

THE SIEGE OF TENOCHTITLAN: AZTEC CULTURE BEFORE AND AFTER THE CONQUEST

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When one reflects on the early days of Mesoamerica, that period before Spanish conquest, there is one city that really stands out. Famed for riches of gold and turquoise, feared due to human sacrifice, and still remembered Tenochtitlan remains in the forefront of early Mexican history. It was at this great city that one of the most influential battles in the conquest of New Spain was won. The Spanish along with indigenous allies, faced off against a warrior society that had taken the Mesoamerican world by storm. The culture of the Aztecs was one that focused on myth and religion, everyday life revolved around ideas of omens and mystery. These beliefs and military focus created a rich and dominant empire within Mesoamerica, and it was these riches and power that ultimately painted a target on the city of Tenochtitlan.

To fully understand the culture of the Mesoamerican Aztecs it is important to grasp the layout of the great city of Tenochtitlan. The city temple, Templo Mayor, became an important religious center, that's very layout was devoted to the gods.¹ Tenochtitlan was founded on the spot where myth tells us, Mexica viewed an eagle perched on a cactus and devouring a snake.² Many have come to believe that it is more likely that the natives viewed the sun over a nopal cactus, and it was this representation that led them to build a temple perfectly aligned with the sun.³ Myth relates a story in which the actual temple was built upon the spot where the heart of Copil took root and grew into a cactus.⁴ "The builders of the great Mexica ceremonial center possessed certain cosmological communications related to the myth of the founding of their city that they sought to replicate in their sacred space."⁵ Here we see that the Aztecs were a culture deeply rooted in religion.

The Aztec leader, Montezuma, has been painted as an indecisive leader, who allowed himself to become a pawn in the hands of Cortés. However, the political power of Tenochtitlan really fell to the Calpulli, a group of "lineage

¹ A. F. Aveni, E. E. Calnek and H. Hartung, "Myth, Environment, and the Orientation of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan," *American Antiquity* Vol. 53 No. 2 (April 1988) 287-309, accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/281020>, pg. 287.

² *Ibid.*, 288.

³ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 305.

leaders” refereed for their military superiority.⁶ It was in 1372 that the Aztec Calpulli decided to adopt a tlatoani, or governor, it was this role that Montezuma would ultimately come to occupy.⁷ Montezuma has been described as a leader, “paralyzed by terror, first by omens and then by the conviction that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl.”⁸ Whatever the cause Montezuma submitted himself to being a Spanish prisoner and a puppet that Cortés was able to control.⁹ It was the Spanish duty to, “take [Montezuma] alive in chains or make him subject to Your Majesty’s Royal Crown.”¹⁰

Montezuma’s power and culture gave him the authority of “Great Speaker,” it was his duty to classify and decide if new comers were to be trusted.¹¹ Perhaps due to his own religious beliefs, or his cultures emphasis on gifts, Montezuma showered Cortés with offerings in belief that he was sharing the splendor of his community. Cortés on the other hand took this as a gesture of submission and thus thrust himself in a dominant role over the Aztec ruler. Cortés entered the Aztec society with ideas of conquest, and was accidently welcomed with open arms and a show of wealth. After the conquest an Aztec noblemen reflected on the previous spender of Tenochtitlan:

It is a fearful place, a place of fear, of glory. There is glory, there are glories, things made glorious. There is bragging, there is boasting; there are haughtiness, presumption, pride, arrogance. There is self-praise, there is a state of gaudiness. There is much gaudiness, there is much arrogance- a state of arrogance. It is a place where one is intoxicated, flattered perverted.¹²

The siege of Tenochtitlan is often divided into two phases. The first began in April of 1519, when the Spanish first made landfall.¹³ It was during this year on Easter Sunday that Tendile, governor under Montezuma, met with Cortés and offered the first gifts of gold.¹⁴ Rumor remains that during this visit Tendile brought with him several painters to better help Montezuma size up his enemy. The painters, according to López de Gómara, painted the Spanish horses, weapons, and numbers before returning the painting via messenger to Montezuma.¹⁵ This shows a leader who wishes to understand and identify the advantages of his enemies. The distinct advantages and disadvantages held by each side during the siege may not have been obvious during the military campaign, however, modern historians are now able to review the battle and pinpoint the weakness and advantages held by both sides.

⁶ J. Rounds, “Lineage, Class, and Power in the Aztec State,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (February 1979) 73-86, accessed on February 13, 2014, <http://jstor.org/stable/643385>. Pg. 75.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Inga Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty: Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico,” *Representations*, No. 33 (Winter, 1991) 65-100 accessed February 13, 2014. <http://jstor.org/stable/2928758>. Pg. 69.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 70.

¹¹ Ibid., 71

¹² J. Rounds, “Lineage, Class, and Power in the Aztec State,” 80-1.

¹³ Inga Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 66.

¹⁴ Michael Schreffler, “Their Cortés and Our Cortés: Spanish Colonialism and Aztec Representation,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 2009) 407-425. Accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27801638>. Pg. 407.

¹⁵ Ibid., 411.

When one compares the Spanish conquistadors against the Aztec warriors one will find two sides near equally matched in knowledge.¹⁶ The Spanish possessed more advanced technology, but within that there was more room for disaster. Issues of wet powder, cannon weight, and poor horse upkeep plagued the Spanish during their siege.¹⁷ Despite their limited technology the Aztec possessed the advantage of sheer manpower, and a unique ability to adapt.¹⁸ The Aztec understood how to use the element of surprise, the ability to read and learn Spanish tactics, and knowledge of mimicking Spanish weapons.¹⁹ However, it was the exceptional use of psychological warfare that gave the Aztec their biggest advantage over Spanish forces.²⁰

The Aztec fed off the Spanish fear of sacrifices and cannibalism, this was one of the biggest adaptations they made to their war plan during the conquest.²¹ For Aztec culture human sacrifice was a way of renewing the sun's warmth, through the heat of human bodies.²² The Aztec would slay captives before the temple of Tlaloc, giving their hearts in offering to the sun.²³ Most victims that fell prey to sacrifice were warriors who lost to the Aztec army, thus creating more fear among the Spanish military force.²⁴ These fears were furthered by Hernán Cortés when he stated, "made of dough from all the seeds and vegetable which [people] eat, ground and mixed together, and ground with the blood of human hearts, which those priests tear out while still beating."²⁵ The Spanish conquistadors had reason to fear this method of execution, and it was through this that some men met their end.

There are two known occurrences of Spanish sacrifice during the siege. The first occurred when the Aztecs captured 15 Spanish prisoners and executed them as their comrades watched from the safety of the lake.²⁶ These men were stripped naked and scarified at Tlacoachcalco, a near unimaginable horror to the Spanish men watching in the distance. The second known execution occurred at Yacacolo, and included not only the Spanish but also those Native Mesoamericans who allied with them. After those men were killed the Aztec arranged the heads of not only the Spanish, but also their horses on pikes, with their faces pointed upwards towards the sun.²⁷ To the God fearing Spanish ending life as a sacrifice was an inconceivable horror.

¹⁶ Inga Clendinnen, "Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty," 77.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 79-80.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² John M. Ingham, "Human Sacrifice at Tenochtitlan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 26 No (July 1984) 379-400. Accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/178547>. Pg. 391.

²³ Ibid., 393.

²⁴ Ibid., 382.

²⁵ Ibid., 391.

²⁶ Miguel León-Portilla ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, (Boston: Beacon Press books, 1962). 103.

²⁷ Ibid., 107.

The first phase of the siege lasted for the six months that the Spanish held and controlled Montezuma.²⁸ During this time the Aztec engaged in uprisings that were met with the massacre of “Noche Triste,” in June 1520.²⁹ It was here that Cortés ordered the killing of several unarmed natives as they celebrated a festive. After the unnecessary death of so many innocent Aztec warriors the Spanish forces retreated to Tlaxcala, to recruit allies against the Aztec.³⁰ Before beginning the actual siege that would span from May to August of 1521.³¹

To understand the sheer destruction and brutality of the war it is necessary to understand the character of Cortés. He was described by W. H. Prescott in his 1840’s manuscript, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, as a man who was ruthless and manipulative.³² He was a man who knew how to stage violent acts for maximum effect. “He was careful to count every Spanish life, yet capable of conceiving heroic strategies,”³³ He is a man remembered for his cruelty, the best example being the mutilation of Tlaxcalan emissaries, who were freely admitted into camp only to have their hands cut off when they were accused of being spies.³⁴ Perhaps the biggest separation between Cortés and other Spanish conquistadors was his “recklessness” in faith.³⁵ While many of the Spanish men waited in line for confession and guarded the limited supply of wafers and wine for Mass, Cortés allowed indigenous priest to linger in control of temples:

He destroyed the existing idols, whitewashed the existing shrine, washed the existing attendants and cut their hair, dressed them in white, and taught these hastily refurbished priests to offer flowers and candles before an image of the Virgin.³⁶

These “Pagans” were noted as having blood matted hair and stinking of decaying flesh, yet Cortés viewed them as priests and moved on. Speaking to his character as a man on a mission of gold and glory, and shedding light on the tactics he used in the siege against the Aztec.

The first battle of the siege happened just outside Tlatecolco, and resulted in an Aztec victory.³⁷ Bernal Díaz describes a scene of never-ending battle, in which conflicts were fought on an everyday basis.³⁸ The Spanish wanted to begin the siege by braking water pipes that lead up to the city, however, their plans were foiled when they were met with hostile resistance.³⁹ The Aztec’s met Cortés with resistance, at Xoloco they constructed a wall in

²⁸ Inga Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 66.

²⁹ Ibid., 67

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 68.

³² Ibid., 65-6.

³³ Ibid., 72.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 73

³⁷ Miguel León- Portilla ed., *The Broken Spears*, 94.

³⁸ Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, J.M. Cohen trans. (London: Penguin Group, 1963) 361.

³⁹ Ibid., 359.

hopes of keeping the invading Spaniards at bay; but it seems that these efforts were in vain for without much effort Cortés was able to destroy the wall with his cannons.⁴⁰

Once inside the city the Spaniard instantly began to slaughter anyone in their way. The Aztec Priests ascended to the top of the temple and began to eat drums and call their warriors forth.⁴¹ Firsthand accounts from Aztec survivors paint a terrorizing scene. The city was painted black with the smoke or gunfire, and in the darkness one could hardly see the flying arrows.⁴² “The water was red with the blood of the dead and dying. Those who were hit by the steel arrows were also doomed; they died instantly and sank to the bottom of the lake.”⁴³ Despite the anguish and death felt on both sides of the struggle, the Aztec held true to their warrior heritage.

The Aztec warriors held war in high regard, war was something to be proud of, a way of appeasing their gods.⁴⁴ Two stories from the battlefield demonstrate this cultural commitment to warfare. The first begins when two champion warriors step out and wish to engage in combat against the best Spanish soldiers.⁴⁵ When Cortés witnessed this act of bravery he orders two mounted soldiers to charge at the warriors with their lances. Against all odds one of the Aztec warriors was able to sever the hoof of one of the horses and take the beast down, sensing that his troops were in grave danger of losing the battle Cortés orders his cannons to fire against the entire Aztec army.⁴⁶ This was a shameful act in the mind of the Mesoamericans.

The second great act of military collectiveness is given in vivid account, and proves that the Aztec acted as a single military force, not simply for the interest of the individual. One of the warriors finds himself stabbed by and unexpected Spanish cavalymen, he grabbed hold of the lance and held on. The two overpowered the Spaniard knocking him from his horse and proceeding to kick, beat, and ultimately cut off his head.⁴⁷ Often times the Spanish would turn to their cannon and use their gun powder to their advantage. Fighting from afar, and limiting their losses while maximizing Mesoamerican casualties.

Three captains in the Aztec army stood against the Spanish conquistadors, Tzoyectzin, Temoctzin, and Tzilacatzin forced the Spanish from the city.⁴⁸ The ensuing blockade devastated the city, leaving the people to languish in filth and death. A lack of freshwater resulted in dysentery, others died from starvation (many even resulted to eating dirt).⁴⁹ The city of Tenochtitlan had very little in the way of resources, the Chinampa, or personal gardens produced

⁴⁰ Miguel León- Portilla ed., *The Broken Spears*, 96.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁴ John M. Ingham, “Human Sacrifice at Tenochtitlan,” 391.

⁴⁵ Inga Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty ,” 80.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-1

⁴⁷ Miguel León- Portilla ed., *The Broken Spears*, 98.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

no more than 15% of the total cities food.⁵⁰ The city was one that was dependent upon tribute and trade, and it was their millenarianism that kept this source open.⁵¹ It was clear, “the city was dying, thirsty, choking on its own dead. This slow strangling is referred to as if quite separate from the battle.”⁵² This separation is noted upon reflection by a survivor, “Nothing can compare with the horrors of that siege and the agonies of starving... little by little they forced us to the wall.”⁵³

The Spanish eventually broke through the city walls, and ran ramped through the market place.⁵⁴ Killing any Aztec they came across working their way to the city temple. It was here that the Spanish set fire to the sacred sight, and erected their banners to show their victory.⁵⁵ The Aztecs fled to the wall breaking small holes just large enough for a man to fit through, stopping the mounted conquistadors in their tracks.⁵⁶ The Spanish were surprised at the fact that the Aztec left the fires burning and the banners in place, but the simple truth was they respected the signs that the Spanish were close to victory.⁵⁷

In the Mesoamerican culture war consisted of a meeting of the two opposing sides, outside of the city that was being invaded. The offensive side would rush the city and try to penetrate the walls, once inside they would set fire to the temple of the local god.⁵⁸ It is obvious that the Aztec recognized the ritualistic burning of the house of their gods as a Spanish victory. The Mesoamericans interpreted signs and omens on the battlefield. Take for example the battle of Otumba, in which the Aztec leader was cut down and his banner stolen by the Spanish. It was the capture of the banner that signified a loss to the Aztec, now the loss of life.⁵⁹ Banners stood out to the natives, they would often attack Spanish banner carriers first on the field.⁶⁰ Perhaps the Aztec recognized the importance that a banner, or a flag held in the minds and hearts of the Europeans.

The Aztec held the siege at bay for a total of 80 days, before deciding it was time to discuss tribute.⁶¹ Their leader Cuauhmoc went to Cortés to discuss the terms of surrender, after the cities nobles decided on a suitable tribute.⁶² It was during this time that the citizens began to flee from the city. Nobles dressed as presents, in a feeble attempt to hide their riches from the gold hungry Spanish, but it was to no avail.⁶³ The Spanish engaged in mistreatment of the

⁵⁰ Inga Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 382

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Inga Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 87.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁶¹ Miguel León-Portilla ed., *The Broken Spears*, 124.

⁶² Ibid., 117.

⁶³ Ibid., 118.

people looting, abusing, and spreading further violence throughout the streets. A once proud and noble people march past the city walls of the city they called home, a city destroyed on a quest for gold. The words of the grief stricken leader speak for the whole city,

I have done everything in my power to save my kingdom from your hands. Since fortune has been against me, I now beg you to take my life. This would put an end to the kingship of Mexico, and it would be just and right, for you have already destroyed my city and killed my people.

In total the loss of life to the indigenous population was great. 200 thousand had allied with Spain, 30 thousand men from Tezcoco alone had been killed, along with 240 thousand Aztec.⁶⁴ The Spanish had conquered Tenochtitlan, and with it they took a giant step towards the conquest of Mexico.

After the siege there were notable changes within the culture and population that remained. Perhaps one of the biggest changes that occurred after the conquest can be viewed through comparing pre and post conquest poetry. Aztec nobility created the most complex poetry written in Mesoamerica.⁶⁵ Their songs and poems stood in contrast to the violence that their culture has become so linked with, these poems stressed beauty in nature and the written word.⁶⁶ Powerful words depict the battlefield as a place of beauty:

Nobles and Kings are sprouting as eagles, ripening as jaguars, in
Mexico: Lord Ahuitzotl is singing arrows, singing shields.

Giver of Life, let your flowers not be gathered!...

You've adorned them in blaze glowers, shield flowers.⁶⁷

The creation of poetry was linked to religious and political practices, and often created under the guidance of priests.⁶⁸ After the Spanish conquest a notable shift occurred in the subject of Aztec poetry, stress on "God the father, Jesus Christ, and Santa Maria," begin to take shape.⁶⁹ The classical style of Aztec poetry completely vanished in a span of twenty years, this leads many scholars to theorize that traditional poetry died out with the last generation to attend Aztec schools.⁷⁰ Although the basic concepts remained the same something shifted after Spanish conquest, "Not only is warfare a different proposition for a defeated people..., but the relations of beauty, the divine, and the ephemeral mortal life are all altered."⁷¹

⁶⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁵ David Damrosch, "the Aesthetics of Conquest: Aztec Poetry before and after Cortés," *Representations*, No. 33, (Winter, 1991), pp. 101-120, accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928759>. pg. 101.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ From the *chimallixochitl* as quoted in "The Aesthetics of Conquest" Ibid., 105.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 112.

Although the Spanish played a vital part in the conquest of Mexico, indigenous conquistadors also played a pivotal role. The Tlaxcalteca from Tlaxcala, proved to be invaluable allies during wars, such as the siege of Tecnochtitlan, and in the aftermath these people were awarded greatly by the Spanish empire.⁷² Afterward, Spain granted shields to not only the city of Tlaxcala, but also to singular noble families.⁷³ During the mid-sixteenth century indigenous lords began asking for coat of arms for their families, and it was only since they asked that the Spanish government granted such requests.⁷⁴ One must remember that even before the Spanish conquest shields and banners played an important role in Mesoamerican life.⁷⁵ In order to acquire a shield one needed to demonstrate knowledge of Spanish law, to compose a petition to the court.⁷⁶ Indigenous arms differed from European norms by combining elements of religion with traditional images of war.⁷⁷ This demonstrates a clear adaptation by native lords to adapt to the Spanish legal system and protect their high status.⁷⁸

The Aztecs were a society of proud and noble people, deeply rooted in tradition and religion they rose to a superpower among the people of Mesoamerica. Even in the gravest times of war they held on to their culture, and remained true to the warrior roots that founded their society. The Spanish entered the new world in a quest for gold, glory, and God. Along the way they found the city of Tenochtitlan, which seemed to promise two of the fundamental goods in which they sought. The war between the two resulted in the conquest of not only a people, but provided a stepping stone into the ultimate conquest of Mesoamerica as a whole. Mesoamerican culture remained during the siege and afterwards found a way to adapt to a changing world.

⁷² María Castañeda de la Paz, "Central Mexican Indigenous Coats of Arms and the Conquest of Mesoamerica Coats of Arms." *Ethnohistory* 56;1 (Winter 2009) accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40280414>, 125.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

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