

# The Aztecs and Tenochtitlan on the Eve of Conquest

Traci Ardren, Ph.D.

The Kislak Conquest of Mexico paintings depict a tumultuous series of battles and encounters between the invading armies of Spain, led by Hernán Cortés and his captains, and the indigenous Mexicans they encountered during their journey from the Gulf of Mexico to the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan. In these paintings, the indigenous combatants are generally romanticized and homogenized as great warriors and worthy foes or allies of Cortés and his men. Although the culture groups of the Gulf Coast, Tlaxcala, and Central Mexico were separate entities, the paintings make little visual distinction between one type of “Indian” and another. It seems important, therefore, to begin with a brief introduction to the Aztec empire and its ruling people, the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, as we know them today.

## The City

Daily life in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica people and heart of the Aztec empire, vibrated with the hustle and bustle of

any large multicultural urban city. With a population of approximately 200,000, it covered an area slightly smaller than Classical Rome. Nearby suburbs throughout the central Valley of Mexico swelled the greater urban population to something close to twenty-five million. Everyone who lived in the valley was tied in some direct way to the machinations of the empire — whether as gold worker to the kings, professional long distance trader, schoolchild learning Mexica law and theology, or housewife bringing food to the central market for sale. The Aztec empire of the Mexica was highly structured and reached deeply into the lives of its subjects through taxation and tribute, communal religious ceremonies and performances, and an intricate system of local government and military service.

Carved out of the muddy salt beds around Lake Texcoco, Tenochtitlan’s principal avenues were wide and lined with red and white plastered houses, in which different social classes or extended families lived. The city was crosscut by wide canals,

which carried canoe traffic throughout the different sectors of the city. Three raised causeways linked the island city to suburbs on the mainland. An aqueduct brought water from the mainland to residents of the city. These are indicated (although somewhat inaccurately) in the map of the city that illustrates Cortés' second letter of 1524 (cat. 13). In the seventh Conquest painting, *La caída de Tenochtitlan/The Fall of Tenochtitlan*, architectural details like this were drawn from secondary sources, including sixteenth-century maps and written descriptions, because the first excavations of the ancient Aztec capital did not take place until at least a hundred years after the paintings were made.

The entire infrastructure was maintained by the Mexica state administration. This island city reflected the aims and aspirations of the Mexica royalty. At the heart of Tenochtitlan were two main squares—the ceremonial center where the Templo Mayor and other important temples were located, and which today is the main square of Mexico City, and the market center of Tlatelolco, located to the north of the original settlement. Surrounding these were many neighborhoods, each with its own temples, schools, craft workshops, and local markets. The royal palaces surrounded the main ceremonial square. Their proximity underscores the close relationship between religious and political power.

## The People

The empire was composed of many well-defined social classes, each with its own prerogatives and responsibilities. Perhaps the best known of all Aztec figures is the ill-fated ruler, Moctezuma II (Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin), who ruled from 1502 to 1520. He was a member of the *tehcutili*, or noble class. Aztec kings ruled by virtue of their bloodline, yet the throne did not automatically pass from father to son. When a king died, the highest-ranking council members decided who among the most appropriate heirs would become the *huey tlatoani*, or Great Speaker. This might include any of the deceased king's legitimate sons, or even his brothers, uncles, or nephews.

The *tecuhli* were responsible for government at both the local and state level. These individuals received a salary of sorts, derived from lands that were worked in their names, as well as clothing, food, and gifts from the king. They were exempt from taxes, and their children were entitled to attend a state run school, where they followed a program of religious studies. At the time of Spanish contact, there were large numbers of *tecuhli*. Many warriors and religious specialists were members of this class.

The *pochteca* were professional long-distance traders who supplied various goods from throughout the empire. *Pochteca* traveled in large caravans with their own bodyguards; many were

quite wealthy, even though they were not of noble birth. Their caravans were often under the direct protection of the state. In return, they provided intelligence on the loyalties of subjugated territories and the movements of outsiders within the realm. They traveled as far south as the Maya world, in what is today southern Mexico and Guatemala, looking for tropical quetzal feathers, and far north to trade for turquoise. The *pochteca* usually recruited only from within their families, and their children were eligible for state supported religious education.

Below the *pochteca* in social status were the professional artisans. Specialists in all kinds of trades, many artisans were subjugated outsiders who had been relocated to Tenochtitlan from Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast, and other regions. These masters produced gold jewelry, fancy stone carving, feathered cloaks and shields, and textiles of all kinds within their households. The carved stone sculptures and skull necklace (cat. 1-10) in the exhibition are good examples of their workmanship. Artisans were paid well for this work and received their compensation in the form of food, cloth, raw materials, and sometimes slaves.

Commoners, or *macehualli*, were distinguished from slaves in that they had the right to work land, their children could attend school, and they had the right to vote on matters related to community affairs. Military service was mandatory for the *macehualli*, as was participation in communal work projects, like road and canal maintenance. Commoners throughout the empire strug-

gled under a very high rate of taxation. Slavery might befall commoners who gambled themselves into debt, as well as criminals who plotted against the empire. Those who were simply tired of working the land could also sell themselves into slavery. Mexica law required all slaves to be clothed, fed, and housed, and all children born to slaves were born free.

## The Empire

Aztec is the name we use commonly today, yet the people who ruled Tenochtitlan thought of themselves as Mexica by birth. The empire was actually a confederation of three central Mexican states dominated by the Mexica: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. Thus when we refer to the Aztecs, we are more properly referring to the entire political state. At the time of Spanish contact, most of the twenty-five million people who lived within the central Mexican highlands spoke Nahuatl, the language of the empire, but this fact belies the tremendous cultural and political diversity within the realm. The Mexica controlled perhaps four hundred different city states in and outside the Valley of Mexico, including the culturally distinct Mixtec, Zapotec, Otomí, and Totonac groups.

According to Mexica mythology, their primitive forebears lived in Aztlan (whose precise location is controversial) and

emerged from the mythical cave of Chicomoztoc in approximately A.D. 1000. After wandering for years throughout central Mexico, they arrived in roughly 1325 at the shores of Lake Texcoco, where they founded the city of Tenochtitlan. The Mexica chose the site of their city based on their belief in divine intervention. The legends state that their patron deity Huitzilopochtli had told them that on an island in Lake Texcoco, in the place where the heart of an enemy had fallen, they would see a large nopal cactus in which an eagle lived. This would mark the place where their capital city should be founded. It is said that the Templo Mayor marks the exact spot where the eagle and cactus were located. Thus, the site became sacred ground, because it marked the moment when the Mexica received sanction from their most important god. Indeed, the symbol of an eagle perched on a Nopal cactus growing from a human heart became the pre-Hispanic place glyph for Tenochtitlan, and eventually the symbol for the modern Mexican nation.

By the time the Mexica founded Tenochtitlan in 1325, they were well known by other groups in the Valley of Mexico for their military capabilities. Although they were not yet major players in the political landscape of Central Mexico, they transformed a swampy lakebed into useable land and through political manipulation soon dominated the region. Initially subordinate to the more powerful Tepanacs, in 1428 the Mexica king Itzcoatl defeated the Tepanacs. He then moved to greatly ex-

pand the land base of the Mexica by moving north into Guerrero and through the cities around the lake, eventually solidifying the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan with its allies at Texcoco and Tlacopan.

Succeeding kings continued the military expansionist policies, targeting the peoples and cities of the Gulf Coast, to the east, and the polities of Oaxaca to the southwest. During the process, the Aztec empire cut off and surrounded the Tlaxcalan polity, which they were unable to conquer outright. With this territorial expansion came domination, rebellion, and violent suppression, creating deep-seated anger and resentment that would one day prove their undoing. Only the ancient Tarascan state to the west of the Valley of Mexico and the Tlaxcalans to the northeast remained independent of the Triple Alliance, and the leaders of these powerful areas eventually sought revenge on the Mexica by allying themselves with the Spanish.

## **Religion and the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan**

The Templo Mayor (or Main Temple) seen by Spanish eyes in 1519 was an imposing structure built in the form of a square, stepped platform pyramid. It had two staircases leading to an upper platform where two temples stood. The structure was covered with paint and plaster, and elaborated with various monu-

mental stone sculptures. Its final expansion was completed by King Ahuitzotl in 1478. The illustration of the temple in the Tovar Codex (1582-1587), fails to convey the grandeur of the architecture, which was surely the focus of Tenochtitlan's ceremonial center (cat. 11b).

The two deities venerated at the Templo Mayor were the Aztec patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, god of war, and Tlaloc, an ancient god and patron of rain. Aztec gods were venerated through the creation of sculpture, as well as the performance of rituals involving elaborately costumed impersonators. Few representations of Huitzilopochtli survive today, although images of Tlaloc abound. The exhibition includes two images of Tlaloc, one slightly more abstract than the other (cat. 6, 7). Other Aztec gods included Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, Mayahuel, goddess of Maguey, Xipe Totec, god of renewal (cat. 5), and Chicomecoatl, goddess of agriculture (cat. 8).

## The Beginning of the End

Like all empires, the Aztec empire was a fragile network built on alliances and coercion. The empire inherited by Moctezuma II was large and fractious. He was known as an aggressive ruler, whose tactics engendered fear, mistrust, and even hatred among subjugated peoples. During his reign, tribute demands were in-

creased to fund constant military operations, and those demands caused further discontent among the subject populations. Exploiting this volatile situation, the Spanish under Cortés allied themselves with the traditional enemies of the Mexica as well as those who were ready for yet another rebellion.

Many of the events of the Conquest were included in illustrated books and manuscripts by indigenous artists and writers in the sixteenth century. These first-person accounts describe the terror the native population experienced in fighting new forms of warfare brought by Cortés and the sadness they felt at the destruction of Tenochtitlan. These testimonies also illuminate the ways various members the Aztec empire resisted the Conquest—through opposition to conversion, subversive violence, and the celebration of traditional rituals.

The next essay describes the Spanish side of this explosive meeting between the New World and the Old, addressing, in particular, the person of Cortés and the reasons for his capture of Tenochtitlan in 1521 and remarkable defeat of the Aztec empire.

### SOURCES:

Carmack (1996)

Leon-Portilla (1992)

Moctezuma (1988)

Soustelle (1961)

Townsend (1979)



**Painting 2.** The Arrival of Cortés at Veracruz and the Reception by Moctezuma's Ambassadors/ La llegada de Cortés a Veracruz y la recepción de los embajadores de Moctezuma.