

THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO

*Is it true that we live on earth?
Not forever on earth; we are only a little while here.
Even jade will be broken,
Even gold shall be crushed,
Even Quetzál feathers will be torn apart.
Not forever on earth; we are only a little while here.*

**King Nezahualcóyotl of Texcoco
1402–1472**

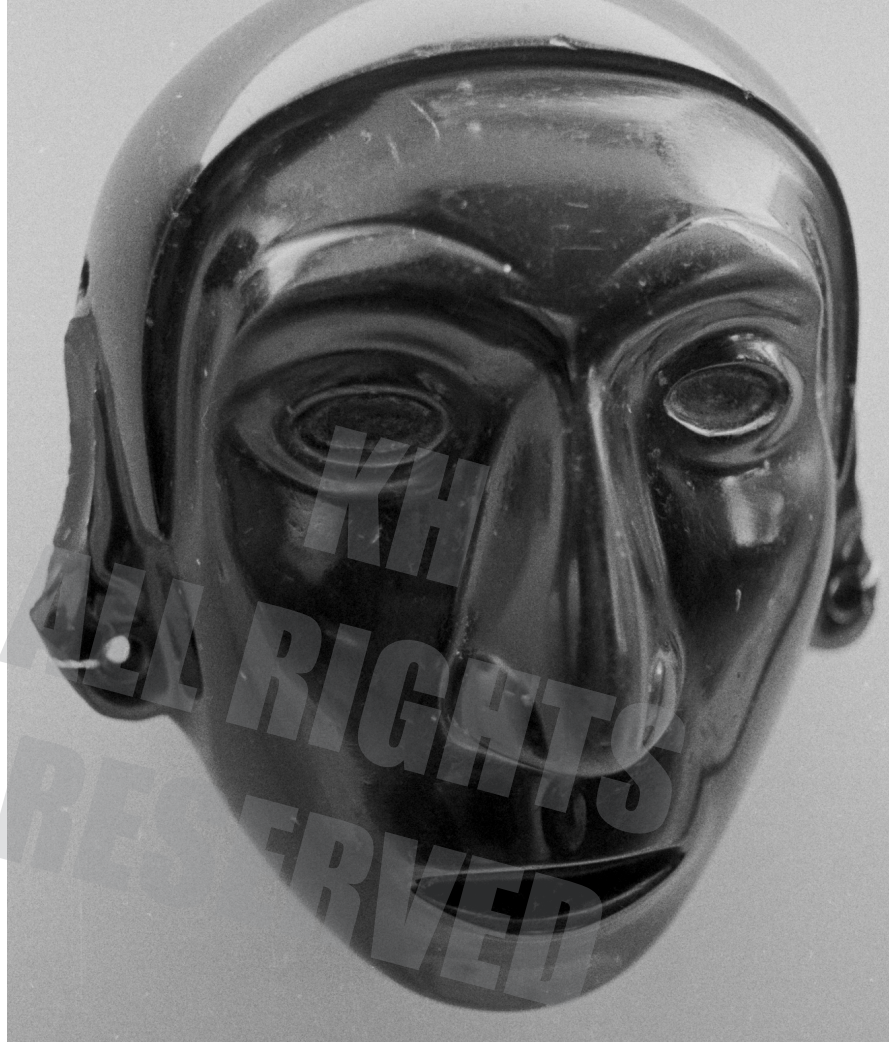
Motecuhzoma II was selected from the royal lineage in 1502. With jurisdiction over all of the Aztec territories, he was a demanding ruler who extracted excessive tributes from his subjects, and enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle. It is said that hundreds of servants attended his needs, and no fewer than 100 different dishes would be prepared for each of his meals. He was interested in all religions, and quite knowledgeable about his country's past history. His respect for tradition and his belief in ancient legends and superstitions were factors in his successful rule, as well as key factors that contributed to the final collapse of the Aztec state. Motecuhzoma lived with total conviction that the great leader Quetzálcóatl would someday return to reclaim his rightful throne.

There were many strange phenomena that occurred during Motecuhzoma's reign; all were interpreted as bad omens. There were comets that flashed through Aztec skies, mysterious reports of lake water boiling, the sound of a weeping woman at night, and unusually violent lightning storms. All created fear in the hearts of the people. Wise men and philosophers told stories of strange dreams that predicted the arrival of strangers who would alter the course of Aztec history. Motecuhzoma was filled with a sense of helplessness and resignation; he felt that the omens anticipated the return of Quetzálcóatl.



Motecuhzoma II

Opposite. Plaza of the Three Cultures, Tlatelolco, Mexico City. In foreground are the Aztec ruins where Cuauhtémoc fought against the Spaniards; in the center is an early 16th c. Catholic Church; modern, 20th century apartment buildings are in the background.



Aztec Noble. (INAH)

In the spring of 1519, Motecuhzoma was advised that fair skinned and bearded foreigners had landed on the shores of Veracruz. It was the year One Reed—and Quetzálcóatl had been fair skinned and bearded. News of the Spaniards' arrival greatly disturbed the king. Messengers were sent from Tenochtitlán to seek out the leader of the foreign group to determine if he was indeed the great Quetzálcóatl. If the leader was the reborn priest-king, the Aztec emissaries were instructed to plead with him to stay away from Tenochtitlán until Motecuhzoma's death, at

which time he could reclaim his rightful throne. The Aztecs placed gifts of food and gold along the shore opposite the boats and waited to see what the strangers would do. The Spaniards took the gifts and asked the Aztecs to accompany them to the lead ship to meet Hernán Cortés, personal representative of Charles V of Spain, the most powerful country in Europe at that time.

Hernán Cortés was born in the Spanish town of Medellin, Spain, in 1485; he was the frail and often sickly son of an upper middle class family. At the age of fourteen, he was sent by his parents to the University of Salamanca to study law, but poor health forced him to leave school before his studies were completed. After some deliberation, Cortés decided to pursue a clerical position in the Spanish army.

Cortés sailed to the West Indies in 1504, at the age of nineteen. He was appointed personal secretary to Diego Velazquez during the Spanish conquest of Cuba, in 1511. At the end of the successful campaign, Velazquez was appointed Governor of Cuba; he named Cortés head of the King's Treasury. Velazquez also gave him substantial landholdings in Santiago de Baracoa, the first Spanish town in Cuba, and a large number of Indian slaves. Cortés used the slaves to work his mines, mining enough gold to start a successful trading operation. Although he became a respected member of the community, serving twice as mayor of Santiago, he was also known for his many amorous affairs, from which he contracted syphilis, an incurable disease.

In 1518, Velazquez appointed Cortés leader of an expedition to Mexico to seek gold, claim land, and develop trade with the Indians. Two earlier attempts to establish contact with Mexico had not been particularly successful in achieving their primary objectives. Cortés accepted the new assignment and began his preparations. It was not until the expedition was fully organized that Velazquez had second thoughts about Cortés. Suspecting him of excessive ambition, he ordered Cortés to stay in Cuba. Cortés ignored the order and set sail for Western Cuba, where he picked up additional supplies and men. He departed for Mexico on February 18, 1519. He was only 34 years old at the time.

Cortés sailed from Cuba in eleven ships with 550 soldiers, some 200 Cuban Indians, a few small cannons, and sixteen horses. He crossed the turbulent seas and landed his ships on

Cortés

the island of Cozumel, off the Yucatán Peninsula, where friendly natives led him to two previously shipwrecked Spanish sailors. The sailors were useful to Cortés as interpreters; they could speak the Mayan language and had become familiar with local customs. Invaluable as translators for the newly arrived Spaniards, they also advised him on issues of protocol. After a brief stay, Cortés left the island, taking one of the previously shipwrecked sailors with him. (The second Spaniard decided to stay with his Maya wife and children.) Cortés continued his journey around the peninsula and eventually landed at Potochan, where the Spaniards were attacked by hostile natives. Many of Cortés' men were wounded, but only two died in the battle; the Indians lost 200 warriors. As a result, the Maya were convinced that the Spaniards were indestructible. Twenty young Indian women were given to Cortés as a respectful parting gift when the Spaniards left Potochan. He sailed along the Gulf Coast to San Juan de Ulua, near the present city of Veracruz, where the inhabitants spoke an entirely different language. Fortunately for Cortés, one woman could speak their language. She translated what they said to the shipwrecked sailor, who translated the information into Spanish for Cortés. Called Malinche by her people, Cortés renamed her **Doña Marina**. She became Cortés' interpreter, advisor on local customs and legends, and mistress.

Doña Marina was Cortés' mistress, advisor and interpreter.

Cortés founded the town of La Villa Rica de Vera Cruz (modern Veracruz) in the name of the King of Spain. He appointed the necessary municipal officers to govern the town and assumed the title of Captain General, with responsibility in all military matters. His primary motives for settling the city in the King's name were to establish a base for the conquest of the country, and to gain favor with the Spanish ruler, gambling that his original disregard of the orders issued by Velazquez would be overlooked in the event of a total and successful conquest. He wrote to the King of Spain and asked for additional support and financial assistance. As an unsolicited but clever gesture of good will, he also sent all of the treasure he had accumulated.

Some of Cortés' men became frightened by the difficulties that faced them in this alien land and plotted to seize the ship to keep the letter and the treasure from reaching their destination. When he learned of their plans, Cortés hanged the two major leaders of the conspiracy against him and had

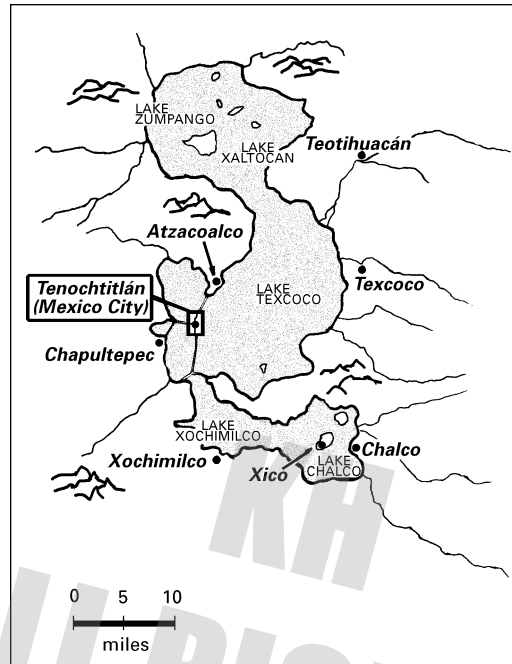
the feet of a third cut off. All of the other participants in the mutinous plan were given 200 lashes. Cortés was now even more determined to let nothing interfere with his decision to conquer the new land. To ensure this, he ordered his men to burn and sink their ships. His decisive but extreme action brought the men close to mutiny, but they now lacked the means to return to Cuba. There was no choice left but to conquer the country or die in the attempt.

Motecuhzoma was constantly aware of Cortés' actions, and gave careful thought to each of the Spaniard's moves. He sent valuable presents to the Europeans, but said he could not make the long journey to Veracruz to meet Cortés because of illness. He hoped that a polite refusal would discourage Cortés, but the Spaniard sent a messenger back to the Aztec king saying that he had a personal message from the Spanish king, and would come to Tenochtitlán to deliver it in person.

Cortés began the arduous journey to Tenochtitlán, across rugged mountains and deserts, and through dangerous and hostile territory. The Spaniards were treated in a courteous manner by the natives they met, for Motecuhzoma had ordered his subjects to be friendly to the foreigners. The only disastrous opposition Cortés encountered during the early part of his journey was when a small band of Tlaxcalans attacked the Spaniards. A short battle took place, and two of Cortés' horses were killed. The Indians had never seen horses and were terrified by the large animals, thinking they were immortal monsters. When the horses died, the Indians realized that the great beasts were only flesh and blood. The god-like qualities of Cortés and his men began to be questioned.

Motecuhzoma sent word to Cortés asking him to proceed to the city of Cholula and await instructions. When the Spaniards reached the city, they were welcomed and given food and gifts. Shortly thereafter, Motecuhzoma sent word to the Cholulans that the "guests" were to be kept in the city by force, if necessary, and they were not to be given any food. He was determined to subject the foreigners to one more test to determine if the men were truly gods. Dona Marina told Cortés of the plan, and he became so enraged he had some of the nobles executed, and then ordered his men to shoot into the main plaza of the town. In the

The March to Tenochtitlán

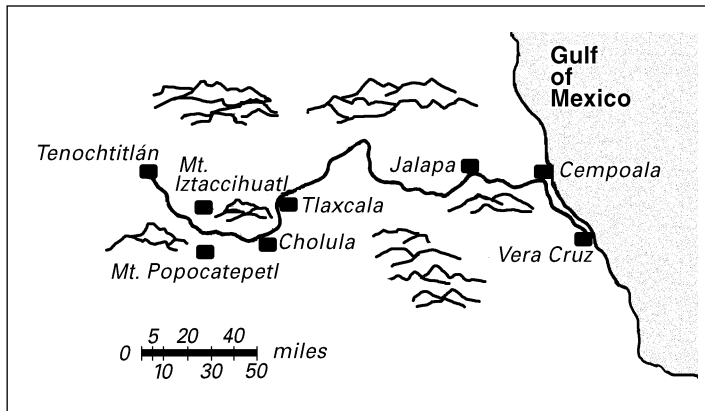


The Valley of Mexico at the time of the Conquest.

five hour battle that took place, approximately 6000 inhabitants were brutally slaughtered. Cortés' name has never been vindicated for his role in this violent and unprovoked attack.

Greatly encouraged by their victory at Cholula, the Spaniards marched on towards Tenochtitlán. They climbed the pass between the snowy mountain peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl and began their descent into the valley. Below them spread the incredibly beautiful city of the Aztecs. They proceeded along one of the wide causeways, and crossed the final drawbridge that gave access to the city. There, under a great canopy, was the Emperor Motecuhzoma. He was clothed in the finest fabrics, adorned with magnificent jewelry, and attended by many servants. The Aztec king greeted Cortés; they saluted each other and exchanged necklaces. Motecuhzoma addressed Cortés as "Quetzálcóatl," and welcomed him back to reclaim his rightful throne. It was November 8, 1519.

Cortés and his men were treated in a courteous manner by the Aztecs, and comfortably housed in Motecuhzoma's father's



Map showing Cortés' initial journey from Veracruz to Tenochtitlán.

magnificent palace where a large quantity of gold was found; it would ultimately be melted down into bars and sent to the King of Spain. The Spaniards were pleased by their reception, but uneasy in the knowledge that their good luck could change, and thousands of Aztecs could turn against them at a moment's notice. After much thought, Cortés decided to confine Motecuhzoma to his quarters, thus assuring their continued safety. It was one of the most disastrous mistakes Cortés made. Although Motecuhzoma protested that his people would never accept such an outrage, he finally agreed to continue his role as leader in this restricted manner. Realizing his people were becoming angry and disenchanted with the foreigners, he told his subjects that he was not a prisoner, but under Cortés' authority because it was the "will of the gods." Though kept under guard, advisors were free to visit him and he was allowed to worship at the Great Temple. The Emperor seemed strangely resigned to his fate. The people grudgingly accepted this turn of events, even though many Aztecs began to question the "divinity" of the Spanish intruders. A noticeable undercurrent of unrest could be detected, and some of the people began to look to Motecuhzoma's brother, Cuitlahuac, for support. There was also bitter opposition to Cortés' demand that human sacrifice cease.

Diego Velazquez became increasingly bitter when he heard reports of Cortés' success, as he had come to view the man as an insubordinate and rebellious soldier. When he was finally appointed Governor of all controllable Yucatán territories,

Intervention from Cuba

Velazquez used his extended jurisdiction to assemble an expedition of about 1000 men, headed by a Spaniard named Panfilo de Narvaez, to bring back the recalcitrant captain. When Cortés learned of their arrival he experienced a sense of foreboding, and correctly suspected the soldiers were sent by Velazquez to take him back to Cuba. He told his men that the troops from Cuba were there to take what he and his men had won. Selecting some volunteers to accompany him to Veracruz, he asked Motecuhzoma to guarantee the safety of the Spaniards that were left to guard Tenochtitlán. The Emperor agreed, and even offered the use of Aztec warriors to Cortés. Leaving Pedro de Alvarado in command of about 80 men, Cortés took the remaining soldiers and departed for the coast. He arrived in Cempoala, Veracruz at night, and immediately launched a surprise attack against the newly arrived Spaniards. After a frenzied skirmish, the newcomers from Cuba surrendered. This decisive action of Cortés enhanced his position among the Indians, as well as with Narvaez' men, who immediately joined his group. With his ranks now greatly increased, Cortés returned to Tenochtitlán.

La Noche Triste— The Sad Night

While Cortés was away, Alvarado gave permission to the Aztecs to conduct a ceremony in honor of their god Huitzilopochtli, as long as human sacrifice was not practiced. According to Spanish accounts of the incident that followed, Alvarado was told that the Aztecs planned to sacrifice the Spaniards who had been left in charge. Alvarado reacted to these rumors without considering their authenticity, and slaughtered 200 Aztec nobles in the midst of their religious ceremony.

Cortés found a strangely silent city when he returned from his victory at Cempoala. He entered Tenochtitlán with over 1000 soldiers, including reinforcements from Cuba. They marched toward Motecuhzoma's palace. It was unusually quiet, because the Aztecs had set a trap and were waiting for him to enter the heart of the city.

Within the open areas of the Great Temple Complex, the Spaniards had little protection from the Indians who attacked from hidden positions on top of the buildings. Even though Spanish cannons and crossbows quickly killed and maimed many Indians, the Aztecs continued to pour into the area from their hiding places among the temples and palaces. They came in wave after wave, and the Spaniards were quickly overwhelmed. Greatly alarmed by the

turn of events, Cortés persuaded Motecuhzoma to plead with the Aztecs to halt their attack. The ruler emerged from his quarters, but in the confusion of battle the outraged Indians threw stones at the palace. One of the stones struck the emperor in the temple; he died three days later. Some accounts say that Motecuhzoma was stoned to death by his own people. Other reports indicate that he was killed by the Spaniards (Pazstory 1994).

Motecuhzoma's brother, Cuitlahuac, assumed leadership, and the Aztecs continued their violent thrust. The Spaniards retreated; their food and gun powder were almost gone, and there were many wounded men. Cortés attempted to negotiate a truce, but the Aztecs rejected his offer.

Cortés realized his position was impossible, and planned a retreat. He had his men quickly build a portable bridge that could be used in their escape, since the Aztecs had removed the bridges that spanned the gaps in the canals. Each man was given as much treasure as he wished to carry. They left the palace on the night of June 30, 1520. Advancing cautiously, they placed their portable bridge over the first canal, and crossed successfully. But they were spotted by the Aztecs before they could cross the second span of water. Thousands of Aztec warriors came pouring out of the city in pursuit. The portable bridge was placed over the second canal, and Cortés and some of his men were able to get across. The remaining foot soldiers panicked; the flimsy bridge broke, and hundreds of men were drowned because the weight of the treasure they had so greedily stuffed into their clothing dragged them under the water. The most dramatic reversal of Spanish fortune occurred on that night: at least 450 Spaniards died, and more than 4000 Indians also perished. The survivors reached the mainland where, according to authenticated records, Cortés was so exhausted and drained by the disaster he sat under a tree and wept. That night was called **La Noche Triste**, the sad night.

Because of their defeat at Tenochtitlán, the Spaniards were uncertain of their reception by the previously supportive mainland Tlaxcalans. They were greatly encouraged when they were greeted with friendliness and reaffirmation of loyalty. Had it not been for the continuing support of these Indian allies, Cortés would not have conquered Mexico.

Cortés conceived an ingenious plan for securing the island city of Tenochtitlán. He decided to use **Brigantines**, which would be far superior in strength and speed to Aztec canoes.

July 1, 1520—In short supply of food and water, Cortés and his men attempted to flee from the great city of Tenochtitlán. It was nighttime, and the streets were deserted. One piercing cry from an alert Indian lookout, however, summoned the warriors who burst out from their hiding places and set upon the retreating Spaniards. When Cortés was finally able to reach the far shore, he found that more than half of his troops, and possibly as many as one thousand Tlaxcalan fighters had been killed. It has been said that an exhausted Cortés sat under a tree in Tacuba and wept.

La Noche Triste—The Sad Night

The Fall of Tenochtitlán

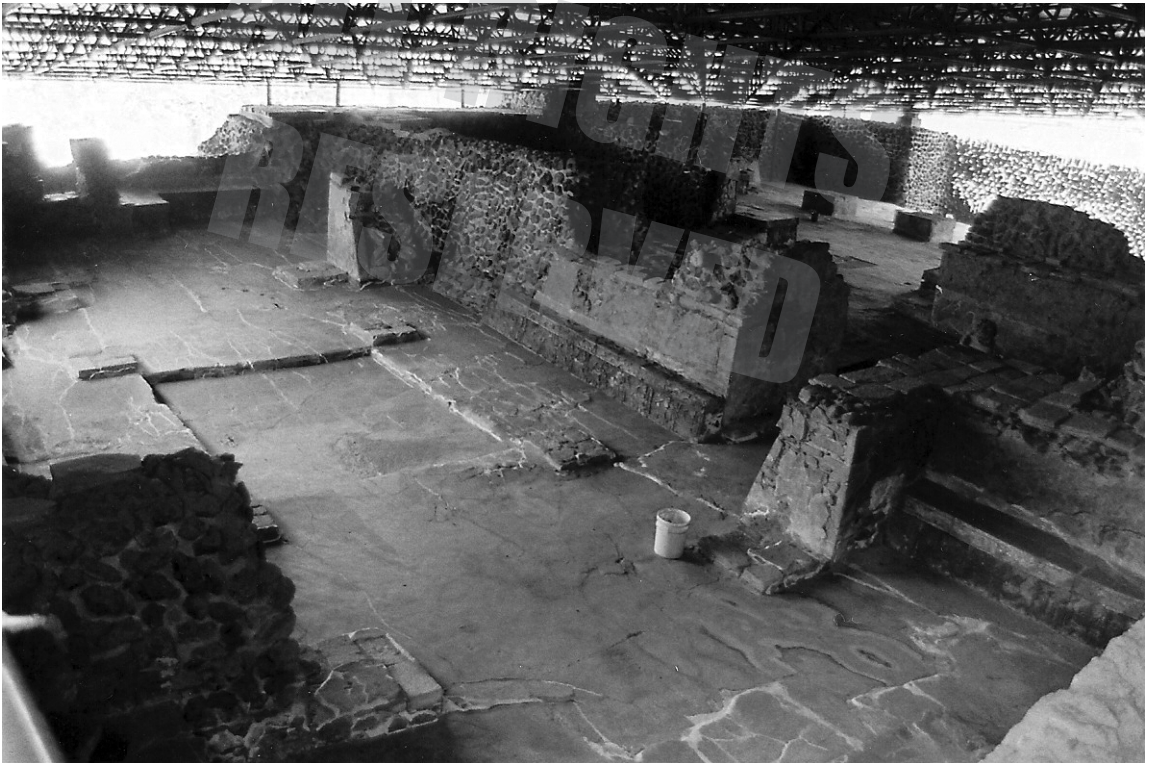
Brigantine: a two-masted sailing ship used for skirmishes.



Excavations of the Templo Mayor, with the Cathedral of Mexico City in background.

His carpenters built the boats in sections that could be carried across the mountains. They would be assembled and fitted with sails and oars on the shore of Lake Texcoco.

Cortés and his army re-entered the Valley of Mexico in November, 1520, establishing headquarters in the city of Texcoco. Supporting him were over 100,000 Indian warriors who had become disenchanted with Aztec rule. They marched toward Tenochtitlán with their portable boats, and assembled them when they reached the lake. Each vessel held about a dozen armed men. As they approached the island city, they attacked the approaching Aztec canoes with such speed and fury that many Indian boats were swamped or crushed. Although the Spaniards were able to penetrate sections of Tenochtitlán, they could not hold their positions because of a ferocious counterattack by the Aztec warriors. Consequently, the earlier advantage of Spanish horses and cannons was greatly reduced



On-going excavations have revealed a portion of Motecuhzoma's palace far below street level in Mexico City's Historic Zone. This photo clearly shows spacious living quarters with stone benches. It is not yet how the ruins of the palace extend.



Excavations of the Great Temple show double stairway and chronological periods of construction.

due to the close-in street fighting. In addition, Cortés gave the order to systematically destroy all of the buildings, great temples, and palaces that gave protection to the Aztecs. These were demolished as he proceeded, so that none remained behind. Unknown to the Spaniards, Cuitlahuac had died from disease brought by the Spaniards, and his cousin, **Cuahtémoc**, was now the Aztec leader.

The Aztecs defended their city for 80 days, suffering heavy casualties. Finally, amidst a horror of destruction, death, and rubble, the city fell. Cuahtémoc was taken prisoner at Tlatelolco, where he had made his last courageous stand against the Spaniards; the date was August 13, 1521. At least 200,000 Aztecs died in the conquest including warriors, members of the priesthood, and thousands of Tenochtitlán's inhabitants. Visiting chiefs were later shown the wreckage of their empire, and newly arrived Spanish ships brought wine and pigs for the Spanish victory celebration (Pazstory 1994). Cuahtémoc was destined to remain a prisoner for the rest of his life. He was kept under constant guard, and brutally tortured when he refused to divulge the location of Motecuhzoma's gold.

The Aztec civilization rose to power because of its brilliant military strategies. The character of the Aztecs' downfall was consistent with their rise: warfare was their historical strength, and military battle resulted in their ultimate collapse. The excessive tribute and tax demands on the people, and constant warfare for expansion ultimately weakened the empire.

The last great warrior-king was Cuahtémoc, whose name means Falling Eagle. Since the eagle was representative of the all-important sun, it might be appropriate to say that in a symbolic sense, the collapse of the empire came with the death of the Setting Sun.

The question of who ultimately caused the collapse of the Aztec empire is a powerful one. Was it the invaders, or was it the role played by religion and superstition, and the resulting effect on society? Perhaps it was not Cortés who defeated the Aztecs, but Motecuhzoma's belief in the promised return of the priest-king, Quetzálcóatl. The Aztecs' entire life activity centered on their religious convictions, and on the excessive demands of their leaders. Both constrained their cultural growth. Cortés brilliantly capitalized on these traditions, and because of this was able to conquer the country.



Cuahtémoc

Cuahtémoc
Falling Eagle

A Question to Ponder

