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The Kidnap

The Spaniards' campaign to defeat the Mexica can be divided roughly into three stages. The first eight months, occupied by the *conquistadores'* march to the capital from a base camp on the coast, was largely a period of political maneuvering, as Cortés sought to discover the nature and potential of the American state and also to probe for possible weakness. The second eight-month period, covering the Spanish stay in Tenochtitlán, was marked by a breakdown in relations between the Europeans and the Americans and ended in a major military victory for the Mexica at the outskirts of their capital. The third, final phase was a period of all-out war and, following the Spaniards' recovery from initial disaster, saw their eventual triumph after a long and bitter siege.

If the first stage was initiated by Cortés' bold decision to march to the very heart of the Mexican power-base, then its climax was the even more audacious kidnap of the emperor. Using as a pretext a clash between a Mexican force and the Spaniards' rearguard at the coast, Cortés sought an audience with Moctezuma less than a week after his arrival in the capital. The emperor duly obliged his guests in his own throne room, only to find himself accused of treachery and surrounded by forty heavily armed men. Faced with increasingly violent threats, Moctezuma finally capitulated and returned under armed escort to the palace in which he had accommodated the *conquistadores.* While most Eurocentric historians have characterised it as a political master-stroke, today the world's media would describe the Spanish action as a terrorist *coup d'etat.*

The seizure of their head of state momentarily paralysed effective Mexican opposition. It also enabled the *conquistadores* to exact the formal submission of Moctezuma and a large number of his senior officials to the Spanish crown. When the Mexica finally attempted to evict their unwanted guests by force, the *conquistadores* claimed that the Mexican oaths of allegiance made them rebels and traitors to their

Spanish overlord. The campaign of conquest was thus a legitimate restitution of acknowledged European authority. As a pretext for the destruction of the Mexican empire, such an argument now appears ludicrously flimsy. The emperor himself had been kidnapped at sword-point in an act of shocking illegality, while, only days before the formal ceremony of submission, many of the leading nobles had been in chains on Cortés' orders. Whether they would have sworn loyalty to the Spanish crown if they had been at liberty to choose is, to say the least, highly doubtful.

Yet Cortés' kidnap of Moctezuma and the subsequent coerced submission remain of enormous significance. Of the various Spanish maneuvers, it was, as Hugh Thomas noted in *The Conquest of Mexico,* 'the critical one in the history of the expedition'.[1] It also assumed a later symbolic importance, the personal relationship between the Spanish leader and his imperial hostage almost coming to stand for the entire confrontation of the two hemispheres and their respective civilizations. The kidnap also dramatises, like few other events in the incessant conflict between Europe and tribal societies, the Christian oscillation between the exercise of ruthless power and an almost obsessive concern for dressing such action in technical legalities. In subsequent episodes of Europe's war with tribal society, as in the case of the British in Tasmania or the Euro-Americans against the Apache, the tribal opponents were deemed so far outside the realms of ordered society that it was not necessary to provide the actions against them with this modicum of respectability. In the early sixteenth century, however, and the age of kings, one did not lightly kidnap an emperor and despoil his realm, even when the emperor was an American heathen. Equally, in the late nineteenth century, when faced with the indigenous communities in South West Africa, who were both Christian and often educated by missionaries, the German colonists felt it necessary to substantiate their claim to African territory with the necessary 'legal' documentation.

In the case of the Germans this meant acquiring title deeds to tribal land from chiefs too drunk to know what they were surrendering And in the case of Columbus 400 years earlier, legitimising his Caribbean annexations meant unfurling the Spanish royal standard and making formal announcement to a beach entirely deserted except for the necessary European legal witnesses. For subsequent Spaniards

elsewhere in the Americas it was a case of reading the *Requerimiento,* a document incomprehensible to those it was meant to address. What all these performances had in common was that they completed a self-referential circle. They were not bilateral contracts between equal parties. They were rituals by Europeans for European audiences, unilateral declarations dressed in legal phraseology to fulfill contingent political requirements, and they were normally followed by, or excused the prior use of, force.

In an example like Moctezuma's submission to Cortés, where there was an appearance of mutual consent, such an agreement provided other opportunities. The tribal leader who became in some way contractually bound to Europeans often then became a strategic weakness for his people, a point of leverage his antagonists could use to prise apart tribal unity. Typically, Cortés soon demanded of the captive emperor that he summon for trial the Mexican officials responsible for attacking the Spanish rearguard—the event that had justified the initial kidnap. Following an inevitable European verdict, about twenty of Moctezuma's men were taken to the city's main square and burnt to death amidst a huge bonfire of Mexican wooden swords and arrows. For the silently assembled crowds it was a terrifying display of national impotence. For their emperor it was a symbolic defeat and a deeply public humiliation.

Moctezuma's capture was in many ways the culmination of a policy that the Spanish commander had pursued since leaving Cuba in November 1518. Simultaneously, it was a ploy as eloquent of its author's otherwise shadowy personality as any event in the history of the conquest. Throughout the period before the kidnap, Hernan Cortés had demonstrated a Machiavellian capacity to manipulate surface appearance, both to outwit Spanish rivals and to secure support from American allies. Even as he was setting sail for Mexico, for instance, he had offered quayside reassurances of loyalty to the Cuban governor, Diego Velazquez, the man nominally in charge of the departing expedition and the man Cortés betrayed immediately on arrival at the American mainland. In order to silence anyone with lingering loyalties to Velazquez, Cortés appealed directly to the Spanish throne to confirm his position as expedition commander. His next, extraordinary step was to

break up nine of his twelve ships, thus impressing on the tiny army of 530 men that with their backs to the sea, their best hope lay in unity behind a single leader, Cortés the *Caudillo.*

Cortés' opening move to secure support from American allies revealed a similar political finesse. The Totonacs, a coastal people only recently drawn into the Mexican imperial orbit, were the first community that the Spaniards encountered. By chance the *conquistadores'* arrival in their capital coincided with the appearance of an official delegation from Tenochtitlán. Cortés, trading on Totonac resentment of Mexican control, urged them to arrest these officials, only for the Spanish commander to release them secretly at a later date. The double deceit was another master-stroke. For while the Totonac act of defiance against the sovereign power had fatally compromised them, Cortés, in liberating the delegation himself, had obscured his own aggressive intention towards their masters in Tenochtitlán. The kidnap of Moctezuma was the ultimate expression of these methods - an attempt to rule Mexico through its emperor, a painless transmission of political authority from America to Europe backed, only if absolutely necessary, by ruthless military force. Small wonder, perhaps, that in the demonography of contemporary Mexico the Spanish *Caudillo* is portrayed not as a brutal warrior, but as a wheedling businessman.

If the emperor's kidnap throws the brightest spotlight on the style and temperament of the kidnapper-in-chief, by contrast, the personality of the victim himself seems, from the moment of capture, to recede into an increasing obscurity. In fact, even before his arrest Moctezuma appeared to suffer a strange character transformation. Right up until the Spanish arrival in his realm from his accession in 1502, he had been the model of a decisive and powerful ruler. In fulfillment of his Nahuatl name, meaning 'Angry Lord', he had pushed back the empire's southern frontier, personally leading his troops into several major battles. He was honoured as a prudent and astute statesman, particularly gifted in oratory. It was also during his rule that many of the works of art now considered typical of Mexican civilization were completed. Towards the close of his reign, Moctezuma could look out across Tenochtitlán from his palace rooftop and survey a nation at the height of its military power and a civilization in its very prime.

According to Jacques Soustelle, one of the most eloquent and compelling, if now somewhat dated, proponents of their achievement, the Mexica represented one of the high points, if not the pinnacle of pre-Columbian civilization. 'Their culture . . .' he wrote in a characteristically impassioned conclusion to *The Daily Life of the Aztecs,* 'is one of those that humanity can be proud of having created . . . it must take its place among our precious treasures — precious because they are so rare.'[2] Such an affirmative judgment may well have been in honor of the fact that Mexican civilization was as short-lived as it had been brilliant and dramatic.

Moctezuma's daily routine might include meals of dozens of finely prepared dishes, served on golden plates, accompanied by music or dance, while moments of imperial leisure could be spent amidst exquisite flower gardens or royal aviaries with collections of brilliantly coloured birds. Yet it was barely 300 years since his tribal ancestors had been rough and impoverished hunter-gatherers. These origins in the arid south-west of the North American continent were reflected in the tutelary deity of the Mexica, the bloodthirsty Huitzilopochtli. Translated somewhat innocuously as 'Hummingbird of the left', Huitzilopochtli was the god of war, of the sun, of the young warrior, of the chase.

About the middle of the twelfth century the oracle of this patron deity advised the Mexica to embark on a wandering journey southwards, which eventually brought them to the Mexican Valley. The rich volcanic soils and abundant water supply had made the region a focus of human settlement for almost 500 years, and it had seen the flowering of successive Mesoamerican civilizations. This cultural legacy was still evident throughout the region and, by its standards, the newly arrived Mexica were a crude people.

The dense population and their unwelcome reception elsewhere in the valley initially restricted the Mexica to the occupation of only two small islets near Lake Texcoco's western shore. It seemed an unlikely site for residence. But Huitzilopochtli had delivered an omen ordaining the location - an eagle perched on a prickly pear with a serpent clasped in its talons - and the god eventually proved worthy of his followers. Although at the outset they had lacked the arts of settled existence, the Mexica put to good use the tribe's one indisputable asset--their ruthless

aggression. Firstly as hired mercenaries and then as conquerors in their own right, they established a steady hegemony over the other communities around the shoreline of the valley lakes. And as they expanded, so they absorbed, integrating with their own traditions the cultural legacy that had survived elsewhere in the valley.

In time they became skilled farmers, and with their *chinampas,* they created a vast garden out of Texcoco's unpromising marshland. As a consequence of these cultural changes another divine force slowly came to assume equal prominence alongside Huitzilopochtli. Tlaloc, god of rain, of cultivation and the harvest, sovereign power against drought or famine, was the second of the Mexica's two principal deities. Jacques Soustelle suggested that the dual presence of these gods at the head of the religious world consecrated 'the union of the two basic ideologies of Mexico . . . On the one hand the religion of the warlike nomad and on the other that of the settled peasants . . .'[3]

After they had embarked on their imperial career the Mexica, ashamed that they had once been considered outcasts by the city-states they now dominated, decided to destroy the historical records revealing their humble origins. In their place they fabricated a genealogy suggesting they were the direct heirs to the Toltecs, creators of the last great civilization to flourish in the Mexican Valley. Inbuilt into this falsehood was the parvenus' reflex deference towards their legendary betters. Yet, in fact, their own artistic accomplishments had come to rival, even to surpass, those of their predecessors. Some of the artistry in which Moctezuma could take especial pride was the Mexican gift for building — cutting, dressing and polishing stone, erecting monumental temples and palaces. Their capital was testament not only to the high level of skill attained by their architects, engineers and masons without the assistance of metal tools, the wheel or draught animals, but to an infinite artistic patience. Tenochtitlán had taken decades to build. When Cortés and his men first surveyed the place, noting the clean, sharp lines, the chiseled concision of its frescoes and the fresh brilliance of its stuccoed walls, they were admiring all the hallmarks of the slowly matured and newly completed artifact.

Amongst the many other elements of Tenochtitlán life which astounded the *conquistadores,* and which have been adduced by later commentators

as evidence of indigenous America's firm grasp of civilised existence, was the Mexica's deep love of flowers and of formally laid gardens, crisscrossed with flowing channels and luxurious pools. Their reverence for cleanliness, so suspect to the dirty and unwashed Spaniards, was manifest in their fondness for bathing, in the construction of public steambaths and in the ubiquitous use of vegetable soaps. The Mexica were fascinated by the abundant flora and fauna which surrounded them. Their medical practices embraced the use of 1,200 different plants; their knowledge of animals enabled the emperors to maintain large collections of the region's exquisitely beautiful birds, as well as a wide selection of Central America's mammal fauna.

The range and quality of other Mexican crafts were similarly impressive. Observing their paintwork on wooden carvings and sculptures, the veteran *conquistador* and chronicler Bernal Díaz wrote that some of these artists were so skilled that 'had they lived in the age of the Apelles of old, or of Michael Angelo *[sic]* or Berruguete in our own day, they would be counted in the same rank.'[4] Tragically, like Tenochtitlán itself, little of this work survived Spanish occupation. One of the most vulnerable arts was the uniquely American feather craft, which involved the creation of elaborate mosaics entirely out of feathers harvested from wild and captive birds without killing them. These weavings were used to adorn ceremonial costume and items of religious ritual. The handful of examples spared by time, climate and the *conquistadores* confirm the highly refined aesthetic expressed in this fragile art. Even at the time of the conquest, Cortés was able to acknowledge the nature of their achievement; 'its like,' he wrote, 'is not to be seen in either wax or embroidery, it is so marvelously delicate.'[5]

Equally susceptible to European indifference was the work of both Mexican lapidaries and goldsmiths. Metallurgy was an innovation dating only from the late Toltec period, but the manufacture of delicate mosaics fashioned from fragments of precious stone, especially their favoured turquoise, had a much longer artistic pedigree. The Mexica's own examples of this craft, especially their death masks and skulls, represent some of the most powerful and haunting images in the art of pre-Columbian America. Mexican gold work was the most inevitable casualty of Spanish greed, with only a small

sample of the finest pieces being retained in an original form. As one authority noted, these surviving ornaments 'make one realize that the Spanish descriptions of Cortés' loot understated the rich ability of the Aztec goldsmiths.'[6] A contemporary European fully qualified to appreciate the nature of their achievement was the German artist Albrecht Dürer, himself a goldsmith's son. When he saw a sample of Mexican treasures on display in Brussels, he wrote: 'In all my life I have never seen anything that rejoiced my heart so much . . . I have been astonished by the subtle spirit of the men of these strange countries.'[7]

The sheer diversity of their cultural achievements spoke eloquently of a high degree of specialisation amongst the work force, and the surpluses of wealth and leisure enjoyed by the upper strata of Mexican society. However, these fundamental constituents of civilization had largely been acquired at the expense of neighbors, and were the fruits of violent conquest. Although the national character had been softened by contact with urban life in the valley, the need to produce soldiers for war was an enduring coordinate of Mexican society. The emperor's own record as personal commander of his army reflected its central position in Mexican society. The state schools for the ruling and priestly classes, the *calmecac,* which Moctezuma himself had attended, imbued in their students a Spartan discipline and a constant yearning to excel in arms. For the Mexica, war was a holy rite and for the individual soldier success in arms meant social prestige and material opportunity, while death in battle conferred spiritual salvation. By the time the Spaniards landed on the North American continent, the Mexica, nominally in alliance with two neighboring cities, had imposed themselves on 371 client tribes in thirty-eight provinces from the Pacific to the Atlantic Oceans. The total area of the lands within their military orbit was about 325,000 square kilometres, and included much of present-day Mexico and a wide variety of peoples with many different languages and customs. In these subject provinces the Mexica established few recognisable institutions of formal empire. The principal burden inflicted upon inhabitants was a tax, in the form of produce, to be paid at regular intervals to Tenochtitlán.

Although some nations, like the recently conquered Totonacs, detested this imposition and readily allied themselves with Cortés in order to regain full independence, the tribute may have been less onerous than they suggested. One of the Spanish officials

charged subsequently with an inquiry into Mexican fiscal arrangements wrote: 'In all this there was a great deal of regularity and of attentiveness to see that no one person was more heavily burdened than the rest. Each man paid little; and as there were many men it was possible to bring together great quantities [of goods] with little work and no vexation.'[8] Despite this judgment, the massive volume of goods pouring into Tenochtitlán, which the Mexica recorded with meticulous care, makes extraordinary reading. Distributed amongst the columns of bearers arriving every eighty days were 33,680 bundles of feathers, 123,400 cloaks of cotton and other fibre, 11,200 tunics and skirts for women, 4,400 bales of cotton, 1,600 loads of chile, 32,000 spear canes, 64,000 baskets of unrefined copal, 2,200 pots of honey, 16,000 balls of rubber, 32,000 reams of paper, 4,000 loaves of unrefined salt, 3,200 deerskins, 60 bowls of gold dust, two live eagles.[9] It was estimated that a million men were needed to carry the unending flow of products.[10]

By means of this enforced tribute the imperial power provided itself with many of the raw materials of Central America. From these, their laborers and craftsmen manufactured what had become the daily necessities of Mexican life, but they also utilized tribute goods and surplus home produce to manufacture export commodities. For the Mexica were a vigorous trading nation and those men conducting the commerce held a privileged position in their society. Long-distance merchants carried away from the capital cloth, rabbit-fur blankets, embroidered clothes, golden jewels, obsidian and copper earrings, obsidian knives, cochineal dye and medicinal herbs. With these they acquired further luxury merchandise for Tenochtitlán, such as emeralds, tortoiseshell, and exotic parrot and quetzal plumes from the coastal rainforests. The main system of exchange was barter, although a few trade items, such as the universally prized cocoa beans, as well as copper axes and gold dust poured into goose quills, had come to play the role of a primitive currency.

Markets were a ubiquitous feature of Mesoamerican life, with the largest and most impressive in a district of Tenochtitlán itself. Tlatelolco, originally a separate city-state with an independent administration and its own long-established commercial traditions, was immediately to the north of the Mexican capital and had been conquered in the late fifteenth century. By 1519 it had been all but incorporated by its more

powerful neighbor. The great tiled square enclosed by covered arcades that had once housed the Tlatelolco market had eventually become the main commercial centre for both. It was the second great plaza of Tenochtitlán, and the largest trading outlet in the Americas. A docking area at one end gave access to the city's canals and then outwards to all the lake waters of the Mexican Valley, so that goods could pour in by canoe from all over the region.

Every few days as many as 60,000 people would congregate to meet, buy, sell and exchange. If, on the day of his arrival, Cortés and his column of soldiers had provided the Mexican crowds with a spectacular live exhibition of European civilization, then Tlatelolco had served a similar purpose for the Spaniards. All the products of a particular type were concentrated in one of the market's fifty zones, and literally everything that Central American humanity had invented, used or cultivated was on display in these different sections.

Remarkably, given the massive state resources which surrounded the emperor, not to mention his own personal record of military conquest, Moctezuma reacted to the news of the Spanish arrival in a mood of abject despair. Following his preliminary intelligence-gathering missions, he then vacillated between a policy of appeasement--hoping to buy off the intruders with expensive gifts--and an attempt to find direction out of the crisis with the aid of state oracles and religious prophets. Possessed by gloomy premonitions as the *conquistadores* marched on his capital, he is alleged to have said: 'All of us will die at the hands of the new gods [the Spaniards] and those who survive will be their slaves and vassals. They are the ones to reign now, and I shall be the last ruler of this land.'[11] This almost blank desolation at the Spanish advance, seemingly so disproportionate to the scale of the threat, was also deeply revealing. It brings into focus an element of the Mexican national character that seemed not to have been expressed in their roll-call of achievements. Equally, it provides an insight into Moctezuma's own personal background: in his earlier years, before his accession as seventh emperor, he had been a chief priest in the national religion.

Religious belief and religious duties were an all-pervasive aspect of Mexican society. Almost as a counterbalance to the aggressive, centrifugal energies which they had channeled into conquest and international trade, the Mexica held profoundly

pessimistic views on the interpenetration of human conduct and cosmic order. Religious duty was for them not merely a practice enriching the human spirit, but an essential precondition of their existence. They believed that if their devotional rites were discontinued, then the smooth ordering of the Cosmos would collapse, the sun would cease to rise, and death and destruction would befall the people. An attachment to sacrifice was universal amongst Mesoamerican religions, rising in the most profound and dire circumstances — drought, famine or war, for example—to the ceremonial offering of human blood. Self-mutilation — by drawing obsidian blades or cactus spines through the limbs, the earlobes, the tongue and, in the case of priests, even the penis — was a commonplace practice. But higher sacrifice was also required. Although this had probably had modest origins in the early years of the empire, by the time of Cortés' arrival the ceremonial presentation of human hearts had assumed a central position in Mexican worship, and also served as powerful state propaganda concerning Mexican military and political might.

Different religious festivals required specific kinds of human victims as well as alternative modes of sacrifice. The god of rain, Tlaloc, required that children be drowned in water. Female devotees of the earth goddesses danced in a frenzy, apparently unconscious of the priests who, stalking amongst them, would slice off their heads. The victims of the god Xipe Totec were first placed in a wicker frame, then shot with arrows by priests, when the skin was flayed from their bodies. For the god of fire, captives were first anesthetized with hashish, then plunged into a blaze until scorched and barely alive, only to be plucked out with hooks to have their hearts ripped from their chests.[12] Prisoners of war taken during combat with one of the many regional enemies of the Mexican state were amongst the most esteemed and also the most frequent victims. The rite most typically employed in their sacrifice required that the captive be held over a slightly convex stone with his arms and legs pinioned by four priests while a fifth, making a deep gash in the chest with an obsidian blade, tore out a still palpitating heart and plunged it into a burning brazier. The head would be cut off and held up, and the body, depending on the status of the victim, either slung or carried down the steps of the temple. Limbs might on occasions be ceremonially consumed by Mexican nobles and warriors, while the torso might go to feed the wild carnivores in the

emperor's private zoo.[13]

Jacques Soustelle suggested that human sacrifice amongst pre-Columbian Americans was an act neither of cruelty nor hatred. Mesoamerican society in general accepted it as a necessary and sacred obligation. There was, moreover, in the build-up to sacrifice, a process of ritual identification between the captor and his victim. The Spanish chronicler Bernardino de Sahagún recorded that 'When a man took a prisoner he said, "Here is my well-beloved son." And the captive said, "Here is my revered father." Victims were often identified with the deity to whom they were dedicated. Eating their limbs thus symbolized the communion of men with the sacrificed god - the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, but with genuine flesh and blood.

Notwithstanding the sense of ceremony and of obligation attending these religious matters, the Mexica had carried human sacrifice to appalling extremes. A much-quoted example concerns the dedication of the great temple of Huitzilopochtli at the heart of Tenochtitlán. This ceremony took place in 1487; perhaps as many as 20,000 were slaughtered over four days, the lines of victims converging on their place of extinction along the city's four main causeways.[15] Amongst the structures in the capital's main plaza was a huge rack on which the skulls of the sacrificed were collected. A Spanish eyewitness claimed that it held 136,000. Even when allowances are made for the fact that this probably more than doubled the true figure, the scale of the practice becomes apparent.[16]

Hugh Thomas surely speaks for all contemporary observers when he writes, "one would have to have a strong stomach to accept with a purely anthropological judgment all the manifestations of human sacrifice." Indeed the practice remains a major barrier to an understanding of pre-Cortésian Mexico. There has been an increasing effort to place it in a context which, if not favorable, is less disturbing. A number of authors have challenged the earlier exaggerations which depicted Mexico as one 'vast human shambles', and which continue to distort the popular European image of Tenochtitlán society.[18] Soustelle, for instance, attempted to glean the kernel of religious meaning from the outer layers of blood and guts, and also pointed out it consumed fewer human lives than the circuses of ancient Rome.

Some contemporary historians deeply sympathetic to the Mexica, and wishing to

counterbalance the pervasive over-emphasis on this one aspect of Mexican society, have ignored the issue almost completely. Ronald Wright, in *Stolen Continents,* an account of America's conquest from the perspective of its indigenous people, cast doubt on ritual cannibalism and confined his commentary on human sacrifice to saying that it 'was . . . not the persistence of an old "savage" practice among civilized people who should have known better but rather a hypertrophy of sinister elements in their culture which in more gracious times had been kept in check.'[20]

Others, however, felt less constrained. Hammond Innes, for instance, author of *The Conquistadors,* called the Mexican religion 'a filthy one, their rites and practices abominable'.[21] A century earlier, William Prescott was even more precise:

> How can a nation, where human sacrifices prevail, and especially when combined with cannibalism, further the march of civilization? . . . men became familiar with scenes of horror and the most loathsome abominations . . . The heart was hardened, the manners were made ferocious, the feeble light of civilization . . . was growing fainter and fainter, as thousands and thousands of miserable victims throughout the empire were yearly fattened in its cages, sacrificed on its altars, dressed and served at its banquets! The whole land was converted into a vast human shambles! The empire of the [Mexica] did not fall before its time.[22]

In short, human sacrifice justified the conquest, however much loss of life that might have entailed. In these lines Prescott sums up what has been for Europeans, for almost half a millennium, the essential moral lesson at the heart of the story of Mexico's conquest.

Moctezuma's sense of foreboding might have allowed the *conquistadores* to take the politico-military initiative. It may even have enabled them to capture his physical person and therefore stage-manage the oath of allegiance. This in turn may have provided the flimsy legal edifice that would protect them in the immediate aftermath of the conquest, deflecting awkward moral objections that jealous or conscience stricken compatriots might raise. But the disgusting sacrificial practices conducted in the temples of Moctezuma's empire supplied the materials for Europe to construct an impregnable moral fortress around its actions. And in time Mexico's rituals of religious death converted their society's destruction into a morality tale, in which evil

was banished and good triumphed. Even now in many European representations of pre-Cortésian Mexico, human sacrifice is depicted not just as a subordinate, if macabre and depressing, feature of their society, treated on a par with the circuses of ancient Rome or the Tyburn gallows of eighteenth-century England, but as something fundamental. Sacrificial victims lying prostrate on altar stones constitute *the* paradigmatic image of Mexican civilization, as something evil, brutal and perverted, constantly reinforcing the idea that its destruction was a divine blessing.

The whole question of human sacrifice has crucial moral implications for the conquest. When they first encountered the phenomenon, the *conquistadores* were understandably appalled. Cortés wrote in his dispatches that those Europeans who had seen it said it was 'the most terrible and frightful thing that they have ever seen'.[23] Bernal Díaz, in his description of the exploratory expedition to the American mainland in 1518, recalled how, on visiting a temple and discovering for the first time the bodies of two freshly sacrificed boys, these battle-hardened *conquistadores* were 'all too upset by the sight . . . and too indignant at [the priests'] cruelty.'[24] They were as disgusted by the that caked the walls and floors of the temples, as they were terrorized later, during the battle for Tenochtitlán, by the screams of their compatriots captured and condemned to the obsidian blades of the Mexican priests. Small wonder that the practice was rapidly suppressed upon completion of the conquest, or that it loomed large in their imaginations, holding a central place in their subsequent accounts of the events.

And yet the horrors of human mutilation hardly represented a phenomenon outside the scope of the *conquistadores'* New World experience. In a quarter of a century they had inflicted a holocaust of death and suffering on indigenous Caribbeans. Bartolome de Las Casas described such men betting on whether they could slice their victim in two with a single stroke of an axe. He recounted incidents in which babies were swung by the feet, and their heads smashed open against rocks.[25] The Spaniards' armored dogs were trained to run down and disembowel human quarry, and were reared on the flesh of their victims. Even one of their more lenient twentieth-century assessors described this portion of the Spanish conquests as 'one of the most dismal episodes in the history of exploitation'.[26] For Spaniards in America at that time, the sight of death and of the mutilation of indigenous inhabitants was almost a universal experience.

Clearly, then, there were powerful reasons other than genuine shock or moral outrage for the deep preoccupation with human sacrifice. Most obviously the *conquistadores* recognized from the outset its huge propaganda potential in their enterprise of conquest. Who would condone an anthropophagous society, or condemn its dissolution when it violated one of Europe's cardinal taboos? In his dispatches Cortés turned the moral screw even tighter by falsely suggesting children were the usual victims of sacrifice.[27] On another occasion, to justify his slaughter and enslavement of one community, he pointed out in a letter to Charles V that 'they eat human flesh'; then added with sinister indifference, 'a fact so notorious that I send your Majesty no farther proof of it'.[28]

In addition to its value as moral ammunition in the Spanish campaign, there were other, less obvious factors at work in the European obsession. The Spaniards, on almost all their missions of American conquest and exploration, were relatively few in number and often deep in unknown, potentially hostile territory. They had no means of guidance. Their maps, if they possessed any, were not so much exercises in cartography as blotting paper for the medieval imagination, populated with a whole bestiary of freaks - beings with huge ears, with a single Cyclopean eye, with tails, without heads, with heads in the middle of their chests, people who lived off the smell of fruit, Amazons, sorcerers, devourers of human flesh. The *conquistadores'* willingness to confront these grotesques is one undeniable constituent in their legendary courage. But they were also haunted by such images, just as they were oppressed by fears of the eternal flames in an actual hell.

In the gruesome demon-gods and morbid practices of Mexican religion they seemed literally to have encountered the most forbidding aspects of their own internal landscape. It is hardly surprising that as the men of Cortés advanced deeper into the Mexican heartland, they were haunted by fears of being surrounded, engulfed by the dark and menacing realm of their own subconscious. Typical of this anxiety is Bernal Diaz's lurid nightmare vision before passing into the maw of Tenochtitlán itself. If Moctezuma were to attack them, he wrote,

> he would put an end to us in a single day, and he could

> then offer his sacrifices to [Huitzilopochtli] . . . and to Tezcatlipoca, the god of hell; and they could feast on our thighs, legs, and arms, and the snakes, serpents, and tigers that they kept in wooden cages…could gorge on our entrails and bodies and all that was left.[29]

In Mexico the pervasive European dread of being consumed by the unknown environment - which was surely, in part, a projection of their own violent intention — conjoined with the threat of being literally, physically devoured. Descriptions of human sacrifice and cannibalism, which are an overwhelming obsession of sixteenth-century Europeans in the Americas, became the single dominant trope through which this wider complex of subconscious urges and anxieties were expressed.

Not only were there factors which led the *conquistadores* to over-stress this aspect of Mexican society, but they were far from consistent in their approach to the subject. Their own indigenous allies who joined a final alliance to destroy Tenochtitlán regularly sacrificed Mexican soldiers, and allegedly ate them. But Cortés turned a blind eye to this behavior, allowing expediency to overrule any question of morality. It was evidently neither so terrifying nor so repugnant when there was a degree of identification not with the victim, but with the sacrificer.

Of equal significance is the way in which the Spaniards' own behaviour came remarkably close to the reviled Mexican habit. Bernal Diaz, for example, described how his compatriots repeatedly opened up; enemy corpses for fat to seal their own wounds and those of their horses, detecting nothing exceptional or unwholesome in it.[30] While the Mexica's post-mortem dismemberment and use of human flesh, stripped of its religious and social context, appeared to European eyes as demonic barbarism, their own actions were comfortably sheathed in cultural rationalisation.

The opposing emotions of pity and anger, aroused by the sight of the two sacrificed boys, and so firmly expressed by Diaz in the passage quoted earlier on his first visit to a Mesoamerican temple, are to be seen not so much as expressions of an absolute moral code, as responses with social and political functions. Spanish pity for the victims buttressed the sense of moral mission, while their anger nourished common feelings of hatred towards the agents of such cruelty, the Mexica.

It was that same moral inconsistency that enabled them to invest their own

actions with totally separate values from those attached to the specific act of human sacrifice. They were content to see accused Mexican commanders burnt alive, or to perpetrate acts of mutilation, to lop off hands, arms, ears, feet, noses, testicles. They were willing to torture and to inflict mass slaughter: in a single charge they claimed five times the number of Spanish dead for the whole siege; in one day during the siege they claimed 40,000 casualties.[31] Moreover, they clung to the underlying rationale that converted the uses of deliberate terror and unopposed massacre into perfectly acceptable and necessary components of military policy. Writers like Hammond Innes, so repelled by the work of the obsidian blade on the Mexican altar, could appreciate the argument for such cold-blooded use of Spanish steel. 'It only goes to prove,' he argued, 'that . . . the ruthless use of force induced respect, even admiration, rather than hatred.'[32]

Despite such judgments, one has to conclude that the issue of human sacrifice offers no genuine ground for differentiating between Mexican and Spanish standards. In the end it was simply a question of aesthetic and social conditioning that made slaughter on the field of battle seem so much more acceptable to Europeans than that delivered on the temple altar. Although today human sacrifice might still seem an act of appalling cruelty, so too does the practice of burning humans at the stake or throwing them to the lions. Human sacrifice neither justified the conquest, nor can it be the only criterion for assessing Mexican civilization; in exactly the same way Iberian society can be considered solely on the basis of the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition. Both communities in the sixteenth century were capable of extreme brutality, but, locked within their own cultural system, each viewed the actions of the other with incomprehension and repugnance.

When Bernal Díaz asserted that all their victories were the work of Jesus Christ he expressed not only the superiority of the Spanish deity as intended, but just how closely the violent fundamentalist ideology of the *conquistadores* — in fact, of many European Christians, from the Spaniards in the sixteenth century to the Germans in the twentieth; resembled the religion of the Mexica. Blood, sacrifice, death, conquest, power: these were the concerns of the gods of both nations. Ronald Wright noted: "Both believed they had a divine mission rule the world. In more than one way, they deserved each other."