

The city of Tenochtitlan: center of the Aztec world

When Hernán Cortés led a Spanish army of five hundred soldiers, accompanied by several thousand skilled, allied native warriors, into the Aztec capital on November 8, 1519, the Europeans were filled with wonder by the enormous, splendid city in the middle of Lake Tezcoco. One of these soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, left this initial glimpse:

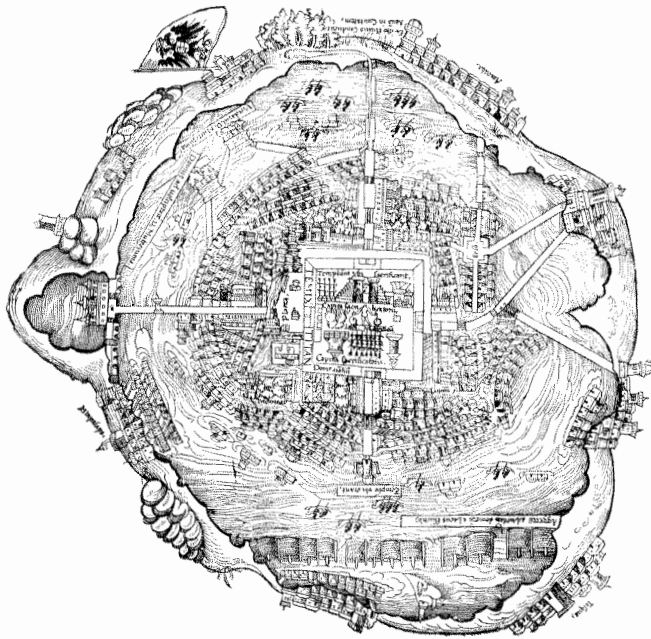
[W]hen we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level Causeway going towards Mexico, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and pyramids rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream... the appearance of the palaces in which they lodged us! How spacious and well built they were, of beautiful stone work and cedar wood, and the wood of other sweet scented trees, with great rooms and courts, wonderful to behold, covered with awnings of cotton cloth.

The size of the buildings and the great crowds who welcomed these strange-looking visitors left the Spaniards astonished. They saw huge palaces “coated with shiny cement and swept and garlanded... adjacent to great oratories for idols,” some of which were covered with blood. The Aztec island capital, Tenochtitlan,

was at that time one of the largest cities in the world with nearly 200,000 inhabitants. Seville, the largest city known to most of the conquistadors, had 60,000 people, while London had closer to 50,000. The largest cities on earth, Paris and Constantinople, each had roughly 300,000 inhabitants.

Tenochtitlan, the "Great City of Mexico" as the Spaniards referred to it, was the supreme settlement of a political and economic empire made up of more than four hundred cities and towns spread through central Mesoamerica and extending into several distant southern and eastern areas. Tenochtitlan was the dominant sacred and political settlement of a Triple Alliance,

The Aztecs



1. Engraved map of Tenochtitlan, embellished with several European pictorial conventions, from the first edition of Cortés's letters, printed in 1524.

which included the city-states of Tezcoco and Tlacopan. Together these three polities strove to control more than five million people spread over an area of more than 77,000 square miles. Yet this city's population, social complexity, and power was concentrated on an island of only 4.6 square miles, which actually combined the two separate settlements of Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan into one core settlement. Radiating out from this island capital were more than a half-dozen causeways that linked it to nine smaller urban settlements on the nearby mainland and pushed the population of this megalopolis closer to 300,000 people. As the Spaniards quickly learned, the Aztec capital was both a garden city of great agricultural productivity and the center of a tributary empire that attracted and redistributed vast supplies of foodstuffs and commodities. This powerful economic system made Tenochtitlan the focus of Spanish envy and hopes for wealth and political domination. The centrality of the city and its linkage to a much wider ecological and political world became evident as the Spaniards toured the city. If we had been part of that tour in November and December of 1519, here is some of what we might have seen.

As the Spaniards walked along a major causeway toward the central ceremonial precinct, they saw the many bridges under which passed scores of canoes carrying people and goods to various neighborhoods and markets. They were soon greeted by "many more chieftains and caciques [who] approached clad in very rich mantles, the brilliant liveries of one chieftain different from those of another, and the causeways were crowded with them." Eventually the visitors saw the entourage of the ruler Motecuhzoma (He Who Grows Angry Like a Lord) Xocoyotzin (the Younger) approaching them. Known in Nahuatl as the *tlatoani*, or chief speaker, the king appeared "beneath a marvelously rich canopy of green-colored feathers with much gold and silver embroidery and with pearls and *chalchihuites* suspended from a sort of bordering, which was wonderful to look at." The "Great Montezuma" was adorned from head to foot as a

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living man-god who wore bejeweled sandals with soles of gold that never touched the earth, for other lords swept the ground and spread cloths before him. Surrounded by eight other richly dressed chieftains, four of whom supported a canopy over his head while the rest attended his every move and protected this man-god from intruders, the Aztec ruler greeted the Spaniards. Cortés, however, made an initial *faux pas*. He dismounted his horse and stepped forward with his arms outstretched to embrace the Aztec ruler. But as he neared Motecuhzoma's body several of the ruler's assistants strongly restrained him. The scene quickly recovered its sense of order through elaborate speeches of welcome by Motecuhzoma (aided by doña Marina—Cortés's Indian translator and mistress), which made it clear who was in charge and that the Spaniards were welcome guests. Soon the Spaniards were conducted to their quarters within the capital city. Motecuhzoma exchanged gifts with Cortés, giving him "a very rich necklace made of golden crabs, a marvelous piece of work, . . . and three loads of mantles of rich feather work." Cortés reported in his letter to the king of Spain that he took off a necklace of pearls and cut glass that he was wearing and gave it to Motecuhzoma. Motecuhzoma spread his wealth around to Cortés's captains in the form of golden trinkets and feathered mantles, and gave each soldier a woven mantle.

In the following days the Spaniards visited "the great house full of . . . books" (actually screenfold codices on which were painted the calendrical, historical, and geographical records of the empire) and then the royal armories "full of every sort of arms, many of them richly adorned with gold and precious stones, . . . shields great and small, . . . two-handed swords set with stone knives which cut much better than our swords." They then proceeded to an enormous aviary filled with countless species of birds "from the royal eagle . . . and many other birds of great size, . . . quetzals, . . . from which they take the rich plumage which they use in their green featherwork." Spanish admiration turned to repulsion when they were led into the great "Idol House" containing not only

"fierce gods" but many kinds of beasts of prey, including jaguars, wolves, and foxes, being fed with the flesh of other animals. Díaz del Castillo then added this ominous report: "I have heard it said that they feed them on the bodies of the Indians who have been sacrificed." Spanish admiration returned when their tour took them to lapidary and gold workshops where they saw jewelers working with precious stones and *chalchihuites*, which reminded the Spaniards of emeralds. They saw featherworkers, sculptors, weavers, and an immense quantity of fine fabrics with attractive and complex designs.

The Spaniards, always with an eye out for native women, were not disappointed when they saw large numbers of Motecuhzoma's beautifully dressed mistresses attending him and his nobles. They also viewed "nunneries" of young maidens being guarded and instructed by veteran "nuns." The Spaniards relaxed in lush gardens with sweet scented trees and medicinal herbs, and marveled at the luxurious homes of Aztec nobles.

Spanish interest in Aztec wealth escalated when the group arrived at the nearby imperial marketplace of Tlatelolco that, according to Cortés, was twice as large as the great market of Salamanca and filled with 60,000 people each day. Díaz del Castillo added that they "were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise that it contained, and at the good order and control that was maintained. . . . Each kind of merchandise was kept by itself and had its fixed place marked out." The weavers spinning many colors of cotton reminded some Spaniards of the silk market in Granada. What also greatly impressed the Spaniards were the various inspectors and magistrates who mediated disputes and kept order among the bustling crowds. At one point in their tour the Spaniards were taken to the top of one of the great pyramids for a bird's eye view of Tenochtitlan, which prompted Díaz del Castillo to make enthusiastic comparisons with the great cities of Europe: "we turned to look at the great marketplace and the crowds of people, . . . the murmur and hum of their voices and

words that they used could be heard more than a league off. Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome, said that so large a marketplace and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before."

Soon, the Spaniards witnessed a grand banquet presided over by Motecuhzoma, where more than thirty dishes, including rabbit, venison, wild boar, and many types of fowl, were prepared for him and his entourage of nobles, servants, and guards. The ruler sat on a soft and richly worked stool at a table with tablecloths of white cotton and was served by four beautiful women who brought him hand-washing bowls, towels, and tortilla bread. Seated behind a gold painted screen, he was joined by high government officials and family members with whom he shared the best dishes of the night, including fruit from distant regions of the empire as well as a chocolate drink made from cacao beans, which he drank in "cup-shaped vessels of pure gold." Entertainers showed up at some of these dinners: "some very ugly humpbacks... were their jesters, and other Indians, who must have been buffoons... told him witty sayings and others... sang and danced, for Motecuhzoma was fond of pleasure and song, and to these he ordered to be given what was left of the food and the jugs of cacao."

Then, Díaz del Castillo added a provocative and enigmatic passage about human sacrifice and cannibalism in relation to the feast: "I have heard it said that they were wont to cook for him the flesh of young boys, but as he had such a variety of dishes, made of so many things, we could not succeed in seeing if they were human flesh or of other things... so we had no insight into it."

The Spaniards saw many more places and cultural practices in the Aztec capital in the days and months following their initial tour. But within a year and a half of the Spanish arrival, the social order, architectural beauty, and neighborhoods of the entire island city were shattered and many thousands of people were killed by

war and disease. The human price paid in this European and Mesoamerican encounter was tremendous on both sides but especially among the Aztecs, whose population would be decimated in the coming decades. While the Spaniards were, in the end, militarily and politically victorious, one of their chroniclers remembered their terrible defeat during the battle known as the Noche Triste: the Aztecs, fed up with Spanish abuses and the murders of a group of priests and dancers at a festival, attacked the intruders and drove them out of the city and into the waters. "The canal was soon choked with the bodies of men and horses. They filled the gap in the causeway with their own drowned bodies. Those who followed crossed to the other side by walking on the corpses." But the greatest laments were those of the Aztecs about their own destruction and defeat as is clear in this poet's words:

We are crushed to the ground.

We lie in ruins.

There is nothing but grief and suffering in Mexico and Tlatelolco

Where once we saw beauty and valor.

Díaz del Castillo shared this lament forty years later when he wrote: "Of all these things that I then beheld today all is overthrown and lost, nothing left standing."

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