



Attack of the Spanish on the Mixtón town of Nochistlan, 1541, in Diego Muñoz Camargo, *Historia de Tlaxcala*, ca. 1581-1584

# MEXICA (AZTEC) & TLAXCALA ACCOUNTS OF THE SPANISH CONQUEST, 1500s

Miguel León-Portilla, a Mexican anthropologist, compiled native accounts of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, publishing them in *Visión de los Vencidos* (*Vision of the Vanquished*, 1959) to present a chronological account from the perspective of the Indians of Mexico, including the Mexica (Aztec) and the Tlaxcala.

Adapted from the *Cronica Mexicana*, accounts compiled by Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, the grandson of Motecuhzoma, ca. 1578

Motecuhzoma summoned the chief officials of all the villages. He told them to search their villages for magicians and to bring him any they found. The officials returned with a number of these wizards, who were announced and then brought into the king's presence. They knelt before him, and with one knee to the floor, and did him the greatest reverence. He asked them: "Have you not seen strange omens in the sky or on the earth? In the cases under the earth, or in the lakes and streams? A weeping woman, or strange men? Visions, or phantasms, or other such things?" But the magicians had not seen any of the omens that Motecuhzoma sought to understand, and therefore could not advise him. . . .

"What can we say? The future has already been determined and decreed in heaven, and Motecuhzoma will behold and suffer a great mystery which must come to pass in his land. If our king wishes to know more about it, he will know soon enough, for it comes swiftly. This is what we predict, since he demands that we speak, and since it must surely take place, he can only wait for it." . . .

A few days later a *macehual* [common man] came to the city from Mictlancuauhtla. No one had sent him, none of the officials; he came of his own accord. he went directly to the palace of Motecuhzoma and said to him: "Our lord and king, forgive my boldness. I am from Mictlancuauhtla. When I went to the shore of the great sea, there was a mountain range or small mountain floating in the midst of the water, and moving here and there without touching the shore. My lord, we have never seen the like of this, although we guard the coast and are always on watch." . . .

Adapted from the *Codex Florentino*, accounts compiled by the Benedictine priest Bernardino de Sahagún, with drawings by Indian and mestizo artists, compiled ca. 1555, publ. 1585

Motecuhzoma then gave orders to Pinotl of Cuetlaxtlan and to other officials. He said to them: “Give out this order: a watch is to be kept along all the shores at Nauhtla, Tuztlan, Mictlancauhtla, wherever the strangers appear.” The officials left at once and gave orders for the watch to be kept. . . .

The year 13-Rabbit now approached its end. And when it was about to end, they appeared, they were seen again. The report of their coming was brought to Motecuhzoma, who immediately sent out messengers. It was as if he thought the new arrival was our prince Quetzalcoatl.\*

This is what he felt in his heart: *He has appeared! He has come back! He will come here, to the place of this throne and canopy, for that is what he promised when he departed!*



Motecuhzoma sent five messengers to greet the strangers and to bring them gifts. . . He said to them: “Come forward, my Jaguar Knights, come forward. It is said that our lord has returned to this land. Go to meet him. Go to hear him. Listen well to what he tells you; listen and remember.”

Motecuhzoma also said to the messengers: “Here is what you are to bring our lord. This is the treasure of Quetzalcoatl.” This treasure was the god’s finery: a serpent mask inlaid with turquoise, a decoration for the breast made of quetzal feathers [tropical bird], a collar woven in the petatillo style with a gold disk in the center, and a shield decorated with gold and mother-of-pearl and bordered with quetzal feathers with a pendant of the same feathers. . . .

Motecuhzoma also gave them the finery of Tezcatlipoca [chief god of the pantheon]. This finery was: a helmet in the shape of a cone, yellow with gold and set with many stars, a number of earrings adorned with little gold bells, a fringed and painted vest with feathers as delicate as foam and a blue cloak known as

“the ringing bell,” which reached to the ears and was fastened with a knot. . . .

[The list of items to be presented to the returned Quetzalcoatl continues. It includes jewelry and symbols of royalty symbols such as a feather head-dress, golden shield, a turquoise-inlaid wand, and a stone-decorated staff.]

These were the many kinds of adornments that were known as “divine adornments.” They were placed in the possession of the messengers to be taken as gifts of welcome along with many other objects, such as a golden snail shell and a golden diadem. All these objects were packed into great baskets; they were loaded into panniers for the long journey.

Then Motecuhzoma gave the messengers his final orders. He said to them: “Go now, without delay. Do reverence to our lord the god. Say to him: ‘Your deputy, Motecuhzoma, has sent us to you. Here are the presents with which he welcomes you home to Mexico.’”

\* *Quetzalcoatl*: the Aztec creator god.

When they arrived at the shore of the sea, they were taken in canoes to Xicalanco. They placed the baskets in the same canoes in which they rode, in order to keep them under their personal vigilance. From Xicalanco they followed the coast until they sighted the ships of the strangers.

When they came up to the ships, the strangers asked them: “Who are you? Where are you from?”  
“We have come from the City of Mexico.”<sup>1</sup>

The strangers said: “You may have come from there, or you may not have. Perhaps you are only inventing it. Perhaps you are mocking us.” But their hearts were convinced; they were satisfied in their hearts. They lowered a hook from the bow of the ship, and then a ladder, and the messengers came aboard.

One by one they did reverence to Cortés by touching the ground before him with their lips. They said to him: “If the god will deign to hear us, your deputy Motecuhzoma has sent us to render you homage. He has the City of Mexico in his care. He says: ‘The god is weary.’”

Then they arrayed the Captain in the finery they had brought him as presents. With great care they fastened the turquoise mask in place, the mask of the god with its crossband of quetzal feathers. A golden earring hung down on either side of this mask. They dressed him in the decorated vest and the collar woven in the petatillo style—the collar of *chalchihuites*, with a disk of gold in the center. . . . Finally they set before him the pair of black sandals. As for the other objects of divine finery, they only laid them out for him to see.

The Captain asked them: “And is this all? Is this your gift of welcome? Is this how you greet people?”

They replied: “This is all, our lord. This is what we have brought you.”

Then the Captain gave orders, and the messengers were chained by the feet and by the neck. When this had been done, the great cannon was fired off. The messengers lost their senses and fainted away. They fell down side by side and lay where they had fallen. But the Spaniards quickly revived them: they lifted them up, gave them wine to drink and then offered them food.

The Captain said to them: “I have heard that the Mexicans are very great warriors, very brave and terrible. If a Mexican is fighting alone, he knows how to retreat, turn back, rush forward and conquer, even if his opponents are ten or even twenty. But my heart is not convinced. I want to see it for myself. I want to find out if you are truly that strong and brave.”

Then he gave them swords, spears and leather shields. He said: “It will take place very early, at daybreak. We are going to fight each other in pairs, and in this way we will learn the truth. We will see who falls to the ground!”



Mexica (Aztec) pendant in the shape of a warrior holding a serpent-headed spearthrower, a shield, darts, and a banner, cast gold-silver-copper alloy, ca. 1450-1500

<sup>1</sup> “The Spaniards and the messengers could communicate because Cortés had brought with him La Malinche and Jeronimo de Aguilar. La Malinche was a native of the Gulf coast who spoke both Nahuatl and Mayan. She joined the Spaniards (who called her Doña Marina) of her own free will and served them faithfully as interpreter throughout the Conquest. Aguilar was a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked in Yucatan in 1511 during a voyage from Darien [isthmus of Panama] to Hispaniola. By the time Cortés ransomed him from the natives eight years later, he spoke Mayan fluently. La Malinche translated the Nahuatl of the messengers into Mayan for Aguilar, who then translated it into Spanish for the conquistadors.” [León-Portillo, *The Broken Spears*, 1962, p. 31]



They said to the Captain: “Our lord, we were not sent here for this by your deputy Motecuhzoma! We have come on an exclusive mission, to offer you rest and repose and to bring you presents. What the lord desires is not within our warrant. If we were to do this, it might anger Motecuhzoma, and he would surely put us to death.”

The Captain replied: “No, it must take place. I want to see for myself, because even in Castile they

say you are famous as brave warriors. Therefore, eat an early meal. I will eat too. Good cheer!”

With these words he sent them away from the ship. They were scarcely into their canoes when they began to paddle furiously. Some of them even paddled with their hands, so fierce was the anxiety burning in their souls. They said to each other: “My captains, paddle with all your might! Faster, faster! Nothing must happen to us here! Nothing must happen . . . !” [ellipsis in original]

They arrived in great haste at Xicalanco, took a hurried meal there, and then pressed on until they came to Tecpantlayacac.

From there they rushed ahead and

arrived in Cuetlaxtlan. As on the previous journey, they stopped there to rest. When they were about to depart, the village official said to them: “Rest for at least a day! At least catch your breath!”

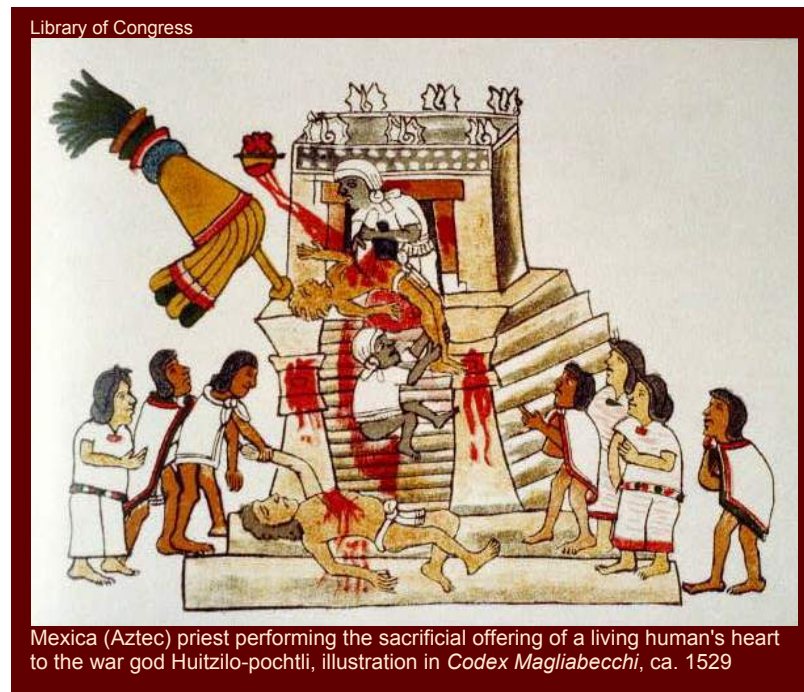
They said: “No, we must keep on! We must report to our king, Motecuhzoma. We will tell him what we have seen, and it is a terrifying thing. Nothing like it has even been seen before!” Then they left in great haste and continued to the City of Mexico. They entered the city at night, in the middle of the night. . . .

The messengers went to the House of the Serpent, and Motecuhzoma arrived. The two captives [ordered by Motecuhzoma to be brought from the prison] were then sacrificed before his eyes: their breasts were torn open, and the messengers were sprinkled with their blood. This was done because the messengers had completed a difficult mission: they had seen the gods, their eyes had looked on their faces. They had even conversed with the gods!

When the sacrifice was finished, the messengers reported to the king. They told him how they had made the journey, and what they had seen, and what food the strangers ate. Motecuhzoma was astonished and terrified by their report, and the description of the strangers’ food astonished him above all else.

[below]

He was also terrified to learn how the cannon roared, how its noise resounded, how it caused one to faint and grow deaf. The messengers told him: “A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its entrails: it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire. The smoke that comes out with it has a pestilent odor, like that of rotten mud. This odor penetrates even to the brain and causes the greatest discomfort. If the cannon is aimed against a mountain, the mountain splits and cracks open. If it is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. This is a most unnatural sight, as if the tree had exploded from within.”



Mexica (Aztec) priest performing the sacrificial offering of a living human's heart to the war god Huitzilo-pochtli, illustration in *Codex Magliabecchi*, ca. 1529





Then the strangers ate the tortillas, the eggs and the hens, and fruit of every variety: guavas, avocados, prickly pears and the many other kinds that grow here. There was food for the “deer” also: reed shoots and green grasses.

Motecuhzoma had sent the magicians to learn what sort of people the strangers might be, but they were also to see if they could work some charm against them, or do them some mischief. They might be able to direct a harmful wind against them, or cause them to break out in sores, or injure them in some way. Or they might be able to repeat some enchanted word, over and over, that would cause them to fall sick, or die, or return to their own land.

The magicians carried out their mission against the Spaniards, but they failed completely. They could not harm them in any way whatever.

Therefore they hastened back to the city, to tell Motecuhzoma what the strangers were like and how invulnerable they were. They said to him: “Our lord, we are no match for them: we are mere nothings!” Motecuhzoma at once gave out orders: he commanded the officials and all the chiefs and captains, under the threat of death, to take the utmost pains to learn what the strangers needed and to provide it.

When the Spaniards left their ships and began to march here and were at last on the way, they were served and attended as they came and great honors were done them. They marched forward under protection, and everything possible was done to please them. . . .

At last they came. At last they began to march towards us.

A man from Cempoala, who was known as the Tlacochealcatl [Chief of the House of Arrows], was the first official to welcome them as they entered our lands and cities. This man spoke Nahuatl. He

showed them the best routes and the shortest ways; he guided and advised them, traveling at the head of the party.

When they came to Tecoaac, in the land of the Tlaxcaltecas, they found it was inhabited by Otomies.<sup>2</sup> The Otomies came out to meet them in battle array; they greeted the strangers with their shields.

But the strangers conquered the Otomies of Tecoaac; they utterly destroyed them. They divided their ranks, fired the cannons at them, attacked them with their swords and shot them with their crossbows. Not just a few, but all of them, perished in the battle.

And when the Tecoaac had been defeated, the Tlaxcaltecas soon heard the news; they learned what had taken place there. They felt premonitions of death: terror overwhelmed them, and they were filled with foreboding.

Therefore the chiefs assembled; the captains met together in a council. They talked about what had happened, and said: “What shall

we do? Shall we go out to meet them? The Otomi is a brave warrior, but he was helpless against them: they scorned him as a mere nothing! They destroyed the poor *macehual* with a look, with a glance of their



Meeting of Cortés and the Tlaxcaltecas, in Diego Muñoz Camargo, *Historia de Tlaxcala*, ca. 1581-1584

<sup>2</sup> “One of the tribes that had settled in the Valley of Mexico (and elsewhere) long before the arrival of the Aztecs.” [León-Portillo, p. 49]

eyes! We should go over to their side: we should make friends with them and be their allies. If not, they will destroy us too . . . .” [ellipsis in original]

Therefore the lords of Tlaxcala went out to meet them, bringing many things to eat: hens and hens’ eggs and the finest tortillas. They said to the strangers: “Our lords, you are weary.”

The strangers replied: “Where do you live?” Where are you from?”

They said: “We are from Tlaxcala. You have come here, you have entered our land. We are from Tlaxcala; our city is the City of the Eagle, Tlaxcala.” (For in ancient times it was called Texcala, and its people were known as Texcaltecas.<sup>3</sup>)

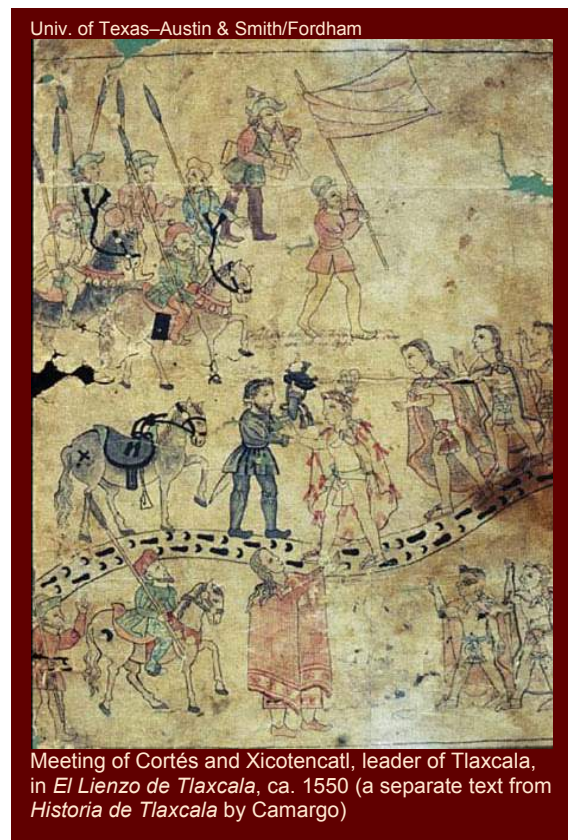
Then they guided them to the city; they brought them there and invited them to enter. They paid them great honors, attended to their every want, joined with them as allies and even gave them their daughters.

The Spaniards asked: “Where is the City of Mexico? Is it far from here?”

They said: “No, it is not far, it is only a three-day march. And it is a great city. The Aztecs are very brave. They are great warriors and conquerors and have defeated their neighbors on every side.”

At this time the Tlaxcaltecas were enemies of Cholula. They feared the Cholultecas; they envied and cursed them; their souls burned with hatred for the people of Cholula. This is why they bought certain rumors to Cortés, so that he would destroy them. They said to him: “Cholula is our enemy. It is an evil city. The people are as brave as the Aztecs and they are the Aztecs’ friends.”

When the Spaniards heard this, they marched against Cholula. They were guided and accompanied by the Tlaxcaltecas and the chiefs from Cempoala, and they all marched in battle array.<sup>4</sup>



When they arrived, the Tlaxcaltecas and the men of Cholula called to each other and shouted greetings. An assembly was held in the courtyard of the god, but when they had all gathered together, the entrances were closed, so that there was no way of escaping.

Then the sudden slaughter began: knife strokes, and sword strokes, and death. The people of Cholula had not foreseen it, had not suspected it. They faced the Spaniards without weapons, without their swords or their shields. The cause of the slaughter was treachery. They died blindly, without knowing why, because of the lies of the Tlaxcaltecas.

And when this had taken place, word of it was brought to Motecuhzoma. The messengers came and departed, journeying back and forth between Tenochtitlán and Cholula. The common people were terrified by the news; they could do nothing but tremble with fright. It was as if the earth trembled beneath them, or as if the world were spinning before their eyes, as it spins during a fit of vertigo . . . . [ellipsis in original]

When the massacre at Cholula was complete, the strangers set out again toward the City of Mexico. They came in battle array, as conquerors, and the dust rose in

<sup>3</sup> “Texcala: “Where there are many rocks.” The Aztecs explained the origin of the word Tlaxcala in this way, but to the Tlaxcaltecas it means “where there were corn tortillas.” [León-Portillo, p. 49]

<sup>4</sup> “This was customary and therefore roused no suspicion among the Cholultecas.” [León-Portillo, p. 49]

whirlwinds on the roads. Their spears glinted in the sun, and their pennons [pointed banners] fluttered like bats. They made a loud clamor as they marched, for their coats of mail and their weapons clashed and rattled. Some of them were dressed in glistening iron from head to foot; they terrified everyone who saw them.

Their dogs came with them, running ahead of the column. They raised their muzzles high; they lifted their muzzles to the wind. They raced on before with saliva dripping from their jaws.

**Adapted from *Historia de Tlaxcala*, accounts compiled by Diego Muñoz Camargo, 1585**

From this time forward, the Spaniards had no other purpose than to raise soldiers against the Culhuas Mexicanos [Aztecs]. They did this within a very short time, so as to give them no opportunity to form an alliance with the Tlaxcaltecas. And to avoid bad thoughts, as well as other new incidents and proposals, Cortés saw to it that his new friends and confederates did not leave his side, using his wits as always, as an astute leader, to take advantage of a favorable situation.

When the ranks were formed, the Spanish troops and the Tlaxcaltecas marched out in good military order, with many important and famous captains, all skilled in warfare according to their ancient customs and practices. These captains were Piltecuhtli, Acxoxecatli, Tecpanecatli, Cahuecahua, Cocomitecuhtli, Quauhtototua, Textlipitl and many others; but because they were so many, with such a variety of names, the others are not set down here, only the most outstanding, who were always loyal to Cortés until the end of his conquest.

The first invasion took place at Cholula, which was governed and ruled by two lords, Tlaquiach and Tlalchiac (for the lords who succeeded to that command were always known by those names, which mean “Lord of what is above” and “Lord of what is below”).

Once they entered the province of Cholula, the Spaniards quickly destroyed that city because of the great provocations given by its inhabitants. So many Cholultecas were killed in this invasion that the news raced through the land as far as the City of Mexico. There it caused the most horrible fright and



consternation, for it was also known that the Tlaxcaltecas had allied themselves with the “gods” (as the Spaniards were called in all parts of this New World, for want of another name).

The Cholultecas had placed such confidence in their idol Quetzalcoatl that they believed no human power could defeat or harm them. They thought they would be able to vanquish us in a very short

time — first, because the Spaniards were so few, and second, because the Tlaxcaltecas had brought them against Cholula by deceit. Their faith in the idol was so complete that they believed it would ravage their enemies with the fire and thunder of heaven, and drown them in a vast flood of water.



This is what they believed, and they proclaimed it in loud voices: “Let the strangers come! We will see if they are so powerful! Our god Quetzalcoatl is here with us, and they can never defeat him. Let them come, the weaklings: we are waiting to see them, and we laugh at their stupid delusions. They are fools or madmen if they trust in these sodomites from Tlaxcala, who are nothing but their women. And let the hirelings come, too: they have sold themselves in their terror. Look at the scum of Tlaxcala, the cowards of Tlaxcala, the guilty ones! They were conquered by the City of Mexico, and now they bring strangers to defend them! How could you change so soon? How could you put yourselves into the hands of these foreign savages? Oh, you frightened beggars, you have lost the immortal glory that was won by your heroes, who sprang from the pure blood of the ancient Teochichimecas, the founders of your nation. What will become of you, you traitors? We are waiting, and you will see how our god Quetzalcoatl punishes his foes!”

They shouted these and other similar insults, because they believed that the enemy would surely be consumed by bolts of fire which would fall from heaven, and that great rivers of water would pour from the temples of their idols to drown both the Tlaxcaltecas and the Spanish soldiers. This caused the Tlaxcaltecas no little fear and concern, for they believed that all would happen as the Cholultecas predicted, and the priests of the temple of Quetzalcoatl proclaimed it at the top of their voices.

But when the Tlaxcaltecas heard the Spaniards call out to St. James, and saw them burn the temples and hurl the idols to the ground, profaning them with great zeal and determination, and when they also saw that the idols were powerless, that no flames fell and no rivers poured out — then they understood the deception and knew it was all falsehoods and lies.

Thus encouraged, they grew so brave that the slaughter and havoc increased beyond imagining. Our friends also became well aware of the Spaniards’ courage; they never again plotted any crimes, but were guided by the divine order, which was to serve Our Lord by conquering this land and rescuing it from the power of the devil.



Memorial service in honor of a dead chieftain, in *Codex Magliabecchi*, ca. 1530

Before the battle began, the city of Tlaxcala sent messengers and ambassadors to Cholula to ask for peace and to say that they were marching not against the Cholultecas but against the Culhuas, or Culhuacanenses Mexicanos. (They were called Culhuas, it is said, because they had come from the region of Culhuacan in the West; and Mexicanos, because the city which they founded and made supreme was called Mexico.) The envoys told the Cholultecas that they were marching under the command of Cortés and that they

came desiring peace. They said that the people of Cholula should fear no harm from the bearded strangers, for these were a very great and noble people who only sought their friendship. Thus they begged the Cholultecas as friends to receive the strangers in peace, because they would be well used by them and suffer no ill treatment, but they also warned them not to anger the white men, for they were a

very warlike, daring and valiant people, who carried superior weapons made of white metal. They said this because there was no iron among the natives, only copper.

They also said that the strangers brought arms which could shoot fire, and wild animals on leashes; that they were dressed and shod in iron, and had powerful crossbows, and lions and ounces so ferocious that they ate people (meaning the fierce greyhounds and mastiffs which the Spaniards had brought with them); and that against this might the Cholultecas could not prevail, or even defend themselves, if they angered the “gods” and did not surrender peacefully, as they should do to avoid greater harm. And they counseled them as friends to act in this manner.

But the Cholultecas paid no attention to these words, preferring to die rather than surrender. Rejecting the good counsel of the Tlaxcaltecas, they flayed the face of Pahlahuatzin, the ambassador, a man of great repute and valor. They did the same to his arms, which they flayed to the elbows, and they cut his hands at the wrists so that they dangled. In this cruel fashion, they sent him away, saying: “Go back, and tell the Tlaxcaltecas and those other beggars, or gods, or whatever they are, that this is how we invite them to come. This is the answer we send them.”

The ambassador returned in great agony, victim of an outrage that caused much horror and grief in the republic, because he was one of the worthiest and most handsome men of this land. He died in the service of his homeland and republic, where his fame is eternal among his people, who keep his memory alive in their songs and sayings.

The Tlaxcaltecas were enraged at this inhuman treatment of Patlahuatzin. They took such unthinkable cruelty as a great affront, since all ambassadors were traditionally respected and honored by foreign kings and lords, to whom they reported the treaties, wars and other events that took place in these provinces and kingdoms. Therefore they said to Cortés: “Most valiant lord, we wish to accompany you, in order to seek vengeance against Cholula for its insolent wickedness, and to conquer and destroy that city and its province. A people so obstinate and vicious, so evil and tyrannous, should not remain alive. And if there were no other cause than this, they would deserve eternal punishment, for they have not thanked us for our good counsel, but have scorned and despised us because of our love for you.”

The valiant Cortés answered them with a stern face: “Have no fear. I promise you revenge.” And he kept this promise, waging a cruel war in which vast multitudes were slaughtered, as is recorded in the chronicles.

The Cholultecas said that their foes would all be drowned by their idol Quetzalcoatl. This was the most venerated idol among the many that were worshipped in this land, and its temple at Cholula was considered a shrine of the gods. They said that when the crust was scraped from a portion of the limed surface of the temple, water gushed out. To save themselves from drowning, they sacrificed children of two or three years of age and mixed their blood with lime to make a kind of cement with which to stop up the springs and founts. They said that they if they were ever in danger during a war with the white gods and the Tlaxcaltecas, they would break open all the mortared surfaces, from which a flood of water would pour forth to drown their enemies. And when they saw how hard pressed they were, they set to work.

But none of their expectations was fulfilled, and they lost all hope. Of those who died in the battle of Cholula, the greater number hurled themselves from the temple pyramid in their despair and they also hurled the idol of Quetzalcoatl headfirst from the pyramid, for this form of suicide had always been a custom among them. They were as rebellious and contemptuous as any stiff-necked, ungovernable people, and it was their custom to die in a manner contrary to that of other nations — that is, to die headlong. In the end, the greater part of them died in despair, by killing themselves.



Quetzalcoatl

*Codex Magliabecchi, ca. 1530*



Ritual human sacrifice

When the battle of Cholula was finished, the Cholultecas understood and believed that the God of the white men, who were His most powerful sons, was more potent than their own. Our friends the Tlaxcaltecas, seeing themselves in the very thick of that battle and massacre, called upon St. James the Apostle, shouting his name in loud voices: "Santiago!" And from that day to this, when they are in some difficulty or danger, the Tlaxcaltecas invoke the saint. . . .

When Cholula had been stormed and destroyed, and a great host of people killed and plundered, our armies marched forward again, causing terror wherever they went, until the news of the destruction spread through the whole land. The people were astonished to hear such strange reports, and to learn how the Cholultecas were defeated and slain in so short a time, and how their idol Quetzalcoatl had not served them in any way.