

John Pohl's MESOAMERICA: THE MEETING

TWO POINTS OF VIEW

Nearly everyone has heard the story of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire which took place between A.D. 1519-1521. It continues to be retold as a remarkable military achievement with Hernan Cortés' vastly outnumbered, but better armed, Spaniards defeating the Aztec hordes only under the most desperate conditions. Of course much of this heroic legacy was promoted by the Spaniards themselves. Cortés was careful to emphasize his personal valor in his letters to Emperor Charles, and other members of the expedition (like Bernal Díaz del Castillo) later wrote highly romanticized accounts. But fewer people are aware of another side to the story that is very different, and no less extraordinary: the conquest as the Aztec Indian people themselves experienced it and retold it in both written and pictographic form.

HISTORICAL RECORDS OF THE CONQUEST

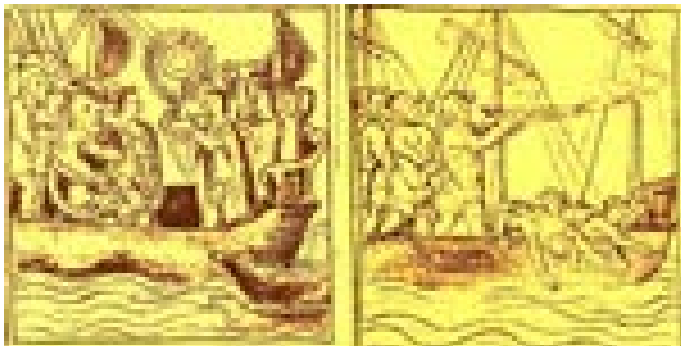
"The conquered gave an account of the many things that took place during the war that the conquerors were unaware of. Those who told this story were persons of good character and it is believed that they all told the truth." (Florentine Codex)

The Florentine Codex

In working with Aztecs who had actually lived through the conquest, the early Spanish historian Friar Bernardino de Sahagún was especially interested in the indigenous perspective of the conflict and recorded it in Book Twelve of his history known today as the Florentine Codex. This work features significant insights into how the Aztecs perceived the Spaniards and sought to adapt their military and political strategies accordingly throughout the campaign.

The Lienzo de Tlaxcala

The Spaniards frequently conveyed the impression that they had succeeded in bringing down the Aztec empire by themselves. The reality of the situation was very different. The fact is that the Spaniards owed their success not so much to their superior arms as to their Indian allies. In nearly



all their battles, the Spaniards fought together with indigenous armies numbering in the tens of thousands, especially the Tlaxcalteca who had already become bitter enemies of the Aztec empire. The Tlaxcalteca later commemorated their participation in the conquest with a pictorial manuscript now called the Lienzo de Tlaxcala.



Aztec ambassadors boarded Cortés' ship and presented the commander with sumptuous gifts including the ritual dress of their gods. Cortés responded by putting the ambassadors in irons and terrifying them with a demonstration of his matchlock guns. (Florentine Codex) Click on Image for more detail.

The Florentine Codex depicts Cortés' men disembarking from their ships. Informed by Maya and other Indian peoples to the east of the capital of the great Aztec empire lying in the Central Mexican highlands, the Spaniards reached the coast of Veracruz on April 21, 1519. (Florentine Codex) Click on Image for more detail.

Next, Cortés reached Cempoala on June 3, 1519. The Totonac lord of that kingdom was

impressed by the Spanish captain, and promised to supply his small Totonac army for the march inland in hopes of freeing his city-state from oppressive Aztec tribute demands.

Meanwhile, when the Aztec ambassadors returned to Tenochtitlán, they reported all that they had learned of the Spaniards to their emperor Motecuhzoma. (Florentine Codex) Click on Image for more detail.

"They were very white, their eyes were like chalk. Their armaments, their swords, their shields, their lances, were all of iron. The animals they rode were as high as a roof top and looked like deer. Their dogs were huge, their eyes blazed yellow like fire. They moved about with their tongues hanging, always panting." (Florentine Codex)

Map depicting the route taken from Veracruz to Tenochtitlán by Cortés and his Indian-Spanish army. Click on Image for more detail.

Meanwhile, Cortés learned of a confederacy of city states whose capital was located at Tlaxcala. The Tlaxcalteca, as they were known, had resisted the Aztec empire for many years, but now found themselves entirely surrounded. After an initial conflict with the Spaniards, the Tlaxcalteca soon understood that they shared a common enemy in the Aztec empire and made an alliance with Cortés. On September 23, 1519, the Tlaxcalteca led the Spaniards into their city, and gave them all the provisions they needed.

The Lienzo de Tlaxcala illustrates the meeting between Cortés and the four ranking tlataloque or "speakers" of the Tlaxcalteca. The woman standing next to Cortés is Malinche or Malinalli,

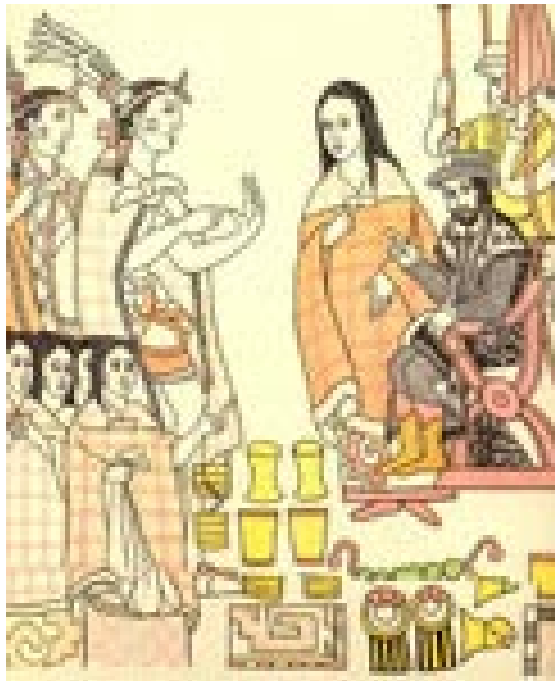




an Indian woman who served as translator. The Spaniards also called her Doña Marina. (Lienzo de Tlaxcala) Click on Image for more detail.

The Tlaxcalteca told the Spaniards that they were surrounded by enemies who had long ago sworn obedience to the Aztec empire. They urged them to march against

Cholula first and promised to provide them with an army. When Cortés and his allied Indian-Spanish army reached Cholula, the nobles greeted them before the great temple of the god Quetzalcoatl. Then the slaughter began. The Cholulteca had not foreseen it and thousands were brutally massacred. The conquerors justified the deaths of the Cholultecas punishment for their having executed a Tlaxcalteca ambassador and for plotting the death of Cortés. When the people of Tenochtitlán heard of the murder they were filled with dread.



Motecuhzoma dispatched his noblemen to meet Cortés at a pass lying between the volcanos of Iztac-cihuatl and Popocatepetl. With offerings of gold, the Aztecs attempted to dissuade the invaders from marching into the Basin of México.

“They seized upon the gold as if they were monkeys. For clearly their thirst for it was unquenchable, they starved, lusted for it and they stuffed themselves with it.” (Florentine Codex)

One lord attempted to deceive the Spaniards by claiming to be the Aztec emperor but he was exposed as an imposter by the Tlaxcalteca and the invaders marched on.

Advised by their allies to approach Tenochtitlán from the south, Cortés met little resistance and on November 8, 1519 he crossed the Cuitlahuac causeway over Lake Texcoco to enter Tenochtitlán.

Motecuhzoma personally went out to meet Cortés and his men. He gave them garlands of flowers, hung gold necklaces around their necks, and gave them presents of every sort. Doña Marina interpreted what Motecuhzoma said for Cortés:

“Lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on earth. You have come to your city of México.”

Then Cortés responded through Marina:



“Tell Motecuhzoma that we are his friends and that there is nothing to fear. We have waited long to meet with him.” (Florentine Codex)

Motecuhzoma played the gracious host and allowed the Spaniards to occupy a palace while he attended to everything desired of him. But within a week Cortés seized the emperor, put him in chains and held him hostage. Motecuhzoma’s vassals were angry and disgusted with the emperor for showing such weakness, and withdrew from the city.

The Spaniards soon questioned Motecuhzoma about gold. After many days Motecuhzoma showed Cortés a treasure house filled with pre-

cious objects. The Spaniards immediately set hot fires and melted the gold into bars. The Tlaxcalteca took the jade instead for they considered it more valuable.

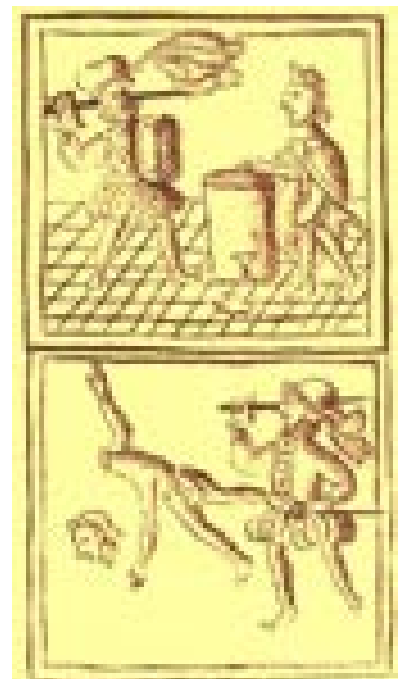
The Aztecs refused to attend the Spaniards. “None of us dared enter the palace for we were terrified, stunned... we just left the palace in fear.” (Florentine Codex)

On April 20, 1520, Pánfilo de Narváez landed at Veracruz with orders from the governor of Cuba to arrest Cortés for disobeying orders. Cortés decided to leave the Tenochtitlán garrison to Pedro de Alvarado, and to deal with this new threat from Narváez directly.

Cortés took Narváez by surprise and captured him. Then he recruited the newly arrived troops with promises of gold and returned to Tenochtitlán. (Lienzo de Tlaxcala) Click on Image for more detail.

Meanwhile, back in the Aztec city, the Spaniards who had stayed behind with Alvarado found themselves in a very dangerous position of their own making. It was the time for the feast of Toxcatl that was dedicated to the Aztec’s principal god, Huitzilopochtli. Alvarado foolishly suspected treachery and viciously attacked the celebrants, killing many people.

“They surrounded our dancers and then set upon the drummers. One had his hands severed and then they struck off his head. They charged the crowd and hacked at us with their iron swords... they cut us to pieces... the blood ran like water and so the war broke out.” (Florentine Codex) Click on Image for more detail.



The Aztecs were outraged and drove the Spaniards back into their palace where they were besieged. The Spaniards were now trapped under force and surrounded by a hostile enemy who no longer respected the wishes of their own emperor. Lord Itzquauhtzin, who was also a hostage, attempted to make peace and shouted from the palace:

“Men of Tenochtitlán! Your ruler, the lord of all men, Motecuhzoma begs you. We are not equal to the Spaniards. Abandon the battle... otherwise doom will be your fate.” (Florentine Codex)



But the Aztecs no longer respected the wishes of their emperor and showered the palace with sling stones and arrows. They were furious. They hunted down and killed anyone they suspected of trying to aid Motecuhzoma and the other hostages.

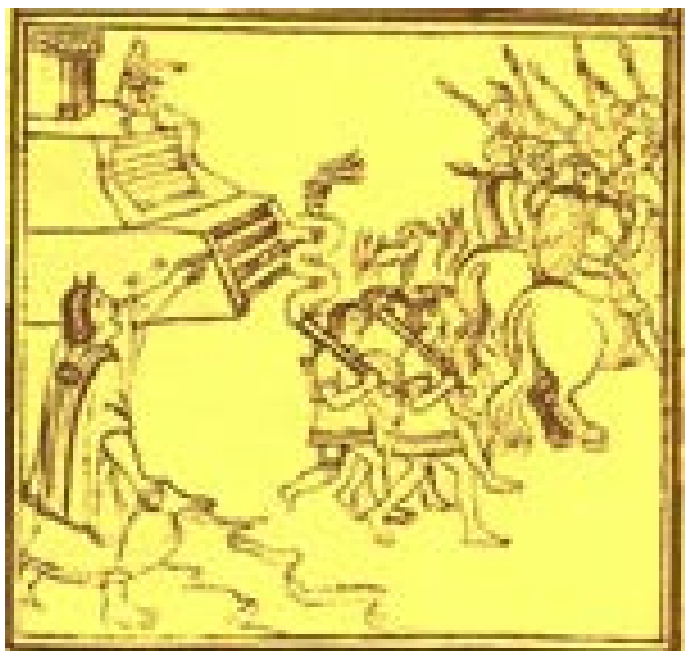
When Cortés returned, the Aztecs permitted him to enter the palace and then he too was entrapped. A vicious battle continued for many days.

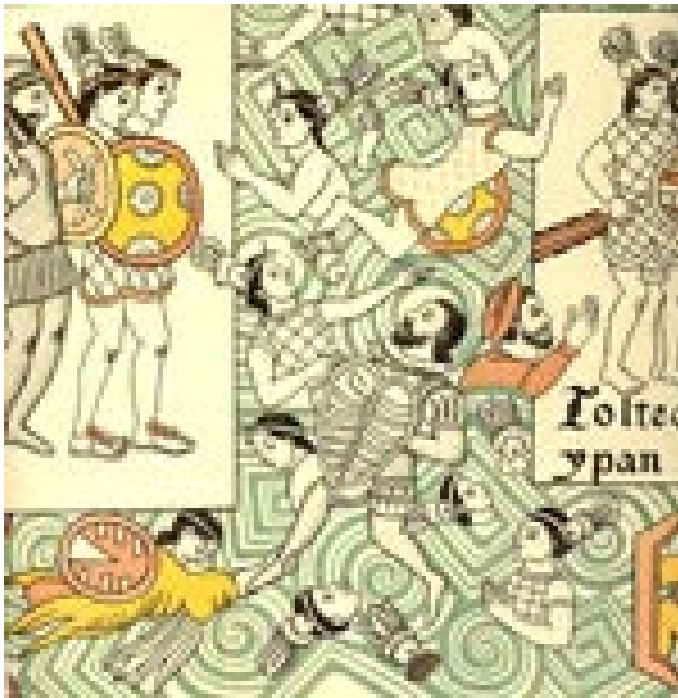
Finally, the Spaniards threw the bodies of both Motecuhzoma and Itzquauhtzin into a canal. Click on Image for more detail.

On the night of June 30, 1520, the Spaniards attempted to escape. They waited until midnight and moved forward through the streets with the Spaniards in the lead and the Tlaxcalteca forming the rear guard. The Aztecs had removed all the

bridges over the causeways, but Cortés improvised with the use of a moveable wooden platform. But, when they reached the fourth canal along their route, a woman drawing water saw them and called out.

“Mexico, all of you, they are fleeing, they are sneaking away.” (Florentine Codex) Then a guard at the top of the temple of Huitzilopochtli sounded the alarm and the boatmen headed forward carrying hundreds of warriors to entrap the Spaniards. Click on Image for more detail.





The fighting was vicious but the Spaniards kept moving forward until they reached the Tolteca canal where the chasm was too wide to cross. (Lienzo de Tlaxcala) [Click on Image for more detail.](#)

“They all tumbled into it. The Tlaxcalteca, the Spanish footmen and horsemen, the women; all became entangled and fell over the brink as if pushed from a cliff. The canal was filled with the dead and those who came last trod upon the bodies of their companions to make the crossing.” (Florentine Codex)

The few who survived reached Otoncalpolco on the western shore of Lake Texcoco, and there they received food and supplies from the people of a nearby kingdom. These people

then sought to ally themselves with the Spaniards just as the Tlaxcalteca had.

The Spaniards had no choice but to flee to the north and try to escape back to Tlaxcala. But everywhere they went, the Indian people evacuated their towns and hid in the mountains. The Aztec army caught up with the Spaniards at Tonan Mountain and took them by surprise at dawn. The battle lasted several hours and the Aztecs very nearly succeeded in annihilating their enemies. Then Cortés saw the Aztec commander on a nearby hill, charged him on horseback, and slew him. The army was thrown into disorder and the Spaniards escaped.

The Lienzo de Tlaxcala indicates that Cortés was welcomed back to Tlaxcala where he offered as a gift - the emblem of the Aztec commander he had killed. [Click on Image for more detail.](#)



“When the Spaniards fled we thought we had seen the last of them but this was not to be... a great pestilence came, the smallpox. It caused great misery. It covered the body with pustules, those who suffered could only lie in their beds. Many died of hunger for there was no one left alive in their homes to look after them.” (Florentine Codex) [Click on Image for more detail.](#)

In December 1520, the new Aztec emperor Cuitlahuac succumbed to smallpox and Cortés began his march on Tenochtitlán once again.

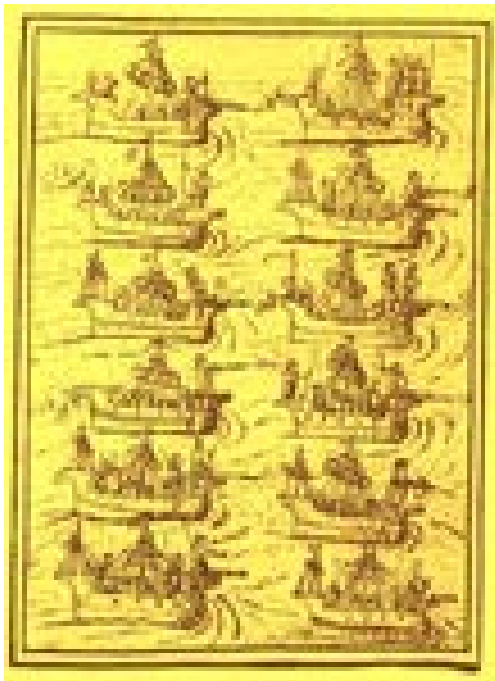


Reinforced with thousands of Indian troops from enemy city states who sought to destroy the Aztec capital, the Spaniards divided their army and moved into both Texcoco and Tlacopan.

In February 1521, Cuauhtemoc was made emperor.

The Spaniards had constructed boats, twelve in all, and launched them into the lake. Cortés was investigating where the

canals were straight and deep enough to attack Tenochtitlán by both land and water. The Aztecs attacked them.



“Guns filled the prows of the Spanish boats and they fired upon the Aztec canoes that lay massed. When they fired at us many were killed and the canoes sunk. But we soon learned how to judge their shots and we never ran a direct course.” (Florentine Codex)

Each day the Spaniards would move forward into the city but they soon found themselves trapped in the narrow streets where they fought desperately in hand to hand combat until nightfall when they had to withdraw. These skirmishes lasted well into the spring of 1521.



Tzilacatzin, the mighty, as portrayed in the Florentine Codex. While the battle for Tenochtitlán continued, cer-

tain soldiers on both sides began to emerge as heroic characters. The Spaniards were especially fearful of this warrior who was known for carrying a shield loaded with huge ball stones that he hurled at their formations.

Many Spanish captives were taken in the summer of 1521. The Florentine Codex indicates that they were ritually executed before the great temple of the Aztec war god Huitzilopochtli. Even the heads of their horses were displayed as war trophies on the tzompantli, or skull rack. Cortés himself was badly wounded and nearly



captured. Click on Image for more detail.

Each day Cortés gave orders to fill in the canals so that his cavalry could charge into the center of the city. At night however the Aztecs simply removed the stones and opened up the breaches in the causeways. But, all they succeeded in doing was to prolong their suffering.

The Spaniards put their allies to work and dismantled much of the city, stone by stone. Many of the Aztecs fled to the north to fortify the great market place at Tlatelolco. But the suffering was great. Thousands died from famine.

Surrounded at Tlatelolco, the Aztec lords decided to surrender on August 13, 1521. Emperor Cuauhtemoc went by canoe. He was taken to Cortés.

“And so the war ended, we laid down our shields. We have suffered enough! Some fled across the lake others across the causeways. Spanish soldiers stopped people everywhere, looking for gold. They stripped the women, even peering into their mouths. As for the men many were taken and branded on the cheeks.” (Florentine Codex)

“But what of the gold?” demanded Cortés. Cuauhtemoc directed that all that he had in his canoe be brought forth.

“Is that all there is?” replied Cortés. An Aztec lord reminded the Spanish commander that they had taken all the gold, but had lost it in the Tolteca canal when they fled the city the year before:

“Let Cortés listen,” he said. “This is how that treasure was made. When Motecuhzoma was alive, war was declared and we, the Méxicas, the Tlatteoloca, the Tepanec, and the Acolhua campaigned together. When we conquered, when a city fell, we all returned to our cities. Only later the people of the conquered cities came to us and brought their tribute: jade, turquoise, gold, and precious feathers; it was all brought here to Tenochtitlán... and now it is lost.” (Florentine Codex)

