

## Chapter 7

# The fall of the Aztec empire

### David Carrasco, *The Aztecs: A Very Short History*

How could the Aztec empire, with its powerful military tradition, complex religious institutions, and long-range trading and spy system, fall to a conflicted group of Spanish invaders in less than two years and on home ground? In this fragment of a pre-conquest song, the Aztecs expressed supreme confidence in their city and worldview:

Proud of itself  
Is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.  
Here no one fears to die in war.  
This is our glory.  
This is Your Command,  
O Giver of Life!  
Have this in mind, O princes,  
Do not forget it.  
Who could conquer Tenochtitlan?  
Who could shake the foundation of the heavens?

Between Easter Sunday 1519 and August 13, 1521, the Aztec capital and its complex social pyramid were broken at the top and profoundly transformed throughout. In a Spanish triumphal view constructed by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Hernán Cortés, and generations of subsequent writers, the extraordinary courage and ingenuity of five hundred Spanish soldiers brought

Tenochtitlan to its knees—a testament to Iberian cultural superiority. Yet many aspects of this “conquest” have seldom been adequately understood. Although the Spaniards had superior military technology (cannons, harquebuses, and crossbows), their success was more the result of the massive indigenous armies that fought the Aztecs with Cortés and the rapid spread of European diseases that devastated the native population, including the royal family. Another factor was the effective translations by one of the most fascinating female figures in history, Malintzin, alternatively known as doña Marina or La Malinche. Also worth mentioning was the identification of Cortés with the returning man-god Quetzalcoatl. The so-called conquest was as much an indigenous civil war and rebellion by the Aztecs’ enemies, who formed crucial alliances with the Spaniards and supplied thousands of native warriors who served under Cortés’s leadership.

When Cortés and his men arrived in Cozumel in 1519, one of the first words they recognized spoken by the natives was “Castilian” (Castilian). It turned out that two shipwrecked Spaniards had been living on the mainland since 1511. Searching inland, Cortés found one, a Spanish priest named Gerónimo de Aguilar, who lived as a laborer in a Maya community and spoke their language but retained his native Spanish. Aguilar told Cortés of another survivor, Gonzalo Guerrero, who had become a Maya war chief in another town. While Aguilar was happy to be rescued, Guerrero had married an Indian woman, had children with her, gotten tattooed in the native style, and become a war captain. In the social and military drama that followed, Aguilar aided the Spaniards by translating crucial information for them as they attempted to form alliances with indigenous communities, some of which harbored deep antipathy for the Aztecs. Guerrero stayed on the Maya side and helped them resist and fight the Spaniards at all costs. His tattooed body apparently was found among the Maya killed in a fight with the Spaniards, south of Yucatan, in 1535.

## The three tongues

The subsequent defeat of the Aztec nobles, warriors, and Motecuhzoma was accomplished by many forces, not least the power of language. Communication between these two peoples was extremely confusing, and misunderstanding was the rule in the early meetings, in part because three languages, not two, were involved. The key person serving as a language bridge was neither Aguilar nor Cortés but Malintzin, whom the Spaniards called doña Marina. She spoke both a Maya dialect and the Nahuatl of the Aztecs, and eventually learned basic Spanish. After the Spaniards won a battle against a Maya community, she and a few other women were given to Cortés. She became one of his mistresses and bore him his favorite son, Martín. She accompanied the Spaniards during their march to the central plateau and played a crucial role during the meetings between Cortés and Motecuhzoma. Díaz del Castillo gave her tremendous credit for Spanish victories: "This was the great beginning of our conquests and thus, thanks be to God, things prospered with us . . . because without the help of doña Marina we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico." She appears in a number of paintings by native and colonial artists in the act of translating at key meetings between Spaniards and native lords. Today in Mexico she is known as La Malinche and has been the subject of not only derisive books about her as a traitor to native Mesoamericans but also admiring books about her intelligent and shrewd tactics of bridging the cultures that constitute Mexico.

## The hazardous road to the Great City of Mexico

Early in their explorations and battles with coastal Maya peoples, news came that somewhere in the distance stood a great and wealthy kingdom in the highlands. Each time the invaders pressed local chiefs for more gold and trade goods, they were pointed in that direction, and Cortés became obsessed with finding his way to what he called the "Great City of Mexico." Along the way, the



11. Doña Marina serving as interpreter between Aztec nobles and Spaniards, redrawn from the *Florentine Codex*.

Spaniards discerned that there were many city-states whose intense political and economic rivalries could be played against one another, which Cortés accomplished with remarkable skill. Meanwhile, Motecuhzoma repeatedly sent nobles acting as his spies to meet the Spaniards and discern their military strength, and through the work of Aztec artists, provide images of their ships, weapons, armor, dogs, and horses. Cortés soon founded a settlement, Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (Rich Town of the True Cross) and in a shrewd political maneuver had himself designated its legal representative, thereby bypassing his patron and superior Governor Velásquez in Cuba and establishing his authority in New Spain directly under the king. Cortés quickly managed a crucial alliance with the Totonacs of Cempoala who revealed that they wanted out from under Aztec dominance. The Totonacs provided

warriors and porters, and thus strengthened Spanish maneuverability with cannons and supplies. This alliance was the first of many, and the troop heading for Tenochtitlan burgeoned into a multiethnic army.

The critical turning point in Spanish military fortunes took place when Cortés led this army to the outskirts of Tlaxcala, a large, prosperous confederacy made up of four provinces. The Tlaxcalans had successfully resisted Aztec domination for many years even though they were surrounded by provinces allied with Motecuhzoma. When the Tlaxcalans refused Cortés's entreaties to form an alliance, the Spaniards launched a series of attacks against them; they counterattacked and began to weaken the Spanish advantage. After serious casualties on both sides, the two entered into an alliance against the Aztecs, which proved absolutely crucial to Spanish success in the months ahead.

The Aztecs

Soon, this multiethnic army headed for Tenochtitlan by way of Cholula, the great pilgrimage center of central Mesoamerica, which had recently become allied with Motecuhzoma. While feigning a desire for political alliance, Cortés had his soldiers surround and massacre a huge group of Cholula's population, including women and children, assembled in the main courtyard. With their powerful military reputation preceding them, the Spanish, Tlaxcalan, and Cempoalan warriors crossed the mountains between Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl and descended into the southern lake region of the Basin of Mexico. As Motecuhzoma waited, Cortés led a sizable contingent up the causeway from Iztapalapa into the capital where greetings, gift exchanges, and the grand tour (see chap. 1) took place. Motecuhzoma housed them in spacious palaces and enticed them with sumptuous gifts of gold, silver, and women. But after several weeks the Spaniards, alerted by rumors of rebellions, attacks, and betrayals, eventually took Motecuhzoma prisoner in his own palace where he became a puppet ruler.

## Spanish massacres and the murder of Motecuhzoma

Before long, news from the coast reached Cortés that the Spanish governor in Cuba had sent another Spanish contingent to arrest him for violating the contract terms of his expedition. Nineteen ships filled with 1,400 men armed with twenty cannons and scores of horseman and crossbowmen arrived and presented Cortés with the greatest political challenge of his career. He confronted this rival force with a surprise attack and persuasive stories of victories, heroism, wealth, and women. He successfully convinced the majority of the soldiers to abandon their original purpose and thus gained an army of Spaniards now three times the size of what he had arrived with months before. Just as this triumph was accomplished, terrible news arrived from the capital. Cortés had left his most able and brutal lieutenant Pedro de Alvarado in charge of Motecuhzoma, the palace, and the city. Díaz del Castillo left this poignant description of what transpired:

Let me say how ill luck suddenly turned the wheel and after great good fortune and pleasure follows sadness... it so happened that at this moment came the news that Mexico was in revolt and that Pedro de Alvarado was besieged in his fortress and quarters... there arrived four great chieftains sent to Cortés by the great Motecuhzoma to complain to him... with tears streaming from their eyes, that Pedro de Alvarado sallied out from his quarters with all the soldiers and for no reason at all, fell on their Chieftains and Caciques who were dancing and celebrating in honor of their idols and he killed and wounded many of them.

The massacre of hundreds of unarmed Aztec nobles and musicians during a yearly ceremony dedicated to the god Tezcatlipoca has become a moment of infamy in Mexican memory as an act of extreme Spanish cruelty. According to several indigenous accounts, the finest Aztec warriors gathered to sing and dance "with all their hearts so that Spaniards would marvel at

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the beauty of the rituals” but “at that moment in the feast, when the dance was loveliest and when song was linked to song, the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants.” The Spaniards blocked the exits of the ceremonial precinct and brutally attacked the dancers and musicians, beheading drummers, disemboweling men and women, “their entrails hanging out, . . . arms were torn from bodies, some attempted to run away but their intestines dragged as they ran, . . . they seemed to tangle their feet in their own entrails.” Terrified, some celebrants tried to hide by pretending to lie dead among the victims. Following the slaughter, weeping mothers and fathers of the dead came to look for bodies, which they collected and ceremonially burned at a sacred shrine called the Eagle Urn.

Aztec hospitality and political confusion was replaced by all-out revolt against the Spaniards. By the time Cortés returned with his troops on June 24, 1520, the Aztecs had turned the city into a trap, and mayhem ensued. The Aztecs assaulted the enlarged Spanish and Tlaxcalan forces for twenty-three straight days, killing them in their quarters and when they came out to fight. Aztec assassins picked off stray Spaniards and even those Mexica suspected of helping them. When the Aztecs repulsed Cortés’s attempt to negotiate his withdrawal from the city, he forced Motecuhzoma out onto a roof to plead for peace. The *tlatoani* was murdered—some say strangled by the Spaniards for fear he would incite a greater revolt, others say stoned to death by his own subjects for his poor leadership. The murdered ruler’s brother, Cuitlahuac, who had earlier urged resistance against the Spaniards, led a massive attack and, on a rainy night, drove the Spaniards out of the city. In what is known today as the Noche Triste (Night of Sadness) and in the desperate days of retreat that followed, more than eight hundred Spaniards (including five women) and two thousand Tlaxcalan warriors were killed. During the Noche Triste it is reported that Spanish and Tlaxcalan bodies filled the canals to such a depth that survivors walked across the water on top of them. Some four hundred Spaniards, all of them wounded, barely

escaped the city and, humiliated in defeat, dragged themselves out of the Basin of Mexico and back to the allied area of Tlaxcala, fighting rear guard actions most of the way. Once in Tlaxcala, they recuperated for five and a half months and worked closely with the Tlaxcalan nobles and military units to plan Spanish vengeance in the form of a siege and invasion of Tenochtitlan.

## The siege and fall of Tenochtitlan

European microbes also came to Cortés’s aid and proved to be some of the most effective warriors of all. During this five-month period, an epidemic of smallpox swept through the Aztec population, killing warriors, nobles, and commoners. Cuitlahuac, the new ruler who had led the assault on Cortés, died two months later. As astonishing as it seems, within a year, 40 percent of the indigenous population of Central Mexico had died of smallpox. The Aztecs later recalled their misery: “There was hunger. Many died of famine. There was no more good, pure water to drink—only nitrous water. Many died of it—contracted dysentery, which killed them. The people ate anything—lizards . . .”

To ensure the success of the upcoming siege, Cortés made two decisive military decisions. First, he ordered the construction of thirteen brigantines by Spanish and Tlaxcalan carpenters back in Tlaxcala, out of sight of Aztec spies. The Spaniards recovered sails, anchors, and rigging from the ships they had scuttled on the coast, and this equipment along with arms, gunpowder, harquebuses, and crossbows was carried back to Tlaxcala. Eventually these small ships, forty-two feet long, built in sections, were transported over the mountains and down to the city of Tezcoco where they were assembled. For several months, Cortés led a contingent of Spanish and Tlaxcalan warriors to circumambulate the lake region, spy on Aztec defenses, weaken Aztec allies, and build alliances with Aztec enemies who played crucial roles in the upcoming battle. When the attack and siege of the city was launched in May 1521, the Spaniards numbered 700 foot soldiers,

120 crossbowmen and arquebusiers, and 90 horseman. Cortés divided them into three armies that assaulted the city from three directions while the ships, loaded with cannons and landing forces, moved in on the lakes. What insured the Aztec defeat, however, was the fact that 90 percent of the attacking forces were experienced warriors from Tlaxcala and other city-states. The final battles were as much a native civil war against the Aztecs as a Spanish conquest.

The populace of the city was in weakened physical and spiritual condition when the three-month siege began. The Spaniards not only halted fresh water, food supplies, and transportation into the city with the brigantines, but they also attacked at every chance with their cannons and catapults to further weaken the capital. Initially, the Aztecs repulsed the multidirectional attacks with heavy losses to the invaders, and vicious fighting on the lakes and along the causeways continued as tactics shifted on both sides. In a scene symbolic of the shifting military advantage, the Spanish and Tlaxcalan warriors entered the ceremonial center near the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, cut down Aztec warriors, and dragged one of their cannons to the top of the huge round stone used for sacrificing enemy warriors. They fired repeatedly at the Great Temple, while the priests beat their war drums incessantly until Spanish soldiers climbed up, cut the priests to pieces, and tossed their bodies over the sides. When counterattacked, the Spaniards fled and left the cannon behind. It was captured by the Aztecs, who pushed it into the lake so that it could not be used again. Hand-to-hand combat turned into utter mayhem in many parts of the city as the Aztecs were slowly pushed back; they lost control of neighborhoods, walkways, and canals until they made a last stand near the imperial marketplace at Tlatelolco where the brigantines could not penetrate.

Rape, murder, and dismemberment turned Tenochtitlan into a killing field until the Spaniards cornered the final Aztec *tlatoani* Cuauhtemoc (Diving Eagle) and his surviving troops in Tlatelolco.

There, Cuauhtemoc surrendered to Cortés thus ending the resistance of the Aztecs and signaling the fall of the capital city to the invaders. The date was August 13, 1521. The Spaniards and their Indian allies went on a rampage, plundering homes and palaces, and massacring thousands. Women were brutally raped and men were branded, beaten, and forced into servitude.

This haunting passage from the *Florentine Codex* marks our farewell to the Aztec capital:

For their part, the men of Castile were searching for people along the roads. They were looking for gold. Jade, quetzal plumage, and turquoise had no importance for them. Women carried it in their breasts, under their petticoats, and the men, we carried it in our mouths or in our *maxtli* [loincloths]. And also they selected among the women those with dark skins, those with dark-skinned bodies. And some during the plunder covered their faces with mud and put on ragged clothes, tattered blouses. Everything which they wore was in shreds. . . . All covered their noses with white handkerchiefs; they were nauseated by the dead bodies, already disintegrating.

The last Aztec ruler, Cuauhtemoc, was later tortured and hanged by Cortés, and the lineage of the powerful royal family reaching back to Acamapichtli came to a tragic end, one that still haunts Mexico and Spain. But at the site of Tlatelolco today there is a monument that announces a new beginning:

On August 13, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtemoc, Tlatelolco fell to the power of Cortés. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat. It was the painful birth of the Mestizo people which is Mexico today.