SUSAN TOBY EVANS

ANCIENT MEXICO & CENTRAL AMERICA

ARCHAEOLOGY AND CULTURE HISTORY

SECOND EDITION

with 462 illustrations, 80 in color

Thames & Hudson

20 THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO AND ITS AFTERMATH

"FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD" was one of Cortés's favorite mottos, and in this spirit he and his troops began the long march to the Aztec capital, leaving Zempoala in mid-August, 1519. Motecuzoma was the perfect Aztec emperor for the Spaniards to contact. As news of the Spaniards' activities reached him, he became fatalistic and morose, and as the omens began to collect, his response was despair rather than resistance. In Ahuitzotl, the Spaniards would have faced more formidable opposition.

The legend persists that the Mexicans regarded Cortés as the returning god Quetzalcoatl, or even as Huitzilopochtli. Actual references to this in first-hand sources such as Cortés's letters are vague, and the story seems to have arisen in the mid-16th century, when chroniclers such as Motolinía and Sahagún recorded it (Thomas 1995). Certainly the Mexicans regarded the Spaniards as possessing strengths that had to be respected, and Cortés was prepared to exploit every coincidence that identified him with powers that intimidated the Aztecs. The Aztecs, in turn, were predisposed to look for signs of spiritual potency in these unknown adversaries, because they perpetually understood the world in terms of such interpretations. However, they were also practical, and in the range of their responses to the approach of the Spaniards we can perceive the divisions among Tenochca political leaders that was to contribute to the Aztec downfall. Motecuzoma kept sending messengers who would bring gifts, but tell the Spaniards not to come to Tenochtitlan, not to trust the "allies" who told tales of Mexica power and cruelty. When other Tenochcan and Texcocan leaders advocated eliminating the invaders, their sharp protests against appeasement and accurate predictions of disaster had no effect on Motecuzoma.

THE SPANIARDS COLLECT ALLIES

As the Spaniards pressed toward Tenochtitlan, they passed through two important regions, Tlaxcala and Puebla [**20.1**]. Parts of Puebla had become provinces of the Aztec empire, but the region's most important city, Cholula, was not, and had maintained independence from the Triple

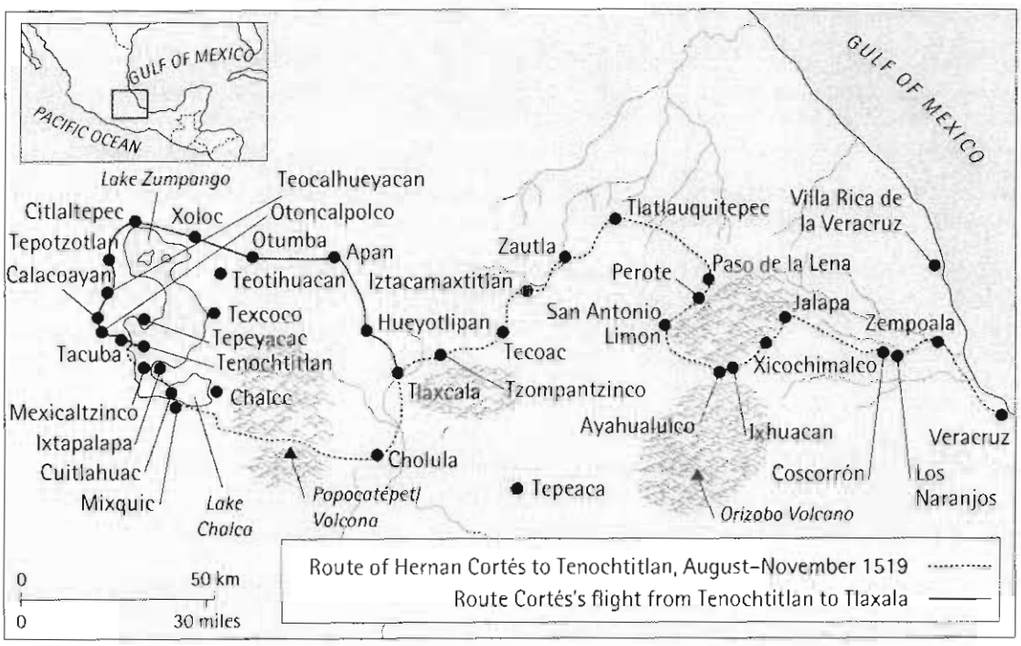
20.1 *Middle America showing sites and regions mentioned in this chapter.*

Alliance without actually incurring enmity. Farther to the north, Tlaxcala was fiercely antagonistic to the Mexica, and its landlocked position, surrounded by Aztec provinces, had resulted in embargos of some basic goods as well as promoting culture isolation and a state of constant readiness for war on its borders. With Tlaxcala the Spaniards made common cause.

Tlaxcala

Tlaxcala was connected to the northern Basin of Mexico by the Plain of Apam, and these adjacent regions shared a high, cool, dry environment. Furthermore, their Postclassic Nahuatl- and Otomí-speaking populations were similarly distributed, with maguey-farming families dispersed over terraced hillsides and small city-states on the alluvial plain (García Cook 1981; Snow 1996), which was "all cultivated and harvested, leaving no place untilled" (Cortés 1986: 68). In contrast to most other regions, where the city-states were distanced from each other, in Tlaxcala the four main capitals (the "Cuatro Señorios") were clustered together, their territories radiating out behind them. These centers, Tepeticpac, Quiahuiztlan, Ocotelulco, and Tizatlan, were so close that the Spaniards thought them to be one city, "so big and remarkable ... much larger than Granada and very much stronger ... and very much supplied with the produce of the land" (Cortés 1986: 67). Cortés also described a large market that drew 30,000 people daily and provided a wide range of goods and services.

For all this seeming unity, there were tensions between the four dynasties, and even between generations within the same dynasty. These problems had the usual sources: greed, sexual jealousy, and ongoing vendettas that had acquired their own momentum. The Tlaxcalan nobles provide an inter-



20.2 *Cortés's routes and sites along the way.*

esting case of the use of feasting to relieve these tensions, or, given the circumstances, to channel them differently, because Tlaxcalan feasts involved intoxication and often ended in violence (Motolinía 1950).

The reasons for ingesting hallucinogens until homicidal rage ensued had to do with contacting the spirits of dead ancestors, which was thought to be facilitated by achieving a transcendent state (Pohl 1998). This practice of inducing visions in order to contact the dead is revealed by the motifs decorating the feasting rooms themselves. Archaeological investigation has uncovered part of the palace of Xicotencatl the Elder, the *tlatoani* of Tizatlan, and the highest-ranking among the rulers of the Cuatro Señorios. One of the rooms in his palace has polychromed decorations in Mixteca-Puebla style, depicting such malevolent deities as the Tzitzime and Tezcatlipoca, as well as skulls, hearts, and other themes of death and destruction.

The Tlaxcalan-Spanish Alliance The Spaniards reached the Cuatro Señorios in September of 1519 with some difficulty, because they were ambushed by troops led by Xicotencatl the Younger. But both sides put this skirmish behind them at the peace-making intervention of his father, the elder Xicotencatl, who welcomed the Spaniards and in fact sent them off toward Cholula with porters to carry the cannons. The two Xicotencatls were to quarrel again over the Spaniards nearly a year later, when Cortés and his troops escaped the Basin of Mexico with their lives and sought refuge in Tlaxcala on their way to their base on the Gulf Coast. The younger man suggested that the Tlaxcalans should kill the Spaniards and steal their possessions; his father flew into a rage at this idea, and "ordered his son to be killed when he knew of his plots and treason" (Díaz 1956: 325), and the Spaniards were given sanctuary.

AZTEC FEASTING

AS WE HAVE SEEN, feasts were an essential component of social life throughout Mesoamerican culture history. Just like modern parties, feasts in ancient societies provided important occasions for demonstrations of social solidarity, for exchanging information and gifts, and for showing off the hosts' ability to command and distribute high quality food and party decorations and favors. Feasts were also occasions where the participants could transcend their everyday lives and (one hopes) enjoy themselves.

With all these motivating factors, it is obvious that feasts would range from spectacular events staged in the main courtyards of the great imperial palaces, with casts of hundreds (guests and servers), to the other end of the power-and-wealth spectrum, where a few poor people would modestly honor an important rite with the best of their limited resources. Sources such as the *Florentine Codex* and *The History of the Indies of New Spain* (Durán 1994 [1581]) offer many descriptions of the most elaborate feasts, in the palaces and in the compounds of the *pochteca* merchants.

The baptismal feast description from the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1979: 117–119), "which telleth how a feast was held," offers a view of a fairly modest event, one which most people would have been likely to have participated in from time to time. When the guests arrived there was a period of settling down in their proper places. As soon as the guests were seated, tobacco was served and smoked, and then flower servers distributed crowns and garlands. In wealthy houses, there were also gifts – tobacco, flowers, and clothing – and then the food was served.

Food preparation was the domain of the women of the house, and they would have spent considerable time planning the menu and readying the dishes. Tamales (steamed dumplings of corn meal with seasonings and fillings) were mainstays of festivals among many groups in Mesoamerica, in ancient times and today. Stews featured turkey and dog meat in a sauce of tomatoes and other vegetables and chiles. Accompanying these entrees were tortillas and sauces not unlike the chile-spiced tomato *salsa* that in the modern U.S. has become the most popular ready-made condiment.

20.3 *At Aztec feasts, guests were presented with flowers, cylindrical pipes full of tobacco, and food, as these illustrations from the* Florentine Codex *show. Dancing and music were highlights of a good party.*

Before dining, each guest "said grace" by dropping a bit of food onto the ground as an offering to Tlaltecuhtli, the earth god (Coe 1994: 77). If the hosts were rich, chocolate was served after dinner. Cacao beans had to be imported from *tierra caliente* regions along the Gulf lowlands and Pacific Coast (Coe and Coe 1996). They were sold whole in city markets, and one could also buy a cup of the prepared beverage, which was made by mixing the ground beans with water, and, if desired, adding such seasonings as chile or honey or vanilla.

Chocolate consumption was restricted both because of the cost and because it was thought to be too stimulating for the inexperienced. The Tenochca emperor drank chocolate every day, and many people probably only had a few cups in a lifetime, but it is likely that most adults had tasted chocolate, because it was customary for kitchen workers to get the leftovers of a feast, and in many noble houses the servants were people from rural farming villages who were working a labor tribute shift.

20.4 *At this* pulque *feast (*Codex Magliabechiano*), the* pulque*-god impersonator drinks through a straw. He faces a woman whose sound scroll is only a series of dots, probably reflecting the drunken disintegration of her verbal skills.*

While chocolate's high cost and stimulating properties made it a status symbol, *pulque*, maguey sap beer, was eschewed by the elite not only because it was abundant and common, but also because it made people drunk. Not that all intoxicants were regarded with distaste: Axayacatl commanded hallucinogenic mushrooms in tribute (de la Garza 1990: 63), and lords and wealthy merchants ate them at their feasts, after which they "ate no more food; they only drank chocolate through the night" while they danced and had visions (Sahagún 1959: 39). This kind of party intoxication was justified by its higher purpose – an avenue to the future, to seeing one's fate – while common drunkenness was despicable, and made the common drunkard a vehicle for forces of chaos that conld bring ruin to whole families.

Strong condemnations of the effects of *pulque* drinking seem to have served as constant warnings to a large population of regular drinkers. Maguey was grown everywhere in the Central Highlands, and farming families used fresh sap as potable beverage. Fresh sap ferments within a few days – it would be impossible for families *not* to have a ready supply of crude beer if they wanted it. And *pulque* was highly valued for its medicinal qualities and was used as a base for many other medicines. So almost anyone feeling tired or achy at the end of a long day of work might ease the chill with a bowl of *pulque*, and its use was the reward of old age.

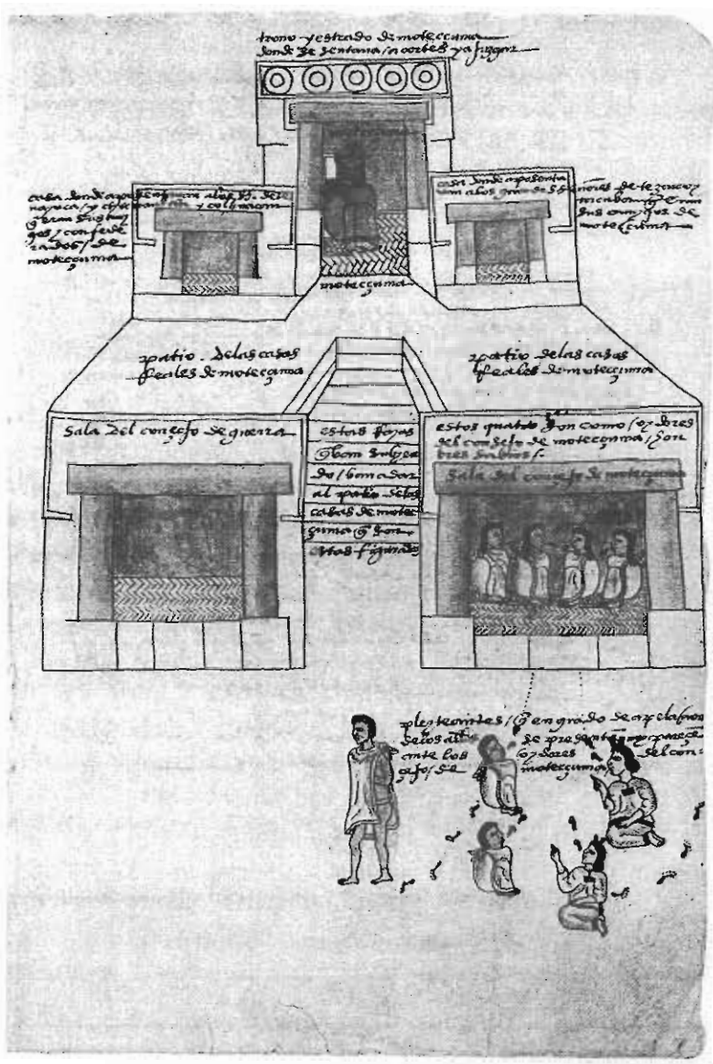
In spite of abhorrence of public drunkenness, the Aztecs well understood that drinking alcohol livened up a party. At a baptismal feast if the *pulque* server "saw that those who he gave wine did not become intoxicated ... but only sat staring and grimacing" he served everyone all over again. Once under the influence, people began singing, and then exchanging sentimental greetings. The mood became so festive that people turned to "laughing and making witty remarks, making others burst into laughter ... [until they] sat exhausted with mirth" (Sahagún 1979: 119). Many feasts featured instrumental music and dancing, as well.

Some parties went all night – the Aztecs seemed to value nearly constant moderation, but when they decided to become immoderate, they wished to savor the experience fully. In fact, if anyone did not have a good time at a party, it was customary for the host to welcome them back the next day, restaging hospitality toward a happier ending.

Alliance with the Tlaxcalans would be crucial to the conquest of the Mexica, and the visit in 1519 gave the partnership a reasonably good start. Xicotencatl described Tenochtitlan and how the Tenochca could seal it off from invasion by partially dismantling the causeways, and how the houses were defensible, with their interior courtyards and high outer walls. The Tlaxcalans urged the Spaniards to travel to Tenochtitlan via Huexotzingo, an independent city-state bitterly opposed to the Mexica. But Cortés chose to travel to Cholula in spite of Xicotencatl's warnings that its "inhabitants were most treacherous" (Díaz 1956: 157).

Puebla

The plains of Puebla extend from their northern boundary, with Tlaxcala, down to the edge of the Mixteca Alta and the Tehuacán Valley system. In 1519, the southern part of this region was controlled by the Aztec empire, with the tiny strategic province of Ahuatlan surrounded by the huge tributary province, Tepeaca, which extended from Morelos on the west to Cotaxtla on the east. Tepeaca province had been subdued by a series of conquests going back to the time of Motecuzoma I, and the town of Tepeaca had ongoing conflicts with the Tlaxcalans, Huexotzingans, and Cholulans (Smith and Berdan 1996: 285).



20.5 *Our most complete depiction of Motecuzoma II's palace in Tenochtitlan is this view from the* Codex Mendoza. *The* huetlatoani *is in his upper chamber, probably his dais room, while members of his court are shown in a lower room. Outside, in the courtyard, two men and two women are all talking, arguing about a legal question that the king's judges will decide upon.*

Cholula's relations with its neighbors and with the Aztec empire were complicated, as alliances materialized and then evaporated, old grudges were nursed along and then ignored. According to the Tlaxcalans, the Cholulans had only recently ended their enmity with the Aztec empire, and thus according to the rules of *realpolitik* had become the enemies of the Tlaxcalans.

Cholula was situated amidst fertile and well-irrigated farm land, and Cortés noted that this region was the first place in Mexico that the Spaniards had seen that would be suitable for cattle. As cattle ranching was to become one of the most important industries of Early Colonial New Spain, it was important to locate grazing land. The city of Cholula itself prompted other compar-

isons with the Old World. It was a great pilgrimage center, and Motolinía called it "another Rome, with numerous temples of the demon" – there were at least 300 temple-pyramids – and "every province has its halls and apartments to serve as lodgings during the feasts that were held" (Motolinía 1951: 123). During the Late Postclassic period, Cholula was Mesoamerica's major cult center for the veneration of the Feathered Serpent, whose pyramid was subsequently completely destroyed. The Great Pyramid, still the largest in Mesoamerica, was in ruins in the Late Postclassic period.

Cortés estimated that there were 20,000 houses in Cholula, so its population might have been around 100,000. It had a large marketplace, renowned for the Mixteca-Puebla style pottery sold there – Motecuzoma himself used it in his palace [**20.5**]. They also found something that is a diagnostic of urban life in complex societies: abject poverty. Cortés noted that "there are so many people living in these parts that not one foot of land is uncultivated ...yet in many places they suffer hardships for lack of bread. And there are many poor people who beg from the rich in the streets as the poor do in Spain, and in other civilized places" (Cortés 1986: 75).

Beggars and People of Reason The juxtaposition, in Cortés's thoughts, of the presence of beggars with a high level of social complexity prompts us to ask how Cortés phrased the concept "civilized" in his original Spanish text. His term was "gente de razón" – people of reason, those whose culture was, in many ways, like his own – and not like the cultures of the Caribbean islands. In terms of the cultural evolutionary changes in social structure that we have reviewed in this book, this phrase might have the meaning "people who make rational economic decisions." Egalitarian and even ranked societies are bound by customs that give priority to kin relations as a basis of governance and economic distribution, and there are rather strict limits on the extent to which any family or individual can accumulate a disproportionate amount of wealth. But while stratified societies still depend upon family ties for many basic functions, their large size makes it impossible to depend upon kinship for regulation of relations between groups of people. Limits on the disproportional acquisition of wealth are usually determined by the wealthy themselves, who are typically reluctant to disadvantage themselves, being, after all, people of reason.

Hence the juxtaposition of poverty and societal complexity, of beggars in a land of wealth – features that convinced Cortés that in ancient Mexico he had found important parallels with his own Spain. This was the kind of society he had grown up in, with powerful kings and scheming courtiers and bean-counting bureaucrats, tax-paying peasants and impoverished beggars. There were big cities with busy and complex marketplaces and lots of religious buildings. It is true that Mesoamerica had no metal-dependent technology, and there were no large draft animals to lend impetus to the development of wheeled transport, but these differences

only highlighted the similarities in societal structure. Cultural evolution is far from being a simple lockstep process motivated by technological advances. The circumstances under which "gente de razón" emerge from the ranks of kin-based societies are complicated, but they depend on certain preconditions (pp. 24–25), and when these occur, so, worldwide, will beggars and kings.

Cholulan Intrigues Though initially welcomed into the city, the Spaniards began to feel uneasy after a few days. Their hosts were no longer supplying them with food, and seemed reluctant to talk with them. Streets were being barricaded, and on the housetops piles of rocks accumulated. Finally someone told them of a plot to capture them and present them as a gift to Motecuzoma. The Spaniards and their Tlaxcalan supporters turned on the Cholulans – several thousand were massacred, others were taken prisoner and marched to Tlaxcala, probably bound for sacrifice. Cholula was looted and parts of it were burned. After several days of mayhem, Cortés decided to spare the city's lords on promise of future cooperation.

Meanwhile, Motecuzoma had sent a continuous flow of gifts to Cortés, accompanied by strongly-worded messages of discouragement, all of which said: "don't come to Tenochtitlan." The emperor was ill. The roads were impassable. There was no food. The wild animals in the zoo would eat the Spaniards. Like other appeasement policies known from other historical contexts, this one only fed the appetite of the aggressor. In early November, 1519, Cortés and his entourage moved out of Cholula and over the high pass between Iztaccihuatl and Popocatépetl, and down into the Basin of Mexico.

MOTECUZOMA, PRISONER OF FEAR

Motecuzoma II was a man fate chose to bear the unhappy fame of overseeing the downfall of his empire. No matter what the achievements of his 18-year reign (1502–1520), nor the reputation for military excellence and rhetorical skills that gained him the rulership in the first place, nor even the inevitability of European intrusion and cultural domination, Motecuzoma's last few months marked him permanently as weak and vacillating, unable to summon the courage to die fighting, as so many Tenochca would, in the siege of their city in the summer of 1521.

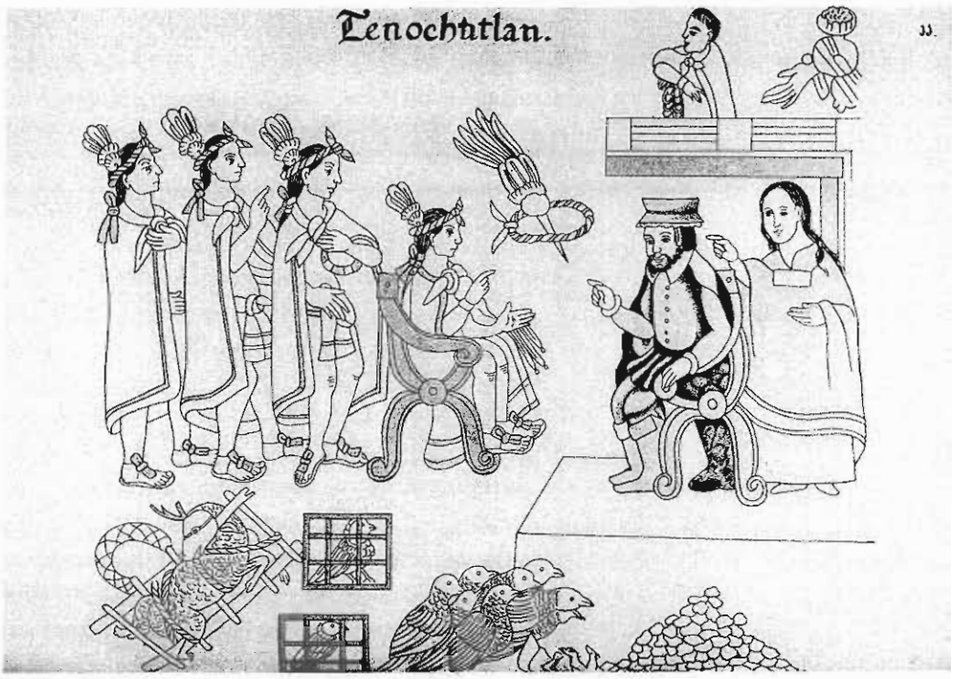
Instead, he now shifted his approach toward the Spaniards. After they entered the Basin of Mexico, he saw to it that they were accommodated and welcomed in their journey. The Spaniards numbered at least 300 (accounts differ as to the exact number) and they were accompanied by about 1,000 Tlaxcalans. In Chalco, Cortés spoke "with the lord and some of the nobles ... who said they were vassals of Moctezuma. In secret they complained to him... saying he committed many grave abuses in ... tribute" (Tapia 1963 [*c.*

1534]: 37). This had become a familiar theme, and Cortés was all too willing to exploit it.

As Cortés and his entourage neared Tenochtitlan, they perceived the size and beauty of the great capital in the distance. Immediately before arriving at Tenochtitlan, the company stayed in a set of nearly completed palaces in the town of Ixtapalapa. These were the property of Motecuzoma's brother Cuitlahuac, who would succeed him as *huetlatoani* of Tenochtitlan in 1520, and then succumb to smallpox, one of the diseases introduced to the New World by Europeans. At this moment in early November, 1519, Cuitlahuac was proudly putting the finishing touches on his new home, "... as good as the best in Spain; that is, in respect of size and workmanship both in their masonry and woodwork and their floors, and furnishings for every sort of household task .... They have many upper and lower rooms and cool gardens, with many trees and sweet-smelling flowers; likewise there are pools of fresh water, very well made and with steps leading down to the bottom. There is a very large kitchen garden next to his house and overlooking it a gallery with very beautiful corridors and rooms, and, in the garden a large reservoir of fresh water, well built with fine stonework, around which runs a well-tiled pavement so wide that four people can walk there abreast. It is four hundred paces square, which is sixteen hundred paces around the edge. Beyond the pavement, toward the wall of the garden, there is a latticework of canes, behind which are all manner of shrubs and scented herbs. Within the pool there are many fish and birds..." (Cortés 1986: 82–83). Díaz was equally impressed, noting that "great canoes were able to pass into the garden from the lake through an opening that had been made so that there was no need for their occupants to land. ... I say again that I stood looking at it and thought that never in the world would there be discovered other lands such as these... Of all these wonders that I then beheld to-day all is overthrown and lost, nothing left standing" (Díaz 1956 [1560s]: 191).

It is worth quoting Cortés and Díaz at length here, not only because their descriptions of Cuitlahuac's palace are among their most extensive, but also because of the complexity of organization indicated by their descriptions. While the beautifully landscaped freshwater ponds must have been striking in their juxtaposition to the expanse of Lake Texcoco beyond, we also see that this was in the service of the state, at several levels. Labor crews performing tribute obligations built the place, dug the ponds, plastered them, brought the stone and timbers and plants – all of this magnificence was paid for by the Aztec empire. And the design of the palace reveals how Aztec potentates were kept in contact with affairs of state – canals brought canoes directly to the palaces (Motecuzoma's new palace in Tenochtitlan was also served by a special canal) just as limousines and helicopters today ferry executive officers of business and government from one important meeting to another.

The next day, 8 November 1519, Cortés and company moved up the causeway and were met by Motecuzoma II [20.6]. Hundreds of Aztec lords



20.6 *Cortés, with Marina behind him, meets Motecuzoma II, who is backed by his lords. The drawing is from the* Lienzo de Tlaxcala *(1979 [c. 1550]), which was originally produced in 1550 by the Tlaxcalans to remind the Spaniards of Tlaxcala's important role in the conquest. The artist uses a mixture of native and European styles, with the use of perspective and Western-style posture, and anachronistic details, such as the European chairs in which the principals are seated.*

came forward to greet Cortés. He and Motecuzoma exchanged gifts, and then Motecuzoma led Cortés to Axayacatl's palace, which had been prepared for the Spaniards. This was the scene in which Motecuzoma sat Cortés on the throne of the dais room, and then presented him with even more gifts.

About a week later, Cortés told Motecuzoma that he had learned of a skirmish between Spaniards and Aztec forces down on the Gulf Coast and was so shocked that he felt compelled to take Motecuzoma under protective custody "until the truth were known and he [Motecuzoma] was shown to be blameless" (Cortés 1986: 89). Motecuzoma was finally convinced of the wisdom of this, and moved, with his servants, into Axayacatl's palace. When the perpetrator of the coastal disturbance was brought up to Tenochtitlan to be executed, Cortés had Motecuzoma put in irons, too, but then set him free.

Cortés's actions during this period reveal him to be a master of psychological management: he flattered, frightened, disoriented Motecuzoma. He kept Motecuzoma safe and well tended, needing this tame *huetlatoani* to shield Spanish interests as they undermined and took over the Aztec empire. Cortés insisted that "many times I offered him his liberty ... and each time he told me that he ... did not wish to go" (Cortés 1986: 91), in large part because he did not want to have to deal with lords who would try to convince him to resist the Spaniards.

Meanwhile, the weeks passed rather pleasantly for Motecuzoma and Cortés. Between November 1519 and the beginning of May, 1520, the Spaniards and Mexicans shared a courtly life that was familiar to both groups, with time spent feasting, enjoying women, going on hunting expe-

ditions, gambling. Motecuzoma was generous with gifts, and good-humored in the face of Spanish greed. Playing at a game of chance, Pedro Alvarado consistently cheated when keeping track of Cortés's score, and Motecuzoma made a joke of it, and paid up (Díaz 1956: 235). The Spaniards toured Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, admiring the great Tlatelolco market that drew 60,000 buyers and sellers daily to exchange goods from all over Mexico.

Cortés and his men climbed to the top of the highest pyramids, revulsed by the stench of blood that coated the temples. They lectured Motecuzoma about the evils of human sacrifice, but he answered them sharply, and they did not press the point, aware that many Mexican nobles wanted the Spaniards dead. From the tops of pyramids the Spaniards could see the city surrounded by the lake, and its interconnections by canals and bridges. It is obvious from later events that during this time the Spaniards were assessing the city's defenses and planning the best way to launch an attack. It is also clear, from the speed at which Cortés and other Spaniards registered claims to various pieces of property, as soon as the conquest was completed, that they had been praising Motecuzoma's pleasure palaces with an eye toward owning them.

Cortés decided that Tenochtitlan could only be taken from the lake, and thus sailboats must be built in preparation. He sent to the Spaniards on the

20.7 *Another illustration from the* Lienzo de Tlaxcala *shows Tlaxcalan and Spanish forces stationed in four towns surrounding the beleaguered island city of Tenochtitlan. The swirling design around the circled temple pyramid is the Central Mexican motif for water, and in it are four canoes with soldiers armed with obsidian-bladed clubs.*

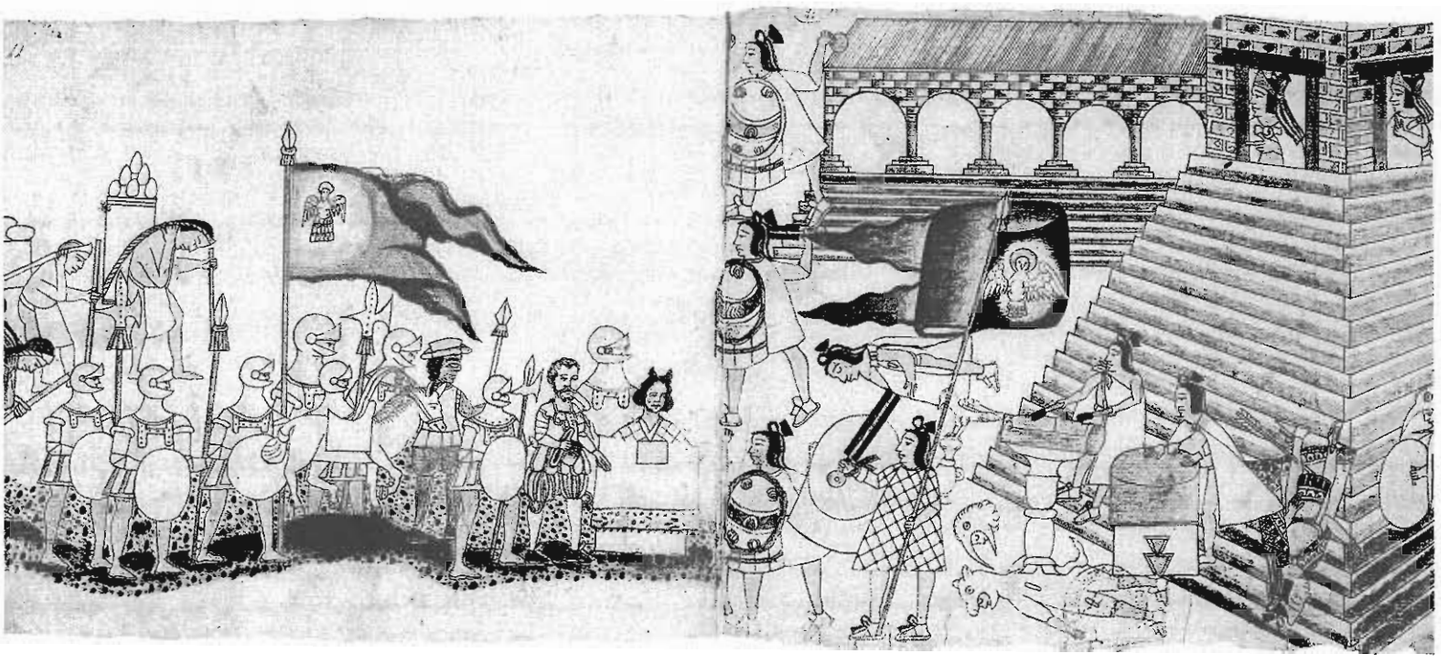
Gulf Coast for blacksmiths and materials and soon two sloops were ready for testing. Motecuzoma heard about the maiden voyage, and suggested that the boats be used to transport him and his lords to his hunting preserve on the island of Tepepulco, near Ixtapalapa. They soon arrived at Tepepulco, and "Montezuma killed all the game he wanted, deer and hares and rabbits, and returned very contented to the city" (Díaz 1956: 239).

Peace Breaks Down The idyll could not last. Word got out that the Spaniards had broken into the treasury, and Aztec resistance to Motecuzoma's house arrest began to build. Furthermore, Motecuzoma established a secret communication with the Spaniards on the Gulf Coast – Cortés's deputy, Narváez, sent messages to Motecuzoma telling him that Cortés and the others "were bad men and thieves who had fled from Castile without the permission of ... the King" (Díaz 1956: 257) and that once Narváez got permission, he would rescue Motecuzoma and imprison Cortés. Of course, Narváez's intent was to secure for himself the position of chief conquistador, but the behind-the-scenes connivance on both sides indicates the challenges of operating within this welter of plots.

20.8 *Motecuzoma may have been killed by his own people when he tried to calm the Aztecs' anger after Alvarado's massacre of the Aztec lords. The Spaniards took his body and that of another noble outside Axayacatl's palace, and from there the Aztecs carried him off and cremated him. As his body burned, his former subjects regarded him "only with fury, no longer with much of the people's good will ... they said 'This blockhead! He terrorized the world ... This man! If anyone offended him only a little, he at once disposed of him.'" (Sahagún 1975: 66).*

Cortés heard of Narvaez's insubordination, and took some of the Spaniards back to the coast, leaving Alvarado in charge. The deteriorating relations between the Mexica and the captors of their king broke down altogether over the festival of Toxcatl, an important celebration honoring Huitzilopochtli. Alvarado gave permission for the festival to take place, but forbade human sacrifice. Accounts of the events of this last great Tenochca celebration differ, with Alvarado claiming that the Spaniards' food supply had been cut off, that Motecuzoma and his attendants were armed to overthrow the Spaniards, and that the Mexicans fully intended to sacrifice humans, including the Spaniards.

"And when dawn broke, when it was already the feast day ... already began the singing, the winding dance" (Sahagún 1975: 53) performed by hun-



20.9 *These two scenes from the* Codex Azcatitlan *(late 16th century) show, on the left, Cortés and Marina approaching Tenochtitlan, leading a procession of Spaniards in armor carrying the banner of the Holy Ghost, and on the far left, some of their native porters. In the scene on the right, Motecuzoma is dead, face down on the stairs, while other Aztecs play drums and one bears the banner with the Holy Ghost.*

dreds of Tenochca noblemen in the ritual precinct. Alvarado and his men blocked the exits and massacred hundreds of Aztec lords, the leaders of government and war. The Spaniards went back to Axayacatl's palace, killed some of the Aztec lords attending Motecuzoma, and fortified the palace. They sent Motecuzoma out to urge calm on his people, but the *huetlatoani* no longer commanded the respect of the Tenochca. Meanwhile, the city was in mourning, and fury against the Spaniards was mounting; Aztecs destroyed the sailboats the Spaniards had built, and began readying the city for war.

This was the scene Cortés returned to. Firing their guns and trying to appear confident, Cortés and his men rode across the short causeway from Tacuba to Tenochtitlan, rather than make themselves more vulnerable on the long Ixtapalapa causeway. The city was utterly silent, and Cortés reached Axayacatl's palace unharmed. Yet whenever the Spaniards would show themselves, a shower of rocks hurled from adjacent buildings would drive them to cover, and attempts to leave the palace were doomed. In late June, Cortés ordered the construction of a moveable wooden fortress that would permit the Spaniards to secure the area around the palace. But in the meantime, there was evidence that the Mexica had elected a new *huetlatoani*, and it was Cuitlahuac, Motecuzoma's brother. When Motecuzoma went out onto the roof to address the Tenochca, he was hit by stones and died soon thereafter. The Spaniards killed the several dozen lords who still attended him, and the bodies were pushed outside the palace. Motecuzoma, on whose whim had rested the fate of millions, was cremated without ceremony [20.8].

20.10 *(Opposite) Upon arriving in Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards showed off their cannon, as depicted in this illustration from the* Florentine Codex *(top). Unfortunately, they lost such armaments in their hasty retreat on La Noche Triste (second from top), and at the Battle of Otumba had to fight the Aztecs with swords and spears (second from bottom). Scholars have argued about the extent to which Western technology – metal tools and weapons, mechanical devices such as cannons and guns – advantaged the Spaniards over the Aztecs. The overwhelming numbers of the Aztecs, and their adaptability, meant that "most of this technology was not decisive" (Hassig 1992: 164). Horses intimidated the Mexicans, but were soon discovered to be vulnerable to attack. War dogs were a savagely effective menace. But the top prize for a force that effected the conquest goes to diseases such as smallpox (bottom). Infectious disease was not deliberately employed as a weapon, but it killed off far more natives than could any conventional method.*

The Sad Night and the Decisive Battle With their food running low, little potable water, and an increasingly angry populace outside their increasingly damaged walls, the Spaniards prepared to abandon the great capital that Cortés had hoped to deliver unharmed to the Spanish king, Charles V. Cortés's astrologer told him that to stay one more day would bring death to them all. The Spaniards decided to leave at night, because the Aztecs avoided fighting then, so at midnight, 1 July 1520, the Spaniards and their horses moved toward Tacuba. But they were spotted, and soon the war drums atop the pyramids were booming, and the Tenochca were rushing to intercept the fleeing Spaniards.

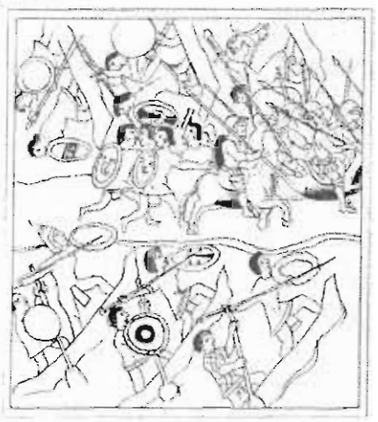
Considering the war canoes that soon filled the lake, and the ease with which the causeways were broken, it is a wonder that so many Spaniards survived, though several hundred are thought to have perished in the rout that has come to be known as La Noche Triste (the sad night). They had laden their horses with Motecuzoma's gold, and little of this reached the mainland, nor did their firearms and ammunition. The ragged group of survivors, still accompanied by their Tlaxcalan allies, made its way toward the northeast corner of the Basin of Mexico, toward the border with Tlaxcala, and, they hoped, sanctuary.

In the upper Teotihuacan Valley, near the town of Otumba, massed Aztec armies engaged the escaping Spaniards, who numbered about 440 men and 20 horses (Davies 1977), plus their Tlaxcalan allies. It was in the Battle of Otumba that formal Aztec methods of warfare were shown to terrible disadvantage [20.10]. The Spaniards cut down the banner carriers and the most gaudily arrayed of the warriors, and thus Aztec battlefield organization dissolved. To be fair to the Aztecs, they had lost nearly 1,000 of their top-ranking lords just days before, in the Toxcatl massacre, and so the armies they were fielding at Otumba were operating under constrained circumstances.

Nonetheless, the Spaniards managed to move east, into Tlaxcala, where their old friend Xicotencatl the Elder gave them sanctuary. In the meantime, more Spaniards were arriving all the time, new gold-seekers who had heard of Motecuzoma's great wealth. For the next nine months Cortés established himself in Tepeaca and readied his troops for the next assault on Tenochtitlan. Because this would be a siege from the lake, Cortés's shipwright supervised the construction of pre-fabricated brigantines in Tlaxcala for transport up to the Basin of Mexico.

The Mexicans, meanwhile, refurbished their city, sacrificed those Spaniards and Tlaxcalans who had fallen into their hands alive, and rejoiced that the enemy had retreated and the threat was over. But by the end of summer, the Spaniards' viral emissary, smallpox, had reached Chalco, and was cutting through Tenochtitlan by late October (Thomas 1995). When Cuitlahuac died of it, the Tenochca elected Ahuitzotl's son, Cuauhtemoc, as *huetlatoani*.

The smallpox epidemics that moved through Mexico at this time began a radical process of population reduction that would continue throughout the



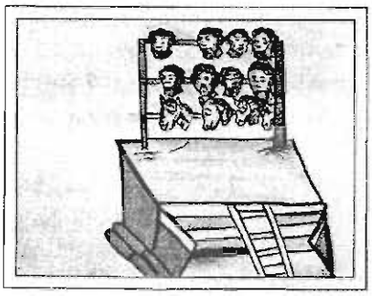
16th century, as one Old World disease after another swept through peoples who lacked any resistance, being without the immunity conferred by having a mild case of the disease in childhood, or resistance on the level of population genetics, by being a member of a group that has survived coexistence with the disease for many generations. Not only did newly introduced infectious diseases strike all ages at once, community by community, thus leaving no one to care for the sick, but the psychological effect was devastating, as well. These were people who watched their world vigilantly for any sign of the mood of the forces around them, and it must have seemed as though in the wake of the Spanish intrusion, the old gods had visited disaster upon their people.

Cortés used these catastrophes to his own advantage. He brought an increasingly large area into alliance with Spain, often in cooperation with the Tlaxcalans as they settled old grudges. Cortés promised the Tlaxcalans incredible prizes if they continued to aid the Spaniards against the Mexica, essentially offering a tax-free partnership in the post-conquest rulership of Mexico. Spain would never permit any such thing, of course, but in the meantime the Tlaxcalans saved Cortés's venture and made it a success. As disease disrupted one region after another, it disrupted political organization, as well, and Cortés made sure that new rulers were his allies. Thus well before Tenochtitlan capitulated to the Spaniards, Cortés had insinuated himself – and Spanish authority – into the Mexican power hierarchy.

Siege of Tenochtitlan The Spaniards returned to the Basin of Mexico early in 1521. They had formed new alliances, such as with the Tenochca's traditional close partner, Texcoco, and that city became their first base of operations in the Basin. Spanish preparations for the assault on Tenochtitlan reveal a combination of European and Mexican methods of provisioning and preparation. The brigantines were a European idea, built by Spaniards and Tlaxcalans under the direction of a Spaniard, and the shaped parts were carried over the mountains from Tlaxcala to Texcoco by 8,000 Tlaxcalan porters, plus another 2,000 carrying food – a line 9.7 km (6 miles) long that arrived in Texcoco on 15 February (Thomas 1995). More labor was required to dig channels from Texcoco to the lake, in order to launch the ships.

The Mexica made desperate attempts to woo allies, but memories of their demanding arrogance were too fresh, and few polities supported them. The Spaniards made forays around the perimeter of the lake; most cities were evacuated at the approach of Cortés and his troops, but at times Mexica army units engaged them in skirmishes. By early summer, 1521, Tenochtitlan would have been sensing the costs of its disintegrating empire, not just in loss of tribute but in disruption of normal food supplies. Cuauhtemoc prepared for war, but was unable to anticipate that the Spaniards would use methods outside Mexica experience, for example, launching an attack in summer, the agricultural season, rather than winter, the war season.

The Spanish forces numbered nearly 1,000 horsemen and infantry, and their native allies numbered in the tens of thousands – some sources



20.11 *Spaniards watched from a distance as their captured comrades were "carried by force up the steps [of a pyramid]...we saw them place plumes on the heads of many of them and they forced them to dance and after they had danced they immediately placed them on their backs and with stone knives they sawed open their chests and drew out their palpitating hearts and offered them to the idols and they kicked the bodies down the steps" (Díaz 1956: 436). The heads of Spaniards and their horses were displayed on the skull rack.*

estimate 200,000 or even 500,000 but these are surely exaggerations of what was an impressively substantial number of auxiliary troops. On 1 June, the 12 brigantines were launched from Texcoco, moving to surround Tenochtitlan. It soon became apparent that a negotiated peace was out of the question, and that the city would fall only when the Tenochca were so debilitated by war and starvation that they could no longer fight, and when the buildings were destroyed so that there was no place to defend [20.11].

This was a painfully gradual process. In addition to defending their city, house by house, during the day, the Aztecs worked through the nights creating barriers and clearing out the canals as the Spaniards filled them in. The descriptions recounted by Cortés, Díaz del Castillo, and the elite Aztec informants of Sahagún all stress the tenacity of the Tenochca in defending the city. Abandoned by their former allies, the Tenochca must have drawn strength from their great sense of destiny as they struggled onward under siege, even when their only water was brackish, and their only food was grass. On 13 August 1521, the Aztecs gave up their city and their empire, both much damaged by the onslaught of Cortés and the Spaniards. The city, in fact, was mostly leveled. Cuauhtemoc had survived, and surrendered.

EARLY COLONIAL NEW SPAIN

It would take the Spaniards decades to complete their conquest of Mesoamerica – Tayasal (Flores), on an island in Lake Petén Itzá, in the northern lowlands of Guatemala, was the last stronghold of the Itzá Maya, finally conquered by the Spanish in 1697. But in effective terms, Spain had become an empire, and Mesoamerica was the first great civilization it absorbed.

Far beyond the Spaniards' wildest plans of subduing Mexico, diseases cleared the land and simplified the complicated political and ethnic situation. The population of the Basin of Mexico declined from about one million in 1519 to about 250,000 by 1610 (Sanders 1992: 179, see also Lovell 1992, Whitmore 1992), the size of the population at the start of the Postclassic period. Elsewhere in New Spain, the situation was even worse, with whole areas of the Gulf lowlands becoming depopulated. In the Early Colonial period, the Spaniards left the political hierarchy of the Aztec empire largely intact and installed themselves at the top. Aztec society as a whole was demoted, "and whereas for lower classes this entails only a further degradation, for ruling classes the change is absolute, from a dominant to a subordinate rank" (Gibson 1960:169). Conditions worsened as the Spaniards attempted to extract maximum tribute amounts from a population that was a fraction of its former size, not only because of disease but also from enslavement during the conquest and forced labor in mines and rebuilding projects thereafter.

Depopulation made easier the imposition of Spanish practices. In many parts of the Central Highlands, the family farm was an essential component of the economy – its terraced maize fields neatly edged with maguey, its

productivity a result of the well-integrated labor efforts of the farming household (Evans 2005). As population declined and cattle were introduced, these small holdings were overrun by grazing animals, and eventually abandoned by the families who worked them. The Spaniards imposed abandonment of rural villages in many regions by ordering the "congregation" of dispersed populations into the surviving larger towns. Plantations and ranches spread over former farmland, and bovine demography charted an opposite path to that of the native humans: "herds nearly doubled in fifteen months; insufficiently guarded, they overran the countryside and destroyed all the Indians' maize" (Chevalier 1970: 93).

All of these effects helped the Spaniards to eradicate devil-worshipping native culture while recasting Middle America into a likeness of Spain. When we focus on access to important resources, we find ample evidence of the importance of transferring as much wealth back to Europe as quickly as possible. Yet in addition to the conquistadors and their agenda of violence and greed, there were the missionaries, appalled but undaunted by the extent of soul-saving necessitated by the huge indigenous population and their deeply held beliefs. The task before the missionaries was to convert the native people to Catholic Christianity as quickly as possible. It is obvious that most of these conversions were accomplished at mass meetings that few of the converts would have understood.

20.12 *The proselytizing Spanish clergy attempted to conceptualize Christianity in forms sacred to the Aztecs. Featherwork was among the most valued of native art forms, and this depiction of Christ in featherwork was a fusion of native culture and European values. The script is Cyrillic, an antiquated form of the writing of Russia, and the message here has not been deciphered.*

The longer-term task of conversion required explaining Christianity so that individuals understood and with free will accepted the new faith. This method was applied to converting young Aztec noblemen, with the idea that these would be the opinion leaders of the next generation. This process began soon after the conquest, and was spearheaded by Franciscan missionaries such as Fray Pedro de Gante, a humanist who espoused the tactic of contextualizing the new faith in some of the forms of the old. Thus the native population attended services in "open-air chapels" which were large courtyards attached to European-style churches (McAndrew 1965). Churches themselves were often built upon the leveled-off platforms of native pyramids, and the ritual precinct west of the pyramid/church base became the open-air chapel. Much of public ritual in Mesoamerican culture had always been conducted outdoors, in the courtyards of temple precincts and rulers' houses, and using this architectural form suited the established native habits of listening to sermons in palace courtyards or in the plazas at the base of pyramids.

There were natural points of convergence between native and Christian religions. Each had a formal priesthood, and formalized litanies of prayer. Both celebrated important passages in the lives of individuals with sacred rites celebrating birth, coming of age, marriage, confession of sins, and death. Each belief system honored the body and blood of a sacrificial victim as its most basic sacrament. These parallels made the new religion understandable, while also increasing the possibility that devil-worship could hide behind its structurally similar forms.

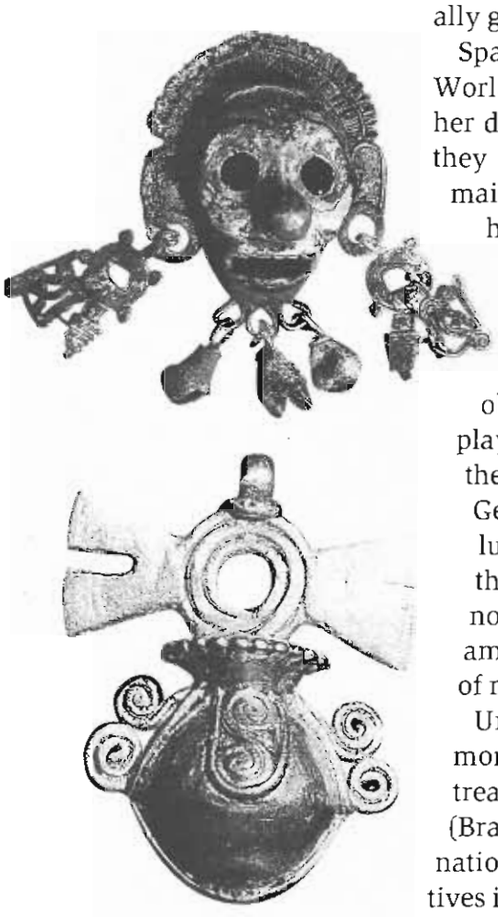
Music, poetry, and dance were other native ceremonial practices that the missionaries used as contexts for the new religion. And yet these efforts to syncretize Christianity and the native belief system met with criticism from the more conservative Catholic clergy, who argued for complete eradication of indigenous religion. Given what we know of how the Mesoamericans viewed their lives and world as drenched with spiritual meaning, it is obvious that removing all traces of the indigenous belief system would be impossible. Of course, the showier aspects of Mesoamerican religion – the priesthood, temple precincts, practices such as human sacrifice, the display of books, statuary and amulets – were too visible to survive the vigilance of the missionaries. For those reluctant to convert, there were the more rigorous methods developed by the Spanish Inquisition, whose gruesome punishments for heresy rivaled any sacrificial rites of the natives for pain inflicted in the cause of spiritual betterment.

But how do you eradicate a deeply rooted belief system? Or the spiritual associations of important landscape features, such as the mountains that serve as a horizon calendar? How do you convince a subjugated population that the new god loves them, when they are dying in great numbers from diseases introduced by their conquerors, while their farmlands are overrun by cattle and sheep imported from Spain? How do you convince them that they have no need of talismans like figurines of Tlaloc and Xochiquetzal? An important part of the process of forging the new *mestizo* culture involved the gradual substitution of Christian imagery and significance for that of the old gods [**20.12**]. Patron deities were replaced by patron saints with similar characteristics, and new icons provided comfort as the old idols were destroyed.

World of Wonders

The Age of Discovery that brought the Spaniards to the New World was part of the European Renaissance, and the reports of explorations fueled an ongoing transformation of the Western world view. While the importation of luxury goods from Asia had for centuries been part of European commercial enterprises, the discovery of the Americas, and more important, the discovery of the civilizations there had the effect of creating a globally shared economy and political system. The modern age began at this time, and modern problems and attitudes have their roots in the Age of Discovery's nationalistic, entrepreneurial spirit and its appropriation of the resources of the world outside Europe to serve the ends of Europe's rulers and capitalistic investors.

In fact, the conflict between rulers – the heirs to ancient dynasties, jealous of their powers – and capitalists was being played out in many nations of Europe. In the Netherlands and England, the entrepreneurial spirit was allowed to serve the government, with the overall effect that private investors were willing to take considerable risks in the business of exploration and exploitation, and this emphasis on the rights of the individual was part of the humanistic emphasis of the Renaissance that would eventually give rise to modern republics such as the United States.



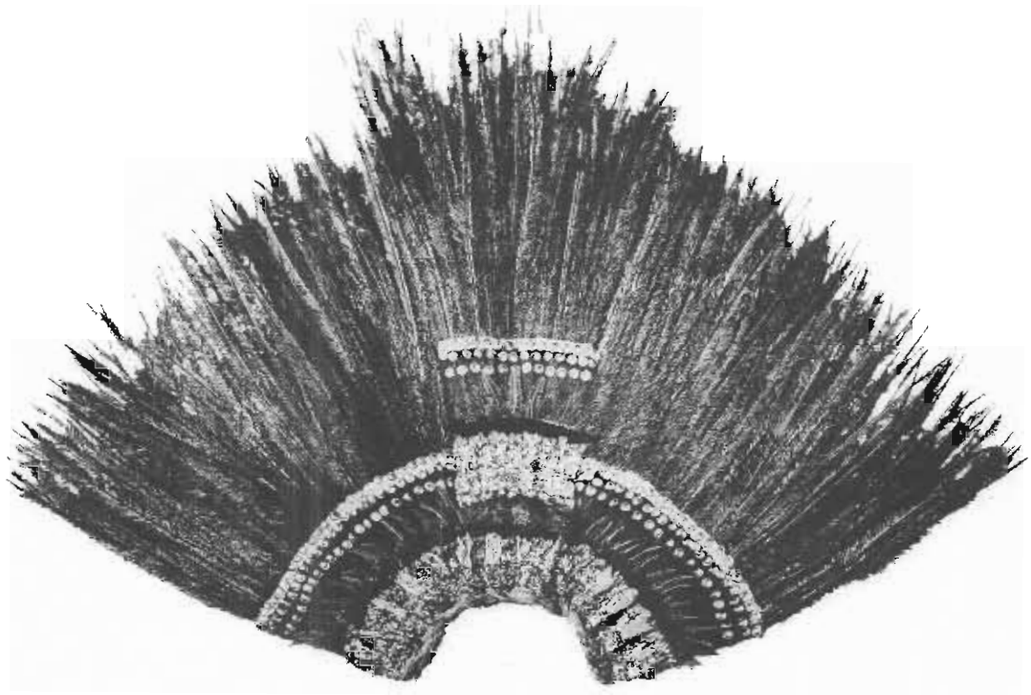
20.13, 20.14
Under the floor of the shrine to Huitzilopochtli in Stage II of the Templo Mayor was a funerary urn carved out of obsidian. In addition to cremated human bones and incense, it contained these tiny amulets. The silver monkey head wears earrings in the shape of serpents, while the gold bell bears a top ornament signifying "movement."

Spain's pioneering role in exploring and laying claim to much of the New World brought incalculable fortune to her rulers, and effectively thwarted her development as a modern nation. But Spain's kings could counter that they had succeeded where other European nations had failed: they had maintained a powerful monarchy in the face of rising republicanism, they had sustained the true Catholic faith at a time that saw the spread of the Reformation, which they regarded as religious heresy, and they had conquered great civilizations and been remarkably successful in destroying indigenous traditions of intellectual achievement.

These attitudes are demonstrated in the fate of the marvelous objects that Cortés sent back to Spain. The earliest examples were displayed, and it is remarkable that in August of 1520, only nine months after the Spaniards arrived in Tenochtitlan, Albrecht Dürer, the celebrated German painter and engraver, wrote in his diary that he had seen the luxury objects from Mexico. "The things which have been brought to the King from the new golden land ... All the days of my life I have seen nothing that has gladdened my heart so much as these things, for I saw among them wonderful works of art, and I marvelled at the subtle ingenia of men in foreign lands" (quoted in Honour 1975: 28).

Unfortunately for ancient Mexico's cultural heritage, Charles V was more impressed by the gold than the goldworking skill, and reduced the treasures of the New World to negotiable ingots as quickly as possible (Braun 1993: 22). The few items that are today the prizes of Europe's national museums were largely gifts from the Spanish king to his royal relatives in other European capitals. Other kings, more influenced by humanism and its nurturing of intellectual curiosity, established collections of exotic works, "cabinets of curiosities" that were the germinal forms of museums of natural history and art [20.15].

This interest in oddities was an important basis for antiquarianism, the study of antiquity through examination of collections of exotic and ancient artifacts and sites. Antiquarianism was itself the outgrowth of the interest in the Classical world of ancient Rome and Greece that had been a major intellectual theme of the Renaissance (Bernal 1980; Willey and Sabloff 1974). It was also the consequence of changes in the way people saw themselves and the earth, relative to the universe. While the early 16th century brought the discovery of Aztec and Inca civilizations, 1543 brought Copernicus's theory that the solar system centered on the Sun – that Earth was not the center of the cosmos. Contributions in the 17th century by Galileo, Kepler, and



20.15 *This Aztec royal headdress features the long iridescent green quetzal feathers associated with Mesoamerican rulership since the Formative period. Now in the Vienna Völkerkunde Museum, it is a rare surviving example of the treasures sent from Mexico in the early 1500s.*

Newton and countless other observers and inventors transformed the Bible-based view of planetary history into one in which humans played a subsidiary role. This growing realization that the literal interpretation of the world through the Bible was at odds with the common sense of experience shook Europeans out of centuries of habitual conformance with the dictates of clergy and kings, as they realized the substance behind challenges to totalitarianism in religion and politics.

The discovery of the Americas and other previously unknown inhabited places also challenged the Bible's explanation of the history and diversity of humankind. The thorny question about these newly discovered peoples was whether or not they *were* human. If native Americans were not human, one could simply treat them like domestic animals and use them for labor and slaughter them at will – a definite economic benefit for the government. But if they were human, then they had souls and one had to convert them to the true faith of Catholicism and away from devil worship. This was the argument of Bartholomé de Las Casas, who had served as Bishop of Chiapa [sic] and who, in 1551, came before Charles V's Council of the Indies to defend the humanity of the native Americans.

"For the Creator of every being has not so despised the peoples of the New World that he willed them to lack reason and made them like brute animals ... On the contrary, they are of such gentleness and decency that they are, more than the other nations of the entire world, supremely fitted and prepared to abandon the worship of idols and to accept ... the word of God" (de Las Casas 1974 [1550]: 28).

Las Casas's arguments won the day, though natives still were not treated as the spiritual equals of the Spaniards – native men could not be ordained

as priests, for example. However, the humanism of Las Casas and many others would take its toll on blind faith, because if the world was full of different kinds of humans, then how could the Bible, strictly interpreted, be accurate? These questions, and the efforts to answer them in a systematic way, would eventually, in the 17th and 18th centuries, develop into the scientific perspective of inquiry so essential to modern technological innovation.

Science and Religion, Science and Art Science and religious conviction are both belief systems, but they are based on opposing premises. Religion is grounded in faith, and refers questions back to dogma said to be god-given truth. Science is fueled by doubt, by questions that can be framed into testable hypotheses. Science demands that the experiments performed by one investigator be replicable, that is, repeatable by any other investigator under the same experimental conditions.

This characteristic of scientific findings, that they must be verifiable, sets science in opposition not only to religion, but to art, as well. Great works of scientific insight and great works of artistic expression may both derive from creative and skilled masters of their fields, but the modern value of a work of art lies in its power as a statement of indubitable individual genius. In fact, when any doubt is cast upon an artistic work's authenticity as the product of a respected artist, its value drops.

In Europe of the Middle Ages, virtually all art was in the service of religion, and everyone averred faith in the dogma of the established – institutionalized – religion, Christianity. Culture was holistic (possessed a wholeness) in ways that would have seemed familiar to the Aztecs and other Mesoamericans. To doubt the beliefs held sacred in the society was to declare one's self mad, and to be treated accordingly. Insofar as rulers enjoyed luxuries, they earned them through their special relationship with sanctity ("divine right of kings" was a principle common to Medieval Europe and to ancient Mesoamerica) and their putative role as stewards of their people and their society's resources.

The changes that were taking place in Europe of the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery would particularize Western society until, by the 21st century, the individual's right to choose a way of life is regarded as an essential freedom to be defended by force of arms. In the United States, few individuals live out their whole lives within a community of consanguineal and affinal kin who share work and religious faith. For most of us, our relations with each other are particularized, and there are few overlaps between the people we know from school, work, participation in religion, leisure time activities, military service, and our families. When we consider the holistic societies that characterized all the world of 500 years ago, and still persist in many regions, modern Westerners are likely to see them as oppressive and invasive, denying individuals their rights to choose their life's work, their marriage partner, and the privacy of making such choices without community comment.

The contrast between today's world and that of 500 years ago is useful; it contextualizes the changes that have taken place since. These changes affected New Spain much less than they did New England, because Spanish kings clung to the most conservative kind of royal overlordship of their dominions, and their subjects were either of Spanish descent and beholden to the system that assured them a good living in the colonies, or they were of native or *mestizo* descent, and lacked a choice in the matter.

Indigenous Utopia: The Franciscan Perspective

The unremitting bleakness of the 16th century for the native population was relieved, to some degree, by the stroke of fate that, from 1524 to 1564, the task of converting the populace to Christianity was put in the hands of the Franciscan order. The Franciscans were idealistic, seeing their mission in New Spain as the creation of new utopia among a population unspoiled by the corruption of European life. The Franciscans gained the trust of the natives because of their adherence to their vows of poverty, and their unmistakable devotion to the welfare of the people and ceaseless labor on their behalf – traits in sharp contrast to attitudes of the Spanish conquistadors and colonists, whose unbounded greed was matched by their pretension toward an aristocratic life of ease (Baudot 1995: 87).

The Franciscans began educating the Aztecs right after the conquest, with schools begun by Pedro de Gante in Texcoco in 1523 and in Tenochtitlan in 1525. De Gante lived in the royal palace in Texcoco and saw that the courtyards were the contexts of learning there and in the *calmecac* schools. De Gante began teaching in Texcoco, and then designed the Franciscan school in Tenochtitlan after the architectural pattern of the Aztec palace. The opening, in 1536, of the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco as an institution of higher education for native youth was the Franciscans' strong statement of faith in the abilities of indigenous peoples to contribute to New Spain. Classes covered many basic topics, and were taught in Latin and Nahuatl.

Their works bore important fruit – the Colegio became a workshop in the production of texts and pictures documenting native culture. Sahagún's great work, the *Florentine Codex*, was also known as the *The General History of the Things of New Spain*. The students at the Colegio were the informants for the twelve-volume work, which has been called the world's first ethnography, and which followed a Renaissance-style format of beginning with descriptions of the supernatural (gods, omens), then moving down the Great Chain of Being to earthly lords and wealthy merchants, then describing the common people, plants and animals. Other chroniclers of this period contributed information about regions (e.g., Landa [1975], who burned many Maya books but catalogued their culture). In the late 16th century the Spanish government sponsored an ambitious survey of its holdings, and the results, the *Relaciones Geográficas* ("Geographical Accounts," see Moreno 1968, Mundy 1996) are among the most important sources of information about pre-conquest and early Colonial Mesoamerica.

20.16 *Chichén Itzá's Castillo pyramid, as depicted by Frederick Catherwood, who traveled through the Maya region with John Lloyd Stephens in the 1830s. Their publications were instrumental in publicizing the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica.*

In addition to the documentation of native practices, interest began to arise in ancient ruins and the cultures that had produced them. In the late 16th century, Copán was described, and in the 17th century Tikal and Yaxchilan were discovered, and Teotihuacan was explored by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645–1700), an important pioneer in the preservation of ancient Mexican manuscripts. Early Colonial New Spain was isolated by Spain from contact with the rest of the world, but by the 18th century the European intellectual climate of inquiry had begun to affect even the Spaniards. Soon after Pompeii was discovered, near Naples (Italy) in 1748, Charles III ordered that Palenque be explored.

Independence and the Rediscovery of Indigenous Culture In 1803 Alexander von Humboldt arrived in New Spain – his visit coincided with expansion of natural history interest among intellectuals in Europe and the Americas. His book, *Vues des cordillères et monuments,* was published in 1810, the same year that Mexico's struggle for independence began. There was a mutually reinforcing coincidence of the ongoing efforts of Mexico and the Central American nations toward freedom from Spain, and great public interest in the pre-Columbian past. This was an age of well-illustrated travel books, and Stephens and Catherwood's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1843) inspired interest in the Maya [20.16].

The late 19th century saw the dawn of modern archaeology, with exploration of the Maya region by Alfred Maudslay (Graham 1998), while Leopoldo Batres started excavations at Teotihuacan. These were efforts to explore sites systematically so as to recover information with all possible care. Archaeology was becoming professionalized; in Mexico the government instituted a special agency and laws to inspect and conserve its heritage.

In 1911, a new war of independence was being waged in Mexico, and democratic nationalism in Mexico and Central America brought propagandistic harkening back to indigenous roots of power. Centenary celebration of the Mexican revolution was the impetus for the excavation and reconstruction of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan. We can see how effectively this promotion of native culture was accomplished in the Mexican cultural renaissance of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, which created new appreciation for indigenous imagery and sympathy for the conquered ones in the murals of David Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Diego Rivera, while Frida Kahlo made use of native ethnographic icons in her work. Mexico at this time applied vigorous energy toward universal public education. While this publicized the knowledge of the ancient past and promoted identification with the nation as a whole, there was a loss of indigenous culture, in that education demanded fluency in Spanish, which led to a loss of fluency in native languages and surviving cultural practices.

The 1920s to 1940s saw the discovery of many important sites, such as those of Olmec culture (La Venta, San Lorenzo) which in the 1940s was accepted by many scholars as being the first great complex society in Mesoamerica, predating the Maya. Farther north in the Gulf lowlands, El Tajín and other sites were explored in the 1930s and 1940s, and in the Valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán began to be excavated in 1931. Research continued in the Maya lowlands, and was initiated along the West Mexico Coast and Northwestern Frontier. In the Basin of Mexico, Archaic and Early Formative sites were discovered in the 1920s through the 1950s, and the Cuicuilco pyramid was uncovered in the mid 1920s.

The Late 20th Century In the 1950s the study of the past was revolutionized by the discovery of radiocarbon dating. While other methods of establishing the actual elapsed time since an object was made or used have been developed before and since radiocarbon dating, none had its versatility or reliability. Chronology is the backbone of all historical description and interpretation, and the ability to place objects, sites, and cultures in chronological order transformed archaeology's power to describe and understand the past (Freter 2001).

The first great goal of the new chronological era was to put things in order, the second was to discern the great processes of change that had taken place, and explain why they had taken place. These goals have occupied archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and art historians working with the material and documentary evidence of ancient Mesoamerican culture for the last 50

20.17 *Visitors to Mesoamerican archaeological sites seek an understanding of ancient cultures, and sometimes also seek ancient wisdom. The spring equinox brings hundreds of thousands of visitors to Chichén Itzá to watch the serpentine shadow form on the balustrade of the Castillo pyramid. These visitors may also gain spiritual strength from participation in what has become a yearly ritual for a New Age.*

years, and continue to provide focus for ongoing research. At the same time that descriptions of many archaeological cultures have been published, artifacts may be seen at dozens of museums (Gonlin 2001), and many archaeological sites in Mexico and Central America have been made into archaeological parks, among the most spectacular and interesting tourist destinations in the world [20.17].

The Living Past

The culture history described in this book has been drawn from the work of scholars who have uncovered sites, charted settlement patterns over vast regions, analyzed skeletons and material culture remains, and deciphered ancient writing and other symbolic systems. We now have a rich set of sources for understanding cultural evolution in Mesoamerica, and can appreciate the lives and work of the ancient peoples who inhabited Middle America, their ingenuity in developing sophisticated cultural solutions to basic human challenges, and the sense of beauty that marked their greatest works. Their history is, once again, as alive as the landscape they dwelt within.