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A Nahua Account of the Conquest of Mexico

For centuries it had been a well-known part of the “Black Legend” of the horrors of the Spanish conquest that the first archbishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, collected thousands of Nahua manuscripts and burned them. (Nahua is the word for the people and the language of the Aztec empire.) However, some Nahua documents survived the archbishop’s fires, and others were re-created through oral histories taken shortly after the conquest by sympathetic Spanish priests and Nahua natives trained in anthropological

James Lockhart, ed. and trans., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 90–104.

and historical skills. These documents, usually known as codices (a codex is a simple form of book), lay unread and unappreciated for centuries in libraries and private collections across Mexico, Europe, and the United States. In the 1960s, a new generation of social and ethnohistorians compiled and published native voices from the conquest. These accounts, translated into English and Spanish, contribute to our understanding of how the two sides understood what happened when people from Europe and the New World first made contact.

The following document is drawn from the Florentine Codex, named for its home in the Laurentian Library in Florence, Italy. Probably the most famous of the Nahua descriptions of the conquest, it was first transcribed from Nahua hieroglyphs by native scholars trained and educated in Latin and Spanish by Fra Bernardino de Sahagún. A Franciscan priest known for his rigorous and respectful study of native custom and history, Sahagún supervised the production of the original bilingual Spanish/Nahua edition in the mid-sixteenth century. The Nahua assistants who translated the hieroglyphs, compiled the oral histories, and searched other sources to write this history remain unknown. Contemporary historians struggle with conflicting accounts, different versions of the same documents, and complex political motivations behind the many views of the conquest.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Some scholars argue that Nahua accounts of the conquest are filled with scapegoats and excuses for the defeat. Which of these can you spot in this document?
2. Does this document contradict or confirm the traditional notion that the Nahua believed the Spanish were gods? Why should it matter to historians whether the Nahua believed this?
3. How might accounts of the conquest written by Tlascalans, a group in the hinterlands who had been conquered by the empire, differ from those of the Tenochca, who were living in the center of the empire in the capital city of Tenochtitlán?

Tenth chapter, where it is said how the Spaniards landed uncontested and came on their way in this direction, and how Moteucçoma¹ left the great palace and went to his personal home.

Then Moteucçoma abandoned his patrimonial home, the great palace, and came back to his personal home.

When at last [the Spaniards] came, when they were coming along and moving this way, a certain person from Cempoallan,² whose name was Tlacochealcatl, whom they had taken when they first came to see the land and the various

1. **Moteucçoma:** Moctezuma or Montezuma, ruler of the Aztecs.
2. **Cempoallan:** Aztec province in what is now Veracruz.

altepetl,³ also came interpreting for them, planning their route, conducting them, showing them the way, leading and guiding them.

And when they reached Tecoaac, which is in the land of the Tlaxcalans,⁴ where their Otomis⁵ lived, the Otomis met them with hostilities and war. But they annihilated the Otomis of Tecoaac, who were destroyed completely. They lanced and stabbed them, they shot them with guns, iron bolts, crossbows. Not just a few but a huge number of them were destroyed.

After the great defeat at Tecoaac, when the Tlaxcalans heard it and found out about it and it was reported to them, they became limp with fear, they were made faint; fear took hold of them. Then they assembled, and all of them, including the lords and rulers, took counsel among themselves, considering the reports.

They said, "How is it to be with us? Should we face them? For the Otomis are great and valiant warriors, yet they thought nothing of them, they regarded them as nothing; in a very short time, in the blink of an eyelid, they destroyed the people. Now let us just submit to them, let us make friends with them, let us be friends, for something must be done about the common people."

Thereupon the Tlaxcalan rulers went to meet them, taking along food: turkey hens, eggs, white tortillas, fine tortillas. They said to them, "Welcome, our lords." [The Spaniards] answered them back, "Where is your homeland? Where have you come from?" They said, "We are Tlaxcalans. Welcome, you have arrived, you have reached the land of Tlaxcala, which is your home."

(But in olden times it was called Texcallan and the people Texcalans.)

Eleventh chapter, where it is said how the Spaniards reached Tlaxcala, [also] called Texcallan.

[The Tlaxcalans] guided, accompanied, and led them until they brought them to their palace[s] and placed them there. They showed them great honors, they gave them what they needed and attended to them, and then they gave them their daughters.

Then [the Spaniards] asked them, "Where is Mexico?⁶ What kind of a place is it? Is it still far?" They answered them, "It's not far now. Perhaps one can get there in three days. It is a very favored place, and [the Mexica] are very strong, great warriors, conquerors, who go about conquering everywhere."

Now before this there had been friction between the Tlaxcalans and the Cholulans.⁷ They viewed each other with anger, fury, hate, and disgust; they could come together on nothing. Because of this they put [the Spaniards] up to killing them treacherously.

They said to them, "The Cholulans are very evil; they are our enemies. They are as strong as the Mexica, and they are the Mexica's friends."

3. **altepetl:** Nahuatl word for city or town.

4. **Tlaxcalans:** Also, Tlascalans—a large native group that allied with Cortés against the Mexica.

5. **Otomis:** A native group that lived near Tlaxcala.

6. **Mexico:** The Aztec empire.

7. **Cholulans:** A native group that the Spaniards defeated in battle as part of their alliance with the Tlaxcalans.

When the Spaniards heard this, they went to Cholula. The Tlaxcalans and Cempoallans went with them, outfitted for war. When they arrived, there was a general summons and cry that all the noblemen, rulers, subordinate leaders, warriors, and commoners should come, and everyone assembled in the temple courtyard. When they had all come together, [the Spaniards and their friends] blocked the entrances, all of the places where one entered. Thereupon people were stabbed, struck, and killed. No such thing was in the minds of the Cholulans; they did not meet the Spaniards with weapons of war. It just seemed that they were stealthily and treacherously killed, because the Tlaxcalans persuaded [the Spaniards] to do it.

And a report of everything that was happening was given and relayed to Moteuczōma. Some of the messengers would be arriving as others were leaving; they just turned around and ran back. There was no time when they weren't listening, when reports weren't being given. And all the common people went about in a state of excitement; there were frequent disturbances, as if the earth moved and [quaked], as if everything were spinning before one's eyes. People took fright.

And after the dying in Cholula, [the Spaniards] set off on their way to Mexico, coming gathered and bunched, raising dust. Their iron lances and halberds⁸ seemed to sparkle, and their iron swords were curved like a stream of water. Their cuirasses⁹ and iron helmets seemed to make a clattering sound. Some of them came wearing iron all over, turned into iron beings, gleaming, so that they aroused great fear and were generally seen with fear and dread. Their dogs came in front, coming ahead of them, keeping to the front, panting, with their spittle hanging down.

Twelfth chapter, where it is said how Moteuczōma sent a great nobleman along with many other noblemen to go to meet the Spaniards, and what their gifts of greeting were when they greeted the Captain between Iztactepetl and Popocatepetl.¹⁰

Thereupon Moteuczōma named and sent the noblemen and a great many other agents of his, with Tzihuacpopocatzin¹¹ as their leader, to go meet [Cortés] between Popocatepetl and Iztactepetl, at Quauhtechcac. They gave [the Spaniards] golden banners, banners of precious feathers, and golden necklaces.

And when they had given the things to them, they seemed to smile, to rejoice and be very happy. Like monkeys they grabbed the gold. It was as though their hearts were put to rest, brightened, freshened. For gold was what they greatly thirsted for; they were gluttonous for it, starved for it, piggishly wanting it. They came lifting up the golden banners, waving them from side to side, showing them

8. **halberd:** A weapon with an axe and a long spike set on a long pole.

9. **cuirass:** Type of armor.

10. **Iztactepetl and Popocatepetl:** Respectively, the third-highest mountain in Mexico and an active volcano, both visible from Mexico City.

11. **Tzihuacpopocatzin:** An envoy from Moctezuma.

to each other. They seemed to babble; what they said to each other was in a babbling tongue.

And when they saw Tzihuacpopocatzin, they said, "Is this one then Moteucçoma?" They said it to the Tlaxcalans and Cempoallans, their lookouts, who came among them, questioning them secretly. They said, "It is not that one, o our lords. This is Tzihuacpopocatzin, who is representing Moteucçoma."

[The Spaniards] said to him, "Are you then Moteucçoma?" He said, "I am your agent Moteucçoma."

Then they told him, "Go on with you! Why do you lie to us? What do you take us for? You can't lie to us, you can't fool us, [turn our heads], flatter us, [make faces at us], trick us, confuse our vision, distort things for us, blind us, dazzle us, throw mud in our eyes, put muddy hands on our faces. It is not you. Moteucçoma exists; he will not be able to hide from us, he will not be able to find refuge. Where will he go? Is he a bird, will he fly? Or will he take an underground route, will he go somewhere into a mountain that is hollow inside? We will see him, we will not fail to gaze on his face and hear his words from his lips."

Therefore they just scorned and disregarded him, and so another of their meetings and greetings came to naught. Then they went straight back the direct way [to Mexico].

Thirteenth chapter, where it is said how Moteucçoma sent other sorcerers to cast spells on the Spaniards, and what happened to them on the way.

Another group of messengers—rainmakers, witches, and priests—had also gone out for an encounter, but nowhere were they able to do anything or to get sight of [the Spaniards]; they did not hit their target, they did not find the people they were looking for, they were not sufficient.

They just came up against a drunk man in the road; they went to meet him and were dumbfounded at him. The way they saw him, he seemed to be dressed as a Chalcan,¹² feigning to be a Chalcan. He seemed to be drunk, feigning drunkenness. On his chest were tied eight grass ropes. He came quarreling with them, coming ahead of the Spaniards.

He ranted at them, saying to them, "What are you still doing here? What more do you want? What more is Moteucçoma trying to do? Did he come to his senses yesterday? Has he just now become a great coward? He has done wrong, he has [abandoned] the people, he has destroyed people, [he has hit himself on the head and wrapped himself up in relation to people], he has mocked people and deceived them."

When they had seen this and heard what he said, they made an effort to address him humbly; they quickly set up for him a place to attend to him, an earthen platform with a straw bed, but he absolutely would not look at it. In vain they had set out for him the earthen platform they had tried to make for him there.

[It was as though they entered his mouth]; he scolded them, greatly scolded them with angry words, saying to them, "What is the use of your coming here? Mexico will never exist again, it [is gone] forever. Go on with you; it is no

12. **Chalcan:** A native group renowned among the Aztecs for their poetry.

longer there. Do turn around and look at what is happening in Mexico, what is going on."

Then they looked back, they quickly looked back, and saw all the temples, the calpulli [buildings], the calmecacs,¹³ and all the houses in Mexico burning, and it seemed as though there were fighting.

And when the rainmakers had seen that, their hearts seemed to fail them, they were silent, as though someone had forced something down their throats. They said, "What we have seen was needed to be seen not by us but by Moteucçoma, for that was not just anyone, but the youth Tezcatlipoca."¹⁴

Then he vanished, and they saw him no more. And after that the messengers did not go to encounter [the Spaniards], did not move in their direction, but the rainmakers and priests turned back there and came to tell Moteucçoma. They came together with those who had first gone with Tzihuacpopocatzin.

And when the messengers got there, they told Moteucçoma what had happened and what they had seen. When Moteucçoma heard it, he just hung his head and sat there, not saying a word. He sat like someone on the verge of death; for a long time it was as though he had lost awareness.

He answered them only by saying to them, "What can be done, o men of unique valor? We have come to the end. We are resigned. Should we climb up in the mountains? But should we run away? We are Mexica. Will the Mexica state flourish [in exile]? Look at the sad condition of the poor old men and women, and the little children who know nothing yet. Where would they be taken? What answer is there? What can be done, whatever can be done? Where are we to go? We are resigned to whatever we will see, of whatever nature."

FOR CRITICAL THINKING

1. In what ways did the Florentine Codex represent the native population differently from the way in which Hernando Cortés did?
2. Many Nahua documents agreed with Spanish accounts claiming that Moctezuma acted timidly and lost his empire because he believed that the Spanish were gods. Why might some native chroniclers have had an interest in perpetuating this theory? Why might Europeans have also wanted to perpetuate this idea?
3. What evidence in these documents suggests that the Nahua believed the Spanish were gods?

13. **calmecacs:** Religious schools for boys run by Aztec priests.

14. **Tezcatlipoca:** Aztec god of the night, beauty, war, and material things. He often tempted men to do wicked things as a means of rewarding those who could resist temptations and punishing those who succumbed.

Hernando Cortés, who led the conquest of New Spain, was not unlike many of the adventurers and businessmen who crossed the Atlantic in the first century after Columbus. In 1504, at the age of nineteen, Cortés traveled to Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti) on a convoy of merchant ships. Using his training as a lawyer and family connections, he became the colony notary and received a repartimiento, a Spanish colonial land grant, which included forced native labor. In 1511, he helped conquer Cuba, becoming clerk of the royal treasury; mayor of Havana; and a wealthy owner of land, Indians, and cattle. In 1517 and 1518, two expeditions to the Yucatán brought back rumors of gold and a great inland empire, and Cortés was asked by colonial authorities to command an exploratory expedition to the mainland.

When Cortés and his army of 508 soldiers arrived, they found an Aztec empire in deep crisis. Rapid expansion from the center of power at Tenochtitlán, the world's largest city at the time and now present-day Mexico City, had stretched the empire's rigid political structure and low technological development to the breaking point. Unable to fully integrate the vast agricultural hinterlands into the empire, the Aztecs had resorted to increasingly brutal ritualized terror, human sacrifice, and militarization to keep control. The first natives that Cortés and his men encountered at the margins of the empire fought initially but often quickly changed sides, preferring to take their chances with the Spanish invaders.

With the help of Malinche, a native woman who became Cortés's lover, adviser, and interpreter, Cortés and his men swept through town after town, defeating local armies, abolishing human sacrifice and tax collection, and carrying out mass conversions to Christianity. By the time the Spanish finally arrived in Tenochtitlán, Cortés and his mistress were feared and admired as mythical liberators. The conquest required two more years of political maneuvering and bloody battles before culminating in the siege of Tenochtitlán in 1521. Cortés's army, bolstered by as many as 200,000 natives, toppled the Aztec empire and declared the creation of a Christian New Spain.

As word of the conquest filtered back to Cuba, the Spanish royal bureaucracy feared that the upstart Cortés would take all the New World wealth for himself, perhaps even establishing himself as a king. Colonial officials used every political weapon they could find to sabotage Cortés, including officially relieving him of command, organizing mutinies, and seizing all his possessions in Cuba—all to no avail. Realizing that he could trust no one in Havana, and now having great status as a conquistador, he wrote directly to King Charles V of Spain about the things he had seen and done in the New World. These passages are from the dispatches that Cortés wrote to his king in the heat of conquest.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Consider Hernando Cortés's possible motivations for writing. In what ways did his audience—the king of Spain—affect Cortés's account of the conquest?
2. Why were Cortés and 508 men able to conquer an empire of millions?
3. Was Cortés a liberator or an oppressor of the natives? Explain.

They [the Aztecs] have a most horrid and abominable custom which truly ought to be punished and which until now we have seen in no other part, and this is

POINTS OF VIEW

Contact and Conquest (1502–1521)

Anthony Marcus et al., ed., *America Firsthand: Volume One* (9th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 11–20).

I

HERNANDO CORTÉS

Dispatches of the Conquest from the New World

The discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus set off a speculative economic frenzy in Spain and Portugal. Merchants, military men, and adventurers rushed to equip ships and send soldiers in search of the gold, slaves, and spices promised by this vast new world. Twenty-five years after Columbus's discovery, however, the payoff remained elusive. The Spanish colonies in the New World were little more than a few Caribbean islands with sparse populations of settlers, African slaves, and captive Taino natives, who often died of European diseases for which they had no immunity. It was contact with and conquest of the Aztec empire on the mainland and the creation of New Spain (present-day Mexico and Guatemala) in 1521 that finally brought Europeans and natives some understanding of what they could expect from one another and how the future of this new world might look.

Anthony Pagden, ed. and trans., *Hernando Cortés: Letters from Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 35–36, 84–85, 88, 105, 106, 132.

that, whenever they wish to ask something of the idols, in order that their plea may find more acceptance, they take many girls and boys and even adults, and in the presence of the idols they open their chests while they are still alive and take out their hearts and entrails and burn them before the idols, offering the smoke as sacrifice. Some of us have seen this, and they say it is the most terrible and frightful thing they have ever witnessed.

This these Indians do so frequently that, as we have been informed, and, in part, have seen from our own experience during the short while we have been here, not one year passes in which they do not kill and sacrifice some fifty persons in each temple; and this is done and held as customary from the island of Cozumel to this land where we now have settled. Your Majesties [the King and Queen of Spain and the Roman Empire] may be most certain that, as this land seems to us to be very large, and to have many temples in it, not one year has passed, as far as we have been able to discover, in which three or four thousand souls have not been sacrificed in this manner. . . .

After we had crossed [a] bridge, Moctezuma¹ came to greet us and with him some two hundred lords, all barefoot and dressed in a different costume, but also very rich in their way and more so than the others. They came in two columns, pressed very close to the walls of the street, which is very wide and beautiful and so straight that you can see from one end to the other. It is two-thirds of a league long and had on both sides very good and big houses, both dwellings and temples.

Moctezuma came down the middle of this street with two chiefs, one on his right hand and the other on his left. One of these was that great chief who had come on a litter to speak with me, and the other was Moctezuma's brother, chief of the city of Yztapalapa, which I had left that day. And they were all dressed alike except that Moctezuma wore sandals whereas the others went barefoot; and they held his arm on either side. When we met I dismounted and stepped forward to embrace him, but the two lords who were with him stopped me with their hands so that I should not touch him; and they likewise all performed the ceremony of kissing the earth. When this was over Moctezuma requested his brother to remain with me and to take me by the arm while he went a little way ahead with the other; and after he had spoken to me all the others in the two columns came and spoke with me, one after another, and then each returned to his column.

When at last I came to speak to Moctezuma himself I took off a necklace of pearls and cut glass that I was wearing and placed it round his neck; after we had walked a little way up the street a servant of his came with two necklaces, wrapped in a cloth, made from red snails' shells, which they hold in great esteem; and from each necklace hung eight shrimps of refined gold almost a span in length. When they had been brought he turned to me and placed them about my neck, and then continued up the street in the manner already described until we reached a very large and beautiful house which had been very well prepared to accommodate us. . . .

1. **Moctezuma:** Or, Montezuma; ruler of the Aztecs.

Most Invincible Lord, six days having passed since we first entered this great city of Tenochtitlán, during which time I had seen something of it, though little compared with how much there is to see and record, I decided from what I had seen that it would benefit Your Royal service and our safety if Moctezuma were in my power and not in complete liberty, in order that he should not retreat from the willingness he showed to serve Your Majesty; but chiefly because we Spaniards are rather obstinate and persistent, and should we annoy him he might, as he is so powerful, obliterate all memory of us. Furthermore, by having him with me, all those other lands which were subject to him would come more swiftly to the recognition and service of Your Majesty, as later happened. I resolved, therefore, to take him and keep him in the quarters where I was, which were very strong. . . .

There are, in all districts of this great city, many temples or houses for their idols. They are all very beautiful buildings, and in the important ones there are priests of their sect who live there permanently; and, in addition to the houses for the idols, they also have very good lodgings. . . .

The most important of these idols, and the ones in whom they have most faith, I had taken from their places and thrown down the steps; and I had those chapels where they were cleaned, for they were full of the blood of sacrifices; and I had images of Our Lady and of other saints put there, which caused Moctezuma and the other natives some sorrow. . . .

Moctezuma, who together with one of his sons and many other chiefs who had been captured previously [and] was still a prisoner, asked to be taken out onto the roof of the fortress where he might speak to the captains of his people and tell them to end the fighting. I had him taken out, and when he reached a breastwork which ran out beyond the fortress, and was about to speak to them, he received a blow on his head from a stone; and the injury was so serious that he died three days later. I told two of the Indians who were captive to carry him out on their shoulders to the people. What they did with him I do not know; only the war did not stop because of it, but grew more fierce and pitiless each day. . . .

We already knew that the Indians in the city [Tenochtitlán] were very scared, and we now learnt from two wretched creatures who had escaped from the city and come to our camp by night that they were dying of hunger and used to come out at night to fish in the canals between the houses, and wandered through the places we had won in search of firewood, and herbs and roots to eat. And because we had already filled in many of the canals, and leveled out many of the dangerous stretches, I resolved to enter the next morning shortly before dawn and do all the harm we could. The brigantines² departed before daylight, and I with twelve or fifteen horsemen and some foot soldiers and Indians entered suddenly and stationed several spies who, as soon as it was light, called us from where we lay in ambush, and we fell on a huge number of people. As these were some of the most wretched people and had come in search of food, they were nearly all unarmed, and women and children in the main. We did them so much harm through all the streets in the city that we could reach, that the dead and the prisoners numbered more than eight hundred; the brigantines also took many people and canoes

2. **brigantine:** A small ship, typically with two masts.

which were out fishing, and the destruction was very great. When the captains and lords of the city saw us attack at such an unaccustomed hour, they were as frightened as they had been by the recent ambush, and none of them dared come out and fight; so we returned with much booty and food for our allies. . . .

On leaving my camp, I had commanded Gonzalo de Sandoval to sail the brigantines in between the houses in the other quarter in which the Indians were resisting, so that we should have them surrounded, but not to attack until he saw that we were engaged. In this way they would be surrounded and so hard pressed that they would have no place to move save over the bodies of their dead or along the roof tops. They no longer had nor could find any arrows, javelins or stones with which to attack us; and our allies fighting with us were armed with swords and bucklers, and slaughtered so many of them on land and in the water that more than forty thousand were killed or taken that day. So loud was the wailing of the women and children that there was not one man amongst us whose heart did not bleed at the sound; and indeed we had more trouble in preventing our allies from killing with such cruelty than we had in fighting the enemy. For no race, however savage, has ever practiced such fierce and unnatural cruelty as the natives of these parts. Our allies also took many spoils that day, which we were unable to prevent, as they numbered more than 150,000 and we Spaniards were only some nine hundred. Neither our precautions nor our warnings could stop their looting, though we did all we could. One of the reasons why I had avoided entering the city in force during the past days was the fear that if we attempted to storm them they would throw all they possessed into the water, and, even if they did not, our allies would take all they could find. For this reason I was much afraid that Your Majesty would receive only a small part of the great wealth this city once had, in comparison with all that I once held for Your Highness. Because it was now late, we could no longer endure the stench of the dead bodies that had lain in those streets for many days, which was the most loathsome thing in all the world, we returned to our camps.

