiliate the Refugees*

The Spanish soldiers were stationed along the roads to search the fleeing inhabitants. They were looking only for gold and paid no attention to jade, turquoise or quetzal feathers. The women carried their gold under their skirts and the men carried it in their mouths or under their loincloths. Some of the women, knowing they would be searched if they looked prosperous, covered their faces with mud and dressed themselves in rags. They put on rags for skirts and rags for blouses; everything they wore was in tatters. But the Spaniards searched all the women without exception: those with light skins, those with dark skins, those with dark bodies.

A few of the men were separated from the others. These  
*one hundred and eighteen*



*Surrender of the Aztecs (Lienzo de Tlaxcala)*

*one hundred and nineteen*

men were the bravest and strongest warriors, the warriors with manly hearts. The youths who served them were also told to stand apart. The Spaniards immediately branded them with hot irons, either on the cheek or the lips.

The day on which we laid down our shields and admitted defeat was the day 1-Serpent in the year 3-House.<sup>2</sup> When Cuauhtemoc surrendered, the Spaniards hurried him to Acachinanco at night, but on the following day, just after sunrise, many of them came back again. They were dressed for battle, with their coats of mail and their metal helmets, but they had left their swords and shields behind. They all tied white handkerchiefs over their noses because they were sickened by the stench of the rotting bodies. They came back on foot, dragging Cuauhtemoc, Coanacotzin and Tetelepanquetzaltzin by their cloaks.

### *Cortes Demands Gold*

When the fighting had ended, Cortes demanded the gold his men had abandoned in the Canal of the Toltecs during the Night of Sorrows. He called the chiefs together and asked them: "Where is the gold you were hiding in the city?"

The Aztecs unloaded it from canoes: there were bars of gold, gold crowns, gold ornaments for the arms and legs, gold helmets and disks of gold. They heaped it in front of the Captain, and the Spaniards came forward to take possession of it. Cortes said: "Is this all the gold in the city? You must bring me all of it."

Tlacotzin replied: "I beg the lord to hear me. All the gold we owned was kept in our palaces. Is it not true that our lords took all of it with them?"

*one hundred and twenty*

La Malinche told Cortes what Tlacotzin had said. Then she translated the Captain's answer: "Yes, it is true. We took it and stamped it with our seal. But we lost it in the Canal of the Toltecs when your warriors surprised us. You must bring it all back."

Tlacotzin replied: "I beg the god to hear me. The people of Tenochtitlan do not know how to fight in canoes; it is not their custom. This is done only by the people of Tlatelolco, who fought in canoes to defend themselves from your attacks. Is it not possible that the Tlatelolcas took the gold?"

Then Cuauhtemoc said to Tlacotzin: "Yes, it is very possible. Our lords may have taken the wrong people prisoners. Everything suggests it. The rest of the gold must be in Texopan. The gold our lords took is here." Cuauhtemoc pointed at the heap they had unloaded from the canoes.

The Captain replied: "Only this little?"

Tlacotzin said: "Perhaps someone has stolen the rest. Why not search for it? Why not bring it to light?"

La Malinche told him what the Captain replied: "You must bring us two hundred bars of gold of this size." And she held her hands apart to show them the size.

Tlacotzin said: "Perhaps some woman has hidden the gold under her skirts. Why not search for it? Why not bring it to light?"

Ahuelitoc the Mixcoatlailotlac said: "I beg our lord and master to hear me. Even as late as the reign of Motecuhzoma, the Tepanecas<sup>3</sup> and the Acolhuas joined the people of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco in conquering our enemies.<sup>4</sup> We all went out together to defeat them; and when they had surrendered, we each went back to our own city. Then the conquered tribes brought us the tribute we had imposed: quetzal feathers, gold, jade, turquoise and other kinds of precious stones, as well as

*one hundred and twenty-one*

birds with rich plumage, such as the bluejay and the bird with a crimson ruff. All these things were brought here to Tenochtitlan: all the tribute, all the gold. . . .”

## *The Ravage of Tenochtitlan*

(From the *XII relacion* by Alva Ixtlilxochitl)

On the day that Tenochtitlan was taken, the Spaniards committed some of the most brutal acts ever inflicted upon the unfortunate people of this land. The cries of the helpless women and children were heart-rending. The Tlaxcaltecas and the other enemies of the Aztecs revenged themselves pitilessly for old offenses and robbed them of everything they could find. Only Prince Ixtlilxochitl of Tezcoco, ally of Cortes, felt compassion for the Aztecs, because they were of his own homeland. He kept his followers from maltreating the women and children as cruelly as did Cortes and the Spaniards.

At nightfall the invading forces retired again. Prince Ixtlilxochitl, Cortes and the other captains agreed to complete the conquest of the city on the following day, the day of St. Hippolytus the Martyr.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after daybreak, they approached the place where the remnants of the enemy were gathered. Cortes marched through the streets, but Ixtlilxochitl and Sandoval, the captain of the brigantines, approached by water. Ixtlilxochitl had been informed that Cuauhtemoc and his followers were assembling for escape in their canoes.

The anguish and bewilderment of our foes was pitiful to see. The warriors gathered on the rooftops and stared at the ruins of their city in a dazed silence, and the women and children and old men were all weeping. The lords and nobles crowded into the canoes with their king.

*one hundred and twenty-two*

## *The Capture of Cuauhtemoc*

At a given signal, our forces attacked the enemy all at once. We pressed forward so swiftly that within a few hours we had totally defeated them. Our brigantines and canoes attacked their flotilla; they could not withstand us but scattered in every direction, with our forces pursuing them. Garcia de Olguin, who commanded one of the brigantines, was told by an Aztec prisoner that the canoe he was following was that of the king. He bore down on it and gradually caught up with it.

Cuauhtemoc, seeing that the enemy was overtaking him, ordered the boatman to turn the canoe toward our barkentine and prepare to attack it. He grasped his shield and *macana* and was determined to give battle. But when he realized that the enemy could overwhelm him with crossbows and muskets, he put down his arms and surrendered.

### *Cuauhtemoc Acknowledges His Defeat*

Garcia de Olguin brought him before Cortes, who received him with all the respect due to a king. Cuauhtemoc placed his hand on the Captain's dagger and said: "I have done everything in my power to save my kingdom from your hands. Since fortune has been against me, I now beg you to take my life. This would put an end to the kingship of Mexico, and it would be just and right, for you have already destroyed my city and killed my people." He spoke other grief-stricken words, which touched the heart of everyone who heard them.

Cortes consoled him and asked him to command his warriors to surrender. Cuauhtemoc immediately climbed onto a

*one hundred and twenty-three*

high tower and shouted to them to cease fighting, for everything had fallen to the enemy. Of the 300,000 warriors who had defended the city, 60,000 were left. When they heard their king, they laid down their arms and the nobles came forward to comfort him.

Ixtlilxochitl was eager to clasp Cuauhtemoc's hand. The prince arrived in one of the two brigantines that were taking various lords and ladies to Cortes; among these were Tlacahuepantzin, son of Motecuhzoma, and Queen Papantzin Oxomoc, widow of Cuitlahuac. Ixtlilxochitl led them into the Captain's presence. Then he ordered that the queen and the other ladies be taken to Tezcoco and held there under guard.

That same day, after looting the city, the Spaniards apportioned all the gold and silver among themselves, leaving the feathers and precious stones for the nobles of Tezcoco and the cloaks and other objects for their warriors.

### *The Length of the Siege*

The siege of Tenochtitlan, according to the histories, paintings and chronicles, lasted exactly eighty days. Thirty thousand men from the kingdom of Tezcoco were killed during this time, of the more than 200,000 who fought on the side of the Spaniards. Of the Aztecs, more than 240,000 were killed. Almost all of the nobility perished: there remained alive only a few lords and knights and the little children.

### *Cortes Deals with the Nobles and Priests*

(From the VII relacion by Chimalpain)

When the arms and trappings of war had been put aside,  
one hundred and twenty-four

the lords were brought together in Acachinanco. These were Cuauhtemoc, lord of Tenochtitlan; Tlacotzin, the serpent woman;<sup>6</sup> Quiztzin, lord of Azcapotzalco; Panitzin, lord of Ecatepec; and Motelhuihtzin, the royal steward. The last-named was not a prince, but he was a great captain during the war. Cortes ordered that they be bound and taken to Coyoacan. Panitzin, however, was not bound. At Coyoacan they were thrown into prison, where the Spaniards burned their feet.

It was at this same time that the Spaniards questioned the priests Cuauhcoatl, Coahuayhuatl, Tecohuentzin and Tetlanmecatl about the gold that had been lost in the Canal of the Toltecs. The Spaniards also demanded the eight bars of gold that had been stored in the palace under the care of the steward Ocuitecatl. The steward had died of smallpox during the plague. Only his son was left; and when he discovered that four of the eight bars had disappeared, he immediately fled.

The five lords who had been taken to Coyoacan were led from the prison, and Cortes addressed them through his interpreters, Jeronimo de Aguilar and La Malinche: "I want to know who the rulers of the city were, and also who ruled the Tepanecas and the people of Acolhuacan, Chalco and Xochimilco."

The five lords deliberated for a while. Then Tlacotzin said: "I beg the god to hear these few words of mine. I had no lands whatever when I first came here; the Tepanecas, the Acolhuas and the people of Chalco and Xochimilco all had lands. I made myself their lord with arrows and shields, and took possession of their lands. But what I did was no more than what you have done, for you also have come here with arrows and shields to capture all our cities."

When the Captain heard this, he turned to the other lords, and spoke in a voice ringing with authority: "He came here

with arrows and shields to seize your lands. He forced you to be his servants. But now that I have come, I set you free. You are no longer his vassals. Your lands are your own again.”

<sup>1</sup> The *macana* was a sort of flattened club edged with sharp pieces of obsidian. It was the dreaded closing-in weapon of the Aztec warrior.

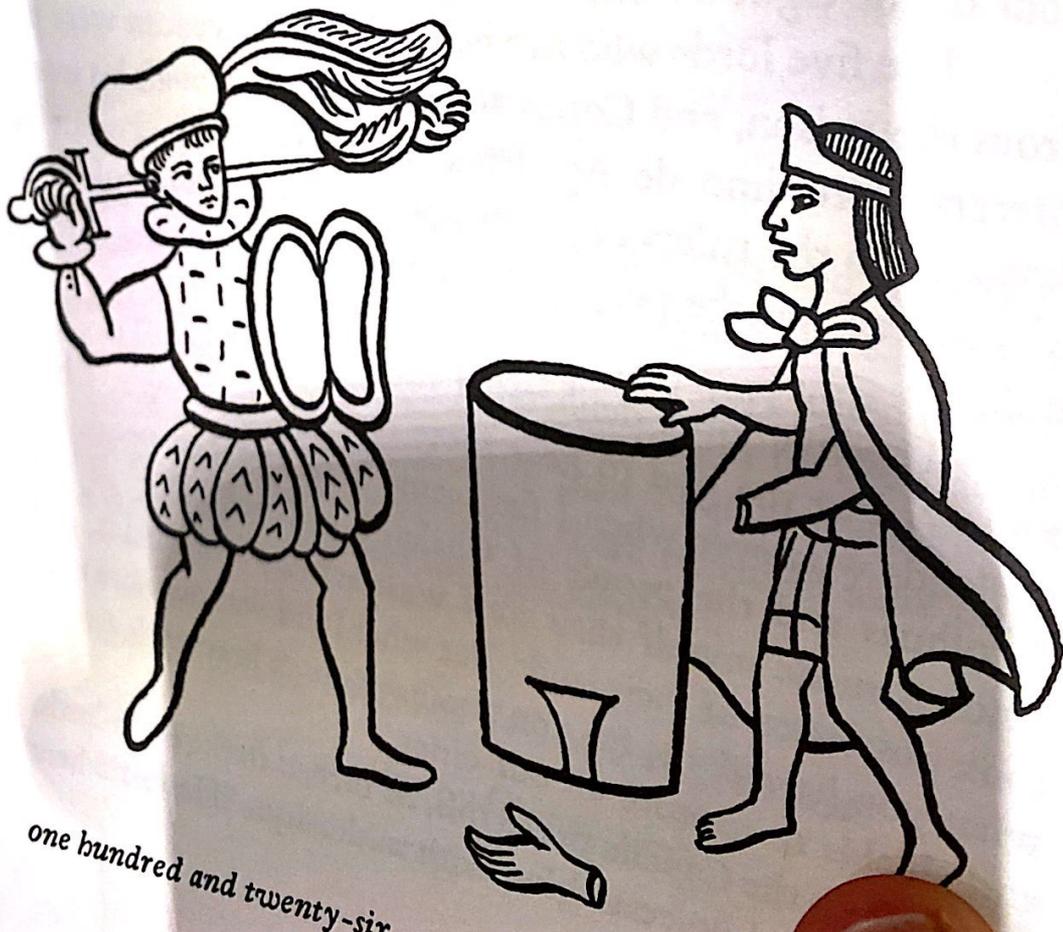
<sup>2</sup> August 13, 1521.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 10, note 6.

<sup>4</sup> There was a triple alliance among the Aztecs, the Tepanecas of Tacuba and the Acolhuas of Tezcoco. Motecuhzoma, King of Mexico around 1440, became the leader of the allied armies, conquering towns and small states in what is today Guerrero and Morelos.

<sup>5</sup> August 13, 1521.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 3, note 1. Tlilpotonque, who held this office under Motecuhzoma, had apparently died in battle or in the siege.



one hundred and twenty-six



## *Chapter Fourteen*

# The Story of the Conquest as Told by the Anonymous Authors of Tlatelolco

### *Introduction*

In the thirteen preceding chapters we have presented the story of the Conquest in selections from various native sources, arranged according to the chronological sequence of events. Now, as a recapitulation, we offer another indigenous account. It describes all the major incidents of the Conquest in briefer form, but it also contains a considerable amount of material that cannot be found in other documents. Therefore it is not a mere summary but an important, independent narrative. As such, it inevitably introduces a

*one hundred and twenty-seven*

number of discrepancies, both with the texts we have presented earlier and with the Spanish chronicles of Bernal Diaz and others.

This account was written in Nahuatl in 1528 by anonymous authors in Tlatelolco. Like several of the texts by Sahagun's native informants, it reflects the pride of the Tlatelolcas in their home quarter of the city. It is probably the oldest prose document of all those drawn upon in this book. The original is now in the National Library in Paris, where it forms part of *Unos anales historicos de la nacion mexicana*—the so-called Manuscript 22.

### *The Arrival of Cortes*

Year 13-Rabbit. The Spaniards were sighted off the coast.

Year 1-Canestalk. The Spaniards came to the palace at Tlayacac. When the Captain arrived at the palace, Motecuhzoma sent the Cuetlaxteca<sup>1</sup> to greet him and to bring him two suns as gifts. One of these suns was made of the yellow metal, the other of the white.<sup>2</sup> The Cuetlaxteca also brought him a mirror to be hung on his person, a gold collar, a great gold pitcher, fans and ornaments of quetzal feathers and a shield inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

The envoys made sacrifices in front of the Captain. At this, he grew very angry. When they offered him blood in an "eagle dish," he shouted at the man who offered it and struck him with his sword. The envoys departed at once.

All the gifts which the Cuetlaxteca brought to the Captain were sent by Motecuhzoma. That is why the Cuetlaxteca went to meet the Captain at Tlayacac: he was only performing his duties as a royal envoy.

Then the Captain marched to Tenochtitlan. He arrived here during the month called Bird,<sup>3</sup> under the sign of the day

*one hundred and twenty-eight*

8-Wind. When he entered the city, we gave him chickens, eggs, corn, tortillas and drink. We also gave him firewood, and fodder for his "deer." Some of these gifts were sent by the lord of Tenochtitlan, the rest by the lord of Tlatelolco.

Later the Captain marched back to the coast, leaving Don Pedro de Alvarado—The Sun—in command.

### *The Massacre in the Main Temple*

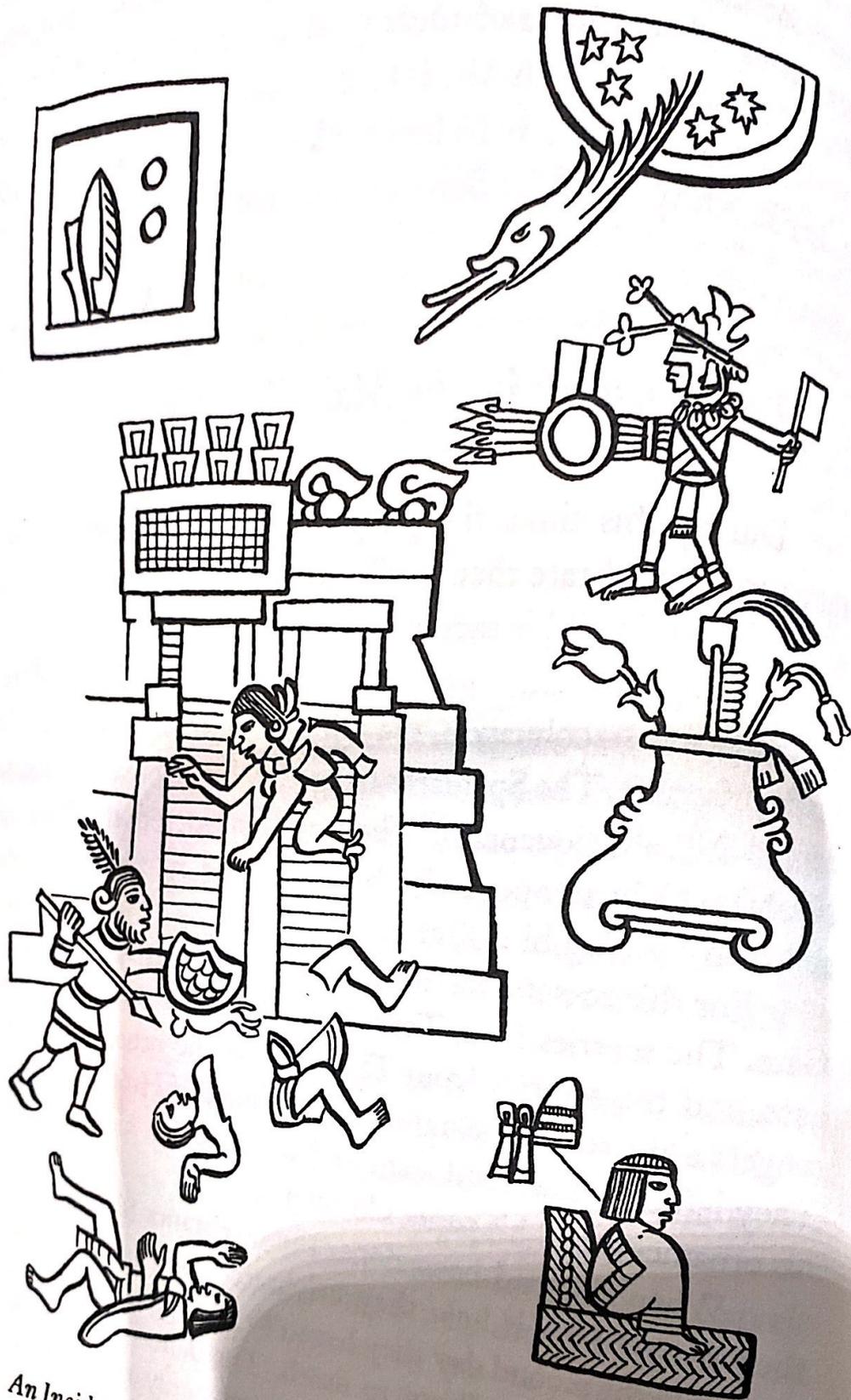
During this time, the people asked Motecuhzoma how they should celebrate their god's fiesta. He said: "Dress him in all his finery, in all his sacred ornaments."

During this same time, The Sun commanded that Motecuhzoma and Itzcohuatzin, the military chief of Tlatelolco, be made prisoners. The Spaniards hanged a chief from Acolhuacan named Nezahualquentzin. They also murdered the king of Nauhtla, Cohualpopocatzin, by wounding him with arrows and then burning him alive.

For this reason, our warriors were on guard at the Eagle Gate. The sentries from Tenochtitlan stood at one side of the gate, and the sentries from Tlatelolco at the other. But messengers came to tell them to dress the figure of Huitzilopochtli. They left their posts and went to dress him in his sacred finery: his ornaments and his paper clothing.

When this had been done, the celebrants began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death. The dancers and singers were completely unarmed. They brought only their embroidered cloaks, their turquoises, their lip plugs, their necklaces,

*one hundred and twenty-nine*



An Incident During the Conquest (Codex Vaticanus A.)  
one hundred and thirty

their clusters of heron feathers, their trinkets made of deer hooves. Those who played the drums, the old men, had brought their gourds of snuff and their timbrels.

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers—and even the spectators—were also killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.

The king Motecuhzoma, who was accompanied by Itzcohuatzin and by those who had brought food for the Spaniards, protested: "Our lords, that is enough! What are you doing? These people are not carrying shields or *macanas*. Our lords, they are completely unarmed!"

The Sun treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the Captain left for the coast. We allowed the Captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might, and that was the beginning of the war.

### *The Night of Sorrows*

The Spaniards attempted to slip out of the city at night, but we attacked furiously at the Canal of the Toltecs, and many of them died. This took place during the fiesta of Tecuilhuitl. The survivors gathered first at Mazatzintamalco and waited for the stragglers to come up.

Year 2-Flint. This was the year in which Motecuhzoma died. Itzcohuatzin of Tlatelolco died at the same time.

*one hundred and thirty-one*

The Spaniards took refuge in Acueco, but they were driven out by our warriors. They fled to Teuhcalhueyacan and from there to Zoltepec. Then they marched through Citlal-tepec and camped in Temazcalapan, where the people gave them hens, eggs and corn. They rested for a short while and marched on to Tlaxcala.

Soon after, an epidemic broke out in Tenochtitlan. Almost the whole population suffered from racking coughs and painful, burning sores.

### *The Spaniards Return*

When the epidemic had subsided a little, the Spaniards marched out of Tlaxcala. The first place they attacked and conquered was Tepeyacac. They departed from there during the fiesta of Tlahuano, and they arrived in Tlapechhuan during the fiesta of Izcalli. Twenty days later they marched to Tezcoco, where they remained for forty days. Then they reached Tlacopan and established themselves in the palace.

There was no fighting of any kind while they were in Tlacopan. At the end of a week they all marched back to Tezcoco.

Eighty days later they went to Huaxtepec and Cuauh-nahuac,<sup>4</sup> and from there they attacked Xochimilco. A great many Tlatelolcas died in that battle. Then the Spaniards returned to Tezcoco again.

Year 3-House. The Aztecs began to fight among themselves. The princes Tzihuacpopocatzin and Cicpatzin Tecuenotzin were put to death, as were Axayaca and Xoxopehualoc, the sons of Motecuhzoma. These princes were killed be-

*one hundred and thirty-two*

cause they tried to persuade the people to bring corn, hens and eggs to the Spaniards. They were killed by the priests, captains and elder brothers.

But the great chiefs were angry at these executions. They said to the murderers: "Have we ourselves become assassins? Only sixty days ago, our people were slaughtered at the fiesta of Toxcatl!"

### *The Siege of Tenochtitlan*

Now the Spaniards began to wage war against us. They attacked us by land for ten days, and then their ships appeared. Twenty days later, they gathered all their ships together near Nonohualco, off the place called Mazatzintamalco. The allies from Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco set up camp on either side of the road.

Our warriors from Tlatelolco immediately leaped into their canoes and set out for Mazatzintamalco and the Nonohualco road. But no one set out from Tenochtitlan to assist us: only the Tlatelolcas were ready when the Spaniards arrived in their ships. On the following day, the ships sailed to Xoloco.

The fighting at Xoloco and Huitzillan lasted for two days. While the battle was under way, the warriors from Tenochtitlan began to mutiny. They said: "Where are our chiefs? They have fired scarcely a single arrow! Do they think they have fought like men?" Then they seized four of their own leaders and put them to death. The victims were two captains, Cuauhnochtli and Cuapan, and the priests of Amantlan and Tlalocan. This was the second time that the people of Tenochtitlan killed their own leaders.

*one hundred and thirty-three*

## *The Flight to Tlatelolco*

The Spaniards set up two cannons in the middle of the road and aimed them at the city. When they fired them, one of the shots struck the Eagle Gate. The people of the city were so terrified that they began to flee to Tlatelolco. They brought their idol Huitzilopochtli<sup>5</sup> with them, setting it up in the House of the Young Men. Their king Cuauhtemoc also abandoned Tenochtitlan. Their chiefs said: "Mexicanos! Tlatelolcas! All is not lost! We can still defend our houses. We can prevent them from capturing our storehouses and the produce of our lands. We can save the sustenance of life, our stores of corn. We can also save our weapons and insignia, our clusters of rich feathers, our gold earrings and precious stones. Do not be discouraged; do not lose heart. We are Mexicanos! We are Tlatelolcas!"

During the whole time we were fighting, the warriors of Tenochtitlan were nowhere to be seen. The battles at Yacacolco, Atezcapan, Coatlan, Nonohualco, Xoxohuitlan, Tepeyacac and elsewhere were all fought by ourselves, by Tlatelolcas. In the same way, the canals were defended solely by Tlatelolcas.

The captains from Tenochtitlan cut their hair short, and so did those of lesser rank. The Otomies and the other ranks that usually wore headdresses did not wear them during all the time we were fighting. The Tlatelolcas surrounded the most important captains and their women taunted them: "Why are you hanging back? Have you no shame? No woman will ever paint her face for you again!" The wives of the men from Tenochtitlan wept and begged for pity.

When the warriors of Tlatelolco heard what was happening, they began to shout, but still the brave

*one hundred and thirty-four*

Tenochtitlan hung back. As for the Tlatelolcas, their humblest warriors died fighting as bravely as their captains.

### *The Tlatelolcas Are Invited to Make a Treaty*

A Spaniard named Castaneda approached us in Yauh-tenco. He was accompanied by a group of Tlaxcaltecas, who shouted at the guards on the watchtower near the breakwater. These guards were Itzpalanqui, the captain of Chapultepec; two captains from Tlapala; and Cuexacaltzin. Castaneda shouted to them: "Come here!"

"What do you want?" they asked him. "We will come closer." They got into a boat and approached to within speaking distance. "Now, what have you to say to us?"

The Tlaxcaltecas asked: "Where are you from?" And when they learned that the guards were from Tlatelolco, they said: "Good, you are the men we are looking for. Come with us. The 'god' has sent for you."

The guards went with Castaneda to Nonohualco. The Captain was in the House of the Mist there, along with La Malinche, The Sun (Alvarado) and Sandoval. A number of the native lords were also present and they told the Captain: "The Tlatelolcas have arrived. We sent for them to come here."

La Malinche said to the guards: "Come forward! The Captain wants to know: what can the chiefs of Tenochtitlan be thinking of? Is Cuauhtemoc a stupid, willful little boy? Has he no mercy on the women and children of his city? Must even the old men perish? See, the kings of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula, Chalco, Acolhuacan, Cuahnahuac, Xochimilco, Mizquic, Cuitlahuac and Culhuacan are all here with me."

*one hundred and thirty-five*

One of the kings said: "Do the people of Tenochtitlan think they are playing a game? Already their hearts are grieving for the city in which they were born. If they will not surrender, we should abandon them and let them perish by themselves. Why should the Tlatelolcas feel sorry when the people of Tenochtitlan bring a senseless destruction on themselves?"

The guards from Tlatelolco said: "Our lords, it may be as you say."

The "god" said: "Tell Cuauhtemoc that the other kings have all abandoned him. I will go to Teocahuayacan, where his forces are gathered, and I will send the ships to Coyoacan."

The guards returned to speak with the followers of Cuauhtemoc. They shouted the message to them from their boats. But the Tlatelolcas would not abandon the people of Tenochtitlan.

### *The Fighting Is Renewed*

The Spaniards made ready to attack us, and the war broke out again. They assembled their forces in Cuepopan and Cozcacuahco. A vast number of our warriors were killed by their metal darts. Their ships sailed to Texopan, and the battle there lasted three days. When they had forced us to retreat, they entered the Sacred Patio, where there was a four-day battle. Then they reached Yacacolco.

The Tlatelolcas set up three racks of heads in three different places. The first rack was in the Sacred Patio of Tlilancalco [Black House], where we strung up the heads of our lords the Spaniards. The second was in Acacolco, where we strung up Spanish heads and the heads of two of their horses.

*one hundred and thirty-six*

The third was in Zacatla, in front of the temple of the earth-goddess Cihuacoatl, where we strung up the heads of Tlaxcaltecas.

The women of Tlatelolco joined in the fighting. They struck at the enemy and shot arrows at them; they tucked up their skirts and dressed in the regalia of war.

The Spaniards forced us to retreat. Then they occupied the market place. The Tlatelolcas—the Jaguar Knights, the Eagle Knights, the great warriors—were defeated, and this was the end of the battle. It had lasted five days, and two thousand Tlatelolcas were killed in action. During the battle, the Spaniards set up a canopy for the Captain in the market place. They also mounted a catapult on the temple platform.

### *Epic Description of the Besieged City*

And all these misfortunes befell us. We saw them and wondered at them; we suffered this unhappy fate.

Broken spears lie in the roads;  
we have torn our hair in our grief.  
The houses are roofless now, and their walls  
are red with blood.

Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas,  
and the walls are splattered with gore.  
The water has turned red, as if it were dyed,  
and when we drink it,  
it has the taste of brine.

We have pounded our hands in despair  
against the adobe walls,

*one hundred and thirty-seven*

for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.  
The shields of our warriors were its defense,  
but they could not save it.

We have chewed dry twigs and salt grasses;  
we have filled our mouths with dust and bits of adobe;  
we have eaten lizards, rats and worms. . . .

When we had meat, we ate it almost raw. It was scarcely  
on the fire before we snatched it and gobbled it down.

They set a price on all of us: on the young men, the  
priests, the boys and girls. The price of a poor man was only  
two handfuls of corn, or ten cakes made from mosses or  
twenty cakes of salty couch-grass. Gold, jade, rich cloths,  
quetzal feathers—everything that once was precious was now  
considered worthless.

The captains delivered several prisoners of war to Cuauh-  
temoc to be sacrificed. He performed the sacrifices in person,  
cutting them open with a stone knife.

### *The Message from Cortes*

Soon after this, the Spaniards brought Xochitl the Acol-  
nahuacatl,<sup>6</sup> whose house was in Tenochtitlan, to the market  
place in Tlatelolco. They gripped him by both arms as they  
brought him there. They kept him with them for twenty days  
and then let him go. They also brought in a cannon, which  
they set up in the place where incense was sold.

The Tlatelolcas ran forward to surround Xochitl. They  
were led by the captain from Huitznahuac, who was a Huas-  
teco.<sup>7</sup> Xochitl was placed under guard in the Temple of the  
Woman<sup>8</sup> in Axocotzinco.

*one hundred and thirty-eight*

As soon as the Spaniards had set Xochitl loose in the market place, they stopped attacking us. There was no more fighting, and no prisoners were taken.

Three of the great chiefs said to Cuauhtemoc: "Our prince, the Spaniards have sent us one of the magistrates, Xochitl the Acolnahuacatl. It is said that he has a message for you."

Cuauhtemoc asked them: "What is your advice?"

The chiefs all began to shout at once: "Let the message be brought here! We have made auguries with paper and with incense! The captain who seized Xochitl should bring us the message!"

The captain was sent to question Xochitl in the Temple of the Woman. Xochitl said: "The 'god' and La Malinche send word to Cuauhtemoc and the other princes that there is no hope for them. Have they no pity on the little children, the old men, the old women? What more can they do? Everything is settled.

"You are to deliver women with light skins, corn, chickens, eggs and tortillas. This is your last chance. The people of Tenochtitlan must choose whether to surrender or be destroyed."

The captain reported this message to Cuauhtemoc and the lords of Tlatelolco. The lords deliberated among themselves: "What do you think about this? What are we to do?"

### *The City Falls*

Cuauhtemoc said to the fortune tellers: "Please come forward. What do you see in your books?"

One of the priests replied: "My prince, hear the truth

*one hundred and thirty-nine*

that we tell you. In only four days we shall have completed the period of eighty days. It may be the will of Huitzilopochtli that nothing further shall happen to us. Let us wait until these four days have passed."

But then the fighting broke out again. The captain of Huitznahuac—the same Huasteco who had brought in Xochitl—renewed the struggle. The enemy forced us to retreat to Amaxac. When they also attacked us there, the general flight began. The lake was full of people, and the roads leading to the mainland were all crowded.

Thus the people of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco gave up the struggle and abandoned the city. We all gathered in Amaxac. We had no shields and no *macanas*, we had nothing to eat and no shelter. And it rained all night.

### *The People Flee the City*

Cuauhtemoc was taken to Cortes along with three other princes. The Captain was accompanied by Pedro de Alvarado and La Malinche.

When the princes were made captives, the people began to leave, searching for a place to stay. Everyone was in tatters, and the women's thighs were almost naked. The Christians searched all the refuges. They even opened the women's skirts and blouses and felt everywhere: their ears, their breasts, their hair. Our people scattered in all directions. They went to neighboring villages and huddled in corners in the houses of strangers.

The city was conquered in the year 3-House. The date on which we departed was the day 1-Serpent in the ninth month.<sup>a</sup>

*one hundred and forty*

The lords of Tlatelolco went to Cuauhtitlan. Even the greatest captains and warriors left in tatters. The women had only old rags to cover their heads, and they had patched together their blouses out of many-colored scraps. The chiefs were grief-stricken and mourned to one another: "We have been defeated a second time!"<sup>10</sup>

### *The Offering of Gold*

A poor man was treacherously killed in Otonatlan as he was seeking refuge. The other refugees were shaken by his death and began to discuss what they could do.<sup>11</sup> They said: "Let us beg mercy of our lord the Captain."

First the leaders of Tlatelolco demanded gold objects from everyone. They collected many lip rings, lip plugs, nose plugs and other ornaments. They searched anyone who might be hiding objects of gold behind his shield or under his clothing.

When they had gathered everything they could find, they sent the treasure to Coyoacan in the custody of several chiefs. The chiefs said to the Captain: "Our lord and master, please hear us. Your vassals, the great lords of Tlatelolco, beg you to have mercy. Your vassals and their people are being mistreated by the inhabitants of the villages where they have taken refuge. They scorn us and treacherously kill us.

"We have brought you these objects of gold, and we beg you to hear our pleas."

Then they set the baskets of gold objects before him.

When the Captain and La Malinche saw the gold, they grew very angry and said: "Is this what you have been wasting

*one hundred and forty-one*

your time on? You should have been looking for the treasure that fell into the Canal of the Toltecs! Where is it? We must have it!"

The chiefs said: "Cuauhtemoc gave it to the Cihuacoatl and the Huiznahuacatl. They know where it is. Ask them."

When the Captain heard this, he ordered that the chiefs be placed in chains. La Malinche came to them later and said: "The Captain says that you may leave and speak with your leaders. He is very grateful to you. It may be true that your people are being mistreated. Tell them to return. Tell your people to come back to their houses in Tlatelolco. The Captain wants all the Tlatelolcas to reoccupy their quarter of the city. But tell your leaders that no one is to settle in Tenochtitlan itself, for that is the property of the 'gods.' You may leave now."

### *Cuauhtemoc Is Tortured*

When the envoys from Tlatelolco had departed, the leaders of Tenochtitlan were brought before the Captain, who wished to make them talk. This was when Cuauhtemoc's feet were burned. They brought him in at daybreak and tied him to a stake.

They found the gold in Cuitlahuactonco, in the house of a chief named Itzpotonqui. As soon as they had seized it, they brought our princes—all of them bound—to Coyoacan.

About this same time, the priest in charge of the temple of Huitzilopochtli was put to death. The Spaniards had tried to learn from him where the god's finery and that of the high priests was kept. Later they were informed that it was being guarded by certain chiefs in Cuauhchichilco and Xaltocan.

*one hundred and forty-two*



*Incidents After the Surrender of the Aztecs  
(Proceso de Alvarado)*

*one hundred and forty-three*

They seized it and then hanged two of the chiefs in the middle of the Mazatlan road.

### *The Return to Tlatelolco*

The common people began to return to their houses in Tlatelolco. This was in the year 4-Rabbit. Then Temilotzin and Don Juan Huehuetzin came back, but Coyohuehuetzin and Tepantemoctzin both died in Cuaúhtitlan.

We were left entirely alone when we reoccupied Tlatelolco. Our masters, the Spaniards, did not seize any of our houses. They remained in Coyoacan and let us live in peace.

They hanged Macuilxochitl, the king of Huitzilopochco, in Coyoacan. They also hanged Pizotzin, the king of Culhuacan. And they fed the Keeper of the Black House,<sup>12</sup> along with several others, to their dogs.

And three wise men of Ehecatl,<sup>13</sup> from Tezcoco, were devoured by the dogs. They had come only to surrender; no one brought them or sent them there. They arrived bearing their painted sheets of paper. There were four of them, and only one escaped; the other three were overtaken, there in Coyoacan.

<sup>1</sup> The Cuetlaxtcca were the allied people from Cuetlaxtla in central Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> Gold and silver.

<sup>3</sup> The fourteenth month, October 20–November 8.

<sup>4</sup> Present-day Cuernavaca.

<sup>5</sup> Not the seed-paste figure described in Chapter 9, but the wooden sculpture in the temple on top of the main pyramid.

<sup>6</sup> The Acolmahuacatl was a high priest from the Acolnahuac quarter inside Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

<sup>7</sup> An Indian from eastern Mexico.

<sup>8</sup> The earth-goddess Cihuacoatl.

<sup>9</sup> July 12–July 31.

<sup>10</sup> The first time by Tenochtitlan.

<sup>11</sup> To avoid the same fate. They wanted to return home.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1, note 5.

<sup>13</sup> God of the wind, a frequent disguise of Quetzalcoatl.

*one hundred and forty-four*



## *Chapter Fifteen*

# Elegies on the Fall of the City

## *Introduction*

By way of conclusion, we present three “songs of sorrow,” true elegies written by the post-Conquest Aztec poets. The first song, from the collection of *Cantares mexicanos* in the National Library of Mexico, was probably composed in 1523. The second is part of a whole series of poems recounting the Conquest from the arrival of the Spaniards in Tenochtitlan to the ultimate defeat of the Aztecs. We have selected only the most dramatic moments

*one hundred and forty-five*

from the last section of this series. The third song, also from the *Cantares mexicanos*, recalls the traditional symbolism of "flowers and songs." It laments that only grief and suffering remain in the once proud capital.

These elegies are among the first and most poignant expressions of what Dr. Garibay has called "the trauma of the Conquest." They reveal, with greater eloquence than the other texts, the deep emotional wound inflicted on the Indians by the defeat.

### *The Fall of Tenochtitlan*

Our cries of grief rise up  
and our tears rain down,  
for Tlatelolco is lost.

The Aztecs are fleeing across the lake;  
they are running away like women.

How can we save our homes, my people?  
The Aztecs are deserting the city:  
the city is in flames, and all  
is darkness and destruction.

Motelchiuhtzin the Huiznahuacatl,  
Tlacotzin the Tlailotlacatl,  
Oquitzin the Tlacatecuhtli  
are greeted with tears.

Weep, my people:  
know that with these disasters  
we have lost the Mexican nation.  
The water has turned bitter,  
our food is bitter!  
These are the acts of the Giver of Life. . . .

*one hundred and forty-six*



*Misfortunes of the Conquered (Archives of the Indies)*

*one hundred and forty-seven*

## *The Imprisonment of Cuauhtemoc*

The Aztecs are besieged in the city;  
the Tlatelolcas are besieged in the city!

The walls are black,  
the air is black with smoke,  
the guns flash in the darkness.  
They have captured Cuauhtemoc;  
they have captured the princes of Mexico.

The Aztecs are besieged in the city;  
the Tlatelolcas are besieged in the city!

After nine days, they were taken to Coyoacan:  
Cuauhtemoc, Coanacoch, Tetzlepanquetzaltzin.  
The kings are prisoners now.

Tlacotzin consoled them:  
"Oh my nephews, take heart!  
The kings are prisoners now;  
they are bound with chains."

The king Cuauhtemoc replied:  
"Oh my nephew, you are a prisoner;  
they have bound you in irons.

"But who is that at the side of the Captain-General?  
Ah, it is Dona Isabel, my little niece!  
Ah, it is true: the kings are prisoners now!

"You will be a slave and belong to another:  
the collar will be fashioned in Coyoacan,  
where the quetzal feathers will be woven.

*one hundred and forty-eight*

we will work only this little piece of land, and thus our sons  
will do so. Let us hope in this manner they will not kill  
us. . . .<sup>4</sup>

### *Dance of the Great Conquest, Eighteenth Century*

In many different forms Nahuatl-speaking people continued over the centuries to express their feelings about what had befallen them. Among the extant testimonies that recall the Spanish invasion, there are several compositions conceived to be performed accompanied by music, song, and dance. They are productions belonging to a genre of native plays that were developed throughout the colonial period. Among the numerous "dances" or ballet-dramas whose theme is the "Conquest," there is one written in elegant Nahuatl that deserves special consideration, among other reasons because it was still being performed as late as 1894 in the town of Xicotepec (today Villa Juárez) in the state of Puebla.

As is common in Greek drama, the plot of the "Dance of the Great Conquest" develops in a single day. The story concerns the arrival of Hernan Cortés, his encounter with Motecuhzoma, and some important events said to have immediately followed the meeting. The text conveys a type of Christian lesson centered on the benefits believed to have come from Cortés's advent as the bearer of the true faith. From this one can infer the intervention of a friar's hand; yet at the same time it includes a dialogue between Motecuhzoma and prince Cuauhtemoc that no one but a Nahua could have introduced. This dialogue transforms the play, perhaps created originally as a piece of "missionary theater," into a courageous condemnation both of the Spanish intrusion and of Motecuhzoma's attitude toward Cortés, which we discussed earlier in chapter 4. This attack, uttered by Cuauhtemoc, is accompanied by a contemptuous depiction of the conqueror and his men.

The fact that this play, whose language is indicative of an eighteenth-century composition, was performed as recently as 1894

*one hundred and sixty-two*

demonstrates the enduring force of the collective memory of the Nahuas, which could keep alive sentiments associated with an event that, although it had radically affected their culture and being, occurred in a distant past. Numerous anachronisms and fanciful interpretations of historical facts are understandably present throughout the play. For example, Cuauhtemoc refers to Motecuhzoma as "the great ruler who governs this new land called America." And due most likely to the friar's intervention, following Cuauhtemoc's reprimand of Motecuhzoma the play ends with an imaginary mortal combat in which Cuauhtemoc loses his life. This fight, which supposedly took place on the same day, deviates widely from the accepted historical facts, which identify the Aztec leader's death as taking place when he was hanged by Cortés in Tabasco in 1525. In the spirit of a sermon, a choir sings: "There died poor Cuauhtemoc. He went to Hell. Because of his blindness, his perdition took place."

This admonition, made to be enunciated in an edifying manner, contrasts with the young prince's courageous rebuke against Motecuhzoma. The words, notwithstanding a few anachronisms, ring true to our understanding of the character of the last Aztec "emperor."

Emperor Motecuhzoma, great Lord, Monarch, as you are named here in the land called America.

Improperly are you so named, for you no longer ought to wear the crown, for you have lost courage and you are afraid. . . . Tell me if you dare to speak to this great city? Can you give [something] to those who are down and out in the country from which they came?

They come to mock you. All those who come here are second rate or Spaniards who lost out, who come telling you that in their country there are great cities, talking of another

*one hundred and sixty-three*

king at the head of the empire of Castile by the name of Charles the Fifth, [and] of a Catholic religion.

These are only stories, lies. I do not believe in other books [i.e., except indigenous, picto-glyphic codices]. I feel that their words are only like dreams. You have no courage, but I have, and I will make war and test the strength they claim to have. I shall see it, and many fearful arts will be practiced. There are flints, arrows, new stones. Flints that they will take, those who go out to war, fearful warriors, also Chichimecs, like wild beasts who maintain their anger. They are making straight [truthful] my gods, they all give me great knowledge, science. I shall lead them. I shall encourage them, all who come together, and they [the] armies will show every form of war.

You will likewise lose your kingdom, your crown, and your scepter. You will lose all the esteem that I maintained for you because you gave yourself up. I will search for you in your . . . kingdom, and you shall suffer those lost ones here present, the bandits, Spaniards who have come over here. They come to fool you, for you no longer deserve your dominion.

I deserve it. It belongs to me because I am strong of heart, valiant. I do not want the honor of our gods to come to nothing. You shall see, you shall experience who is the one who calls himself, who is named prince Cuauhtemoc. I have in my hands flames, noise, lightning, embers, smoke, sand, dust, winds, whirlwinds with which I shall drive them back. If they do not want to die, let them go right back to their country. If they do not, they shall perish here no matter what you do to prevent it.<sup>5</sup>

*one hundred and sixty-four*

## *The Manifestos of Emiliano Zapata, April 1918*

Nahuatl-speaking Indians and other natives, among them the Yaqui of Sonora and the Maya of Yucatan, took part in the Mexican Revolution of 1910–19. Emiliano Zapata, a well-known leader of the Revolution and champion of the landless peasants of southern Mexico, was not himself an Indian, but he was a mestizo, born in Anenquico, a small town in Morelos, who, endowed with a charismatic personality, had managed to attract large numbers of Nahuas and others to join the army he had raised. However, the mere idea of an Indian uprising caused such alarm among the elite that a prominent conservative congressman, José María Lozano, warned his fellow partisans of Zapata's successes and threat in these terms: "Zapata has rebelled. . . . He poses as the liberator of the slave; he offers something to all. He is not alone. . . . Countless people follow him. . . . He offers them lands. His preaching begins to bear fruit: the Indians have rebelled!"<sup>6</sup>

Several testimonies exist that describe the pleasure felt by the Nahuas on hearing Zapata addressing them in their own language. One is provided by a native woman, Luz Jiménez, in an account she gave of Zapata's arrival in the village of Milpa Alta, just south of Mexico City: "First news we had about the revolution was the arrival of a great man, Zapata, who came from the state of Morelos. He was well dressed with his tall, crowned, broad-brimmed felt *sombrero*. He was the first great man who spoke to us in Nahuatl. . . . All those who came along with him spoke Nahuatl very much the same as we do. Zapata spoke Nahuatl! When he and his men entered Milpa Alta we could understand what they said."<sup>7</sup>

Emiliano Zapata, who became a legendary hero to thousands of mestizo peasants and Indians, was fighting to get back for them the communal lands that had been usurped by Spaniards, Mexicans, and others of European provenance over the course of centuries. To the eyes of his followers, Zapata's struggle was a fight to regain lost personal freedom and ancestral lands, a battle to assure that land would be owned only by those who worked it.

*one hundred and sixty-five*

After several years of fighting, and already suffering from a decimated army, Zapata tried to regain his forces by issuing two manifestos in Nahuatl on April 27, 1918. In one he urged some Tlaxcalan armed bands, who had previously followed Domingo Arenas, his former ally and later his murdered rival, to come to his side. In the other he repeated the call to the people living in the nearby villages. These manifestos are the last extant examples of public documents in Nahuatl in which, once again, the images of the vanquished and of those who abuse power are vividly depicted. The first manifesto reads as follows:

To you, chiefs, officers, and soldiers of the Arenas Division.

What we all suspected has already occurred. That which had to happen today or tomorrow: your separation from those engendered by Venustiano Carranza [president and head of the federal army]. They never favored, nor loved you. They merely deceived you, envied you. They wanted to hurt you, dishonor you, get rid of you. They never behaved as humans toward you.

To turn the face against those who so badly abuse power, honors you, erases the memory of your past deception [when their chief Arenas sided with the federal government].

We hope you will take part in the ideals for which we are fighting. In this manner we will be one, pressed closely against one flag. Thus our unified hearts will excel. Those who make fun of us, the ones engendered by Carranza, will not be able to destroy us. . . .

Join us, our flag belongs to the people. We will fight together. . . . [T]his is our great work which we will achieve in some way, before our revered mother, [the one] called *Patria* [i.e., homeland or ancestral land].

*one hundred and sixty-six*

Let us fight the perverse, wicked Carranza, who is a tormentor of us all. If we work for our unity, we will fulfill the great command: land, liberty, justice. Let us perform our work of revolutionaries and know our duties toward our revered mother the [ancestral] land. This army's command invites you. That is why I express this word. All those who will follow it, who will fight at our side, will enjoy a righteous and good life. In it we place our word of honor, of sincere men and good revolutionaries.

Tlaltizapan, Morelos, April 27, 1918

The Commander-in-Chief of the Liberation Army,  
Emiliano Zapata<sup>8</sup>

The other manifesto, dated the same day, was addressed to the people in general who lived in the region "where chief Arenas had fought." Here Zapata expresses himself echoing the centuries-old complaints and hopes of the Nahuas:

Our great war will not come to an end, will not conclude until that obscure tyrant, envious, who mocks the people, makes their faces turn around, is defeated. He is Venustiano Carranza who dishonors and makes ashamed our revered mother the [ancestral] land, Mexico. . . .

Here is the people who keep strong and confront the great possessors of lands — Christians [i.e., hacienda owners and caiques], those who have made fun of us, who hate us. . . . We will receive the valiant ones, our hearts will rejoice being together with them. . . .

*one hundred and sixty-seven*

Let us keep fighting. We will not rest until we come to possess our lands, those that belonged to our grandfathers, and which the greedy-handed thieves took from us. . . .

It is now more than ever necessary that we all, with our heart and courage, achieve this great work, following those who began the uprising, who preserve in their souls the true aims and have faith in a pure life.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Liberation Army,  
Emiliano Zapata<sup>9</sup>

### *The Nahuas and the "Coyotes" Today*

The Nahuas, their invincible spirit, and their language are still very much alive today. Contrary to what some had expected or even desired, indigenous endurance, after hundreds of years of adversity, has made possible the survival of a people with a long cultural history. Today, in the last decade of our millennium, there are more than forty million native people in the Americas, one and a half million of whom are Nahuas engaged in the centuries-long struggle to preserve and foster their ancestral cultural identities. The intellectual effort of a growing number of them is currently contributing to a renaissance that includes the production of a new literature, aptly named by them *Yancuic Tlahuolli*, the "New Word."

Among the contemporary Nahua writers we find professionals teaching in rural communities, journalists, and university students. Some are already well acquainted with Nahuatl grammar and the ancient literature inscribed in the language. To them the compositions of pre-Columbian poets, such as the famous Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472), the extant literary narratives, and the detailed chronicles—including those concerning the Spanish invasion found in this book—are a source of inspiration. It has been a great honor and pleasure for me that some of these masters of the "new word" have attended the seminar on Nahuatl culture and language which I

*one hundred and sixty-eight*

have conducted for more than thirty years at the National University of Mexico.

One of these native authors, Joel Martínez Hernández, born in the Huasteca in the state of Hidalgo and himself a teacher, has penned in Nahuatl a literary declaration expressing his thoughts regarding the present and future of the Nahuas. In it he paints a painful image of those he and many Nahuas call "Coyotes," referring to the astute and voracious non-Indians who take advantage of the few possessions left to the indigenous peoples.

Some Coyotes are saying  
that we Nahuas will disappear,  
will vanish,  
our language will be heard no more,  
will be used no more.  
The Coyotes rejoice in this,  
as this is what they are looking for.  
Why is it that they want us to disappear?  
We do not have to contemplate this too long,  
because four hundred years have shown us  
the aim of the Coyotes.  
They are envious of our lands,  
our forests and rivers,  
our work, our sweat.  
The Coyotes want us living  
in the slums of their cities,  
naked and hungry,  
subject to their falsehoods and frauds.  
The Coyotes want us to work for them,  
they want us to abandon  
our communal lands, our labor,

*one hundred and sixty-nine*

our endeavors and language,  
our ways of dressing and living,  
our forms of thinking.

The Coyotes desire  
to make Coyotes out of us,  
and then they will deprive us  
of all that is ours,  
the fruits of our labor  
which has caused us fatigue.  
We must strengthen our hearts  
with one, two words,  
which will illuminate our eyes,  
so we can become fully conscious of it.

We have many tasks to perform.  
I will add only a few words.

Where and how many  
are the Nahuas in Mexico?

We, the Nahuas,  
are not just in one place,  
we are scattered in sixteen states  
and eight hundred and eight municipalities.

One has to understand  
that it is not only in our farm[s],  
not only in our village[s],  
that we Nahuas exist.

Sometimes we hear  
that we Nahuas are vanishing,  
but the census figures  
speak very differently. . . .

Truly we can assert that,  
although some want us to disappear,

*one hundred and seventy*

we Nahuas continue to live,  
we Nahuas continue to grow. . . .10

The Nahuas, formerly vanquished and for centuries oppressed, are indeed growing in numbers and, above all, have become fully conscious of the right they have to preserve their language and culture. With this assurance, today they are busily reflecting upon their culture and its destiny. The "others," imagined and described in many forms by them since the days of the invasion, must come to grips with and understand this new perspective. As is daily becoming more evident, the Nahuas and the millions of other Native Americans throughout the hemisphere are no longer asking for mercy. Like other Americans, north and south of the equator, they know they have their rights as individuals, communities, and ethnic groups. But now another issue has come to the fore: How does one learn to trust in oneself? Some indigenous writers claim that for this to take place a new self-image must be created. One Nahua poet, Natalio Hernández Xocoyotzin, a native of Ixhuatan, Veracruz, has conveyed this insight beautifully.

Sometimes I feel  
that we, the Indians, are waiting  
for the arrival of a Man  
who can achieve all,  
    knows everything,  
is ready to help us,  
will answer our problems.

But, this Man  
who can achieve all,  
    knows everything,  
will never arrive

*one hundred and seventy-one*

because he is in ourselves,  
walks along with us.  
He has been asleep,  
but now he is awakening.<sup>11</sup>

The broken spears, the net made of holes, was it all merely a dream? Ancient poetry was like "the flowers that wither," as a fifteenth-century Nahua poet expressed it. But now it is different. The "person-within" is already awakening, giving strength to the heart of the Nahuas. The words of that inner American being are different from those heard daily in our busy lives, but by listening carefully one can perceive in them the wisdom of the Nahua elders.

They shall not wither, my flowers,  
they shall not cease, my songs,  
I, the singer, lift them up.  
They are scattered, they spread about.  
But even though my flowers may yellow,  
they shall live  
in the innermost house  
of the bird of the golden feathers.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This letter, preserved in the General Archive of the Indies, Seville, is amply commented in "Bartolomé de las Casas in the Indigenous Consciousness of the Sixteenth Century," chap. 4, M. Leon-Portilla, *Endangered Cultures*, trans. Julie Goodson-Lawes (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), pp. 85-96.

<sup>2</sup> See M. Leon-Portilla, *The Aztec Image of Self and Society: An Introduction to Nabua Culture*, ed. J. Jorge Klor de Alva (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), chap. 5.

<sup>3</sup> This letter - Doc. 165, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid - republished with permission, is found in Arthur J. O. Anderson, Frances Berdan, and James Lockhart, eds. and trans., *Beyond the Codices: The Nabua View of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 181-87.

<sup>4</sup> "Corporate land title of Santo Tomás Ajusco," General Archive of the Nation, Mexico City, Section "Lands" (Tierras) 2676. The Nahuatl text and an ancient Spanish version of it have been published by Marcelo Díaz de Salas and Luis Reyes García in "Testimonio de la Fundación de Santo Tomás Ajusco," *Tlalocan* (Mexico: National Autonomous University of Mexico, 1970), vol. 6, pp. 193-212.

<sup>5</sup> A copy of the Nahuatl text of this "dance" was recorded by the ethnologist Bodil Christensen in Xiutepec, renamed Villa Juárez, in the state of Puebla.