

ANCESTRAL LEGACY · HISTORY OF MEXICO · VOLUME 11

The Fall of Tenochtitlan, 1519-1521

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Investigación exhaustiva académica

Investigación: Esteban Gutiérrez A.

Editado por EGA

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Series Prologue

The history of the Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica has been told, for far too long, through the eyes of the conqueror. This series is born of the conviction that only by understanding the worldview, science, art, and social organization of the Mexica from within their own internal logic can we come close to their greatness and the tragedy of their fall.

Ancestral Legacy: History of Mexico is the result of exhaustive academic research drawing on primary sources —the codices— and on the foundational works of Mexican anthropology and archaeology: Jacques Soustelle, Miguel León-Portilla, Alfredo López Austin, and Ross Hassig, among others. This is not another tale of sacrifices and wars, but a deep immersion in the civilizational fabric that built the Empire of Anáhuac.

The thesis holding these twelve volumes together is clear: the greatness of Mexica culture did not lie solely in its military might, but in its exceptional capacity to create a civilizational synthesis. In barely two centuries, the Mexica forged a complex imperial state that articulated a structured religious worldview, a social engineering of castes and guilds, a meticulously recorded tribute economy, and a deeply ritualized everyday life —all of it in the lake environment of Tenochtitlan. Its fall was not the end of a barbarian culture, but the abrupt murder of a civilization in full development,

whose legacy endures in Mexican identity today.

Each volume of the series explores one chapter of that story in depth: the origin and founding, the prodigious city, religious thought, the pantheon and sacrifice, the state, society, tribute, daily life, science and war, the codices, the conquest, and finally the legacy. Each book includes its own index, illustrations, a glossary of Nahuatl terms, a timeline, and an annotated bibliography, so it can be read on its own or as part of the whole.

May this work help vindicate the memory of a people murdered in the fullness of their development, and may new generations come to know —with rigor and with pride— the roots of Mexico.

Research: Esteban Gutiérrez A.

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Chapter 1. The Arrival: Men from the East, 1519

The rebel armada

On February 10, 1519, eleven ships sailed from the port of Santiago de Cuba toward the west. Aboard were 508 Spaniards, sixteen horses, fourteen pieces of artillery, thirty-two crossbowmen, and thirteen arquebusiers. They were commanded by a thirty-three-year-old man, an Extremaduran hidalgo from Medellin named Hernán Cortes. What no one knew —not even his own men— was that the man was sailing in rebellion. The governor of Cuba, Diego Velazquez, had ordered the expedition halted at the last moment; Cortes slipped away by night, disobeying his own commander's written order. That escape turned a trading venture into a conquest: without the governor's license, the only way Cortes's men could avoid being treated as criminals was to achieve a triumph so great that the king of Spain would legitimize it. From day one, the conquest of Mexico was a desperate gamble.

For two years, the expeditions of Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba (1517) and Juan de Grijalva (1518) had brought news of a land to the west where gold abounded and where cities of stone rose. The Maya of the coast had spoken of a great empire inland, rich in tribute and in prisoners. Cortes did not invent his destiny: he chose

it with a gambler's eye. And to win over his men he did something no previous captain had dared: he read their dreams aloud to them. He promised they had not come to trade trinkets, but to take an empire.

The Caribbean crossing had its own stations. At Cozumel, the Spaniards rescued a man who had spent eight years living among the Maya: Jerónimo de Aguilar, a castaway from an earlier expedition, who had learned the Maya language and now served as interpreter. On the coast of Tabasco, after the battle of Centla against the Chontal Maya, the defeated lords offered Cortes twenty enslaved women. One of them, a young woman of about eighteen named Malinalli, spoke Nahuatl and Maya. No one then could guess that the enslaved girl would become the single most important piece in the entire conquest—more decisive than the cannons and the horses.

On Good Friday of 1519, April 19, the fleet anchored off the coast of Chalchihuecan. The next day, Holy Saturday, the Spaniards landed on the beach they called San Juan de Ulua. The news ran inland with the speed of Mexica couriers. Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, the tlatoani who ruled the empire from Tenochtitlan, ordered ambassadors sent with gifts. What follows is one of the most told—and worst understood—episodes in the history of the Americas.

The divided empire

To understand what happened next, one must understand the empire the Spaniards found. The Mexica did not rule a uniform territory or a united nation. Their empire was a Triple Alliance—Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan—that dominated some four hundred tributary lordships scattered across central and southern

Mexico. The system ran on tribute, not occupation: defeated peoples kept governing themselves as long as they promptly paid their quota of maize, cacao, cotton cloaks, feathers, and slaves. Mexica power rested on the threat of military reprisal, not on centralized administration or shared loyalty.

That architecture had an enormous crack: resentment. Every tributary people remembered the day Mexica armies had arrived demanding obedience, the day their warriors had been carried off as prisoners for the sacrifices of the Templo Mayor. The Triple Alliance had expanded over barely ninety years —the blink of an eye in historical terms— and its dominion was far from accepted. Entire regions had never been subdued, the most important being Tlaxcala, a confederation of four lordships that had resisted for over a century in a mountainous enclave east of the Valley of Mexico. The Mexica besieged it with the so-called Flower Wars, ritual campaigns to capture prisoners, but never managed to conquer it. The Tlaxcalans hated the Mexica with a hatred cultivated over generations.

And there was something else, invisible to the Spaniards but decisive: the health of the empire. The government of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, who had taken the throne in 1502, was going through a period of internal tension. The tlatoani had concentrated power, displaced old counselors, and increased the tribute burden. Rebellions by subjugated peoples multiplied: Cuetlaxtlan rebelled, the Mixtecs, the peoples of the Gulf Coast. In the years before 1519, the empire spent more energy repressing its own subjects than expanding. The great Mexica empire was a pressure cooker, and the Spaniards —without knowing it— arrived just as the lid began to lift.

This is the first pillar of the thesis that sustains this book: the Spaniards did not defeat a united empire at its peak. They found a fractured empire, surrounded by enemies waiting for the first chance at revenge. The conquest was, before it was a war between Europeans and Indigenous peoples, a Mesoamerican civil war in which a handful of Europeans managed to pick the right side.

Veracruz and the Villa Rica

On April 22, 1519, Cortes founded a settlement on the coast: the Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz. The founding was no innocent administrative act: it was a juridical coup. By creating a cabildo—a Spanish-style town council—, Cortes got that council, made up of his own men, to name him captain general and chief justice, answering directly to the king rather than to the governor of Cuba. With that legal maneuver, the rebellion against Velazquez was disguised as obedience to the monarch. Velazquez's men who protested were arrested. Cortes, the fugitive, became the Crown's representative by decree of his own subordinates.

Soon the emissaries of Moctezuma arrived. The scene was recorded in Cortes's letters and in the conquistadors' testimonies: the Mexica ambassadors spread before the Spaniards the finest cloaks, quetzal-feather headdresses, objects of gold and silver worked with a mastery that left the Europeans stunned. Among the gifts came a golden disk the size of a cartwheel representing the sun, another of silver representing the moon, and ceremonial armor. The Spaniards, who until then had only seen gold in nuggets and dust, discovered that in that land the precious metal became art. The effect was the opposite of what Moctezuma intended: instead of sating the newcomers' greed, the gifts ignited it. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, the

soldier-chronicler, would write years later that at the sight of such riches the men were left "astounded," wondering whether there was another kingdom like it in the world.

But the ambassadors also brought a clear message: the tlatoani asked the foreigners not to advance inland. He offered annual tribute in exchange for them staying on the coast or leaving. Cortes answered with courtesy and lies: he said he came as ambassador of the most powerful king in the world and could not return without personally seeing the great lord Moctezuma. Diplomacy had become a contest: each side studied the other, measured its strength, and bought time.

On the coast, meanwhile, Cortes wove his first Indigenous alliance. The Totonacs of Cempoala, a tributary people of the Mexica who resented the yoke, received the Spaniards with open arms. Their lord, Xicomecoatl —whom the Spaniards nicknamed "the fat cacique"— told them of the abuses his people suffered: the Mexica tax collectors carried off the maize, the women, the children for sacrifice. Cortes did something very shrewd: when the Mexica collectors arrived to demand tribute, he ordered them seized. It was an act of open war against the empire, executed with borrowed hands: the Totonacs, encouraged by the Spaniards, refused to pay. The Totonac rebellion was the first visible crack in the empire, and the Mexica themselves had opened it with their oppressive tribute system. Cortes only had to push.

In August 1519, Cortes made the most famous decision of his life: he ordered his own ships scuttled —rendered unusable. Popular history says he "burned his ships," though in reality he dismantled and sank them to salvage the timber and iron. The gesture was unequivocal: there would be no retreat. His men, willing or not,

would have to win or die. With some four hundred Spaniards and several hundred Totonac allies, Cortes set out marching inland. He was going to look for the enemies of his enemies. He was going to look for Tlaxcala.

Cuba, 1518-1519: the backstory of the expedition

To understand the conquest of Mexico one must first look at Cuba, because Cortes's expedition was not born in Spain but in the Caribbean, and it inherited all the vices of the Antillean colonial world. In 1519, Cuba had been colonized for barely eight years: Diego Velazquez had subdued the island between 1511 and 1514 with a brutality that wiped out the Taino within a generation. The economic model was the *encomienda*: a few colonists received entire Indigenous towns to exploit in the gold mines and on the haciendas. Cuban gold —placer gold, easy to extract— was running out, and a generation of indebted, ambitious colonists desperately sought a new frontier to get rich on.

Velazquez was the master of that world: governor, distributor of *encomiendas*, partner in every business. Hernán Cortes had been his trusted man —secretary, mayor of Santiago— but the relationship had soured over political and personal rivalries. When Velazquez organized the third expedition to the west —after those of Hernandez de Cordoba and Grijalva— he named Cortes captain, probably because he was the only one with the energy and connections to outfit it quickly. It was a mistake the governor would regret for the rest of his life.

The expedition was financed like a venture-capital enterprise: Cortes put up his fortune —and his partners'—, the captains contributed horses and weapons, Santiago merchants lent money at

high interest. Every participant was a shareholder expecting dividends in gold and in Indians. That structure explains the later dynamic: Cortes could not have ordered a retreat even had he wanted to, because his "investors" would have abandoned him; and he could not distribute too little loot, because his creditors would have ruined him. The conquest was, financially speaking, a speculative bubble that could only be sustained by ever-greater victories.

The break between Cortes and Velazquez—in February 1519—turned the expedition into a rebellion. Velazquez, alarmed at the power Cortes was accumulating, ordered the fleet stopped before it sailed; Cortes put to sea by night, slipping past the governor's agents. From that moment, every man in the expedition was technically a rebel, and their only salvation was success: if they took an empire, the king would pardon them; if they failed, they would hang. That sword of Damocles explains Cortes's suicidal boldness in every later decision: scuttling the ships, marching inland, taking Moctezuma prisoner. These were not the gestures of a self-assured military genius: they were the bets of a man with no alternative. The conquest of Mexico was made possible, at bottom, by a power struggle between two Caribbean colonists.



The messengers and Moctezuma's fear

What was Moctezuma thinking while all this was happening? The Mexica sources, collected decades later by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun in the Florentine Codex, describe an anguished tlatoani, sending sorcerers and spies to watch the foreigners and receiving ever more alarming reports: white bearded men, huge animals carrying riders, sticks that thundered and killed at a distance. Some versions say Moctezuma tried to stop the Spaniards with sorcery, sending wizards against them, and that the wizards returned saying nothing could be done.

These accounts must be read with care. They were collected by Spanish friars from the mouths of Mexica elders fifty years after the events, when defeat was already a collective trauma and when it suited everyone to explain the catastrophe as the design of the gods. But even discounting the legend, the underlying portrait is plausible: Moctezuma ruled an empire accustomed to the world working by known rules —enemies came from known peoples, with known weapons, for known reasons— and suddenly an enemy appeared that fit no category. They were not gods, as has sometimes been lightly said; they were something worse: they were unpredictable.

Moctezuma's indecision has been judged harshly for five centuries. He has been called cowardly, superstitious, paralyzed by prophecy. It is an unjust, anachronistic judgment. Moctezuma acted as any prudent ruler would before an unknown threat: he sent embassies, offered gifts to buy time, tried to bribe the intruders to leave, gathered information, and avoided provoking open war before knowing the enemy's real strength. His error was not cowardice but underestimation: he believed a few hundred foreigners could be

managed with diplomacy, as any rebellious lordship was managed. He did not understand —no one in his place would have understood— that those men had not come to negotiate a place within the Mesoamerican order, but to destroy that order entirely.

While the Spaniards marched toward Tlaxcala, Moctezuma kept sending gifts. Each shipment of gold confirmed to the Spaniards they were on the right track. The tlatoani, without knowing it, was financing with his own generosity the greed that would destroy him.

The conquistadors: who they really were

It is worth undoing a persistent misunderstanding: Cortes's men were not an army. Spain did not send a professional military force to conquer Mexico; what arrived was a company of indebted adventurers, organized as a high-risk commercial enterprise. Each man had invested in the expedition: his horse, his weapons, his share of the provisions. The captains had borrowed from Cuban merchants. If the enterprise failed, ruin was personal. That economic structure explains the ferocity of the conquest better than any ideology: those men were not fighting for king or cross first; they were fighting not to lose everything.

Who were they? Mostly second-rank hidalgos —the lowest rung of the nobility—, peasants, artisans, and veteran soldiers of the Italian wars and the Reconquista. The average age was around thirty. Many had come to the Caribbean seeking easy gold and had found, instead, an encomienda economy where a few got rich and most barely survived. Cortes himself was the prototype: a fortune-less Extremaduran hidalgo, a notary and encomendero in Cuba, up to his neck in debt, with a reputation as a womanizer and brawler. His genius was not military in the classical sense —he had never

commanded an army in a formal battle—; his genius was political and psychological: he could read men, lie convincingly, and turn other people's desperation into loyalty.

Spanish weaponry deserves an honest description, because the myth of technological superiority has been built on it. The Spaniards brought fourteen small artillery pieces —falconets and culverins—, thirteen arquebuses, and thirty-two crossbows. The arquebuses of the time were clumsy weapons: they took a minute or more to reload, misfired in humidity, and had short effective range. Crossbows were more reliable but slow. Artillery served mostly for the psychological effect of its thunder. The real Spanish advantages were three, and none was magical: Toledo steel swords —which cut where wooden macanas edged with obsidian blades went blunt—, horses —sixteen at first, whose speed and mass were unknown in Mesoamerica— and metal armor and quilted cotton, which stopped arrows and stones. But sixteen horses do not conquer an empire, and swords break. What conquered the empire was what those men carried in their heads: the experience of the Reconquista —eight centuries of war against a culturally distinct enemy—, the notion of total war, and above all the willingness to ally with whomever was necessary. The Mexica had never made war that way.

The empire in 1519: apogee and cracks

The empire Moctezuma Xocoyotzin ruled in 1519 was, in many ways, the culmination of Mesoamerican civilization. In less than a century, the Mexica had gone from newcomers in the Valley of Mexico to dominating some two hundred thousand square kilometers, with an estimated population of five to six million. The Triple Alliance —Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan— had subdued

some four hundred altepetl, local lordships that paid tribute. The Matrícula de Tributos, the administrative document recording those obligations, details an astonishingly sophisticated system: each town knew exactly how much maize, how many cotton cloaks, how much cacao, how many quetzal feathers, and how many warriors it owed, and when. The pochteca, long-distance merchants, doubled as the empire's spies, informing the tlatoani of conditions in the provinces.

Moctezuma II had taken the throne in 1502 on the death of his uncle Ahuitzotl. He was a reformist, centralizing ruler: he displaced the old military nobility, elevated loyal administrators, reinforced court ceremonial until the tlatoani became a semi-divine figure —no one could look him in the face or turn their back on him— and expanded the empire to its maximum limits, reaching the Gulf and Pacific coasts. Under his government, Tenochtitlan became the largest, richest city on the continent.

But expansion had a cost, and by 1519 the bills were coming due. The tribute system, efficient on paper, was brutal in practice: the imperial collectors —the calpixque— demanded more and more, and subjugated peoples answered with ever more frequent rebellions. In the years before the Spaniards arrived, the Mixtecs had rebelled, Cuetlaxtlan, several Gulf Coast lordships, and western towns. Each rebellion demanded a punitive expedition, and each punitive expedition left a trail of resentment. The empire was overstretched: it dominated vast territory with very little direct administration, sustained by fear.

There was also a fracture at the top. The Triple Alliance was no monolithic bloc: Texcoco, the alliance's second city, was living through a succession crisis. On the death of the great Nezahualpilli

in 1515, his sons Cacamatzin and Ixtlilxochitl disputed the throne; Moctezuma imposed Cacamatzin, his nephew, humiliating Ixtlilxochitl and his supporters. Texcoco —the Athens of Anahuac, the city of sages— was left divided and resentful. When Cortes arrived, Ixtlilxochitl would see in the Spaniards the opportunity for his revenge, contributing thousands of Texcocan warriors to the conquering coalition and, more importantly, control of the lake's eastern shore. The conquest fed on the empire's internal divisions as much as on external rebellions.

And as if that were not enough, nature conspired too. The years before 1519 had brought bad harvests and famines in several regions; the omens —real or invented afterward— spoke of comets, fires, and nocturnal weeping. An empire that believes itself protected by the gods begins to doubt when the gods fall silent. Moctezuma ruled the most powerful empire in Mesoamerica, yes, but it was a power hollow inside: feared, not loved; obeyed, not followed. The Spaniards did not topple a healthy oak; they pushed a rotted tree.

The omens: when the sky warns

The Mexica sources collected by Sahagun list eight dire omens said to have announced the Spaniards' arrival in the years before 1519: a spike of fire in the night sky —probably a comet— that burned for a year; the spontaneous burning of Huitzilopochtli's temple, which water could not quench; lightning striking Xiuhtecuhtli's temple with no thunder heard; a fire running from west to east across the sky; the boiling of the lake, its waters churning with no wind; a woman's nocturnal weeping, crying "my children, we are lost!"; the capture of a strange bird with a mirror on its head in which Moctezuma saw

warriors in the sky; and the appearance of deformed, two-headed men who vanished when brought before the tlatoani.

Did they really happen? It is impossible to know, and in a sense it does not matter. What matters is that the Mexica —or at least the elders who told these stories fifty years later— needed to believe the catastrophe had been announced. Omens serve a deep psychological function: they turn an incomprehensible disaster into a legible destiny. If the gods warned, then defeat was neither accident nor fault: it was the fulfillment of a cosmic order. It is the same logic that leads defeated peoples to say "it was written."

But the omens should also be read as a political document. Who told these stories, and to what end? Sahagun's informants were Tenochca elders who had survived the conquest and lived in colonial New Spain under the friars' dominion. Telling that the Mexica gods had announced the Spaniards was a way of currying favor with the victors: it implied the Spanish victory was divine will, which made defeat more digestible and evangelization more legitimate. The friars, for their part, spread the omens enthusiastically, because they served preaching: "even your own gods announced our coming."

Stripped of their apologetic function, the omens reveal something true and moving: the empire's state of mind on the eve of catastrophe. An empire that feels secure does not invent dire omens; it invents —or remembers, or exaggerates— them when it already senses something is wrong. The years before 1519 were years of bad harvests, rebellions, and a tlatoani increasingly enclosed in his ceremonial. Collective anxiety sought an outlet in the sky. And when the Spaniards arrived, anxiety found its retroactive explanation: "we had been warned." The omens did not

predict the conquest; the conquest, by happening, gave meaning to earlier fears.

Quiahuiztlan: the first act of war

Shortly after founding the Villa Rica, Cortes marched with his men to Quiahuiztlan, a fortified Totonac town on a hilltop, allied with Cempoala. There occurred a seemingly minor episode that was in reality the first act of open war against the Mexica empire—and a perfect sample of Cortes's method.

While the Spaniards were at Quiahuiztlan, five Mexica tribute collectors arrived, with their imperial insignia, to demand the customary payment from the Totonacs. The Totonacs, frightened, received them with their usual humility. Cortes, watching the scene, ordered his men to seize the collectors. The Totonacs were horrified: seizing an imperial collector was rebellion, and rebellion was punished with extermination. But Cortes did not stop there: that night, in secret, he ordered two of the prisoners freed and sent back to Moctezuma with a message: he had not ordered the arrest—it had been the Totonacs' doing—and he, Cortes, remained the tlatoani's friend.

It was a masterstroke of duplicity. Before the Totonacs, Cortes appeared as their protector against the empire; before Moctezuma, as a friend who had tried to prevent the incident. The Totonacs, now committed to rebellion—they had taken part in the arrest—had no way back: either they stayed with the Spaniards or they faced Mexica vengeance alone. Cortes had tied them to his cause with a knot they could not untie. It is the same method he would use again and again: committing his allies to irreversible acts so the alliance could never break.

The Quiahuiztlan episode also reveals the psychology of the declining empire. The Mexica collectors arrived with their usual arrogance, without significant military escort, confident that mere imperial prestige sufficed. They did not understand that the world had changed: that armed foreigners were rewriting the rules. The empire kept acting as if nothing had happened, collecting tribute on a coast where another flag already flew. That institutional blindness—the inability to adapt to a new threat—would remain a Mexica constant to the end. While Cortes improvised, innovated, and betrayed creatively, the empire repeated its customary gestures, emptier each time.

Moctezuma Xocoyotzin: portrait of the tlatoani

To judge Moctezuma one must know him, and knowing him requires stripping away five centuries of legend—that of the coward paralyzed by prophecy and that of the tyrant who deserved to fall. The real man was one of the most capable, and most tragic, rulers in American history.

Moctezuma Xocoyotzin—"the Younger," to distinguish him from his grandfather Moctezuma Ilhuicamina—was born around 1466, son of the tlatoani Axayacatl. He trained as both warrior and priest: he fought in his uncle Ahuitzotl's expansion wars and served in the temple, a dual career typical of Mexica nobility. When the council elected him tlatoani in 1502, at thirty-six, he was a man in his prime: cultured, disciplined, ambitious.

His reign—eighteen years—was that of a centralizing reformer. Moctezuma reorganized the imperial administration: he replaced old military chieftains with loyal officials, professionalized tribute collection, reinforced the tlatoani's power against the nobility, and

carried court ceremonial to unprecedented refinement. He expanded the empire to its maximum limits: under his command, Mexica armies reached the Gulf and Pacific coasts, subdued the Mixtecs and Zapotecs, and carried the imperial frontier farther than ever. Tenochtitlan, under his government, became the continent's largest, richest metropolis. Until 1519, Moctezuma was —justly— considered Mesoamerica's most powerful ruler.

But his reforms made enemies. The old warrior nobility, displaced from power, resented him. Subjugated peoples, squeezed by ever-heavier taxation, rebelled with growing frequency. And his own governing style —distant, ceremonious, all but divine— isolated him from reality: surrounded by courtiers who told him only what he wanted to hear, Moctezuma lost touch with the discontent growing in the provinces and in his own court.

Facing the Spaniards, Moctezuma made real mistakes, but they were mistakes of information, not of character. He underestimated the threat because no one in his world had faced such a threat: foreigners who wanted neither tribute nor vassalage, but the total destruction of the existing order. His strategy —buying time with gifts and embassies while gathering information— was rational, and it was the one that had worked against every previous enemy. The problem is that time favored the Spaniards: each passing month, Cortes wove more alliances and Moctezuma lost more authority.

The captive Moctezuma —of those last months— is the most pathetic, most human figure in this story. A man who had been treated as a god, reduced to managing his own captivity: receiving the Spaniards courteously, issuing orders he knew were useless, trying to keep up appearances before a people who already despised him. When he died —stoned by his own people or

strangled by his captors— he died alone, never fully understanding what had destroyed his empire. History remembers him as the tlatoani who lost Mexico; it would be fairer to remember him as the ruler who faced the unforeseeable with the only tools his world had given him, and they were not enough.

The horses: terror on four legs

Sixteen horses landed at Veracruz in 1519. Sixteen animals against an empire of five million people. And yet those sixteen horses were—in Mexica minds— a more fearsome weapon than the cannons. It is worth understanding why.

Mesoamerica had no horses: they had gone extinct in the Americas thousands of years earlier, and no Mesoamerican people had ever seen such a large domesticated animal. When the Mexica first saw a Spanish rider, they did not see a man on an animal: they saw—according to several testimonies— a single two-headed, six-limbed creature, a monster. The terror was instinctive and total. At the battle of Centla, a charge by a dozen riders scattered thousands of Maya warriors who until then had fought bravely.

But the psychological effect wore off fast —faster than the Spaniards expected. The Tlaxcalans, in the war of September 1519, learned in weeks what Europeans took centuries to perfect: how to kill horses. They discovered that a well-aimed lance in the animal's belly brought it down, that horses stumbled on broken ground, that at night they were nearly useless. They killed several in Tlaxcala and more on the Noche Triste, where on the narrow causeways horses were a death trap for their own riders. By 1521, the Mexica no longer fled cavalry: they fought it.

Still, horses remained decisive at key moments: at Otumba, the charge of the last riders decided the battle; in the siege, cavalry sallies broke up warrior formations on the causeways. But the lesson is clear: the horse was a shock weapon, not a weapon of conquest. Its power lay in surprise, and surprise —like all surprises— runs out. Empires do not fall to sixteen horses; they fall to internal divisions and plagues. The myth of the invincible horse is another romantic adornment of the conquest that this book aims to dismantle: it was useful, it was feared, but it was not decisive.

The pochteca: merchants, spies, and informants

Long before the Spaniards arrived, Moctezuma had eyes on the coast —and those eyes belonged to merchants. The pochteca, the long-distance traders of Tenochtitlan, were far more than businessmen: they were the empire's intelligence service, and their reports shaped Moctezuma's decisions in 1519.

The pochteca were a hereditary caste with their own gods —Yacatecuhtli, lord of travelers— their own courts, and their own laws. They organized caravans that traveled for months to the farthest corners of Mesoamerica: to the cacao lands of the southeast, to the gold rivers of the west, to the Gulf Coast. They traded luxury goods —feathers, jade, cacao, cotton— and returned with something more valuable than merchandise: information. Every pochteca caravan was a reconnaissance mission. They reported on rebellious moods in tributary towns, on harvests, on the movements of enemy armies. The tlatoani received their reports personally.

When the Spaniards landed at Veracruz, the pochteca network went into overdrive. Mexica merchants on the coast observed the

foreigners, counted their ships, noted their weapons, and sent runners to Tenochtitlan. It was largely through pochteca reports that Moctezuma learned what he knew: the number of men, the horses, the "thunder sticks." But the pochteca had a limitation no intelligence service can escape: they could describe what they saw, but they could not interpret what it meant. They reported that the strangers melted gold—but not that they would kill for it. They reported the horses—but not what cavalry charges could do. Information without the right framework is just noise.

There is a deeper irony: the pochteca system shows the empire was not blind—it had one of the best intelligence networks in the pre-modern world. Moctezuma knew more about the Spaniards than the Spaniards initially knew about him. The problem was never lack of information; it was lack of imagination. No report could convey that these particular foreigners played by rules no one in Mesoamerica had ever used: the rule that a few hundred men could topple an empire by turning its subjects against it. The pochteca counted ships and swords. They could not count treason—because treason, in 1519, had not happened yet.

The Flower Wars: ritual war and its price

To understand Tlaxcala's hatred of the Mexica—the emotional fuel of the conquest—one must understand the Flower Wars, the strangest and cruelest institution of the Mexica empire.

The *xochiyaoyotl*, "flowery war," was a form of ritual combat the Mexica waged against certain enemies—Tlaxcala above all. Unlike wars of conquest, its purpose was not territory or tribute but captives: both sides agreed, more or less, to meet in battle at set times and places, fight with the aim of capturing rather than killing,

and take prisoners for sacrifice. For the Mexica, it was a religious necessity: the gods demanded human hearts, and the Flower Wars were the hunting ground. For the Tlaxcalans, it was a nightmare they could not refuse: to decline battle would have meant dishonor and, eventually, invasion anyway.

Modern historians debate how "agreed" these wars really were—the Tlaxcalans experienced them as what they were: a slow bleeding. Every year, young Tlaxcalan warriors were captured and led to Tenochtitlan, where their hearts were offered to Huitzilopochtli atop the Templo Mayor. Every Tlaxcalan family lived with the knowledge that their sons might end as sacrifices to the enemy's gods. It was a form of psychological warfare as much as religious practice: the Mexica demonstrated, year after year, that they could take Tlaxcalan lives at will and Tlaxcala could do nothing to stop it.

The Flower Wars explain two things about the conquest. First, the depth of Tlaxcalan hatred: this was not political rivalry but a blood debt accumulated over generations, paid in the flower of Tlaxcalan youth. When the Tlaxcalans massacred Cholulans, sacked Tenochtitlan's barrios, and slaughtered Tlatelolco's population, they were settling a century-old account. Second, the Mexica's military overconfidence: decades of Flower Wars—stylized, ritual, with rules—had softened the empire's understanding of real war. The Mexica knew how to fight ceremonial battles against familiar enemies. They did not know how to fight a total war against an enemy who recognized no rules. The Flower Wars trained them for a game the Spaniards refused to play.

Chapter 2. La Malinche and the Alliances: War Made of Words

Malinalli: the girl who learned two worlds

Before there were decisive battles, there were words. And the words had a woman's name. Malinalli Tenepatl —baptized by the Spaniards as Dona Marina and known to history as La Malinche— is perhaps the most debated, least understood figure of the entire conquest. For centuries she was called a traitor; in modern Mexico, "malinchista" means one who prefers the foreign to one's own. It is a judgment that says more about us than about her. To understand Malinalli one must start with a simple fact: she betrayed no people, because no people had treated her as their own.

Malinalli was born around 1500 in the Coatzacoalcos region, daughter of a local cacique. As a child she lost her father; her mother remarried and had another son, and —according to the version she herself told Bernal Diaz— her mother and stepfather sold her into slavery so the new male child would be the heir. The girl was passed from hand to hand to Tabasco, where the Chontal Maya gave her to the Spaniards along with nineteen other women after the battle of Centla. She was about eighteen, spoke Nahuatl

—the empire's language— and had learned Maya in captivity. She was, without knowing it, the only person on the continent capable of building a linguistic bridge between two worlds.

The bridge worked like this: Cortes spoke Spanish with Jerónimo de Aguilar; Aguilar translated into Maya; Malinalli translated from Maya into Nahuatl. It was a clumsy three-link chain, but it worked. And Malinalli learned Spanish with astonishing speed: within months she could translate directly from Spanish to Nahuatl, and Aguilar was no longer needed. From then on, in every negotiation, every embassy, every conspiracy, the voice that sounded was hers.

But to reduce Malinalli to "the translator" is to understand nothing. Interpreters in the history of conquests are never neutral: they are diplomats, spies, counselors, and sometimes the true authors of policy. Malinalli did not just translate words: she explained contexts. She taught the Spaniards how the Mexica empire worked, who its enemies were, what gestures and gifts meant, when an embassy was a trap and when a threat was a bluff. When Moctezuma's ambassadors spoke in flowery, ceremonious Nahuatl, she caught nuances Aguilar would never have grasped. When the Tlaxcalan lords hesitated, she found the words to convince them. Bernal Diaz, no man for easy praise, wrote that Dona Marina had "mucho ser y mandado" —presence and authority— and that the Indigenous people respected her as a lady.

One episode reveals her true role. At Cholula, as we shall see, it was an old woman of the city who secretly warned her that the Cholulans were preparing an ambush against the Spaniards. Malinalli listened, feigned complicity, then ran to warn Cortes. Without that warning, the Spanish column would have been annihilated in Cholula's streets. The conquest stood, literally, on the

loyalty of a woman whom official history called a traitor. Traitor to what? She had been sold by her own mother, enslaved by the Maya, handed to foreigners. She owed loyalty to no throne. What she did was use her intelligence to survive and to impose herself in a world of armed men —and she succeeded extraordinarily: she ended up as Cortes's companion, mother of his son Martin, and one of the few Indigenous women of the era whose name survived.

Malinalli's lesson is this book's second great key: the conquest was not won with arquebuses, but with information. Whoever understands the enemy defeats him; whoever does not understand him does not even know he is at war. The Spaniards, thanks to her, stopped being blind in a strange land. The Mexica, by contrast, never had a Malinalli: they never fully understood what the Spaniards wanted or how they thought.

The chain of tongues: Aguilar and the miracle of communication

The history of the conquest is usually told as a history of weapons, but it was first a history of words, and words needed a logistical miracle. When Cortes landed, he found a continent where dozens of mutually unintelligible languages were spoken. Without interpreters, the Spaniards would have been deaf and mute: unable to negotiate, to spy, to threaten precisely. Providence —or chance— gave them two.

The first was Jerónimo de Aguilar, a Spanish cleric shipwrecked in 1511 off Yucatan who had lived eight years among the Maya, first as a slave, then as a respected man. When Cortes rescued him at Cozumel, Aguilar wept with joy and joined the expedition. He spoke fluent Maya but not a word of Nahuatl, the empire's language. He

served during the first months, in Tabasco and on the coast, where Maya was useful.

The second was Malinalli, and her story has been told. But the concrete mechanics of translation deserve attention, because they reveal how utterly the conquest depended on one person. For weeks, every conversation between Cortes and the Mexica ambassadors passed through a three-link chain: Cortes spoke Spanish, Aguilar rendered it into Maya, Malinalli rendered it from Maya into Nahuatl, and back the same way. Each link was an opportunity for error, misunderstanding, or deliberate manipulation. How could Cortes be sure Malinalli translated faithfully? He could not. He had to trust. And that trust —forced, inevitable— made an eighteen-year-old enslaved girl the most powerful person in the expedition after Cortes himself.

Malinalli learned Spanish with a speed that amazed everyone. Within months she no longer needed Aguilar: she translated directly from Spanish to Nahuatl. And with the language came power. Because translating is not just swapping words: it is interpreting intentions. When a Mexica ambassador used the flowery, ceremonious language of Nahua diplomacy —full of metaphors, ritual humility, veiled threats— Malinalli did not just convey the literal sense: she explained to Cortes what was really being said. "He says his lord offers you his friendship" could mean, from her lips, "he says that because he is afraid" or "he says that to buy time." No Spaniard could have read those nuances. She was the expedition's eyes and ears.

Historians stress one detail: Malinalli was no passive translator. On several occasions she took her own diplomatic initiatives, spoke with Indigenous noblewomen, wove information networks, and —as

at Cholula— acted as a spy. The Spaniards called her "Dona Marina" and treated her with respect unusual for an Indigenous woman of the time; the Indigenous called her "Malintzin" —with the reverential suffix -tzin— and called Cortes "Malintzin's captain," as if he were her subordinate. It was no wild exaggeration: without her, the captain could not have given a single intelligible order.

Tlaxcala: the pact with Mexico's enemies

In September 1519, Cortes's column reached Tlaxcalan territory. What followed was one of the fiercest wars of the entire conquest—and the most important. For nearly three weeks, the Tlaxcalan armies, commanded by the young general Xicotencatl, attacked the Spaniards again and again. The Spanish chroniclers speak of tens of thousands of warriors; the figures are exaggerated, but the intensity was not: the Spaniards were several times on the verge of annihilation. The Tlaxcalans learned fast: they discovered horses were not invincible, that swords went blunt, that arquebuses took too long to reload. They fought at night, when horses were less useful; they attacked in waves to exhaust the few Spaniards. Had the war lasted a few more weeks, Cortes's expedition would have ended there, in the Tlaxcalan mountains, and Mexico's history would be different.

But Tlaxcala was no kingdom under a single command: it was a confederation of four lordships —Tepeticpac, Ocotelulco, Tizatlan, and Quiahuiztlan— governed by a senate of elders. And in that senate there was a deep division. Xicotencatl the Younger wanted to fight on until the foreigners were exterminated. His father, Xicotencatl the Elder, and the influential lord Maxixcatzin were beginning to see another possibility: those foreigners hated the

Mexica as much as they did, and had proven hard to kill. Why not use them as a weapon against Tenochtitlan?

The decision was made as great decisions are made in history: by calculation, not sympathy. The Tlaxcalans did not ally with the Spaniards out of admiration; they allied because they had spent a century dreaming of destroying the Mexica and suddenly an ally appeared offering the chance. The pact was sealed with ceremonies and marriages: the Tlaxcalan lords offered their daughters to the Spanish captains, and Cortes accepted the baptism of several maidens. The alliance was consecrated in October 1519, when the Spaniards entered the city of Tlaxcala received as honored guests.

Pause on what this means. Without Tlaxcala there is no conquest. It is that simple. The Tlaxcalans contributed tens of thousands of warriors —serious estimates speak of up to fifty thousand men in the final campaigns— plus food, porters, information, refuge when the Spaniards were defeated, and safe territory to rebuild the brigantine fleet. The Spaniards, at the decisive moment of the siege of Tenochtitlan, numbered barely nine hundred. Their Indigenous allies numbered over a hundred thousand. The proportion says it all: the conquest of Mexico was an Indigenous enterprise with Spanish advice, not the reverse.

And Tlaxcala was not alone. Through 1519 and 1520 the Totonacs of Cempoala joined, the Texcocans —where Cortes installed a puppet ruler—, the Chalca, the Xochimilca, the people of Iztapalapa after its city fell. Each people that joined the Spaniards did so for its own reasons: revenge against the Mexica, ambition to shake off tribute, ancient local rivalries. Cortes did not create that coalition from nothing: he found it waiting, like a forest fire waiting for a spark.

Xicotencatl the Younger: the general who almost won

The Tlaxcalan war —September 1519— is usually told from the Spanish side: the heroic resistance of a handful of Europeans against innumerable hordes. But seen from the Tlaxcalan side, it is the story of a brilliant general who came close to changing the course of American history and was betrayed by his own people's divisions.

Xicotencatl the Younger —also called Xicotencatl Axayacatzin— was the commander of the Tlaxcalan armies, son of one of the confederation's four lords. He was young, bold, and a notable tactician: within days he understood Spanish strengths and weaknesses better than any other Mesoamerican commander. He discovered that horses —the most feared weapon— were vulnerable if attacked on broken ground and at night; that arquebuses, after the first volley, left their bearers defenseless for an eternal minute; that Spanish swords, fearsome in single combat, went blunt against macanas; and that the Spaniards, few and far from their bases, could not sustain a war of attrition.

His strategy was impeccable: continuous wave attacks, day and night, to exhaust the Spaniards; ambushes in the defiles; night attacks on the Spanish camp. For nearly three weeks the Tlaxcalans kept up pressure that several times nearly broke the expedition. The Spaniards —Bernal Diaz admits it— spent entire nights without sleep, watching with weapons ready, awaiting attack. There were moments when defeat seemed imminent: in one battle the Tlaxcalans killed several horses —the hardest blow they could strike— and nearly took the camp.

Why did Xicotencatl lose? He did not lose on the battlefield: he lost in the senate. Tlaxcala was a confederation, and war-and-peace decisions were made by the council of the four lords. While Xicotencatl fought, his father and Maxixcatzin negotiated in secret with Cortes. The elders had reached a political conclusion: even if they could exterminate those Spaniards, more would come —Cortes had spread the idea that behind him stood a king with infinite armies— and meanwhile the Mexica remained the mortal enemy. Better to ally with the foreigners and use them against Tenochtitlan. Xicotencatl the warrior wanted immediate military victory; the elders, long-term political victory. The elders won.

The young general obeyed —reluctantly— the order to cease hostilities, but never accepted the alliance. Two years later, during the siege of Tenochtitlan, while commanding a Tlaxcalan contingent, he abandoned the siege and returned to Tlaxcala —sources dispute whether by desertion or after a quarrel with Cortes. Cortes had him captured and hanged as a traitor. It was a political execution: Xicotencatl represented the Tlaxcalans who never believed in the alliance, and his death sealed Tlaxcala's submission to the Spanish project.

Xicotencatl's figure deserves rescue from oblivion: he was the only Mesoamerican commander who understood the Spaniards in time and nearly defeated them. Had the Tlaxcalan senate backed him two more weeks, Cortes's expedition would have ended in the mountains, and Mexico's history would be different. His defeat was not military but political —and that is, in miniature, the story of the entire conquest: the Mesoamericans lost not for lack of courage or military intelligence, but through division.

The senate of Tlaxcala: the conquest's most important decision

The Spanish-Tlaxcalan alliance was no impulse or accident: it was a deliberate decision, taken after a debate historians consider one of the most momentous political moments in American history. And it was taken in a senate, not on a battlefield.

Tlaxcala governed itself as a confederation of four lordships —Tepeticpac, Ocotelulco, Tizatlan, and Quiahuiztlan— each with its lord, meeting in a council of elders that decided war and peace. When the Spaniards arrived in 1519, the council was split. Xicotencatl the Younger —the general— demanded the foreigners' extermination: he considered them a mortal threat and believed —correctly— they could be beaten. His father, Xicotencatl the Elder, and Maxixcatzin, the most influential lord, favored negotiation: those foreigners hated the Mexica, had proven tough, and could be the weapon Tlaxcala had awaited for a century.

The debate lasted weeks while war continued in the mountains. The war party argued the Spaniards were unpredictable, that their god demanded the destruction of the Tlaxcalan gods, that allying with them was inviting the tiger to dinner. The alliance party answered with brutal realism: Tlaxcala had spent a century resisting the Mexica without defeating them; the Spaniards offered a unique opportunity; and if they exterminated these, more would come —Cortes had made sure to spread word that behind him stood a king with infinite armies.

The alliance won, but not unanimously: it was a divided decision, imposed by the elders against the judgment of the general in the field. And once taken, it was honored with remarkable discipline:

Tlaxcala never broke the pact, not even at the worst moments. That discipline reveals the nature of Tlaxcalan politics: once the senate decided, the confederation obeyed.

The Tlaxcalan senate's decision —October 1519— is, in a sense, the true beginning of the conquest of Mexico. Without it, Cortes would have been a corpse in the mountains; with it, he had an army. Great historical events are usually attributed to battles or heroes; this one was decided in a chamber, by elders coldly calculating their revenge. History should remember their names —Xicotencatl the Elder, Maxixcatzin— with the same attention it gives Cortes: it was they who, unknowingly, signed Tenochtitlan's sentence.

The empire's enemies: a map of resentment

To understand the coalition that destroyed Tenochtitlan one must visit, one by one, the peoples who formed it, because each had its own reasons and its own history of grievances. The conquest was no foreign invasion backed by a few traitors: it was a general rebellion of Anahuac against its capital, with the Spaniards as catalyst.

The Gulf Coast Totonacs were first. Their lordship of Cempoala had been subdued by the Mexica only decades before, and tribute was a constant bleeding: the calpixque carried off cotton, maize, and —what hurt most— youths for sacrifice. When Cortes seized the Mexica collectors, the Totonacs felt for the first time in years that the empire could be defied. They gave the expedition several hundred warriors and, more importantly, porters and guides. Without them, the Spaniards could not even have fed themselves on the march inland.

The Tlaxcalans were the main course: a confederation of four

lordships that had resisted over a century of Mexica siege. Their hatred of Tenochtitlan was not political but existential: the Flower Wars —those ritual campaigns the Mexica launched to capture prisoners for sacrifice— were fought mostly against them. Every year, Tlaxcalan youths were captured and sacrificed in the Templo Mayor. Every Tlaxcalan family had dead to avenge. When the Tlaxcalan senate decided to ally with the Spaniards, it did so not from admiration of the foreigners but because a hammer with which to strike their mortal enemy had finally appeared. And once the decision was taken, they honored it with astonishing loyalty: they lost thousands of men on the Noche Triste and in the siege, and never turned back.

The Texcocans gave the empire's second city to the Spanish cause, and their story most reveals Mexica internal fractures. Ixtlilxochitl, the prince dispossessed by Moctezuma, joined Cortes with his supporters and turned Texcoco —on the lake's eastern shore— into the naval base of the final campaign. It was on Texcocan territory that the brigantines were assembled. Without Texcoco there is no fleet, and without a fleet there is no siege. The conquest of Tenochtitlan was, to a large extent, a civil war among the Triple Alliance's cities.

And then there were the rest: the Chalca, traditional Mexica enemies; the Xochimilca and the people of Cuitlahuac, chinampa peoples of the lake's shore who contributed canoes and knowledge of the waters; the Huexotzinca; the people of Iztapalapa after their city fell. By the summer of 1521, Cortes commanded —or rather coordinated— a coalition of over a hundred thousand Indigenous warriors. The nine hundred Spaniards were the tip of a spear whose shaft was entirely Indigenous. Whenever anyone says "the

Spaniards conquered Mexico," remember that proportion: a hundred to one.

Cortes's diplomacy: gifts, hostages, and marriages

How does one build such a coalition in under two years, with no common language, no common currency, nothing in common but the enemy? The answer is that Cortes turned out to be a diplomat of extraordinary talent, and his diplomacy combined four instruments the Mexica could not counter.

The first was the gift. Cortes distributed among Indigenous lords glass beads, scissors, shirts, hats —worthless objects in Europe but exotic in Mesoamerica— and, above all, promises of loot. To the Tlaxcalans he promised the sack of Tenochtitlan; to Ixtlilxochitl, the throne of Texcoco. Each promise was a mortgage on a future that did not yet exist, but it worked.

The second was marriage. Following the Mesoamerican —and European— custom of sealing alliances with matrimonial ties, Cortes accepted —and promoted— his captains' unions with allied lords' daughters. The baptized Tlaxcalan maidens given to Spanish captains created kinship bonds that turned alliance into family. He himself took Malinalli as his companion, with whom he had a son, Martin —one of the continent's first mestizos, a living symbol of the alliance.

The third was the hostage. Cortes took hostages naturally: lords' sons who "accompanied" the expedition, lords "invited" to stay in the Spanish camp. It was common practice in Mesoamerican diplomacy, and Cortes adopted it unashamedly. Moctezuma's

imprisonment was only the most spectacular case of a habitual method.

The fourth, darkest, was measured terror. Cholula was the master example: a calculated massacre so the message would run through all Anahuac. But there were others: at Texcoco, at Iztapalapa, Cortes ordered exemplary punishments against those who resisted. The message was always the same, two-faced: with me, loot and protection; against me, extermination. It was the Reconquista's diplomacy, applied to a new continent.

Against this, Mexica diplomacy —refined, ritual, based on prestige and veiled threat— proved useless. Moctezuma sent ever richer gifts hoping to buy the retreat; Cortes accepted them as tribute and advanced. The empire knew how to dominate through fear of its armies; it did not know how to negotiate with someone who did not fear its armies. The Spaniards won the diplomatic war before the military war began, and they won it because they understood —thanks to Malinalli— the rules of the Mesoamerican game, while the Mexica never understood the rules of the Spanish game.

Cholula: the massacre that announced the war

From Tlaxcala the Spaniards marched to Cholula, the sacred city dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, famous throughout Mesoamerica for its temples and priests. What happened there in October 1519 is one of the darkest episodes of the conquest and one of the most revealing of Cortes's method.

According to the Spanish version, the Cholulans —instigated by Moctezuma's agents— were preparing an ambush: they had dug stake-filled pits in the streets, removed women and children from

the city, and gathered Mexica warriors outside. The warning came, as noted, through Malinalli. Cortes decided to strike first: he summoned Cholula's lords to a temple courtyard and, at an agreed signal, the Spaniards and their Tlaxcalan allies—who hated the Cholulans, allies of the Mexica—massacred those assembled, then sacked the city for two days. Thousands of unarmed people died.

Historians still debate whether the conspiracy really existed or was a pretext. What is undisputed is the effect: the Cholula massacre was a message addressed to all Anahuac. It said: "see what happens to those who betray us." And it worked. When the Spaniards reached the Valley of Mexico, no town dared bar their way. Terror, coldly dosed, proved as effective a weapon as cannons. Cholula also revealed something about the Indigenous allies: it was the Tlaxcalans who carried out much of the killing, settling a long-awaited revenge against a rival city. The conquest's violence had, from the start, Indigenous hands.

Cholula from inside: conspiracy or pretext?

The Cholula massacre—October 1519—is the morally murkiest episode of the march to Tenochtitlan, and historians have spent a century debating a simple question: did the Cholulan conspiracy really exist, or did Cortes invent the pretext to make an example?

Consider the evidence. The Spanish version—Cortes in his letters, Bernal Diaz in his chronicle—is detailed and coherent: the Cholulans, instigated by Moctezuma, planned to ambush the Spaniards in the city's narrow streets; they had dug stake pits, withdrawn women and children, posted Mexica warriors outside; Malinalli uncovered the plan through an old woman; Cortes struck preemptively. The Indigenous version—fragmentarily preserved in

regional annals— suggests otherwise: that the Cholulans received the Spaniards hospitably, that there was no such conspiracy, and that the massacre was a calculated act of terror, executed largely by the Tlaxcalans, Cholula's mortal enemies, who seized the occasion for revenge.

Evidence supports each version. For the conspiracy: Cholula was a loyal Mexica ally and Tlaxcala's enemy; Moctezuma had motive to order an ambush; withdrawing women and children is classic war preparation; and Malinalli —whose loyalty to the Spaniards was total— believed in the conspiracy. Against it: the Spaniards had motive to invent it —they needed an exemplary punishment before entering the valley—; the Tlaxcalans had motive to exaggerate it —they wanted their rival destroyed—; and the pattern would repeat later at the Templo Mayor, where Alvarado also alleged a conspiracy to justify a massacre.

The most prudent position —defended by historians like Hugh Thomas— is intermediate: there were probably contacts between Cholula and Moctezuma and probably discussions of what to do with the foreigners, but the "imminent ambush" was exaggerated or fabricated to justify a preemptive strike Cortes had already decided on. The real objective was strategic: Cholula was Anahuac's sacred city, and destroying it —or subduing it through terror— sent an unequivocal message to Tenochtitlan: "not even the sacred protects you from us."

Whatever the truth, the result is indisputable: thousands of Cholulans died —sources speak of three to six thousand—, the city was sacked for two days, and the temples lay in ruins. And one detail must not be lost: it was the Tlaxcalans who did most of the killing and looting. The "Spanish massacre of Cholula" was, in

execution, a Tlaxcalan revenge. Once again, the conquest's violence had Indigenous hands, moved by hatreds older than the Europeans' arrival.

The women of the alliance: the other pact

When Cortes's alliances are discussed, people think of warriors and lords, but there was another pact, less visible and equally decisive: that of the women. In every allied town, the lords offered the Spaniards women —daughters, sisters, captives— as wives, concubines, or servants. The Spaniards accepted them as part of the diplomatic loot. Those women —hundreds, perhaps thousands— are the conquest's great forgotten, yet their role was crucial.

First, because they sealed alliances with blood ties. When a Spanish captain took a Tlaxcalan lord's daughter as wife, the alliance stopped being a treaty and became kinship. The mestizo children born of those unions —the first, Martin, son of Cortes and Malinalli— were living proof that the two worlds could mix. For Indigenous lords, giving their daughters was also a way to secure a place in the new order: a Spanish captain's father-in-law had better chances of keeping his lordship than one who resisted.

Second, because those women were —like Malinalli on a large scale— cultural bridges. They taught the Spaniards local customs, warned them of dangers, explained the codes. Every mixed household was a small survival school. Spaniards living with Indigenous women learned Nahuatl, learned to eat the local food, learned to move in the Mesoamerican world. Without those anonymous mediators, the expedition would have remained a foreign body, unable to feed or orient itself.

Third, because their fate reveals the alliance's darkest face. Many of those women were not wives but loot: distributed among the soldiers, enslaved, violated. Spanish laws —the Laws of Burgos of 1512— theoretically prohibited mistreatment, but on a military campaign no one enforced them. The Indigenous-Spanish alliance, seen from the women's experience, was no pact among equals: it was the surrender of female bodies as diplomatic currency. It is an uncomfortable truth this book will not hide: the conquest also rested on violence against women, exercised by Spaniards and Indigenous allies alike.

Malinalli —Dona Marina— is the exception proving the rule: the only one of those women who managed to turn her position into real power. The rest remained anonymous, but without them there would have been no alliances, no mestizaje, no New Spain to come. That chapter of history still awaits whoever will write it whole.

Centla and Cozumel: the first battles

Before Veracruz there were two stops that prefigured everything to come: Cozumel, where the Spaniards learned to negotiate, and Centla, where they learned to kill. Both deserve telling, because in them the conquest's methods were forged.

At Cozumel —February 1519— the first island they touched, the Spaniards found a Maya population that fled inland at the sight of the ships. Cortes ordered no looting, the prisoners returned, the islanders well treated: he wanted information, not plunder. The strategy worked: the Cozumel Maya returned, traded, and —decisively— told him of Spanish castaways living on the mainland. Thus he rescued Jerónimo de Aguilar, eight years among the Maya. Cozumel proved that diplomacy —when convenient— paid better

than violence. Cortes took note: he would alternate carrot and stick throughout the campaign as each situation demanded.

At Tabasco —March 1519— the lesson was the reverse. At Potonchan, the Chontal Maya refused to receive the Spaniards and attacked them. The battle of Centla —March 25— was the conquest's first major combat: a few hundred Spaniards against thousands of Maya warriors. The Spaniards were hard pressed until Cortes launched the cavalry —barely a dozen riders— at the Indigenous flanks. The effect was devastating: the Maya, who had never seen horses, fled in panic. The battle lasted hours and hundreds of Indigenous died; Spanish losses were few.

Centla taught the Spaniards three lessons they would apply in Mexico: that cavalry was as powerful a psychological weapon as a physical one; that Mesoamerican armies, numerous but without steel weapons, broke before a determined charge; and that after victory, calculated magnanimity paid —Cortes pardoned the defeated, held a mass, and accepted the lords' gifts. And it was at Centla that the Tabascans handed over the twenty enslaved women, Malinalli among them. The battle that looked like a mere Caribbean skirmish gave Cortes his most valuable weapon: not the horses, but the interpreter.

One symbolic detail must not be lost: at Centla the Spaniards baptized the place Santa Maria de la Victoria and held the first mass on the Mexican mainland. The conquest, from its first battle, presented itself as a religious enterprise. That narrative —cross beside sword— would accompany every later massacre, giving sacred justification to essentially economic violence. When reading of Cholula, of the Templo Mayor, of the siege, remember Centla: the pattern —provocation, battle, massacre, mass, interested pardon—

was set there, in March 1519, and never changed.



The children of the conquest: Martin and the first mestizos

The conquest was not only a clash of armies but the beginning of a new people —and the first child of that new people was born from the conquest's most famous union. Martin Cortes, son of Hernán Cortes and Malinalli, is often called the first mestizo: the first person born of a Spanish father and an Indigenous mother in mainland North America. His life —and the lives of thousands like him— is the conquest's most intimate legacy.

Martin was born around 1522, after the fall of Tenochtitlan. His mother, Malinalli, by then Dona Marina, was still Cortes's companion; his father was the most powerful man in New Spain. But Martin's privilege was fragile: he was illegitimate in Spanish law,

and his mother's status —a baptized Indigenous noblewoman, but Indigenous nonetheless— placed him in a social limbo. Cortes recognized him, gave him his name, and eventually took him to Spain, where the boy was raised as a gentleman and even received a knighthood in the Order of Santiago. It was an extraordinary rise for the son of an enslaved woman —and it shows how fluid the early colonial world was, before the rigid caste system hardened.

Martin was not alone. The conquest produced thousands of mestizo children: sons and daughters of Spanish soldiers and Indigenous women —some from consensual unions, many from violence. These children grew up between two worlds, speaking both languages, belonging fully to neither. In the first generation, many were absorbed into Spanish society if their fathers recognized them; the unrecognized ones merged into the Indigenous or the emerging mixed population. Within a century, mestizos would be the largest group in New Spain.

The mestizo is Mexico's founding paradox made flesh. Octavio Paz, in "The Labyrinth of Solitude," wrote that the Mexican is the son of La Malinche —"the Chingada," the violated mother— and that Mexican identity begins with that wound. It is a harsh reading, but it captures something true: Mexico was born from violence and union at once, from conquest and love, from rape and marriage. To be Mexican is to carry both Cortes and Cuauhtemoc in the blood, both the victor and the vanquished. Martin, the boy with the conquistador's name and the interpreter's eyes, was the first to embody that duality. Five centuries later, a whole nation still does.

The tree of the Noche Triste: legend and history

In the town of Tlacopan —today Tacuba, in Mexico City— there

stood for centuries an ancient ahuehuete, a Montezuma cypress, under which, legend says, Hernán Cortes sat and wept on the night of June 30, 1520, contemplating the disaster of the Noche Triste. The "Tree of the Noche Triste" became one of the conquest's most beloved legends —and one of its most revealing.

The story first appears in later chronicles: Cortes, having escaped the slaughter on the causeway, stopped at Tlacopan, sat at the foot of a great cypress, and wept for his dead men, his lost gold, his ruined enterprise. It is a deeply human image —the invincible conquistador broken, weeping like any man— and that is precisely why it endured. It gave the conqueror a soul: he was not a machine of ambition but a man who felt loss.

Historians have questioned the tale: did Cortes really weep? Bernal Diaz, who was there, does not mention the tree or the tears in his account of that night —he describes exhaustion and reorganization, not lamentation. The weeping Cortes appears in later, more literary sources. It may be true —a man who has lost four hundred comrades in one night may well weep— or it may be embroidery. What matters is what the legend means.

The tree stood until 1981, when it was burned —some say by accident, some say deliberately— and died. Its charred trunk was preserved as a monument. And here is the final irony: modern Mexico venerates the tree not as a monument to Cortes's grief but as a monument to Mexica victory. For Mexicans, the Noche Triste is not a Spanish tragedy but an Indigenous triumph: the night the invaders were expelled, the night Tenochtitlan proved it could defeat the foreigners. The tree that legend planted for the conqueror's tears became the memorial of the conquered's victory. History's jokes are sometimes just.

The atlatl and the macana: Mexica weapons up close

The myth of European technological superiority collapses fastest when one looks closely at Mexica weaponry—which was, in many respects, superbly adapted to Mesoamerican war.

The macuahuitl, the Mexica "sword," was a wooden club edged with razor-sharp obsidian blades. Obsidian—volcanic glass—can hold an edge sharper than steel; Spanish chroniclers admitted a macuahuitl could decapitate a horse with one blow. Its weakness was brittleness: the blades chipped against steel armor and broke with repeated use. But in the first shock of battle, before the blades dulled, it was a terrifying weapon.

The atlatl, the spear-thrower, launched darts with far greater force and range than a hand-thrown javelin—effective at over a hundred meters. Mexica archers used powerful bows; slingers hurled stones with deadly accuracy. For protection, warriors wore quilted cotton armor—the ichcahuipilli—which the Spaniards themselves adopted, finding it lighter and cooler than steel in the Mexican heat, and surprisingly effective against arrows.

Against unarmored or lightly armored enemies—which meant nearly all Mesoamerican enemies—this arsenal was devastating. It failed against the Spaniards for two specific reasons, neither of them "superior technology" in the abstract: steel armor stopped obsidian blades and arrows, and horses gave the Spaniards a shock weapon the Mexica could not answer at first. But note the asymmetry: the Spaniards adopted Mexica cotton armor and learned to fear Mexica weapons; the Mexica, within months, learned to kill horses and dodge arquebus fire. The technological gap was

real but narrow —and it closed fast. What never closed was the epidemiological and political gap. Weapons decide battles; they do not decide conquests.

Jerónimo de Aguilar: the forgotten interpreter

History remembers La Malinche and forgets Jerónimo de Aguilar —yet without him, there would have been no Malinche, for it was Aguilar who made the first translations possible.

Aguilar's story reads like a novel. A cleric from Ecija, Spain, he sailed to the Indies in 1510 and was shipwrecked off Jamaica in 1511. He and his companions drifted to Yucatan, where the Maya enslaved them; most died, but Aguilar survived eight years, learning the Maya language and earning a respected position. When Cortes's men found him at Cozumel in 1519, he wept —and immediately offered his services. For the first months of the expedition, he was the only bridge to the Indigenous world: he translated in Tabasco, on the coast, in the first embassies.

Then Malinalli learned Spanish, and Aguilar became redundant. He stayed with the expedition —he fought at Tenochtitlan, survived the Noche Triste— but his star had faded. After the conquest, he received an encomienda, took holy orders again, and died in Mexico in obscure comfort. No monuments, no legends, no "malinchismo" named after him.

Aguilar's obscurity is instructive. He was a man, a Spaniard, a cleric —everything the chronicles valued— yet history forgot him, while it immortalized the enslaved Indigenous woman who replaced him. Perhaps because Aguilar represents the conquest's unglamorous truth: that it depended on accidents, on castaways and

go-betweens, on fragile human chains. Or perhaps because Malinalli's story —the sold girl who became the conquest's voice— is simply more powerful. Either way, remember Aguilar when the translation chain is described: for a few crucial months, the fate of two worlds hung on the Maya learned by a shipwrecked priest.

Chapter 3. The Entry into Tenochtitlan: November 8, 1519

The causeway and the lake city

On November 8, 1519, the column advanced along the Iztapalapa causeway toward the heart of Lake Texcoco. What the Spaniards saw that day left them speechless, and Bernal Diaz—who had seen Europe's and the Caribbean's great cities—wrote his chronicle's most famous passage: he said it seemed a dream, "the enchantments they tell of in the book of Amadis." Before them stretched Tenochtitlan: a city of two to three hundred thousand inhabitants—larger than London or Seville at the time—built on an island in the middle of the lake, joined to the mainland by three ruler-straight causeways, with canals instead of streets, canoes instead of carts, and at its center the sacred precinct with the Templo Mayor rising toward the sky.

The city was an engineering prodigy. The chinampas—artificial farming islands—fed the population; the Chapultepec aqueduct brought fresh water from the shore; the Tlatelolco market gathered tens of thousands of people and goods from across the empire every day. The Spaniards counted the causeways' drawbridges, the

sluices regulating the lake level, Moctezuma's botanical gardens and zoos. It was a complete, sophisticated, clean urban civilization—the chroniclers marveled that the city was swept daily and its inhabitants bathed frequently, unthinkable in the Europe of the time.

But the Spaniards also saw something else: the city was a perfect trap. The causeways were narrow, flanked by water on both sides; the bridges could be raised, leaving an army trapped on the island with no exit. Cortes understood immediately, and that understanding filled him with a cold fear he disguised as boldness. Entering Tenochtitlan meant walking voluntarily into the lion's mouth. Yet he entered, because not entering would have meant admitting defeat, and because his gambler's instinct told him the prize—being inside, near the tlatoani—was worth the risk.



Tenochtitlan from inside: the city that astonished Europe

The Spaniards who entered Tenochtitlan on November 8, 1519, thought they were dreaming, and no wonder. No city they had seen

—not Seville, not Naples, not Constantinople in travelers' tales—resembled it. To grasp the magnitude of what was lost in 1521, one must walk the city as they walked it, eyes wide open.

The Tlatelolco market was the empire's economic heart. Bernal Diaz, who had seen the Mediterranean's bazaars, wrote he had never seen a market like it: every day twenty to sixty thousand people —some sources say more— gathered in a huge plaza ordered by craft streets. There were sellers of gold, silver, and precious stones; of quetzal and parrot feathers; of cotton cloaks in every color; of cacao, vanilla, chili, and maize; of slaves; of fattened dogs for eating; of medicines and herbs; of pottery, mats, canoes. Everything had its assigned place, everything its price, and a market tribunal settled disputes on the spot, with severe punishments for cheats. The *pochteca* —the elite merchants— were a powerful caste with their own gods and laws. It was a sophisticated market economy, running without coined money —cacao and cloaks served as exchange media— and without wheel or beast of burden: everything moved on porters' backs or in canoes.

The city literally floated on water. The *chinampas* —artificial islands built of lake mud and stakes— formed a green belt around the island, yielding up to seven harvests a year thanks to constant moisture. The Chapultepec aqueduct, with its two stone channels —one in use while the other was cleaned— brought fresh water from the western shore's springs, crossing the lake on arches. The causeways —Iztapalapa to the south, Tlacopan to the west, Tepeyac to the north— were straight, wide, and cut by drawbridges raised at night. Canals crossed the city in every direction; canoes were everyday transport. There were streetlamps —braziers— on main

streets, and sweeping crews cleaned the city daily. The chroniclers marveled at something nonexistent in Europe: public baths and the widespread custom of daily bathing.

At the center rose the sacred precinct, a walled square some five hundred meters per side, with the Templo Mayor in the middle: a pyramid some forty-five meters high, crowned by twin shrines, one to Huitzilopochtli and one to Tlaloc. Around it stood dozens of lesser temples, the ball court, the *calmecac* —the nobles' school— and Moctezuma's palace, a complex of buildings with hundreds of rooms, gardens, a zoo with eagles, jaguars, and snakes, and an aviary with the empire's most beautiful birds. The Spaniards climbed the Templo Mayor and from the top beheld the entire city spread over the lake, the snowcapped volcanoes behind. Bernal Diaz wrote "we had never seen the like." He was right: they would never see it again, because they themselves would destroy it two years later.

Tlatelolco: the twin city

When the fall of Tenochtitlan is discussed, people usually forget the besieged city was really two cities: Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, the twin city on the island's north. Tlatelolco deserves its own place in this story, for it was there that resistance grew fiercest and the end came.

Tlatelolco had been founded by a dissident Mexica group and was long Tenochtitlan's rival: it had its own kings, its own market —the empire's largest— and its own ambitions. In 1473, the *tlatoani* Axayacatl subdued it by force after a civil war, and from then on Tlatelolco lived as the dominated younger sister: keeping its identity, market, and pride, but obeying Tenochtitlan. That history

of subjugation matters: when the siege came, the Tlatelolcans fought beside the Tenochcans not from love of their dominators, but because the common enemy was worse.

During the siege, Tlatelolco became the last redoubt. When the allied columns took Tenochtitlan's ceremonial center, the defenders fell back north to the Tlatelolcan barrios and held out there the final weeks. The Tlatelolco market —the city's pride— became a battlefield; its streets, trenches. It was in Tlatelolco that Cuauhtemoc made his last stand, where the most desperate fighting occurred, and where, on August 13, the final slaughter happened.

And it is Tlatelolco —not Tenochtitlan— that gave posterity the conquest's most moving epitaph. In the church of Santiago Tlatelolco, built over the ruins, a plaque sums up the tragedy in Nahuatl and Spanish: it speaks of August 13, 1521, as the day "the city was lost," and asks that it be remembered. The Tlatelolcans —the defeated among the defeated— were the ones who best turned defeat into memory.

Today, the Plaza of the Three Cultures at Tlatelolco —with its pre-Hispanic ruins, colonial church, and modern buildings— is the physical symbol of Mexico's history: three eras superimposed, none fully erased. And it was also, tragically, the scene of another massacre: October 2, 1968. Tlatelolco seems condemned to be the place where Mexico looks into its most painful mirror. Remembering the Tlatelolco of 1521 means remembering that the final resistance was made not by the proud capital, but by the sister city that had never been fully subdued.

The meeting of two worlds

At noon on November 8, where the Iztapalapa causeway met the Coyoacan causeway —near today's Hospital de Jesus— occurred the most famous encounter in Mexican history. Moctezuma Xocoyotzin came out to receive Cortes with a retinue of two hundred lords. The two men looked at each other for the first time. Cortes tried to embrace him; the Mexica lords stopped him: no one could touch the tlatoani. They exchanged necklaces: Moctezuma put on Cortes a necklace of gold snails and shrimp; Cortes put on Moctezuma a necklace of glass beads. The gesture sums up, in miniature, the whole conquest: each side gave what had symbolic value to him, without understanding what it was worth to the other.

The words Moctezuma spoke that day, as Spanish chroniclers transcribed them, have fueled five centuries of debate. The tlatoani supposedly said the Mexica knew from their ancestors that the descendants of their ancient lord Quetzalcoatl would come from distant lands, and that he therefore surrendered his kingdom to Cortes as that lord's representative. If the speech was real, it would prove Moctezuma believed the Spaniards were gods or their envoys, and surrendered without a fight for that reason.

But modern historians —Matthew Restall, Camilla Townsend, among others— have dismantled this version piece by piece. The "welcome speech" follows Mesoamerican diplomatic protocol to the letter: when a great lord received a powerful ambassador, ritual required the host to humble himself verbally and offer his kingdom, and the visitor to courteously decline. It was courtesy theater, not surrender. The Spaniards, ignorant of the protocol, took it literally. And later chroniclers, writing to justify the conquest before king and God, turned a cultural misunderstanding into a voluntary cession of the empire. It is much more comfortable to say "they handed it to

us" than "we took it."

The encounter: what they really said to each other

The November 8, 1519 encounter —Moctezuma and Cortes face to face on the causeway— is the conquest's most depicted scene and, paradoxically, one of the worst understood. What we know of what was said comes almost entirely from Spanish sources, and those sources had a direct interest in presenting the meeting as a voluntary cession of the empire. The scene deserves reconstruction with a historian's skepticism.

The setting: the crossing of the Iztapalapa and Coyoacan causeways, a wide, open point. Moctezuma arrived by litter, accompanied by some two hundred richly attired lords; bearers spread cloaks on the ground so his feet would not touch the earth. Cortes advanced on horseback —dismounting as he approached— accompanied by his captains and by Malinalli, who would translate every word. The two retinues halted at a distance; only the protagonists and a few witnesses drew near.

The necklace exchange —Moctezuma giving a gold necklace with shrimp and snails; Cortes, glass beads— was a ritual of mutual recognition between lords. So far, everything followed the Mesoamerican protocol for receiving ambassadors: honors, gifts, ceremonious speeches.

The problem is the famous speech. According to Cortes —who transcribed it in his Second Letter— Moctezuma said the Mexica knew from their ancestors that their ancient lord Quetzalcoatl would depart to the east and that his descendants would return to rule; that he believed Cortes was that lord's envoy; and that he therefore

surrendered his kingdom and placed himself at Cortes's disposal. It is a speech too perfect: it justifies the conquest as legitimate restoration, turns invasion into restitution and the conqueror into heir.

Modern historians consider it a fabrication —or, at best, a tendentious translation. Matthew Restall has shown the speech follows point by point the *tecpillahutli*, the reverential Nahuatl language lords used to ritually humble themselves before a powerful visitor: "I am poor, I am unworthy, my kingdom is small, all is yours." It was courtesy, not cession. Malinalli —who translated— knew that register perfectly and knew it was not literal; but Cortes, who knew no ceremonial Nahuatl, took it literally, and it suited him to take it so. And when he wrote his letter to the king —a legal document meant to justify his acts— he turned courtesy into surrender.

What did Moctezuma really say? Probably something like: "be welcome, great lord; this is your house; all I have is at your disposal while you are my guest." In Mesoamerican diplomatic language that meant: "I recognize you as a powerful ambassador and offer you hospitality." In Cortes's mind it meant: "he surrenders his empire to me." The misunderstanding —if it was misunderstanding and not manipulation— is the most momentous in American history: on it was built the legal fiction that Mexico was handed over voluntarily, not taken by force.

And a final detail demolishes the Spanish version: if Moctezuma had really surrendered his empire on November 8, why did Cortes need to take the tlatoani prisoner a week later, massacre Cholula before, besiege the city for seventy-five days after, and kill hundreds of thousands? Empires surrendered voluntarily do not require such

violence to take. The blood disproves the speech.

The Quetzalcoatl prophecy: myth and reality

The famous prophecy deserves a pause, because it is the conquest's founding myth and, at once, its greatest falsehood. The story says the Mexica believed Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, had departed to the east promising one day to return, and that Moctezuma identified the Spaniards —white, bearded, come from the east— with the returning god. The image is powerful: an empire paralyzed by its own religion, surrendering to its executioners out of prophetic obedience.

Reality is more complex and more interesting. In Mexica religion, Quetzalcoatl was indeed a god associated with the east, with Venus, with wisdom. But no pre-Hispanic source —no pre-conquest codex— mentions a prophecy of his imminent return or describes him as a white, bearded man. That description first appears in post-conquest texts, when it suited everyone —Spaniards and Christianized Indigenous— to explain defeat as divine will. The friars spread it because it served evangelization: if the Mexica gods themselves had announced the Christians, conversion fulfilled prophecy. And Spanish chroniclers spread it because it turned brutal invasion into manifest destiny.

Did Moctezuma believe Cortes was Quetzalcoatl? Probably not. What is plausible is that the tlatoani —like any good Mesoamerican ruler— interpreted the foreigners' arrival in religious key, consulting auguries and omens, because that is how everything extraordinary was interpreted in his world. The dire omens Mexica sources list —the comet, the temple fire, the woman weeping for her children at night ("O my children, we are lost!")— are real as trauma literature:

they are how a defeated people makes sense of catastrophe. But between consulting auguries and surrendering an empire out of prophetic obedience lies an abyss the evidence cannot cross.

Dismantling the Quetzalcoatl myth is no idle academic exercise: it returns Moctezuma his intelligence and the Mexica their agency. They were not defeated by superstition, but by a military coalition and an epidemic. And that is precisely this book's thesis.

Moctezuma's court: power on stage

Moctezuma Xocoyotzin ruled from a palace that was at once residence, government, and theater of power. Mexica court ceremonial had been carried by him to extremes of refinement: no one could look him directly in the face; lords entered barefoot and humbly dressed; no one turned his back when withdrawing. He ate alone, behind a curtain, served by maidens on fine clay tableware discarded after each use—a ritual extravagance that impressed the Spaniards. He had counselors, judges, administrators, astronomers, and poets in his service. His personal guard was elite warriors. His word was law in an empire of five million.

But that absolute power stood on a narrow base. Moctezuma had reached the throne by council election—the tlatoani did not automatically inherit; he was chosen among royal-family candidates—and his centralizing policy had made enemies within the nobility itself. He had displaced the old captains of his uncle Ahuitzotl's wars, replacing them with loyal administrators. He had increased court pomp while increasing tributes. To many Mexica nobles, Moctezuma was a brilliant reformer but a distant ruler, more concerned with ceremonial than with men.

When the Spaniards entered the city, the court silently split. One faction —the prudent counselors— backed the tlatoani's temporizing policy: buy time, study the enemy, avoid war. Another —the young warriors, led by Cuitlahuac, Moctezuma's brother, and his nephew Cuauhtemoc— held that each day of coexistence with the foreigners was unbearable humiliation and demanded their expulsion by force. Moctezuma, a prisoner in practice from the first days, tried to keep the balance: issuing orders the Spaniards approved and secretly receiving those conspiring against them. It was an impossible game, and everyone knew it.

The captive tlatoani

The Spaniards settled in the palace of Axayacatl, Moctezuma's father, a huge building facing the Templo Mayor. For a week, coexistence was ceremonious: Moctezuma visited the Spaniards, showed them the city, let them climb the Templo Mayor. But Cortes could not sleep easy: four hundred men in a city of two hundred thousand, surrounded by water, were potential hostages. His solution was as bold as it was criminal: take the tlatoani hostage.

The pretext came from an incident on the coast: the Totonacs, encouraged by the Spaniards, had rebelled, and a Mexica captain named Quauhpopoca attacked the Spanish garrison at Veracruz, killing several Spaniards, among them Juan de Escalante. Cortes appeared before Moctezuma with a handful of armed captains and demanded he move to the Axayacatl palace as the Spaniards' "guest." Moctezuma protested, argued, and finally yielded: he preferred to go of his own will rather than be taken by force and provoke a slaughter. From that day, Anahuac's most powerful man lived as the foreigners' prisoner, ruling his empire from a gilded cell.

Moctezuma's imprisonment is one of the conquest's most shameful episodes and, at once, a sample of its deep logic. Cortes had understood something essential: the Mexica empire was a personalist system. All power emanated from the tlatoani; controlling the tlatoani meant controlling the empire. For months, Moctezuma kept giving orders, receiving tributes, administering justice, but every order passed through the Spaniards' filter. The empire ran on autopilot, and the Spaniards had taken the controls.

Meanwhile, the Spaniards discovered Axayacatl's treasure: a room full of gold objects accumulated over generations of tlatoanis. They melted it all into ingots. The royal fifth —the king's share— was set aside; the rest was divided among the men. Each soldier received a sum that in Spain would have made him rich. But greed, once awakened, is not sated by one distribution: the men began wondering how much more there would be in the temples, the palaces, the lords' houses. Axayacatl's treasure gold sealed Tenochtitlan's fate: no one in the expedition contemplated leaving empty-handed anymore.

Axayacatl's treasure: the gold that condemned the city

In the palace where the Spaniards lodged there was a walled-up door that aroused the soldiers' curiosity. Knocking it down, they found a room full of objects accumulated over generations: gold masks, solar disks, jade necklaces, quetzal headdresses, ceremonial shields, dead tlatoanis' jewels. It was Axayacatl's treasure —Moctezuma's father's— kept as a family relic. The Spaniards beheld it with a mix of awe and greed Bernal Diaz described with brutal honesty: he said it seemed to them "all the gold in the world"

was in that room.

What followed was an act of cultural vandalism of historic proportions. The Spaniards systematically melted the pieces: the masterpieces of Mesoamerican goldwork —lost-wax casting, filigree, turquoise inlay techniques Europeans could not replicate— were turned into shapeless ingots. A century's art was reduced to raw metal in days. Only a few pieces Cortes reserved to send the king as samples were spared. The rest —a civilization's material memory— vanished in the crucibles.

The treasure's distribution followed the conquering host's ritual: first the royal fifth for the Crown was set aside; then Cortes's share as captain general; then the captains'; the rest was divided among the soldiers by rank and investment. But there were tricks: Cortes deducted the expedition's expenses —ships, weapons, horses— from the common share, drastically reducing each man's portion. The soldiers protested; some spoke of mutiny. Greed, once lit, is not quenched by distributions: each man began calculating how much more lay hidden in the city, in the temples, in the lords' palaces. Axayacatl's treasure satisfied no one: it created the conviction that Tenochtitlan was an inexhaustible mine and that leaving without emptying it would be stupidity.

That conviction sealed the city's fate. From that moment, no Spaniard seriously contemplated retreat: they had seen the gold, touched it, and wanted more. When Cortes later proposed the final siege, he had to convince no one: his men knew riches lay inside the city and only total victory would give them access. Axayacatl's treasure was, in that sense, the conquest's true motor: not the cross, not the king, but the yellow gleam of molten metal.

And there is a final irony: when the city fell, the expected great treasure never appeared. The Mexica had hidden, melted, or thrown their riches into the lake during the siege; what the victors found was a fraction of the dream. The greed that had driven two years of war was left without object, and the disappointment —as we shall see— would have brutal consequences for the vanquished.

The gods in the temple: the profanation

Spaniards and Mexica living together in Tenochtitlan had one impassable limit: religion. For the Spaniards, the Mexica gods were demons and their temples abominations; for the Mexica, the Spaniards were ignorant foreigners who understood nothing sacred. During the six months of occupation, that fracture surfaced in incidents that poisoned coexistence.

The gravest occurred atop the Templo Mayor. The Spaniards, with new converts' zeal, placed a cross and an image of the Virgin Mary in Huitzilopochtli's shrine, beside the god's statue. For them it was piety: they were "Christianizing" the city's holiest place. For the Mexica it was intolerable profanation: as if foreigners entered a European cathedral and set their idols beside the altar. Moctezuma protested with unusual firmness: he warned Cortes the people were furious, the priests demanded the foreigners' expulsion, the gods were angry. Cortes —one of the few times he backed down— ordered the images removed. But the symbolic damage was irreversible: the Mexica had seen the Spaniards respected nothing, not even the most sacred.

There were other clashes. The Spaniards were scandalized by the human sacrifices —which they witnessed several times— describing them as the devil's work; the Mexica were scandalized that the

Spaniards did not bathe, ate with their hands, and melted sacred gold. Each side saw the other as barbarian. The difference is that the Spaniards had an explicit religious mandate —the papal bull commissioning evangelization— turning their intolerance into sacred duty, while Mexica religion, polytheistic and syncretic by nature, could have absorbed the Christian gods without much trouble: one more god in the pantheon was no theological threat. In this clash, intolerance was almost entirely European.

This religious dimension explains why the final war was also a holy war in Spanish minds —and why the temples' destruction was so systematic. It was not only about defeating a political enemy: it was about extirpating a religion. When the brigantines bombarded the Templo Mayor during the siege, when soldiers toppled the gods' statues, they were executing a theological program. The fall of Tenochtitlan was also the fall of its gods, and the city built over its ruins —Mexico City— rose literally over demolished temples: the cathedral beside the Templo Mayor, churches over shrines. The spiritual conquest began with the military conquest, and both used the same stones.



The palace of Axayacatl: the gilded cage

For six months —November 1519 to May 1520— the Axayacatl palace was the strangest place on earth: the seat of an occupation government that dared not call itself that. The daily life in that gilded cage deserves telling, because in its routines the empire's fate was played out.

The palace was an enormous complex: hundreds of rooms around courtyards, able to house the four hundred Spaniards, their allies, and their horses. The Spaniards took the main halls; Moctezuma —moved there as a "guest"— lived in his private quarters, attended by his servants but watched day and night by Spanish guards. The official fiction was that the tlatoani resided there of his own will, to be near his new friends. No one believed it, but everyone performed it.

Daily routine had something of the theater of the absurd. Moctezuma kept receiving his counselors, signing orders, administering justice: the empire functioned, apparently, normally. But every important decision passed through Cortes, who vetoed, suggested, or imposed. Tributes kept arriving —and a share went to the Spaniards. Provincial lords coming to pay homage to the tlatoani found they had to pass first through the foreigners' antechamber. Moctezuma's authority emptied from within while the ceremonial shell remained.

The Spaniards, for their part, lived in permanent tension. They knew they were surrounded: every walk through the city was a calculated show of force; every night, they doubled the guard. Bernal Diaz describes the night watches, the patrols, the constant fear of surprise attack. The horses —their most valuable weapon— were stabled in the palace, grooms sleeping beside them. Gunpowder was kept under lock. It was the life of a besieged garrison in a seemingly peaceful city.

And amid it all, life went on: the Spaniards gambled —betting the treasure's gold— got drunk on pulque, frequented Indigenous women, quarreled among themselves. Moctezuma —Bernal Diaz says— grew fond of some Spaniards, played Mesoamerican board games with them, showed them his collections. It is an almost tender image —the prisoner and his jailers sharing a game— making the outcome more tragic: that impossible coexistence could only end in violence, because it rested on a lie —the tlatoani's freedom— harder to sustain each day.

When Alvarado massacred the nobility in the Templo Mayor, the fiction collapsed at once. The palace stopped being a gilded cage and became a besieged fortress. The six months of theater were

over; the real war was beginning.

For six months, Tenochtitlan lived a tense normality. The Spaniards strolled through the city, markets kept working, priests kept officiating in the temples. But beneath the surface humiliation grew: the people saw their tlatoani coming and going from the foreigners' palace like a permanent guest, and began murmuring that Moctezuma had sold himself. The Mexica nobility, particularly the tlatoani's brother Cuitlahuac and his nephew Cuauhtemoc, watched with contained rage. The empire had not surrendered: it was biding its time. And the moment came when Cortes made the mistake of leaving.

The brigantines' builders: Martin Lopez and the Tlaxcalan carpenters

The thirteen brigantines that decided the siege were not built by Spaniards alone. Behind the fleet was a story of improvised engineering and Indigenous labor that deserves telling, for it shows how the conquest worked at ground level.

The project was directed by Martin Lopez, a ship's carpenter from Seville who had come with the expedition. Lopez was no engineer of renown —just a competent shipwright— but Cortes gave him an impossible task: build thirteen warships in the mountains, two hundred kilometers from water, with timber cut from unfamiliar forests, using mostly Indigenous labor that had never seen a European ship. Lopez rose to it: he designed simplified brigantines —small, sturdy, easy to assemble and disassemble— and organized the work like a modern production line.

The timber was cut in Tlaxcalan forests by Tlaxcalan woodcutters,

who learned to saw planks to Spanish measurements. The ironwork —nails, fittings, cannon mounts— was forged by Spanish blacksmiths with charcoal made by Indigenous workers. The sails were sewn from cotton cloth; the rigging twisted from local fiber. Every piece was marked, the ships assembled and tested in Tlaxcala, then disassembled for transport. Thousands of tamemes carried the pieces over the mountains to Texcoco, where the ships were rebuilt on the lakeshore.

The human cost is usually omitted: the labor was forced, the conditions brutal, and many porters died on the mountain trails. The brigantines —celebrated as a feat of Spanish ingenuity— were built with Tlaxcalan hands, carried on Indigenous backs, and launched from a Texcocan shore. Even the conquest's most "European" weapon, the warship, was a mixed product. And when the fleet sailed, its crews were mixed too: Spanish sailors and gunners, Indigenous rowers and pilots who knew the lake. The siege of Tenochtitlan was won by a fleet that neither Spaniards nor Indigenous could have built alone —a bitter symbol of the alliance that destroyed the city.

The royal fifth: who got rich from the conquest

The conquest of Mexico is often imagined as a gold rush that enriched Spain. The reality is more sordid and more interesting: almost no one got rich, and those who did were not the ones who bled.

The distribution followed strict rules. From all loot, the "royal fifth" —twenty percent— went to the Crown. From the remainder, Cortes took his captain's share —another fifth, by the expedition's articles— plus reimbursement of his expenses. The captains took

double shares; horsemen more than foot soldiers; crossbowmen more than pikemen. What was left was divided among the rank and file. On paper, it was orderly. In practice, it was a machine for disappointing everyone.

The numbers tell the story. After the fall of Tenochtitlan, the total gold melted down was far less than expected —the Mexica had hidden or lost most of it. After deducting the royal fifth, Cortes's shares, and expenses, each ordinary soldier received about a hundred gold pesos: a modest sum, enough to buy a small farm in Cuba but not the fortune promised. Many soldiers felt cheated; some accused Cortes of hiding treasure. The muttering never fully stopped.

Who did get rich? Cortes himself —who received vast encomiendas, the title of Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca, and an income that made him one of the richest men in the Spanish empire. A handful of captains who secured large encomiendas. The Crown, which received its fifth plus the taxes on all future mining. And the merchants and moneylenders who had financed the expedition, repaid with interest.

The common soldiers —the men who had charged at Otumba, starved in the siege, bled on the causeways— got little: a small gold share, an encomienda if they were lucky, and for most, a lifetime of modest farming in New Spain. Many died poor. The conquest's economy, like all colonial economies, transferred wealth upward: from Indigenous dead to Spanish grandees, from the many who fought to the few who financed. The gold of Tenochtitlan did not enrich Spain's people; it enriched Spain's king and a handful of conquistadors. The rest got glory —and glory, as the veterans learned, does not buy bread.

Moctezuma's zoo: the palace of beasts

Among the marvels that stunned the Spaniards in Tenochtitlan, one of the strangest was Moctezuma's zoo —a palace of living animals that no European court could match.

Bernal Diaz describes it with the wonder of a man who had never seen anything like it: a great house with courtyards and pools where the tlatoani kept "every kind of beast" —jaguars, pumas, wolves, foxes— caged and fed with turkeys and deer. There was an aviary with hundreds of birds: eagles, quetzals with their impossible emerald tails, parrots, hummingbirds, waterfowl in ponds. There were snakes in jars, crocodiles in pools, and —most astonishing to the Spaniards— a house of "monsters": albinos, dwarfs, hunchbacks, people with deformities, kept as living curiosities and, some sources say, as sacred beings.

The zoo was not mere entertainment: it was a statement of imperial power. To keep jaguars from distant jungles, quetzals from southern forests, sea fish from both coasts alive in Tenochtitlan required an empire-wide supply system —tribute in turkeys to feed the carnivores, keepers from subject towns, constant transport of live animals. Every cage was proof that the tlatoani's reach extended to the edges of the known world. It was, in its way, the empire's museum: the world collected and displayed at the center.

The zoo did not survive the conquest. During the siege, the hungry population ate the animals —the jaguars, the birds, everything edible. By the time the Spaniards took the city, the cages were empty. It is a small detail, but a telling one: the empire's most beautiful symbol of power ended as emergency food. When even the emperor's jaguars have been eaten, a city has nothing left. The

Spaniards who later described the empty cages could not know they were looking at the siege's most eloquent monument: an empire that had collected the world's wonders, reduced to eating them to survive a few more days. The empty cages outlasted the empire they had celebrated.

Chapter 4. The Noche Triste: June 30, 1520

The Templo Mayor massacre

In April 1520, news arrived on the coast that changed all plans: Pánfilo de Narvaez had landed at Veracruz with nine hundred Spaniards, eighty horses, and twenty cannons, sent by Diego Velazquez with a clear order: arrest Cortes as a rebel and take possession of the Mexican enterprise. Cortes suddenly found himself between two fires: the Mexica, increasingly hostile, and a Spanish army larger than his own. His answer was the usual one: boldness. He left Pedro de Alvarado in Tenochtitlan with about 120 men in charge of Moctezuma, and marched to the coast with the bulk of his forces to face Narvaez.

What followed on the coast was a masterpiece of intrigue: Cortes bribed Narvaez's captains with Tenochtitlan gold, convinced them Velazquez had deceived them, and in a night attack at Cempoala defeated and captured Narvaez. Most of Narvaez's men joined Cortes. The rebel army had doubled. But the price of that victory was being paid in Tenochtitlan.

Alvarado —"Tonatiuh," the Sun, as the Mexica called him for his blond hair— was a brave captain and a disastrous politician. In

Cortes's absence, the Mexica requested permission to hold the Toxcatl festival, one of the year's most important religious ceremonies, honoring Huitzilopochtli. Alvarado authorized the celebration. And then, in the midst of the feast, when the Templo Mayor courtyard was full of unarmed Mexica nobility —dancing, in their finest dress and jewels— he ordered his men to close the doors and massacre them all.

The Mexica sources, collected in the Florentine Codex, describe the scene with a horror that still chills: the Spaniards cut down the dancers, hacked off their hands, sliced off their heads; blood ran down the temple steps; those trying to flee were speared at the doors. Hundreds of nobles, priests, and young warriors died: the flower of Tenochca aristocracy. Alvarado's motives are still debated: he said the Mexica were preparing an uprising and that he had found hidden weapons; the Mexica said it was greed, to rob the gold jewelry they wore at the feast. Whatever the truth, the effect was immediate and devastating: the entire city rose in arms.

The Templo Mayor massacre is the conquest's true point of no return. Until then, the Spanish occupation of Tenochtitlan —with the tlatoani prisoner but alive, markets functioning— could have resolved in many ways, including negotiated withdrawal. After Toxcatl, no negotiation was possible. The Mexica had understood, once and for all, that the foreigners had not come to rule with them or coexist: they had come to kill. Total war had begun, and they would start it.

Toxcatl: the interrupted feast

To grasp Alvarado's crime one must understand what the Toxcatl festival was, for it was no ordinary celebration: it was one of the

Mexica calendar's most sacred ceremonies, and its profanation was a sacrilege the city never forgave.

Toxcatl —"dry thing," for the season— was the principal feast honoring Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica tutelary god, and Tezcatlipoca. It fell in the calendar's fifth month, with fasts, processions, and ritual dances. Its climax was the sacrifice of a youth carefully chosen a year before —the *ixiptla*, the god's "image"— who for twelve months had lived as a god among men: wearing his insignia, riding through the city in a litter, playing the flute in the streets, feasted and revered. At the feast, the youth climbed the temple, broke his flutes, and was sacrificed. It was a ritual of terrible solemnity and beauty, expressing Mexica cosmic logic: gods sacrifice themselves for men, men sacrifice themselves for gods.

In May 1520, with Moctezuma prisoner and Spaniards in the city, the Mexica asked Alvarado's permission to hold the feast. It was a loaded request: holding Toxcatl affirmed the cosmic order still stood, the gods still protected the city, the Spanish occupation had not broken the world. Alvarado —perhaps without grasping the symbolic dimension, perhaps grasping it all too well— authorized it.

What followed has been told: in mid ritual dance, with participants unarmed and in their best dress, the Spaniards closed the courtyard doors and massacred them. But add now the crime's religious dimension: it was not just political murder but profanation. The Spaniards killed the dancers at their ceremony's holiest moment, in the temple courtyard, before the gods. For the Mexica it was definitive proof the foreigners were enemies of the sacred, destroyers of cosmic order. The war that followed was not just liberation: it was holy war, defense of the gods.

Alvarado's motives remain mysterious. He claimed the Mexica were plotting an uprising and that he had found hidden weapons and a conspiracy. Nervousness is possible —120 Spaniards in a hostile city, Cortes absent, had reason for fear. Greed is also possible: the dancers wore their gold jewelry, and the Spaniards—who had already melted Axayacatl's treasure—knew its worth. And simple brutality is possible: Alvarado was famous for cruelty even among conquistadors. Most likely a mix of all three: fear, greed, contempt.

Whatever the motive, the effect is undisputed: Toxcatl turned a tense occupation into total war. Before the massacre, a negotiated exit existed—at least in theory: the Spaniards could withdraw with their gold, the Mexica recover their tlatoani. After the massacre, there was nothing to negotiate: blood spilled in the temple courtyard demanded vengeance, and vengeance would demand more blood. Alvarado, with a single order, destroyed in an afternoon what Cortes had built in six months of diplomacy. It proves the conquest was no master plan executed precisely: it was a succession of improvisations, errors, and crimes, and the final result—Tenochtitlan's fall—was decided as much by Spanish mistakes as by their successes.

Spaniards against Spaniards: the Narvaez war

In spring 1520, while Cortes consolidated his position in Tenochtitlan, a threat brewed in Cuba that could have ended the conquest before it began: Diego Velazquez, the mocked governor, decided to recover his investment. He organized an armada of eighteen ships with nine hundred Spaniards, eighty horses, twenty cannons, and two thousand Cuban auxiliaries, placing it under Pánfilo de Narvaez, a veteran of imposing bearing and little wit, with

written orders to arrest Cortes for treason and take possession of the Mexican enterprise.

Narvaez landed at Veracruz in April 1520 and made every possible mistake. Instead of marching directly against Cortes, he settled at Cempoala proclaiming his authority, confiscating Cortes supporters' property, threatening the Totonacs. His arrogance alienated the Indigenous; his indiscipline, his own men. Cortes —receiving the news in Tenochtitlan— reacted with characteristic boldness: he left Alvarado with 120 men minding the city and marched to the coast with some three hundred Spaniards, mostly loyal veterans.

What followed was more bribery campaign than battle. Cortes sent agents to Narvaez's camp loaded with Tenochtitlan gold: chains, jewels, ingots. Narvaez's captains —poorly paid, risking much— began defecting to Cortes one by one. Mexica gold, meant to buy the Spanish retreat, ended up buying Spaniards for Cortes's cause. When Narvaez realized the desertion, it was too late: on the night of May 27, 1520, Cortes surprised Cempoala's camp in driving rain. The fight was brief and confused; Narvaez lost an eye to a lance thrust and was captured. His men —nine hundred fresh Spaniards with horses and cannons— joined Cortes almost as a body.

The victory over Narvaez doubled Cortes's army and gave him resources for the final campaign. But it had two unforeseen, decisive consequences. The first: it left Tenochtitlan in Alvarado's hands, whose Templo Mayor massacre —as seen— precipitated the general uprising. Had Cortes not needed to leave to face Narvaez, the city's occupation might have continued its tense but stable course. The second: among Narvaez's men came the smallpox-stricken slave who would unleash the epidemic. The armada sent to stop Cortes ended up providing the army and the

plague with which he would conquer Mexico. The irony is perfect: Velazquez, trying to ruin his rival, handed him victory.

The episode also reveals the conquering enterprise's nature: no national army, but competing armed bands where loyalty was bought with gold. Narvaez's men joined Cortes not from ideals but because Cortes paid better and promised more loot. That mercenarization explains both the conquest's effectiveness and its brutality: they were professional purveyors of violence serving the highest bidder, and the highest bidder controlled Tenochtitlan's gold.

The death of Moctezuma

Cortes returned to Tenochtitlan on forced marches in late June, his forces doubled by Narvaez's men. He entered the city meeting no resistance —an ominous calm— and barricaded himself in the Axayacatl palace. Outside, tens of thousands of Mexica warriors, now led by Cuitlahuac —Moctezuma's brother, freed by the Spaniards in a gesture of incredible clumsiness— besieged the palace. The Spaniards were trapped: no food, no drinking water, surrounded by a city at war.

Then occurred one of Mexican history's most controversial episodes: the death of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin. The Spanish version —Cortes's and Bernal Diaz's— says Cortes asked the tlatoani to appear on the palace roof to calm his people, and that the Mexica, seeing him, greeted him with a hail of stones and insults, calling him coward and traitor, and that a stone to the head wounded him mortally. The Mexica version —collected by Sahagun and the Indigenous annals— says the Spaniards, seeing Moctezuma no longer served them, strangled him along with other captive lords and threw the bodies

at the temple's foot.

Which is true? Historians have debated it for five centuries, and we will probably never know for certain. But there are telling indications. The Spanish version is too convenient: it presents Moctezuma repudiated by his own people, justifying everything after. The Mexica version also has its logic: a prisoner no longer useful is a burden, and the Spaniards were about to flee. What we know is that Moctezuma died in those days —late June 1520— that his body appeared at the Templo Mayor's foot, and that his death ended any chance of negotiated solution. With him died the last link between the two worlds.

Either way, Moctezuma's death reveals the central tragedy of his reign: he was an intelligent ruler trapped in a hopeless situation. Had he resisted the Spaniards from the start, he risked immediate war against an unknown enemy; negotiating, he lost authority before his people. He chose the middle path —buying time, temporizing— and the middle path devoured him. History has judged him with an undeserved harshness: Moctezuma did not lose the empire from cowardice, but because the empire was already lost before he could grasp the threat's nature.

The death of Moctezuma: the two versions face to face

No conquest episode has generated more debate than the death of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, and the two versions deserve a historian's close examination, because in them the memory of the last great tlatoani of the empire at its peak is at stake.

The Spanish version —narrated by Hernán Cortes in his Second

Letter and Bernal Diaz in his True History— goes like this: facing the siege of the Axayacatl palace, Cortes asked Moctezuma to appear on the roof to harangue his people and ask them to lay down arms. Moctezuma agreed; he stepped to the parapet; and the Mexica, seeing him, erupted in fury: calling him coward, traitor, "the Spaniards' woman," showering him with stones, arrows, darts. A stone struck his head; the Spaniards withdrew him; he died days later of his wounds, refusing conversion to Christianity and asking that his children be cared for. In this version, Moctezuma dies repudiated by his own people, victim of the ingratitude of those who could not value his prudence.

The Mexica version —collected by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun from Tenochca elders' mouths and confirmed by Indigenous annals like the Codex Aubin— says otherwise: the Spaniards, seeing Moctezuma no longer served to control the city and preparing their flight, strangled him along with other captive lords —among them the Texcoco king Cacamatzin— and threw the bodies at the Templo Mayor's foot, where his people found them. In this version, Moctezuma dies murdered by his captors, victim of Spanish treason.

What do the indications say? The Spanish version has a convenience problem: it presents Moctezuma repudiated by his own, exempting the Spaniards from his death and justifying all that followed. It is also psychologically dubious: would the Mexica people really have stoned their tlatoani, a sacred figure, in mid-battle against the common enemy? The Mexica version has logic on its side: the Spaniards were going to flee, and a prisoner of that value was a burden and a danger. But it also has a problem: the testimonies were collected decades later, in collective trauma's context, when it suited to present Moctezuma as martyr rather than

collaborator.

Current historians lean toward a prudent middle position: Moctezuma was probably wounded in some disturbance —the rooftop, the stones— and the Spaniards, facing his agony and the imminence of flight, hastened his death or simply let it happen without trying to save him. What is clear is that he died in the last days of June 1520, that his body appeared outside the Spanish palace, and that with him died the last possibility of negotiated exit. Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, the tlatoani who had carried the empire to its maximum extension, ended his days a prisoner of foreigners he had tried to manage with gifts. History has not forgiven his failure; perhaps it should at least forgive that no one in his place could have foreseen what was coming.

The other prisoners: Cacamatzin and the lords

Moctezuma was not the only Mexica lord the Spaniards held prisoner: the Axayacatl palace held an entire captive court, and its story —less known— illuminates the logic of conquering power.

The most important was Cacamatzin, the young king of Texcoco, Moctezuma's nephew. When Cortes decided to take the tlatoani prisoner, he understood he must also neutralize Texcoco —the alliance's second city— so he ordered Cacamatzin arrested on the pretext of conspiracy. The Texcocan king was brought to Tenochtitlan in chains, an unheard-of humiliation for a monarch. With him fell other lords: Tlacopan's, Iztapalapa's, several principal nobles. The Axayacatl palace became a prison of kings.

These prisoners' fate reveals the coldness of the Spanish method. When the uprising erupted after the Templo Mayor massacre, the

Spaniards —preparing flight— no longer needed hostages: they needed to travel light. According to the Mexica version, Moctezuma, Cacamatzin, and the other lords were strangled before the flight; according to the Spanish, some died in the disturbances. The truth is none survived the Noche Triste. An entire generation of Mesoamerican rulers —Tenochtitlan's tlatoani, Texcoco's king, the alliance's lords— vanished in a week.

Eliminating the imperial leadership had a strategic consequence the Spaniards did not fully foresee: it left the empire headless, yes, but it also eliminated the only interlocutors with whom to negotiate. With Moctezuma and Cacamatzin dead, power passed to young warriors —Cuitlahuac, Cuauhtemoc— with no interest in pact-making. The Spaniards, by killing the prisoners, were left with no negotiating pieces and condemned themselves to total war. It was a tactical error born of haste: in their eagerness to flee light, the Spaniards destroyed their only remaining bridge to a diplomatic exit.

And there is a deeper lesson: the lords' imprisonment shows Cortes understood Mesoamerican power better than the Mexica understood Spanish power. He knew the empire was personalist —that controlling kings meant controlling kingdoms— and acted accordingly. The Mexica, by contrast, never took an important Spanish hostage, never tried to decapitate the expedition by capturing Cortes —who walked the city nearly unescorted. The asymmetry of understanding was total: one side played chess; the other did not yet know it was on a board.

The flight by Tlacopan

On the night of June 30, 1520 —the early hours of July 1, precisely—

the Spaniards decided to flee. They could not stay: provisions were running out, the Mexica attacked ceaselessly, and each passing day worsened the situation. The plan was to escape by night along the Tlacopan causeway —the shortest of the three— carrying the melted gold of Axayacatl's treasure. They built a portable bridge to cross the stretches where the Mexica had raised the drawbridges. The column left in silence, at midnight, under fine drizzle.

But Mexica sentinels spotted them. A woman fetching water raised the alarm, the Templo Mayor drums began sounding, and within minutes the causeway became hell. Mexica warriors attacked from canoes on both flanks with arrows, lances, and macanas; the Spaniards, laden with the gold they would not abandon, sank into the lake under their own greed's weight. The portable bridge jammed at the first canal and the column split in two. It was a slaughter.

The Spaniards called it the Noche Triste —the Night of Sorrows. Cortes, legend says, wept under a cypress at Tlacopan —the famous "tree of the Noche Triste." The disaster's figures are eloquent: of the more than 1,200 Spaniards in the city, over 400 died, plus several thousand Tlaxcalan allies. Nearly all horses were lost, all artillery, and —most painful to survivors— nearly all the gold. The Mexica recovered part of the treasure from the lake bottom —Indigenous divers salvaged ingots for weeks— and the rest the water swallowed forever.



But the Noche Triste was not just a military defeat: it was a lesson. The Mexica showed they could beat the Spaniards when fighting on their own terms: at night, on the water, on narrow causeways where horses were useless and cannons could not aim. Had the war remained a war of causeways and canoes, the Spaniards would never have taken Tenochtitlan. Cortes understood perfectly, and that understanding would define his strategy in the final campaign: he would never again fight on the water without his own ships, nor fight again without tens of thousands of allies.

The retreat to Tlaxcala: the ghost army

The Noche Triste survivors' march to Tlaxcala —early July 1520— is one of the conquest's harshest episodes, usually told in passing between the flight and Otumba. It deserves more attention, revealing what those men were made of and, above all, what their

alliances were made of.

The column that left Tlacopan was a ghost army: some four hundred Spaniards —most wounded— a few horses, no artillery, barely any powder, carrying the wounded on improvised litters. A few thousand Tlaxcalans, also decimated, accompanied them. They marched by night and hid by day; ate what they found —green maize, prickly pears, roots—; drank from puddles. The Mexica harassed them ceaselessly: warrior parties attacked the rearguard, cut the roads, shouted insults from the hills. Each day men died of wounds, hunger, exhaustion.

Yet the column did not disintegrate. There were no mass desertions, no mutinies, no cannibalism or surrenders. The Spaniards —who weeks before fought among themselves over the gold's division— marched united under Cortes, obeying orders, tending their wounded. The Tlaxcalans —who had just lost thousands of theirs for a foreign cause— neither abandoned nor surrendered them to the Mexica, which would have been easiest and most profitable. That discipline in defeat says much about both sides: the Spaniards had a cohesion forged in two years of shared danger, and the Tlaxcalans had an objective —Tenochtitlan's destruction— worth more than any immediate revenge.

The march also showed Mexica power's limits. Cuitlahuac had ordered the fugitives pursued and annihilated, but his generals failed to close the trap. Why? Partly geography: once off the lake, on solid ground, the Spaniards regained some advantage —horses were useful again, Mexica formations less effective. Partly politics: the towns the fugitives passed —some Mexica-subjugated— dared not attack them, fearing future reprisals or waiting to see who won. And partly exhaustion: the Mexica had also bled on the Noche

Triste, and their warriors needed rest. The pursuit faded, and the column reached Tlaxcala. The empire had let its enemy slip when it held him at its mercy. There would be no second chance.

The Tlaxcalans' dilemma: why didn't they betray us?

Pause on a question historians have asked for centuries: when the Spaniards reached Tlaxcala defeated, gold-less, horseless, artillery-less —a handful of hungry wounded— why didn't the Tlaxcalans hand them to the Mexica? It would have been the most rational decision: Cuitlahuac offered pardon and alliance to whoever delivered Cortes; the Mexica would have richly rewarded the treason; and Tlaxcala would have rid itself of allies no longer good for anything.

The answer has several layers. The first is hatred: the Tlaxcalans hated the Mexica with a century-old hatred, fed by the Flower Wars and the sacrifices. Handing over the Spaniards would have meant reconciling with Tenochtitlan, unthinkable for the generation that had lost its sons in the Templo Mayor. The enemy of my enemy remained my friend, even defeated.

The second is calculation: the Tlaxcalan lords —Xicotencatl the Elder, Maxixcatzin— were experienced politicians who knew the Spaniards, even defeated, were a unique asset. They had seen what four hundred Europeans could do with cannons and horses; they imagined what they could do with reinforcements —which Cortes promised would come from Cuba and Spain. Besides, the Spaniards were valuable hostages: while they lived, Tlaxcala held a card for any scenario.

The third is honor: in Mesoamerican culture, hospitality and alliance were sacred. The Tlaxcalans had received the Spaniards as guests, sealed the pact with marriages and ceremonies, shed their blood beside them. Betraying them would have been intolerable dishonor. When the Mexica sent ambassadors offering peace for Cortes's head, the Tlaxcalan senate rejected them indignantly. That loyalty—at the Spanish expedition's lowest moment—is one of the entire conquest's noblest, most decisive facts.

And a fourth layer, deepest: the Tlaxcalans had already bet their future. They had massacred Cholula beside the Spaniards, fought on the Noche Triste, become Tenochtitlan's mortal enemies. There was no going back: either they won with the Spaniards or lost alone. The alliance had become irreversible, like all alliances forged in blood. When Cortes proposed rebuilding the army and returning against Tenochtitlan, the Tlaxcalans did not hesitate: they contributed men, food, refuge, and —decisively— the territory where the brigantines would be built. Without that loyalty in defeat, there would have been no victory. The conquest was won in Tlaxcala, in July 1520, when a defeated people decided to keep fighting.

Cuitlahuac: the tlatoani of the resistance

History has been unfair to Cuitlahuac. He ruled barely months—summer to winter 1520—and died of smallpox before completing his work, so his name was eclipsed by his brother Moctezuma's and his successor Cuauhtemoc's. But Cuitlahuac organized the first great Mexica victory against the Spaniards, expelled the foreigners from Tenochtitlan, and designed the defensive strategy that nearly saved the empire. Without smallpox, he might be this story's hero.

Cuitlahuac was Moctezuma's younger brother and lord of Iztapalapa. From the start he had opposed the temporizing policy: when Cortes took Moctezuma prisoner, Cuitlahuac was among the few lords who protested openly. The Spaniards arrested him with other nobles, but in a gesture of historic clumsiness, freed him shortly before the Noche Triste —Cortes hoped he would calm his people, as attempted with Moctezuma. Cuitlahuac left the palace, put himself at the warriors' head, and organized the uprising. The Spanish "goodwill gesture" handed the enemy its best general.

As tlatoani, Cuitlahuac acted with extraordinary energy. He repaired causeways and bridges, stockpiled provisions in the city, reorganized war-canoe squadrons, reinforced lakeside towns' garrisons, and —most importantly— launched a diplomatic offensive to rebuild the imperial coalition: he sent embassies to Tlaxcala, Texcoco, every lordship, warning that after Tenochtitlan they would be next. His message was clear and true: the Spaniards had not come to liberate anyone; they had come to dominate all. Some towns listened; most, blinded by hatred of the Mexica, would not hear.

Cuitlahuac also understood the Noche Triste's military lesson: the Spaniards must be fought on the water and at night, where horses and cannons were useless. He ordered thousands of war canoes built, moats dug on the causeways, stakes and traps prepared. Had the war continued in 1520 with Cuitlahuac in command and no plague, the Spaniards would have faced a fortified, supplied Tenochtitlan led by a competent strategist. But smallpox respects no strategies: in December 1520, the resistance's tlatoani died covered in pustules, like any commoner. His reign lasted some five months. His successor would inherit a sick city and a ruined empire.

Otumba: the impossible battle

The battle of Otumba, July 7, 1520, deserves detailed telling as the episode best summarizing the conquest's military paradox: the Spaniards won battles they could not win and lost the war they thought won.

The Noche Triste survivors —some four hundred wounded, hungry, demoralized Spaniards plus a few thousand Tlaxcalan allies— fled toward Tlaxcala across the plains north of the Valley of Mexico. The Mexica, pursuing since the flight, cut them off at Otumba with a far superior army: sources speak of tens of thousands of warriors. The Spaniards were trapped in open field, no fortifications, no artillery —lost on the Noche Triste— few horses, almost no powder. It was a militarily desperate situation: any manual of the time would have forecast annihilation.

Cortes did the only thing possible: a suicidal gamble. He gathered his last riders —barely twenty— and charged directly at the Mexica army's center, where the enemy general's standard waved. In Mesoamerican war, the standard was no ornament: it was the command center, authority's symbol, the whole army's reference point. Mexica generals fought surrounded by their guard, in litters or on foot, directing by signals. Cortes knew —Malinalli had explained it— and bet everything on one card: if the standard fell, the army would scatter.

The charge worked. The riders pierced the Mexica ranks —which had no effective weapons against cavalry in open field— reached the general, knocked him down, killed him. As the standard fell, panic spread: the Mexica warriors, fighting under centralized, ritual command, lost their reference and fled in disorder. The exhausted

Spaniards could not pursue; they merely survived. They had won the conquest's most improbable battle.

But note what Otumba reveals: the Spaniards won through a tactical stroke of daring, not technological superiority. Without horses —and almost none remained— that charge would have been impossible; without knowledge of the Mexica command system —which Malinalli gave them— they would not have known where to strike. And above all: Otumba changed nothing strategically. The Mexica lost a battle but still controlled the valley, still numbered hundreds of thousands, and the Spaniards were still fleeing. The Spaniards won battles; the war would be decided later, by other means. Otumba proves courage and daring do not suffice to explain the conquest: the other two factors are needed, the decisive ones.

The price of defeat

The Noche Triste was not just a military defeat: it was a lesson. The Mexica showed they could beat the Spaniards fighting on their own terms. If the war had remained a war of causeways and canoes, the Spaniards would never have taken Tenochtitlan. Cortes understood perfectly, and that understanding would define his final campaign's strategy.

The survivors fled toward Tlaxcala, pursued for days. On the way they suffered constant Mexica harassment, hunger, disease. On July 7, at Otumba, the Mexica army cut them off with superior force —and lost, as told. The fugitives finally reached Tlaxcala, where they were received as brothers. The Tlaxcalans —who had just lost thousands of warriors on the Noche Triste— neither repudiated nor surrendered them to the Mexica, as they could have. Instead: they healed them, fed them, offered to continue the war. That loyalty, at

the Spanish expedition's lowest moment, is among the clearest proofs the anti-Mexica alliance was no Cortes whim but a shared project: the Tlaxcalans wanted Tenochtitlan's destruction as much as or more than the Spaniards.

Meanwhile, Tenochtitlan celebrated victory. Cuitlahuac, the new tlatoani, organized the defense, repaired causeways, stockpiled provisions, sent embassies to neighboring towns to rebuild the coalition against the Spaniards. It seemed the empire had been saved. But on the coast, among the men Narvaez had brought, traveled an invisible passenger that would decide the war: a smallpox-stricken slave.

The drums of the Templo Mayor: the sound of war

War in Tenochtitlan had a sound—and the Spaniards never forgot it. The huehuetl, the great upright drum, and the teponaztli, the slit drum, marked the rhythm of Mexica warfare, and their thunder over the lake became, for the conquistadors, the sound of terror.

The huehuetl was a hollowed tree trunk, sometimes two meters tall, covered with a stretched skin and played with the hands; the teponaztli was a horizontal log with two tongues of different pitch, struck with mallets. Together they could be heard for kilometers across the lake—and the Mexica used them as weapons. Before an assault, the drums sounded from the Templo Mayor's summit; during the siege, they marked the hours of attack, the calls to sacrifice, the rhythm of the final resistance. Bernal Diaz writes that when the drums sounded for the sacrifice of captured Spaniards—audible from the Spanish camp—his comrades wept, knowing their friends were dying atop the pyramid.

Sound was psychological warfare, and the Mexica were masters of it. The drums announced that the gods were watching; the conch shells —blown from the temples— carried for leagues; the war whistles, the screams of warriors, the synchronized chanting created a wall of sound meant to break the enemy's nerve before the first blow. The Spaniards answered with their own noise —arquebus volleys, cannon, trumpets— but they admitted the Mexica drums unnerved them.

After the conquest, the drums were silenced —or nearly. The friars banned their use in "idolatrous" rites, though the huehuetl survived in Christian festivals, its pagan voice tamed into church music. But the sound of the siege lived on in memory: veterans, old men in Spain, still dreamed of the drums over the lake. Of all the conquest's weapons, the drum was the only one that kept sounding after the war —in memory, in festivals, in the stubborn pulse of a culture that refused to be wholly silenced.

Cortes's letters: the conquest on paper

Much of what the world "knows" about the conquest of Mexico comes from five letters Hernán Cortes wrote to Emperor Charles V —the *Cartas de relacion*— and those letters are masterpieces of political storytelling: history written by the interested party, in real time, for an audience of one king.

The second letter —dated October 30, 1520, written from Segura de la Frontera after the *Noche Triste*— is the most famous. In it, Cortes narrates the expedition from Veracruz to Tenochtitlan, describes the city with genuine wonder, justifies the seizure of Moctezuma, and presents the disaster of the *Noche Triste* as a temporary setback on the road to certain victory. He asks the king for reinforcements, for

official appointment as governor, and —crucially— for absolution for having disobeyed Velazquez. The letter is a legal brief disguised as a chronicle: every fact is selected to prove that Cortes acted in the Crown's service and that his disobedience was justified by results.

Read critically, the letters reveal their author. Cortes never mentions Malinalli by name —the woman who made his diplomacy possible is invisible in his official account. He inflates the numbers of Indigenous allies when he wants to impress, minimizes them when he wants the glory for his Spaniards. He presents the Cholula massacre as a preemptive strike against a proven conspiracy; he describes Moctezuma's death without clarifying who killed him. And he always, always frames his actions as service to God and king —the two authorities whose approval he desperately needed.

The letters worked: Charles V named Cortes governor and captain-general of New Spain, and the printed editions —translated into Latin, Italian, French— made him famous across Europe. The conquest of Mexico entered the European imagination through Cortes's pen: the official version, the hero's version.

But the letters also contain, between the lines, the truth this book has told. Cortes writes of "more than 150,000" Indigenous allies in the siege —a figure that confirms, from the conqueror's own hand, that the victory was Indigenous work. He describes the brigantines, the causeways, the hunger —the real instruments of victory. Read against the grain, the *Cartas de relacion* are the best proof of this book's thesis: even Cortes, boasting to his king, could not hide that a few hundred Spaniards had conquered nothing alone. The letters are the conquest's founding document —and its most eloquent self-incrimination.

Chapter 5. The Siege and August 13, 1521

The plague: the invisible weapon

Smallpox reached Mesoamerica in Pánfilo de Narvaez's baggage. Among his men came a sick African slave —sources identify him as Francisco de Eguia— who landed at Veracruz in April 1520. The disease spread first among the coastal Spaniards, then, with a dry-field fire's speed, among Cempoala's Indigenous population. The Totonacs, never exposed to the virus, died by the thousands. And when Mexica warriors returned to Tenochtitlan after the Noche Triste, they carried the plague into the city with them.

What followed was a demographic catastrophe unprecedented in the continent's history. Smallpox —the *huey zahuatl*, "the great rash," as the Mexica called it— struck a population with no immunity. The sick covered in pustules, burned with fever, died within days; survivors were left blind or disfigured. But worst was not the disease itself but what it destroyed: in a society where all work was manual and collective, when half the population falls ill at once, no one sows, no one harvests, no one grinds maize, no one nurses the sick. People died not only of smallpox but of hunger and thirst, abandoned in their homes because no healthy person remained to tend them.

The Florentine Codex describes the plague in words that still hurt: it says the disease "took possession" of the city, that the sick "could no longer move, could no longer lie face up or face down," that "many died of hunger" because there was no one to feed them. The dead piled up in houses and streets; there were no hands to bury them. Tenochtitlan, the continent's cleanest, most orderly city, became a charnel house.

And the plague distinguished no rank: in December 1520 Cuitlahuac died, the tlatoani who had organized the Noche Triste victory and was preparing the final defense. He had held the throne barely months. His death was a devastating blow to Mexica morale: the resistance's leader, the man who had expelled the Spaniards, fell not before an army but before an invisible evil no warrior could fight. His cousin Cuauhtemoc —"the descending eagle"— succeeded him, a young man of about twenty-five, son of Ahuitzotl, who would assume the city's defense under the most desperate imaginable conditions.

Pause here, for this is this book's thesis heart. Without smallpox, the siege of Tenochtitlan would have been a very different enterprise, perhaps impossible. The epidemic killed —by the most prudent estimates— between a third and half the Valley of Mexico's population in under a year. It decimated warriors, disorganized agriculture, broke morale, and beheaded Mexica command at the critical moment. The Spaniards, by contrast, were mostly immune: smallpox was an old disease in Europe, and nearly every soldier had survived it as a child. History's most devastating germ warfare was planned by no one —Cortes did not understand what a virus was— but it decided the war more than all the cannons together.

This is no modern speculation: the conquistadors themselves knew

it. Bernal Diaz wrote that smallpox was "a great plague" God sent against the Indians. Later missionaries interpreted it as divine punishment. And current historians —from William McNeill to Noble David Cook— have documented how sixteenth-century epidemics reduced Mexico's Indigenous population by over eighty percent. Tenochtitlan's fall was that demographic collapse's first chapter. No European technology can explain a defeat of that magnitude; a virus can.

The brigantines on the lake

While plague devastated Tenochtitlan, Cortes prepared the final campaign in Tlaxcala with a meticulousness revealing a first-rate strategist. His plan had three legs: a land army vastly superior in numbers thanks to Indigenous allies, cutting the city's supplies, and —the decisive novelty— his own fleet to dominate the lake.

The fleet was the Noche Triste's lesson turned engineering project. Cortes ordered thirteen brigantines —small sail-and-oar boats armed with cannons— built in Tlaxcala, over two hundred kilometers from the lake. Timber was cut in Tlaxcalan forests, the pieces assembled and tested, then disassembled for transport piece by piece to Texcoco, on the lake's shore. The transport was a colossal logistical feat: thousands of tamemes —Indigenous porters— carried beams, sails, nails, and rigging through the mountains, escorted by warriors. At Texcoco, by the water, the boats were reassembled under Martin Lopez, the expedition's ship's carpenter.

On April 28, 1521, the thirteen brigantines were launched on Lake Texcoco in solemn ceremony, with mass and artillery salvos. That day changed war's nature: for the first time, the Spaniards could

fight in the element where the Mexica were invincible. The brigantines, with cannons and sails, could intercept the canoes supplying the city, bombard the causeways, land troops where they pleased. The lake —the liquid wall that had protected Tenochtitlan for two centuries— became an avenue for the enemy.



But the ships would have been useless without the plan's second leg: the allies. By spring 1521, the anti-Mexica coalition was an army of dimensions never seen in Mesoamerica. The Tlaxcalans contributed tens of thousands of warriors; the Texcocans had joined —after Cortes deposed their lord and installed a favorable young prince— the Chalca, Xochimilca, lakeside chinamperos. Estimates speak of over a hundred thousand Indigenous combatants beside barely nine hundred Spaniards. Each causeway would be attacked by a mixed column; each lakeside town would contribute war canoes. Tenochtitlan was about to be besieged by all Anahuac.

The third leg was hunger. Cortes understood he need not take the city by storm: closing it sufficed. Tenochtitlan was an island importing nearly all its food —the chinampas' maize could not feed two hundred thousand. Cortes ordered the surrounding chinampas cut down, supply canoes intercepted, the Chapultepec aqueduct carrying fresh water cut. The strategy was medieval and ruthless:

starve into surrender a city that could not feed itself. It was the same tactic European kings used against rebel cities. And it would work.

Ixtlilxochitl: the Texcoco prince

If Tlaxcala supplied the warriors and smallpox supplied death, Texcoco supplied the naval base without which the siege would have been impossible. And a resentful prince gave Texcoco to Cortes: Ixtlilxochitl, Nezahualpilli's dispossessed son.

The story is a dynastic drama. Nezahualpilli, Texcoco's great philosopher-king, died in 1515 leaving several sons by different mothers. The Texcoco council —with Moctezuma's decisive interference, uncle of one candidate— chose Cacamatzin, the Mexica princess's son. Ixtlilxochitl, another wife's son with strong backing among Texcoco nobility, considered himself robbed: he rebelled, entrenched himself in the kingdom's north, and kept up a sullen war against his brother. Texcoco —the Triple Alliance's second city, the Athens of Anahuac— was left divided in two.

When Cortes reached the valley in 1519, Ixtlilxochitl saw his chance. He sent ambassadors to the Spanish camp offering alliance against Cacamatzin and Moctezuma. Cortes —who understood a local prince's value— accepted at once. After the Noche Triste, when the Spaniards sheltered in Tlaxcala, Ixtlilxochitl became their main valley ally: he contributed thousands of Texcoco warriors, guides who knew the lake inch by inch, and —decisively— the eastern shore territory where the brigantines would be assembled.

Texcoco's fall —early 1521— was a joint operation: Spanish columns and Ixtlilxochitl's supporters took the city, deposed Cacamatzin

—led away prisoner, later to die— and installed a pro-Spanish young prince, with Ixtlilxochitl as power behind the throne. Texcoco became the conquest's arsenal: there the thirteen brigantines were fitted, provisions stockpiled, the siege's logistics organized. Lake Texcoco —the enemy capital's lake— became the conquering fleet's harbor. The irony escaped no one: the empire's second city built the ships that would destroy the first.

Ixtlilxochitl fought in the siege with his warriors and was rewarded afterward: the Spaniards confirmed him as Texcoco's lord and granted privileges. But his victory was pyrrhic: Texcoco, like Tenochtitlan, lay ruined by war and plague, and the prince who had betrayed his brother for ambition ended as one more vassal of the new colonial order. His story is the parable of all the conquest's Indigenous allies: they won their immediate revenge and lost their world. Those who helped destroy Tenochtitlan did not inherit its power: they inherited encomiendas, tributes, and —in time— oblivion. Ixtlilxochitl died Christian and ennobled by the Spaniards, lord of a ghost city.

The invisible army: the allies in the siege

When the siege of Tenochtitlan is discussed, people usually picture a few hundred Spaniards besieging a city of two hundred thousand —an image as epic as it is false. The siege's numerical reality is this book's thesis's most crushing proof, so it deserves precise stating.

In May 1521, Cortes's forces numbered some nine hundred Spaniards: eighty-six horsemen, 118 arquebusiers and crossbowmen, the rest sword-and-buckler foot. Thirteen brigantines with one cannon each. That was the entire European contingent. Facing them, Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco still gathered —after the

plague— tens of thousands of warriors ready to die defending their city.

But the Spaniards did not besiege the city alone. The columns occupying the causeways were accompanied by massive Indigenous contingents: the Tlaxcalans contributed —by the most serious estimates— thirty to fifty thousand warriors; Ixtlilxochitl's Texcocans, a similar number; the Chalca, Xochimilca, Huexotzinca, Totonacs, and dozens more towns added tens of thousands. The total of allied Indigenous combatants ran between a hundred and two hundred thousand men. The proportion was overwhelming: per Spaniard, over a hundred Indigenous allies. Every causeway assault was executed by thousands of Tlaxcalan and Texcocan warriors; the Spaniards were the officers and artillery of an Indigenous army.

And they did not only fight: the allies supplied the campaign's entire logistics. The tamemes —porters— transported provisions, weapons, the brigantines' pieces. Lakeside towns contributed thousands of war canoes harassing the city from the water. The chinamperos cut supplies. Without that Indigenous logistical machine, nine hundred Spaniards could not have maintained a seventy-five-day siege for even a week: they would have starved before the besieged.

Why did they fight? Each town had its reasons, none love of Spain. The Tlaxcalans fought for revenge: a century of Flower Wars, thousands of their youths sacrificed in the Templo Mayor. Ixtlilxochitl's Texcocans fought for the throne Moctezuma had denied them. The Chalca and Xochimilca fought to shake off tribute. And all fought for the promised loot: Cortes had offered them the sack of the continent's richest city. When Tlatelolco fell on August 13, it was the allies who threw themselves into the sack most

fiercely, and they who executed most of the final slaughter. The siege's cruelty had, for the most part, Indigenous hands. It is an uncomfortable fact, but a fact: Tenochtitlan's destruction was Anahuac's work against Tenochtitlan, with European advice.

War on the water: canoes against brigantines

The siege of Tenochtitlan was decided on the water, and Lake Texcoco's naval war —little known outside specialist circles— was one of the sixteenth century's most original campaigns. It pitted two opposite understandings of naval warfare: swift, numerous Mexica canoes against slow but gunned Spanish brigantines.

Mexica war canoes were light wooden craft crewed by two or three warriors: one paddled while the others shot arrows, hurled atlatl darts, or slung stones. Their advantage was maneuverability: they could move through the city's narrow canals, hide among the shoreline tulares —reed beds— attack by night and vanish before brigantines could answer. The Mexica used them boldly: they ambushed isolated brigantines, attacked causeway columns from the flanks, tried to break the blockade with night runs to bring the city food. There were nights when hundreds of canoes surrounded a brigantine, and only its cannon —firing point-blank canister— kept them at bay.

The Spanish brigantines were another thing: fifteen-ton boats with lateen sails and oars, crewed by some twenty-five men —sailors, soldiers, a gunner— armed with a small bow cannon. Their advantage was firepower and toughness: no canoe could sink a brigantine, but a cannon shot could shatter a canoe. Their weakness was draft: in the lake's shallow zones —and Lake Texcoco was largely shallow— brigantines ran aground, then lay at the canoes'

mercy. The Mexica learned fast: they drove stakes underwater in shallow passages to trap Spanish boats, attacking them when immobilized.

The naval war lasted the siege's seventy-five days, a war of attrition. The Spaniards never achieved total lake control: Mexica canoes kept moving by night to the end. But they achieved the essential: stopping daytime supply traffic, bombarding Mexica positions from the water, landing troops at unexpected points, and—most importantly—proving the lake was no longer safe refuge. Tenochtitlan's liquid wall had been flanked. And each brigantine was crewed, remember, with Indigenous help: Spanish sailors did not suffice, and allies supplied rowers and guides who knew every canal and shallow of the lake. Even on the water, the conquest was a mixed enterprise.

The seventy-five days of the siege

The siege began May 26, 1521—some sources say May 30—and would last seventy-five days. Three Spanish columns, each with its Indigenous allies, occupied the three causeways: Pedro de Alvarado by Tlacopan to the west, Cristobal de Olid by Coyoacan to the south, and Cortes by Iztapalapa, also south. The brigantines patrolled the lake. The city was surrounded by land and water.

Cuauhtemoc organized the defense with an energy and talent even his enemies recognized. He repaired causeways, raised barricades at every bridge, organized war-canoe squadrons, distributed provisions, and maintained discipline among a hungry, sick population. The Mexica fought with a heroism the Spanish chroniclers themselves recorded admiringly: defending every inch of causeway, counterattacking by night, capturing Spaniards to

sacrifice atop the Templo Mayor in view of their comrades —deliberate, terrible psychological warfare.

The first Spanish assaults failed. On June 30, 1521 —exactly a year after the Noche Triste— Cortes ordered a general assault by the three causeways. The Mexica feigned retreat, lured the Spaniards into an area of raised bridges, and counterattacked furiously. It was disaster for the attackers: dozens of Spaniards died —some sources say over sixty— and thousands of allies, and the Mexica captured several Spaniards alive who were sacrificed that same afternoon in the Templo Mayor, before their comrades' horrified eyes. Cortes was nearly captured; his men saved him at the last moment. After that defeat the Spaniards changed tactics: instead of storming, they would advance meter by meter, systematically destroying every house, building, block they took, leaving the enemy no shelter. The city began being demolished block by block.

And then came hunger. With the lake blocked by brigantines and causeways in enemy hands, food stopped entering. The Mexica ate first their stores, then lake roots and herbs, then —by the Florentine Codex's most heartbreaking testimony— lizards, insects, tree bark, soaked leather. Fresh water ran out when the Spaniards cut the aqueduct; people drank brackish lake water and sickened. Smallpox kept claiming victims. Streets filled with dead no one could bury. Sahagun records the elders' testimony: "we no longer had shields, we no longer had macanas; there was nothing left to eat."



It must be said plainly: the siege of Tenochtitlan was one of the sixteenth century's most ruthless military operations, comparable to Europe's great sieges. It was no chivalrous battle: it was a city's methodical destruction and its population's extermination by hunger. The Spanish chroniclers tell it proudly; the Mexica sources tell it as the world's end. Both versions agree on the essential: for seventy-five days, Tenochtitlan resisted beyond the humanly bearable.

Hunger as a weapon of war

The siege of Tenochtitlan was not won by storm: it was won by hunger. And hunger was a deliberate weapon, coldly planned by Cortes from the start. The mechanism deserves understanding, for it reveals siege warfare's ruthless logic.

Tenochtitlan was an island of some thirteen square kilometers with

two to three hundred thousand inhabitants. The surrounding chinampas produced food, but nowhere near enough for so many: the city imported most of its maize, beans, chili, and cacao from the mainland, via causeways and canoes. It was a metropolis dependent on its supply lines, like all history's great capitals. Cortes knew —his allies had explained it— and designed the siege as a strangulation operation.

First, the brigantines. Thirteen armed boats patrolling the lake could intercept any canoe trying to carry food to the city. The Mexica had thousands of war canoes and used them bravely —there were fierce naval combats— but canoes could not face brigantine cannons in open water. Gradually lake traffic shrank to ever riskier night runs.

Second, the causeways. The three allied columns occupied the causeways and advanced methodically, destroying every house and building they took to leave no shelter. The lakeside towns supplying the city —Iztapalapa, Xochimilco, Cuitlahuac— were taken one by one or surrendered. Each fallen town was one less pantry for Tenochtitlan.

Third, water. Cortes ordered the Chapultepec aqueduct cut, the city's freshwater artery. Without it, the besieged drank brackish lake water or from the island's few wells. Dehydration and intestinal disease joined hunger and smallpox.

The result was a famine of biblical proportions. The Florentine Codex —our most direct source— describes deterioration in stages: first the maize stores ran out; then people ate lake herbs, roots, flowers; then lizards, mice, insects; finally tree bark, soaked leather, dirt. Children died first; then the elderly; then everyone. Testimonies speak of mothers with no milk for their children, whole

families dead in their homes, streets full of corpses no one had strength to bury. "And we had nothing left to eat," Sahagun's elders say, with a simplicity more chilling than any hyperbole.

Hunger as a weapon has one terrible trait: it distinguishes neither warriors from civilians nor guilty from innocent. The siege of Tenochtitlan killed more civilians than combatants, and that is the truth Spanish victory dispatches usually omit. When the conquest is called a military feat, remember its decisive instrument was starving an entire city to death.

Those who did not fight: women, children, elders

The conquest's chronicles —Spanish and Indigenous— focus on warriors, but the siege of Tenochtitlan was suffered mostly by those who did not fight. They deserve voice, for their suffering is the catastrophe's true measure.

Tenochtitlan's women sustained the city during the siege. While men fought on the causeways, women ground the little remaining maize, nursed smallpox victims, sought edible herbs on the lake's shores under enemy fire, hid children during assaults. The Florentine Codex records heartbreaking scenes: women offering their children to warriors to carry them away from the city, mothers dying embracing their little ones. When Tlatelolco fell, women were the final slaughter's main victims: the victors —above all Indigenous allies— captured them as war booty, raped and enslaved them. The conquest, like all conquests, was written on defeated women's bodies.

The siege's children lived seventy-five days of horror marking survivors forever. Those who survived —and few did— grew up in

colonial Mexico City as a trauma generation: they had seen their parents die of hunger, eaten weeds to live, heard war drums and cannon for months. Some of those children, grown old, were Fray Bernardino de Sahagun's informants when, fifty years later, the friar collected the Florentine Codex testimonies. Thanks to them we know what we know: the siege's memory survived in those who suffered it as children.

And there were the elders, the *tlamatime* —the sages— memory's guardians. Many died in the siege, and with them died an irreplaceable part of Mexica knowledge: genealogies, histories, songs, astronomical and medical learning never written down. The conquest destroyed not just a city but a living library. What survived —the codices, the testimonies— is a fraction of what was lost. Each time we read the Florentine Codex we should remember what we read is what a few elders managed to save from the shipwreck.

August 13: anatomy of the last day

August 13, 1521, dawned over a dying city. Tlatelolco —the last redoubt— was a field of ruins: demolished houses, streets choked with rubble and corpses, unbreathable air. The remaining defenders —perhaps a few thousand warriors, plus women, children, elders— had not eaten in weeks. Cuauhtemoc refused all surrender offers: Cortes had promised to respect his life and rank if he yielded, but the *tlatoani* —young, proud, conscious of his lineage's meaning— preferred to die as a warrior.

The final assault began at dawn by all three causeways at once. The allied columns —tens of thousands of Tlaxcalans, Texcocans, others— advanced over the last barricades while brigantines closed the lake. Resistance was desperate but brief: no strength remained

for battle. What followed was no combat but slaughter. The allies, enraged, threw themselves on the defenseless population: men, women, children cut down without distinction. The Spanish chroniclers —uneasy at the carnage's scale— write that Cortes ordered the killing stopped and his men could not restrain the allies. It is probably true: hatred accumulated over generations obeyed no Spanish orders.

Amid the chaos, Cuauhtemoc made his final decision. With his wife —Princess Tecuichpo, Moctezuma's daughter— his counselors and some nobles, he boarded a large canoe and tried crossing the lake to the mainland. Perhaps he hoped to reorganize resistance in another city; perhaps only to die free. But the brigantines patrolled, and Garcia Holguin's spotted the canoe. The sailors prepared to fire; then they saw the headdresses and insignia: nobles. Holguin ordered the canoe captured intact. Cuauhtemoc, surrounded, offered no resistance: too weak from hunger to wield a weapon.

They brought him before Cortes, who received him in his camp. And then occurred the scene Bernal Diaz immortalized: Cuauhtemoc stepped forward, touched the dagger Cortes wore at his belt and said —in the most widespread version—: "My lord, I have done what I was obliged to do in defense of my city and can do no more; take that dagger and kill me with it." He asked the defeated warrior's honorable death. Cortes —and this is one of the few acts of magnanimity creditable to him without reserve— embraced him, told him not to fear, that he would be treated with honor, and placed him under his protection. That day, the victor respected the vanquished.

But the war had ended in the worst possible way: not with a negotiated surrender saving the population, but with extermination.

Over fifteen thousand people are estimated to have died that last day —mostly civilians. The lake, testimonies say, lay covered with bodies. Tenochtitlan —the city that had astonished the Spaniards two years before— no longer existed: a heap of smoking ruins inhabited by ghosts. August 13, 1521, is Mexican history's most tragic date, and it should be remembered not as victory but as mourning: the day Anahuac destroyed itself, with foreign help.

The fall: August 13, 1521

By early August, the city had shrunk to the Tlatelolco quarter, at the island's northern end. The defenders —women, children, elders included— huddled among ruins, without food, without water, surrounded by corpses. Cuauhtemoc refused to surrender: he had sworn to defend the city to the end, and the priests had assured him the gods might still intervene. But there was nothing left to defend.

On August 13, 1521 —day 1-Coatl, year 3-Calli, by the Mexica calendar— the Spanish columns and their allies entered Tlatelolco. The final slaughter was appalling: the Indigenous allies —Tlaxcalans above all— enraged by generations of hatred, pitilessly massacred the defenseless population. The Spanish chroniclers, uneasy, admit they could not stop the carnage. The lake turned red; the canals clogged with bodies. It was the conquest's darkest day, and its principal executors were not Spaniards.

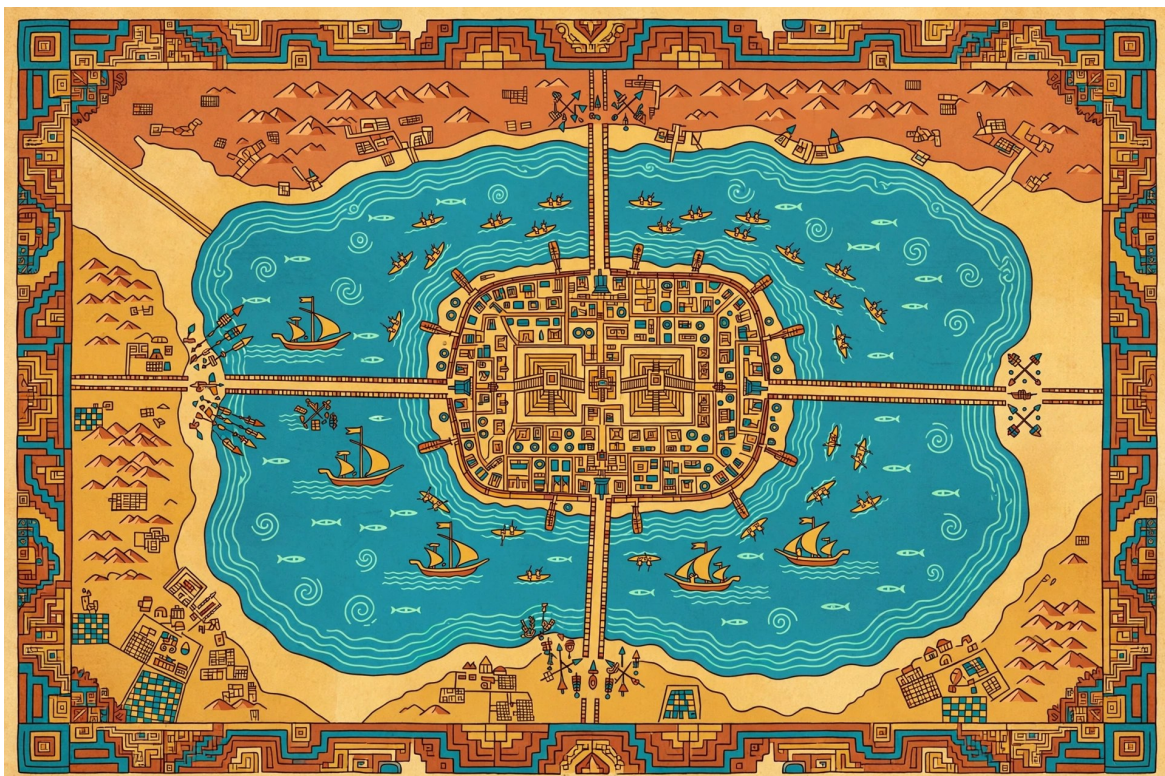


Tenochtitlan after Tenochtitlan

The city's fall was not the story's end but another's beginning. Cortes, pragmatic, understood he needed the Mexica survivors: who would rebuild the city, work the mines, pay tribute? He installed Cuauhtemoc as puppet ruler —the last tlatoani governed four more years as the Spaniards' vassal— and began building Mexico City over Tenochtitlan's ruins, using the demolished temples' same stones to raise churches and palaces. The metropolitan cathedral rose beside the Templo Mayor's ruins; the viceregal palace over Moctezuma's palace. The conquest was written in stone: the new city was, literally, the old city reused.

But violence had not ended. In 1521, disappointed that the gold loot was smaller than expected, Cortes had Cuauhtemoc and other lords tortured —their feet burned with boiling oil— to reveal where the

treasure was hidden. The treasure did not exist: it had been lost on the Noche Triste or spent on the war. Years later, in 1525, during the Hibueras —Honduras— expedition, Cortes ordered Cuauhtemoc hanged on the never-proven charge of conspiring against the Spaniards. Tenochtitlan's last defender died in the jungle, far from his city, executed by the man who had spared his life four years before. With him died the last hope of organized Mexica resistance.



The gold that did not exist: loot and disappointment

After Tlatelolco's fall, the victors divided the loot, and the division revealed the conquest's true economy: a pyramid scheme. The soldiers expected the fabulous gold seen in Moctezuma's gifts and Axayacatl's treasure. What they found was much less: the city had been looted for months by its own defenders —who hid or melted

their jewels— much treasure was lost on the Noche Triste, and what remained was modest. When it was all melted and divided, discounting the royal fifth and the shares of Cortes and his captains, each soldier got about a hundred gold pesos: misery compared to the promise. The men murmured, protested, some wept with rage. They had risked their lives for two years for a fortune that did not exist.

The disappointment had brutal consequences. Convinced the Mexica lords hid a secret treasure, Cortes ordered Cuauhtemoc and other nobles tortured: their feet burned with boiling oil to make them confess where the gold was. Cuauhtemoc endured the torment betraying nothing —because there was nothing to betray— and, legend says, when one companion complained, told him: "am I perhaps on a bed of roses?" The phrase, probably apocryphal, sums up the vanquished's dignity against the victor's greed.

The torture episode stains Cortes's memory forever, and it should not be passed over: the "magnanimous" victor of August 13 could torture a defenseless prisoner from greed. But it also reveals something deeper: the conquest of Mexico, stripped of its religious and civilizing justifications, was at origin a looting enterprise. Gold was the motor; cross and crown, the legitimation. When the gold failed to appear, legitimation ran out of fuel, and what followed —colonization, encomienda, evangelization— was the attempt to build an empire on a disappointing looting's ruins.

After August 13: the city over the ruins

Tenochtitlan's fall was not history's end but the start of a transformation lasting centuries. What happened in the months and years after August 13, 1521, deserves telling, for in it was decided

what would remain of the Mexica world and what would be born in its place.

First came the cleanup —literally. The city was a cemetery: tens of thousands of corpses in streets, houses, canals. Cortes ordered survivors —Mexica and allies— to collect the bodies and burn or bury them. The stench, testimonies say, was unbearable leagues away. Diseases —smallpox still active, plus typhus and other plagues— kept killing for months. The valley's population, some a million and a half before 1519, collapsed: a century later barely a tenth remained.

Second came reconstruction —or rather reuse. Cortes decided to found New Spain's capital over Tenochtitlan's ruins, not elsewhere. The decision was political and symbolic: occupying the vanquished power's center proved power had changed hands. The Spaniards laid the new city out in a grid —the colonial checkerboard— over the old sacred precinct: the cathedral rose beside the Templo Mayor's ruins, the viceregal palace over Moctezuma's palace, conquistadors' houses over nobility's palaces. Demolished temples' stones were reused in churches: the conquest was literally written in stone, with the destroyed world's material.

And the Mexica survivors? Cortes —pragmatic to cynicism— needed them: who would build the new city, farm the chinampas, pay tribute? He installed Cuauhtemoc as the Mexica's ruler under Spanish authority, partly kept the *calpulli* —barrio— structure, and used surviving nobility as intermediaries. It was the colonial system's beginning: the vanquished would keep working, but now for new masters. The *encomienda* —distributing Indigenous towns among conquistadors— institutionalized exploitation: each Spaniard received a group of Indians owing him labor and products in

exchange for "protection" and evangelization. In practice it was disguised slavery that would depopulate central Mexico within a generation.

But the Mexica did not disappear —and this is the epilogue that matters. They survived plague, hunger, sword, and *encomienda*. They learned Spanish without forgetting Nahuatl; adopted Christianity without wholly abandoning their old gods —who survived disguised as saints—; worked building the colonial city while keeping their *barrios*, crafts, festivals. Their descendants populate the Valley of Mexico today: the millions of Mexicans speaking Nahuatl, farming *chinampas* at Xochimilco, celebrating Day of the Dead with pre-Hispanic offerings, are the direct heirs of August 13's vanquished.

Tenochtitlan fell but was not erased. It is still there, under Mexico City: every time the subway digs a tunnel or a downtown building is founded, temples, sculptures, offerings appear. In 1978, the Coyolxauhqui's discovery unleashed the Templo Mayor excavations, and since then the Mexica city slowly emerges from beneath the colonial city, like a memory refusing to vanish. The conquest destroyed an empire; it could not destroy a civilization. And that is this book's last lesson: cities fall, empires die, but peoples —when they keep their language, memory, and dignity— outlive their conquerors.

The songs of the siege: the poetry of defeat

Tenochtitlan's fall left not only chronicles and codices: it left poems. The *Cantares Mexicanos* —the Nahuatl poetry collection gathered in the sixteenth century— contains some of world literature's most heartbreaking laments, composed by those who lived the siege or

by their children. They deserve to close this chapter, for in them history becomes human voice.

The most famous is the "Song of the Fall," which says—in Miguel Leon-Portilla's translation—: "Weeping spreads, tears drip there in Tlatelolco... Where are we going? O friends! Then was it true? We have abandoned the city..." Another fragment, the most quoted of all: "And all this happened to us. We saw it, we marveled at it: with this mournful, sad fate we found ourselves anguished." These are no metaphors: they are testimonies. Those who sang these verses had seen their families die of hunger, eaten leather to survive, heard cannon for seventy-five days.

The Nahua poetry of defeat has a trait unique in the literature of the vanquished: it asks not for revenge, curses not the victors, wallows not in hatred. It weeps. And in weeping, affirms what defeat could not take: dignity. "Is warriors' blood worth nothing?" one song asks. "Did our fathers die in vain?" The implicit answer is no: resistance made sense because it was resistance, because they defended their city to the end. It is the Mexica warrior ethic—honor in defeat—turned poetry.

These songs were passed mouth to mouth for generations, in Nahuatl, long after the city fell. The friars collected them without fully grasping their meaning: to them they were ethnographic curiosities; to surviving Mexica they were the catastrophe's living memory, the equivalent of the Babylonian exile's psalms. Each singing raised Tenochtitlan for a moment.

And they are still sung. Nahua poetry did not die with the conquest: over a million and a half people speak Nahuatl today, and the old songs are studied in universities and recited in ceremonies. The last

word on Tenochtitlan's fall belongs not to Spanish chroniclers or modern historians but to the vanquished poets, who turned defeat into beauty. "With this mournful, sad fate we found ourselves anguished" —five centuries later, the lament still sounds, and while it sounds, Tenochtitlan will not have wholly fallen.

How Mexico remembers the fall: the memory of August 13

Five centuries later, August 13 remains an uncomfortable date in Mexico: no national holiday, no official mourning day, an open wound each generation reinterprets. How a country remembers its greatest defeat says much about who it is, and the memory of Tenochtitlan's fall has lived several lives.

During the colony, the date was commemorated ambiguously: criollos celebrated the "conquest" as Christian New Spain's birth, while surviving Indigenous privately kept mourning, in Nahuatl, in songs and local feasts. Official history was Spanish; real memory was Mexica and clandestine.

With independence, the pendulum swung: the heroes of 1810 —Hidalgo, Morelos— claimed Cuauhtemoc as Mexican liberty's forerunner, and the last tlatoani became a national symbol. The liberal nineteenth century consecrated him: a Cuauhtemoc monument stands on the Paseo de la Reforma; his name baptizes streets, schools, cities. Paradoxically, independent Mexico —mestizo, Catholic, Spanish-speaking— chose as hero the defender of the world the conquest destroyed. It is the founding contradiction of Mexican identity: daughter of Cortes and Malinche, it weeps for Cuauhtemoc.

The twentieth century added layers: the Revolution vindicated the Indigenous; the muralists —Rivera, Orozco— painted the conquest as tragedy and violation; modern anthropology —Leon-Portilla and his "Vision of the Vanquished"— gave the defeated academic voice. And in 2021, five hundred years after the fall, Mexico's government organized commemorations presenting August 13 as "Indigenous resistance" rather than defeat, and asked —unsuccessfully— that Spain apologize for the conquest.

What remains, net, of all these memories? Perhaps this: that Tenochtitlan's fall is no closed episode of the past but a mirror in which Mexico looks each time it asks who it is. Are we the victors or the vanquished? Heirs of Cortes or of Cuauhtemoc? The honest answer —this book's— is both, and Mexico's greatness lies precisely in that assumed duality: a mestizo country that can honor at once the conquistador's daring and the vanquished's dignity, renouncing neither legacy. August 13 is no day of victory or defeat: it is a nation's tragic birthday.



This book's thesis, in closing, can be put in one sentence: Tenochtitlan did not fall to European superiority; it fell to Mesoamerican disunity and a microbe. The Spaniards supplied the spark —a few hundred bold, well-armed, well-informed men— but the resentment of subjugated peoples laid the fire and smallpox supplied the wind. Without Tlaxcala, without the Totonacs, without the Texcocans, Cortes would have been one more corpse at the lake's bottom. Without smallpox, the siege would have faced a healthy, well-defended city, and history would have been different. Remembering this diminishes neither Cuauhtemoc's heroism nor the vanquished's tragedy: on the contrary, it restores their true dimension. They were not beaten by gods or a superior civilization. They were beaten by their neighbors' treason and a plague no one in the sixteenth-century world could have stopped. And still they held out seventy-five days. May the memory of that resistance never be lost.

May this volume honor those who defended Tenochtitlan and recall a truth five centuries of official history tried to hide: that the conquest was won not by the strongest or bravest, but by the luckiest; and that luck, in 1521, took the shape of a virus and the face of allies. History is written by the victors, but memory—stubborn, dignified, indestructible—belongs to the vanquished.

Glossary of Nahuatl Terms

Aztlán — "Place of herons" or "place of whiteness." Mythical homeland of the Mexica.

Calmécac — School of the nobility, where priests, rulers, and judges were trained.

Calpixque — Official in charge of tribute collection in the provinces.

Calpulli — Clan or ward; the basic unit of social and territorial organization.

Chinampa — Agricultural platform built on the lake; "floating garden."

Cihuacóatl — "Serpent Woman." Second-in-command of the empire, in charge of internal administration.

Codex (plural: codices) — Pictographic manuscript on amate paper or deerskin.

Cuauhtli — Eagle; the military order of the eagle warriors.

Huehuetlatolli — "Discourses of the elders." Moral maxims and philosophical reflections.

Huitzilopochtli — Patron god of the Mexica; the sun in its warrior aspect.

Macehualtin — The common people; the agricultural and artisan base of society.

Mexica — The name the so-called "Aztecs" gave themselves.

Mictlan — The underworld, place of the dead.

Nahuatl — Language of the Mexica, still spoken by over a million people.

Ocelotl — Jaguar; the military order of the jaguar warriors.

Ometeotl — "Dual God." The supreme creator principle, abstract in nature.

Pipiltin — The hereditary nobility.

Pochteca — Professional long-distance merchant; also spy and ambassador.

Quetzalcóatl — "Feathered Serpent." God of wisdom, wind, and life.

Telpochcalli — School of the common people, where warriors were trained.

Tezcatlipoca — "Smoking Mirror." God of night, magic, and destiny.

Tianguis — Marketplace.

Tlacotin — Slave; a status neither hereditary nor necessarily permanent.

Tlaloc — God of rain and water.

Tlamatinime — "Those who know." Sages guarding memory and knowledge.

Tlatoani — "He who speaks." The supreme ruler.

Tonalpohualli — Ritual calendar of 260 days.

Triple Alliance — Pact of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan (1428), the empire's foundation.

Xiuhpohualli — Solar calendar of 365 days.

Timeline

1110 (tradition) — Departure from Aztlán; the Mexica pilgrimage begins.

1325 — Founding of Mexico-Tenochtitlan on the islet in Lake Texcoco.

1376 — Acamapichtli, first tlatoani of Tenochtitlan.

1428 — Defeat of Azcapotzalco and formation of the Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan).

1440-1469 — Reign of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina; expansion of the empire.

1450-1454 — The great famine; the Flower Wars become institutionalized.

1486-1502 — Reign of Ahuitzotl; the empire reaches its greatest extent.

1502-1520 — Reign of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin.

1519 — Hernán Cortés lands at Veracruz; alliance with Tlaxcala.

1519 — The Spaniards enter Tenochtitlan (November 8).

1520 — La Noche Triste, the Night of Sorrows (June 30); death of Moctezuma.

1521 — Fall of Tenochtitlan (August 13); end of the Mexica empire.

1521-1821 — The viceregal era; Nahuatl becomes the lingua franca of New Spain.

1821 — Independence of Mexico; the eagle of the founding myth inspires the national coat of arms.

1910-1920 — The Mexican Revolution; the Indigenous past is revalued.

1978 — A chance discovery launches the Templo Mayor Project.

1978-2026 — Excavations of the Templo Mayor in the heart of Mexico City.

Today — Over 1.5 million Nahuatl speakers; the chinampas of Xochimilco still in production.

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The Fall of Tenochtitlan, 1519-1521

On November 8, 1519, Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma Xocoyotzin met face to face at Tenochtitlan. Less than two years later, on August 13, 1521, Cuauhtémoc was captured and the greatest city of the Americas lay in ruins.

This volume reconstructs the fall year by year and defends a thesis that changes everything: the conquest was not a European technological victory, but the result of tens of thousands of Indigenous allies and of an invisible weapon no army could resist — smallpox.