Chapter Eight

The Spaniards Arrive in Tenochtitlan

Introduction

The Spaniards continued their march toward the Aztec capital, accompanied by all the allies they had brought with them from the Tlaxcala region. The account given in the texts by Sahagun's informants, from which the passages in this chapter are drawn, begins with a description of the order in which the various sections of the army made their appearance. They approached the island city from the south, by way of Ixtapalapa, and arrived in Xoloco (later called San Anton and now part of the Avenue of San Antonio Abad) on November 8, 1519. The precise date is recorded in the *XIII relacion* of Fernando de Alva Ixtilxochitl.

sixty-two

When the same ave been carefull describe the greed for the

*Mote.*

The S Tenochtitla reached thei Motec paring to g adorned the knights. Th They flower that in the cent fragrant ye brought gar necklaces o fashioned it

Thus Huitzillan.: manders, th upon them necklaces o he set garla gold neckl every sort a

sixty-three
When Cortes and Motecuhzoma finally met at Huitzillan, on the same avenue, they greeted each other in speeches that have been carefully preserved by Sahagún’s informants. The texts then describe the stay of the conquistadors in Tenochtitlan and their greed for the gold objects stored in the treasure houses.

Motecuhzoma Goes Out to Meet Cortes

The Spaniards arrived in Xoloco, near the entrance to Tenochtitlan. That was the end of the march, for they had reached their goal.

Motecuhzoma now arrayed himself in his finery, preparing to go out to meet them. The other great princes also adorned their persons, as did the nobles and their chieftains and knights. They all went out together to meet the strangers.

They brought trays heaped with the finest flowers—the flower that resembles a shield; the flower shaped like a heart; in the center, the flower with the sweetest aroma; and the fragrant yellow flower, the most precious of all. They also brought garlands of flowers, and ornaments for the breast, and necklaces of gold, necklaces hung with rich stones, necklaces fashioned in the petatillo style.

Thus Motecuhzoma went out to meet them, there in Huitzillan. He presented many gifts to the Captain and his commanders, those who had come to make war. He showered gifts upon them and hung flowers around their necks; he gave them necklaces of flowers and bands of flowers to adorn their breasts; he set garlands of flowers upon their heads. Then he hung the gold necklaces around their necks and gave them presents of every sort as gifts of welcome.

sixty-three
Speeches of Motecuhzoma and Cortes

When Motecuhzoma had given necklaces to each one, Cortes asked him: "Are you Motecuhzoma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Motecuhzoma?"

And the king said: "Yes, I am Motecuhzoma." Then he stood up to welcome Cortes; he came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him in these words: "Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy.

"The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming. The kings Itzcoatl, Motecuhzoma the Elder, Axayacatl, Tizoc and Ahuitzol ruled for you in the City of Mexico. The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields.

"Do the kings know the destiny of those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see!

"No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams. . . . I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

"This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords!"

When Motecuhzoma had finished, La Malinche translated his address into Spanish so that the Captain could understand it. Cortes replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first
to La Malinche: “Tell Motecuhzoma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear. We have wanted to see him for a long time, and now we have seen his face and heard his words. Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented.”

Then he said to Motecuhzoma: “We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear.”

La Malinche translated this speech and the Spaniards grasped Motecuhzoma’s hands and patted his back to show their affection for him.

**Attitudes of the Spaniards and the Native Lords**

The Spaniards examined everything they saw. They dismounted from their horses, and mounted them again, and dismounted again, so as not to miss anything of interest.

The chiefs who accompanied Motecuhzoma were: Cacama, king of Tezcoco; Tetlepanquetzaltzin, king of Tollanapan; Itzcuaughtzin the Tlachochcalcatl, lord of Tlatelolco; and Topantemoc, Motecuhzoma’s treasurer in Tlatelolco. These four chiefs were standing in a file.

The other princes were: Atlxicatzin [chief who has taken captives]; Tepeoatzin, The Tlachochcalcatl; Quetzalaztatzin, the keeper of the chalk; Totomotzin; Hecateupatiltzin; and Guappiatzin.

When Motecuhzoma was imprisoned, they all went into hiding. They ran away to hide and treacherously abandoned him!

**The Spaniards Take Possession of the City**

When the Spaniards entered the Royal House, they placed Motecuhzoma under guard and kept him under their sixty-five
vigilance. They also placed a guard over Itzcuauhtzin, but the other lords were permitted to depart.

Then the Spaniards fired one of their cannons, and this caused great confusion in the city. The people scattered in every direction; they fled without rhyme or reason; they ran off as if they were being pursued. It was as if they had eaten the mushrooms that confuse the mind, or had seen some dreadful apparition. They were all overcome by terror, as if their hearts had fainted. And when night fell, the panic spread through the city and their fears would not let them sleep.

In the morning the Spaniards told Motecuhzoma what they needed in the way of supplies: tortillas, fried chickens, hens’ eggs, pure water, firewood and charcoal. Also: large, clean cooking pots, water jars, pitchers, dishes and other pottery. Motecuhzoma ordered that it be sent to them. The chiefs who received this order were angry with the king and no longer revered or respected him. But they furnished the Spaniards with all the provisions they needed—food, beverages and water, and fodder for the horses.

The Spaniards Reveal Their Greed

When the Spaniards were installed in the palace, they asked Motecuhzoma about the city’s resources and reserves and about the warriors’ ensigns and shields. They questioned him closely and then demanded gold.

Motecuhzoma guided them to it. They surrounded him and crowded close with their weapons. He walked in the center, while they formed a circle around him.

When they arrived at the treasure house called Teucalco,
in, but the
cattered in
as if their
n spread
weak
chickens,
also: large,
other pot-
The chiefs
no longer
ards with
and
lace, they
erves and
ioned him
unded him
ked in the
Teucalco,

The Spaniards Melting Gold Objects (Codex Florentino)
sixty-seven
the riches of gold and feathers were brought out to them: ornaments made of quetzal feathers, richly worked shields, disks of gold, the necklaces of the idols, gold nose plugs, gold greaves and bracelets and crowns.

The Spaniards immediately stripped the feathers from the gold shields and ensigns. They gathered all the gold into a great mound and set fire to everything else, regardless of its value. Then they melted down the gold into ingots. As for the precious green stones, they took only the best of them; the rest were snatched up by the Tlaxcaltecas. The Spaniards searched through the whole treasure house, questioning and quarreling, and seized every object they thought was beautiful.

The Seizure of Motecuhzoma's Treasures

Next they went to Motecuhzoma's storehouse, in the place called Totocalco [Place of the Palace of the Birds], where his personal treasures were kept. The Spaniards grinned like little beasts and patted each other with delight.

When they entered the hall of treasures, it was as if they had arrived in Paradise. They searched everywhere and coveted everything; they were slaves to their own greed. All of Motecuhzoma's possessions were brought out: fine bracelets, necklaces with large stones, ankle rings with little gold bells, the royal crowns and all the royal finery—everything that belonged to the king and was reserved to him only. They seized these treasures as if they were their own, as if this plunder were merely a stroke of good luck. And when they had taken all the gold, they heaped up everything else in the middle of the patio.
La Malinche called the nobles together. She climbed up to the palace roof and cried: "Mexicanos, come forward! The Spaniards need your help! Bring them food and pure water. They are tired and hungry; they are almost fainting from exhaustion! Why do you not come forward? Are you angry with them?"

The Mexicans were too frightened to approach. They were crushed by terror and would not risk coming forward. They shied away as if the Spaniards were wild beasts, as if the hour were midnight on the blackest night of the year. Yet they did not abandon the Spaniards to hunger and thirst. They brought them whatever they needed, but shook with fear as they did so. They delivered the supplies to the Spaniards with trembling hands, then turned and hurried away.

1 Military title given to a warrior who had captured four enemies.
2 The zoological garden attached to the royal palaces.
Chapter Nine

The Massacre in the Main Temple During the Fiesta of Toxcatl

Introduction

Several indigenous texts—the Codex Ramírez, the XIII relaci{on} of Alva Ixtlixochitl and the Codex Aubin—describe the massacre perpetrated during the fiesta of Toxcatl, which the Aztecs celebrated in honor of the god Huitzilopochtli. “This was the most important of their fiestas,” wrote Sahagun. “It was like our Easter and fell at almost the same time.”

Cortes had been absent from the city for twenty days when the massacre took place; he had gone out to fight Panfilo de Narváez, who was coming to arrest him by order of Diego Velázquez, governor of Cuba. Cortes’ deputy, Pedro de Alvarado,
treacherously murdered the celebrants when the festival was at its height.

We have chosen two different accounts of the massacre, both written originally in Nahuatl. They describe it with a realism comparable to that of the great epic poems of classical antiquity.

The first account, by Sahagún's native informants, tells of the preparations for the fiesta, the sudden attack by the Spaniards in the midst of the ceremonies and the retaliation by the Indians, who besieged the Spaniards when they took refuge in Motecuhzoma's palace.

The second brief account is by the native author of the Codex Aubin. “From a literary standpoint,” says Dr. Garibay, “the passage is of extraordinary merit. It shows us the living, suffering people of Tenochtitlan as they faced the attack of the Tonatiuh (Alvarado), who was as handsome as he was wicked.”

The Preparations for the Fiesta

The Aztecs begged permission of their king to hold the fiesta of Huitzilopochtli. The Spaniards wanted to see this fiesta to learn how it was celebrated. A delegation of the celebrants came to the palace where Motecuhzoma was a prisoner, and when their spokesman asked his permission, he granted it to them.

As soon as the delegation returned, the women began to grind seeds of the chicalote.¹ These women had fasted for a whole year. They ground the seeds in the patio of the temple.

The Spaniards came out of the palace together, dressed in armor and carrying their weapons with them. They stalked among the women and looked at them one by one; they stared into the faces of the women who were grinding seeds. After

seven-one
this cold inspection, they went back into the palace. It is said that they planned to kill the celebrants if the men entered the patio.

The Statue of Huitzilopochtli

On the evening before the fiesta of Toxcatl, the celebrants began to model a statue of Huitzilopochtli. They gave it such a human appearance that it seemed the body of a living man. Yet they made the statue with nothing but a paste made of the ground seeds of the chicalote, which they shaped over an armature of sticks.

When the statue was finished, they dressed it in rich feathers, and they painted crossbars over and under its eyes. They also clipped on its earrings of turquoise mosaic; these were in the shape of serpents, with gold rings hanging from them. Its nose plug, in the shape of an arrow, was made of gold and was inlaid with fine stones.

They placed the magic headdress of hummingbird feathers on its head. They also adorned it with an anecuyotl, which was a belt made of feathers, with a cone at the back. Then they hung around its neck an ornament of yellow parrot feathers, fringed like the locks of a young boy. Over this they put its nettle-leaf cape, which was painted black and decorated with five clusters of eagle feathers.

Next they wrapped it in its cloak, which was painted with skulls and bones, and over this they fastened its vest. The vest was painted with dismembered human parts: skulls, ears, hearts, intestines, torsos, breasts, hands and feet. They also put on its maxtlatl, or loincloth, which was decorated with images of seventy-two

disservered was painte
They on its hea
was made
The rated with
this shield
The statue
Final made of of strips.

The

Early by those gathered
of food, s they did
All t
They had the Spania

The temple pa
were all t
Those w fasted for
dancers urinate, ha
at the hip
dissevered limbs and fringed with amate paper. This *maxlatl* was painted with vertical stripes of bright blue.

They fastened a red paper flag at its shoulder and placed on its head what looked like a sacrificial flint knife. This too was made of red paper; it seemed to have been steeped in blood.

The statue carried a *tehuehuelli*, a bamboo shield decorated with four clusters of fine eagle feathers. The pendant of this shield was blood-red, like the knife and the shoulder flag. The statue also carried four arrows.

Finally, they put the wristbands on its arms. These bands, made of coyote skin, were fringed with paper cut into little strips.

---

**The Beginning of the Fiesta**

Early the next morning, the statue’s face was uncovered by those who had been chosen for that ceremony. They gathered in front of the idol in single file and offered it gifts of food, such as round seedcakes or perhaps human flesh. But they did not carry it up to its temple on top of the pyramid.

All the young warriors were eager for the fiesta to begin. They had sworn to dance and sing with all their hearts, so that the Spaniards would marvel at the beauty of the rituals.

The procession began, and the celebrants filed into the temple patio to dance the Dance of the Serpent. When they were all together in the patio, the songs and the dance began. Those who had fasted for twenty days and those who had fasted for a year were in command of the others; they kept the dancers in file with their pine wands. (If anyone wished to urinate, he did not stop dancing, but simply opened his clothing at the hips and separated his clusters of heron feathers.)

*seventy-three*
If anyone disobeyed the leaders or was not in his proper place they struck him on the hips and shoulders. Then they drove him out of the patio, beating him and shoving him from behind. They pushed him so hard that he sprawled to the ground, and they dragged him outside by the ears. No one dared to say a word about this punishment, for those who had fasted during the year were feared and venerated; they had earned the exclusive title “Brothers of Huitzilopochtli.”

The great captains, the bravest warriors, danced at the head of the files to guide the others. The youths followed at a slight distance. Some of the youths wore their hair gathered into large locks, a sign that they had never taken any captives. Others carried their headdresses on their shoulders; they had taken captives, but only with help.

Then came the recruits, who were called “the young warriors.” They had each captured an enemy or two. The others called to them: “Come, comrades, show us how brave you are! Dance with all your hearts!”

_The Spaniards Attack the Celebrants_

At this moment in the fiesta, when the dance was loveliest and when song was linked to song, the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants. They all ran forward, armed as if for battle. They closed the entrances and passageways, all the gates of the patio: the Eagle Gate in the lesser palace, the Gate of the Canestalk and the Gate of the Serpent of Mirrors. They posted guards so that no one could escape, and then rushed into the Sacred Patio to slaughter the celebrants. They came on foot, carrying their swords and their wooden or metal shields.

They ran in among the dancers, forcing their way to the

*seventy-four*
his proper
Then they
him from
led to the
rs. No one
ese who had
se; they had

aced at the
ollowed at a
thered in-
y captives.
; they had

the young
two. The
ow brave

was loveliest
were siezed
ard, armed
geways, all
alace, the
of Mirrors,
, and then
ants. They
en or metal

way to the

The Massacre in the Main Temple (Codex Duran)

seventy-five
place where the drums were played. They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor.

They attacked all the celebrants, stabbing them, spearing them, striking them with their swords. They attacked some of them from behind, and these fell instantly to the ground with their entrails hanging out. Others they beheaded: they cut off their heads, or split their heads to pieces.

They struck others in the shoulders, and their arms were torn from their bodies. They wounded some in the thigh and some in the calf. They slashed others in the abdomen, and their entrails all spilled to the ground. Some attempted to run away, but their intestines dragged as they ran; they seemed to tangle their feet in their own entrails. No matter how they tried to save themselves, they could find no escape.

Some attempted to force their way out, but the Spaniards murdered them at the gates. Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves. Those who ran into the communal houses were safe there for a while; so were those who lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. But if they stood up again, the Spaniards saw them and killed them.

The blood of the warriors flowed like water and gathered into pools. The pools widened, and the stench of blood and entrails filled the air. The Spaniards ran into the communal houses to kill those who were hiding. They ran everywhere and searched everywhere; they invaded every room, hunting and killing.

\textit{The Aztecs Retaliate}

When the news of this massacre was heard outside the Sacred Patio, a great cry went up: "Mexicanos, come running!"
Bring your spears and shields! The strangers have murdered our warriors!"

This cry was answered with a roar of grief and anger: the people shouted and wailed and beat their palms against their mouths. The captains assembled at once, as if the hour had been determined in advance. They all carried their spears and shields.

Then the battle began. The Aztecs attacked with javelins and arrows, even with the light spears that are used for hunting birds. They hurled their javelins with all their strength, and the cloud of missiles spread out over the Spaniards like a yellow cloak.

The Spaniards immediately took refuge in the palace. They began to shoot at the Mexicans with their iron arrows and to fire their cannons and arquebuses. And they shackled Motecuhzoma in chains.

**The Lament for the Dead**

The Mexicans who had died in the massacre were taken out of the patio one by one and inquiries were made to discover their names. The fathers and mothers of the dead wept and lamented.

Each victim was taken first to his own home and then to the Sacred Patio, where all the dead were brought together. Some of the bodies were later burned in the place called the Eagle Urn, and others in the House of the Young Men.

**Motecuhzoma's Message**

At sunset, Itzcuaauhtzin climbed onto the roof of the palace and shouted this proclamation: "Mexicanos! Tlatelolcas!

*seventy-seven*
Your king, the lord Motecuhzoma, has sent me to speak for him. Mexicanos, hear me, for these are his words to you: ‘We must not fight them. We are not their equals in battle. Put down your shields and arrows.’

“He tells you this because it is the aged who will suffer most, and they deserve your pity. The humblest classes will also suffer, and so will the innocent children who still crawl on all fours, who still sleep in their cradles.

“Therefore your king says: ‘We are not strong enough to defeat them. Stop fighting, and return to your homes.’ Mexicanos, they have put your king in chains; his feet are bound with chains.”

When Itzcuauchtzin had finished speaking, there was a great uproar among the people. They shouted insults at him in their fury, and cried: “Who is Motecuhzoma to give us orders? We are no longer his slaves!” They shouted war cries and fired arrows at the rooftop. The Spaniards quickly hid Motecuhzoma and Itzcuauchtzin behind their shields so that the arrows would not find them.

The Mexicans were enraged because the attack on the captains had been so treacherous: their warriors had been killed without the slightest warning. Now they refused to go away or to put down their arms.

The Spaniards Are Besieged

The royal palace was placed under siege. The Mexicans kept a close watch to prevent anyone from stealing in with food for the Spaniards. They also stopped delivering supplies: they brought them absolutely nothing, and waited for them to die of hunger.

seventy-eight
A few people attempted to communicate with the Spaniards. They hoped to win their favor by giving them advice and information or by secretly bringing them food. But the guards found them and killed them on the spot: they broke their necks or stoned them to death.

Once a group of porters was discovered bringing rabbit skins into the city. They let slip the fact that other persons had been hiding in their midst. Therefore strict orders were issued to maintain a watch over all the roads and causeways leading to the city. The porters themselves had been sent by the chiefs of Ayotzinetepec and Chinantlan. They were only performing their duties, but the guards seized them and put them to death for no reason. They would shout: “Here is another one!” and then kill him. And if they happened to see one of Motecuhzoma’s servants with his glass lip plug, they slaughtered him at once, claiming: “He was bringing food to Motecuhzoma.”

They seized anyone who was dressed like a porter or any other servant. “Here is another traitor,” they would say. “He is bringing news to Motecuhzoma.” The prisoner would try to save his life by pleading with them: “What are you doing, Mexicanos? I am not a traitor!” But they would answer: “Yes, you are. We know you are one of his servants.” And they would immediately put him to death.

They stopped and examined everyone in the same way, studying each man’s face and questioning him about his work. No one could walk out of doors without being arrested and accused. They sentenced a great many people for imaginary crimes; the victims were executed for acts they had never committed. The other servants, therefore, went home and hid themselves. They were afraid to be seen in public: they knew what would happen to them if they fell into the hands of the guards or the other warriors.

seventy-nine
After they had trapped the Spaniards in the palace, the Mexicans kept them under attack for seven days, and for twenty-three days they foiled all their attempts to break out. During this time all the causeways were closed off. The Mexicans tore up the bridges, opened great gaps in the pavement and built a whole series of barricades; they did everything they could to make the causeways impassable. They also closed off the roads by building walls and roadblocks; they obstructed all the roads and streets of the city.

*The Massacre According to the Codex Aubin*

Motecuhzoma said to La Malinche: “Please ask the god to hear me. It is almost time to celebrate the fiesta of Toxcatl. It will last for only ten days, and we beg his permission to hold it. We merely burn some incense and dance our dances. There will be a little noise because of the music, but that is all.”

The Captain said: “Very well, tell him they may hold it.” Then he left the city to meet another force of Spaniards who were marching in this direction. Pedro de Alvarado, called The Sun, was in command during his absence.

When the day of the fiesta arrived, Motecuhzoma said to The Sun: “Please hear me, my lord. We beg your permission to begin the fiesta of our god.”

The Sun replied: “Let it begin. We shall be here to watch it.”

The Aztec captains then called for their elder brothers, who were given this order: “You must celebrate the fiesta as grandly as possible.”

The elder brothers replied: “We will dance with all our might.”
Then Tecatzin, the chief of the armory, said: “Please remind the lord that he is here, not in Cholula. You know how they trapped the Cholultecas in their patio! They have already caused us enough trouble. We should hide our weapons close at hand!”

But Motecuhzoma said: “Are we at war with them? I tell you, we can trust them.”

Tecatzin said: “Very well.”

Then the songs and dances began. A young captain wearing a lip plug guided the dancers; he was Cuatlazol, from Tolnahuac.

But the songs had hardly begun when the Christians came out of the palace. They entered the patio and stationed four guards at each entrance. Then they attacked the captain who was guiding the dance. One of the Spaniards struck the idol in the face, and others attacked the three men who were playing the drums. After that there was a general slaughter until the patio was heaped with corpses.

A priest from the Place of the Canefields cried out in a loud voice: “Mexicanos! Who said we are not at war? Who said we could trust them?”

The Mexicans could only fight back with sticks of wood; they were cut to pieces by the swords. Finally the Spaniards retired to the palace where they were lodged.

1 *Argemone mexicana*, an edible plant, also used in medicines.
2 Jacques Soustelle, in *La Vie quotidienne des Aztèques* (Paris: Hachette, 1955), describes the *mazatl* as “a cloth that was wrapped around the waist, passed between the legs and then tied in front, with the two ends hanging down in front and in back. These ends often had decorative borders or fringes. The *mazatl* was known to the Olmecs and Mayas during the earliest period of which we have any record. At the time of the Conquest, it was worn by all the civilized peoples of Mexico except the Tarascos in the West and the Huastecas in the Northeast, who were considered rather scandalous by the inhabitants of the central valley.”

*eighty-one*
A paper made from the inner bark of several different trees of the genus *Ficus*.

The Aztecs had no cows, horses, pigs or other large domesticated animals. For leather and skins, therefore, they used the hides of deer and of such smaller creatures as the rabbit.

A part of the main temple.
of the genus
ated animals,
and of such

Chapter Ten

The Night of Sorrows

Introduction

After disposing of Pansilo de Narvaez, Cortes returned to the city, his ranks increased by troops from the defeated army. According to Sahagun’s informants (from whose writings this chapter is drawn), the Aztecs planned to fall on him from ambush; but he reached the garrison in Tenochtitlan without hindrance and immediately ordered the cannons to be fired. The Aztecs responded by renewing their attack on the palace. The battle raged for four days. During a lull in the fighting, the Spaniards dragged the dead bodies of Motecuhzoma and Itzcuahtzin to the water's edge. No one knows for certain how Motecuhzoma died.

It soon became obvious to Cortes that he would have to

eighty-three
abandon Tenochtitlan. He withdrew at night, but the retreat was discovered, and the Aztecs avenged themselves for the massacre in the temple patio. They attacked as the Spaniards were fleeing down the Tlacopan (now Tacuba) causeway, and the rout was so disastrous that it has been known ever since as "la noche triste," the Night of Sorrows. Those who escaped the disaster found refuge in the nearby village of Teocalhuayacan, where they were welcomed as friends; but three-fourths of the army had perished in the retreat and in the siege that preceded it.

The chapter concludes with a brief selection from the the XIII relation by Alva Ixtilxochitl.

The Spaniards Abandon the City

At midnight the Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecas came out in closed ranks, the Spaniards going first and the Tlaxcaltecas following. The allies kept very close behind, as if they were crowding up against a wall. The sky was overcast and rain fell all night in the darkness, but it was a gentle rain, more like a drizzle or a heavy dew.

The Spaniards carried portable wooden bridges to cross the canals. They set them in place, crossed over and raised them again. They were able to pass the first three canals—the Tecpantzinco, the Tzapotlan and the Atenchicalco—without being seen. But when they reached the fourth, the Mixcoatechialtitlan, their retreat was discovered.

The Battle Begins

The first alarm was raised by a woman who was drawing water at the edge of the canal. She cried: "Mexicanos, come running!" The "Captain Follow the boats and the warri running!" their lash then to The cause fleeing a Aztecs; the Spaniard of the A...
They are crossing the canal! Our enemies are escaping!"

Then a priest of Huitzilopochtli shouted the call to arms from the temple pyramid. His voice rang out over the city: “Captains, warriors, Mexicanos! Our enemies are escaping! Follow them in your boats. Cut them off, and destroy them!”

When they heard this cry, the warriors leaped into the boats and set out in pursuit. These boats were from the garrisons of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, and were protected by the warriors’ shields. The boatmen paddled with all their might; they lashed the water of the lake until it boiled.

Other warriors set out on foot, racing to Nonohualco and then to Tlacopan to cut off the retreat.

The boats converged on the Spaniards from both sides of the causeway, and the warriors loosed a storm of arrows at the fleeing army. But the Spaniards also turned to shoot at the Aztecs; they fired their crossbows and their arquebuses. The Spaniards and Tlacaltecans suffered many casualties, but many of the Aztec warriors were also killed or wounded.

The Massacre at the Canal of the Toltecs

When the Spaniards reached the Canal of the Toltecs, in Tlatelcayohuacan, they hurled themselves headlong into the water, as if they were leaping from a cliff. The Tlacaltecans, the allies from Tliluhquitepec, the Spanish foot soldiers and horsemen, the few women who accompanied the army—all came to the brink and plunged over it.

The canal was soon choked with the bodies of men and horses; they filled the gap in the causeway with their own eighty-five
The Spaniards and Their Allies Flee Down the Tlacopan (Tlacopan) Causeway (Codex Florentino)
eighty-six
drowned bodies. Those who followed crossed to the other side by walking on the corpses.

When they reached Petlalco, where there was another canal, they crossed over on their portable bridge without being attacked by the Aztecs. They stopped and rested there for a short while, and began to feel more like men again. Then they marched on to Popotla.

Dawn was breaking as they entered the village. Their hearts were cheered by the brightening light of this new day: they thought the horrors of the retreat by night were all behind them. But suddenly they heard war cries and the Aztecs swarmed through the streets and surrounded them. They had come to capture Tlaxcaltecas for their sacrifices. They also wanted to complete their revenge against the Spaniards.

The Aztecs harried the army all the way to Tlacopan. Chimalpopoca, the son of Motecuhzoma, was killed in the action at Tlilyuhcan by an arrow from the crossbows. Tlaltecatzin, the Tepanec prince, was wounded in the same action and died shortly after. He had served the Spaniards as a guide and advisor, pointing out the best roads and short cuts.

The Spaniards Take Refuge in Teocalhueyacan

Then the Spaniards forded a small river called the Tepzolatl. Next they crossed two rivers, the Tepzolac and the Acueco, and stopped in Otoncalpulco, where the temple patio was surrounded by a wooden wall. They rested there in safety, catching their breath and recovering their strength.

While they were resting, the lord of Teocalhueyacan paid them a visit. He was known as The Otomi, a title reserved for...
the nobility. He greeted them and offered them the gifts of food his servants had brought: tortillas, eggs, roast chickens, a few live hens and various kinds of fruit. He placed these offerings in front of the Captain and said: "My lords, you are weary. You have suffered many heartaches. We beg the gods to rest now and enjoy these gifts."

La Malinche said: "My lord, the Captain wishes to know where you are from."

He answered: "Tell our lord that we are from Teocalhuyacan. Tell him that we hope he will visit us."

La Malinche said: "The Captain thanks you. We shall arrive tomorrow or the day after."

\[The Aztecs Recover the Spoils\]

As soon as it was daylight, the Aztecs cleared the dead Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecas out of the canals and stripped them of everything they wore. They loaded the bodies of the Tlaxcaltecas into canoes and took them out to where the rushes grow; they threw them among the rushes without burying them, without giving them another glance.

They also threw out the corpses of the women who had been killed in the retreat. The naked bodies of these women were the color of ripe corn, for they had painted themselves with yellow paint.

But they laid out the corpses of the Spaniards apart from the others; they lined them up in rows in a separate place. Their bodies were as white as the new buds of the canestalk, as white as the buds of the maguey. They also removed the dead "stags" that had carried the "gods" on their shoulders.

eighty-eight
Then they gathered up everything the Spaniards had abandoned in their terror. When a man saw something he wanted, he took it, and it became his property; he hefted it onto his shoulders and carried it home. They also collected all the weapons that had been left behind or had fallen into the canal—the cannons, arquebuses, swords, spears, bows and arrows—along with all the steel helmets, coats of mail and breastplates, and the shields of metal, wood and hide. They recovered the gold ingots, the gold disks, the tubes of gold dust and the *chalchihuites* collars with their gold pendants.

They gathered up everything they could find and searched the waters of the canal with the greatest care. Some of them groped with their hands and others felt about with their feet. Those who went first were able to keep their balance but those who came along behind them all fell into the water.

---

*The Account by Alva Ixtlixochitl*

Cortes turned in the direction of Tenochtitlan and entered the city of Tezcoco. He was received only by a group of knights, because the legitimate sons of King Nezahualpilli had been hidden by their servants, and the other lords were being held by the Aztecs as hostages. He entered Tenochtitlan with his army of Spaniards and allies on the day of St. John the Baptist, without being molested in any way.

The Mexicans gave them everything they needed, but when they saw that Cortes had no intention of leaving the city or of freeing their leaders, they rallied their warriors and attacked the Spaniards. This attack began on the day after Cortes entered the city and lasted for seven days.

*eighty-nine*
On the third day, Motecuhzoma climbed onto the rooftop and tried to admonish his people, but they cursed him and shouted that he was a coward and a traitor to his country. They even threatened him with their weapons. It is said that an Indian killed him with a stone from his sling, but the palace servants declared that the Spaniards put him to death by stabbing him in the abdomen with their swords.

On the seventh day, the Spaniards abandoned the city along with the Tlaxcaltecas, the Huexotzincas and their other allies. They fled down the causeway that leads out to Tlacopan. But before they left, they murdered King Cacama of Tezcoco, his three sisters and two of his brothers.

There are several accounts by Indians who took part in the fighting that ensued. They tell how their warriors killed a great many of the Spaniards and their allies, and how the army took refuge on a mountain near Tlacopan and then marched to Tlaxcala.

According to Bernal Diaz the Spaniards built only one bridge.

Dugout canoes. The Aztecs had no vessels larger than the trees that could be carried down from the forests.

A section of the island city. Tenochtitlan was the main section and gave the city its name.

The portable bridge was left behind when the fury of the Aztec assault turned the Spanish retreat into a headlong flight.

An obvious contradiction. The bridge had already been abandoned before the Spaniards reached the Canal of the Toltecs.

The Tepanecas had been the dominant tribe in the Valley of Mexico about a hundred years before the Conquest, but they had been conquered by an alliance among the cities of Tenochtitlan, Tlacopan and Tezcoco, and had never regained any of their former power.
The Siege of Tenochtitlan

Introduction

The Aztecs, convinced that the Spaniards would never return to Tenochtitlan, celebrated their fiestas again in the traditional manner, and Cuitlahuac was elected king to succeed his brother Motecuhzoma. The Aztec kings were chosen by a council of four lords, representing the four quarters, or phratries, into which the twenty clans of the city were evenly grouped. The council attempted to choose the wisest and bravest man among the brothers, sons and nephews of the previous ruler. Their choice of Cuitlahuac may have been influenced by the fact that he had warned against allowing the Spaniards to enter Tenochtitlan (Chapter 7).

This period of normalcy was soon ended by the terrible
plague that quickly spread through the city. The plague seems to have been an epidemic of smallpox, which was previously unknown among the Indians. One of its victims was the new king himself. Shortly afterward, the Spaniards reappeared. They had rebuilt their army in Tlaxcala and marched to Tlacopan by way of Tezcoco.

A number of indigenous documents describe the siege of the Aztec capital. We have chosen the account given by Sahagun’s native informants in the *Codex Florentino*.

**Tenochtitlan After the Departure of Cortes**

When the Spaniards left Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs thought they had departed for good and would never return. Therefore they repaired and decorated the temple of their god, sweeping it clean and throwing out all the dirt and wreckage.

Then the eighth month\(^1\) arrived, and the Aztecs celebrated it as always.\(^2\) They adorned the impersonators of the gods, all those who played the part of gods in the ceremonies, decked them with necklaces and turquoise masks and dressing them in the sacred clothing. This clothing was made of quetzal feathers, eagle feathers and yellow parrot feathers. The finery of the gods was in the care of the great princes.

**The Plague Ravages the City**

While the Spaniards were in Tlaxcala, a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan. It began to spread during the thirteenth month\(^3\) and lasted for seventy days, striking every-

ninety-two
where in the city and killing a vast number of our people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot.

The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads. They could not lie face down or roll from one side to the other. If they did move their bodies, they screamed with pain.

A great many died from this plague, and many others died of hunger. They could not get up to search for food, and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved to death in their beds.

Some people came down with a milder form of the disease; they suffered less than the others and made a good recovery. But they could not escape entirely. Their looks were ravaged, for wherever a sore broke out, it gouged an ugly pockmark in the skin. And a few of the survivors were left completely blind.

The first cases were reported in Cuatlan. By the time the danger was recognized, the plague was so well established that nothing could halt it, and eventually it spread all the way to Chalco. Then its virulence diminished considerably, though there were isolated cases for many months after. The first victims were stricken during the fiesta of Teotleco, and the faces of our warriors were not clean and free of sores until the fiesta of Panquetzaliztli.

**The Spaniards Return**

And now the Spaniards came back again. They marched here by way of Tezcoco, set up headquarters in Tlacopan and...
then divided their forces. Pedro de Alvarado was assigned the road to the Tlatelolco quarter as his personal responsibility, while Cortes himself took charge of the Coyoacan area and the road from Acachinanco to Tenochtitlan proper. Cortes knew that the captain of Tenochtitlan was extremely brave.

The first battle began outside Tlatelolco, either at the ash pits or at the place called the Point of the Alders, and then shifted to Nonohualco. Our warriors put the enemy to flight and not a single Aztec was killed. The Spaniards tried a second advance but our warriors attacked them from their boats, loosing such a storm of arrows that the Spaniards were forced to retreat again.

Cortes, however, set out for Acachinanco and reached his goal. He moved his headquarters there, just outside the city. Heavy fighting ensued, but the Aztecs could not dislodge him.

The Spaniards Launch Their Brigantines

Finally the ships, a dozen in all, came from Tezcoco and anchored near Acachinanco. Cortes went out to inspect the canals that traversed the causeways, to discover the best passages for his fleet. He wanted to know which were the nearest, the shortest, the deepest, the straightest, so that none of his ships would run aground or be trapped inside. One of the canals across the Xoloco thoroughfare was so twisted and narrow that only two of the smaller ships were able to pass through it.

The Spaniards now decided to attack Tenochtitlan and destroy its people. The cannons were mounted in the ships, the sails were raised and the fleet moved out onto the lake. The flagship led the way, flying a great linen standard with Cortes' coat of arms. The soldiers beat their drums and blew their trumpets; they played their flutes and chirimias and whistles.

ninety-four
Spanish Brigantines Besiege the City (Codex Florentino)
ninetys-five
When the ships approached the Zoquiapan quarter, the common people were terrified at the sight. They gathered their children into the canoes and fled helter-skelter across the lake, moaning with fear and paddling as swiftly as they could. They left all their possessions behind them and abandoned their little farms without looking back.

Our enemies seized all our possessions. They gathered up everything they could find and loaded it into the ships in great bundles. They stole our cloaks and blankets, our battle dress, our tabors and drums, and carried them all away. The Tlatelolcas followed and attacked the Spaniards from their boats but could not save any of the plunder.

When the Spaniards reached Xoloco, near the entrance to Tenochtitlan, they found that the Indians had built a wall across the road to block their progress. They destroyed it with four shots from the largest cannon. The first shot did little harm, but the second split it and the third opened a great hole. With the fourth shot, the wall lay in ruins on the ground.

Two of the brigantines, both with cannons mounted in their bows, attacked a flotilla of our shielded canoes. The cannons were fired into the thick of the flotilla, wherever the canoes were crowded closest together. Many of our warriors were killed outright; others drowned because they were too crippled by their wounds to swim away. The water was red with the blood of the dead and dying. Those who were hit by the steel arrows were also doomed; they died instantly and sank to the bottom of the lake.

Defensive Tactics of the Aztecs

When the Aztecs discovered that the shots from the arquebuses and cannons always flew in a straight line, they no longer ran or in zigzag was about they threw had passed houses, da suddenly a

The found ano warriors v

The had been they had sailed tow distance fr were loaded wall.

The standing, to the other road was that, howl

The Working l wall, the r anything t

ninety-six
The Spaniards Debark

The brigantines came up and anchored nearby. They had been pursuing our war canoes in the open lake, but when they had almost run them down, they suddenly turned and sailed toward the causeway. Now they anchored a short distance from the houses. As soon as the cannons in their bows were loaded again, the soldiers aimed and fired them at the new wall.

The first shot cracked it in a dozen places, but it remained standing. They fired again: this time it cracked from one end to the other and crumpled to the ground. A moment later the road was completely empty. The warriors had all fled when they saw the wall collapsing; they ran blindly, this way and that, howling with fear.

Then the Spaniards debarked and filled in the canal. Working hurriedly, they threw in the stones from the shattered wall, the roof beams and adobe bricks from the nearest houses, anything they could find, until the surface of the fill was level

ninetys-seven
with the causeway. Then a squad of about ten horsemen crossed over it. They galloped to and fro, scouting both sides of the road; they raced and wheeled and clattered back and forth. Soon they were joined by another squad that rode up to support them.

A number of Tlatelolcas had rushed into the palace where Motecuhzoma lived before he was slain. When they came out again, they unexpectedly met the Spanish cavalry. The lead horseman stabbed one of the Tlatelolcas, but the wounded man was able to clutch the lance and cling to it. His friends ran to his aid and twisted it from the Spaniard’s hands. They knocked the horseman from his saddle, beat and kicked him as he lay on his back on the ground, and then cut off his head.

The Spaniards now joined all their forces into one unit and marched together as far as the Eagle Gate, where they set up the cannons they had brought with them. It was called the Eagle Gate because it was decorated with an enormous eagle carved of stone. The eagle was flanked on one side by a stone jaguar; on the other side there was a large honey bear, also of carved stone.

Two rows of tall columns led into the city from this gate. Some of the Aztecs hid behind the columns when they saw the Spaniards and their guns; others climbed onto the roofs of the communal houses. None of the warriors dared to show his face openly.

The Spaniards wasted no time as they loaded and fired the cannons. The smoke belched out in black clouds that darkened the sky, as if night were falling. The warriors hidden behind the columns broke from cover and fled; those on the rooftops climbed down and ran after them. When the smoke cleared away, the Spaniards could not see a single Aztec.
The Spaniards Advance to the Heart of the City

Then the Spaniards brought forward the largest cannon and set it up on the sacrificial stone. The priests of Huitzilopochtli immediately began to beat their great ritual drums from the top of the pyramid. The deep throbbing of the drums resounded over the city, calling the warriors to defend the shrine of their god. But two of the Spanish soldiers climbed the stairway to the temple platform, cut the priests down with their swords and pitched them headlong over the brink.

The great captains and warriors who had been fighting from their canoes now returned and landed. The canoes were paddled by the younger warriors and the recruits. As soon as the warriors landed, they ran through the streets, hunting the enemy and shouting: “Mexicanos, come find them!”

The Spaniards, seeing that an attack was imminent, tightened their ranks and clenched the hilts of their swords. The next moment, all was noise and confusion. The Aztecs charged into the plaza from every direction, and the air was black with arrows and gunsmoke.

The battle was so furious that both sides had to pull back. The Aztecs withdrew to Xoloco to catch their breath and dress their wounds, while the Spaniards retreated to their camp in Acachinanco, abandoning the cannon they had set up on the sacrificial stone. Later the warriors dragged this cannon to the edge of the canal and toppled it in. It sank at a place called the Stone Toad.

The Aztecs Take Refuge

During this time the Aztecs took refuge in the Tlatelolco quarter. They deserted the Tenochtitlan quarters all in one
day, weeping and lamenting like women. Husbands searched for their wives, and fathers carried their small children on their shoulders. Tears of grief and despair streamed down their cheeks.

The Tlatelolcas, however, refused to give up. They raced into Tenochtitlan to continue the fight and the Spaniards soon learned how brave they were. Pedro de Alvarado launched an attack against the Point of the Alders, in the direction of Nonohualco, but his troops were shattered as if he had sent them against a stone cliff. The battle was fought both on dry land and on the water, where the Indians shot at the Spaniards from their shielded canoes. Alvarado was routed and had to draw back to Tlacopan.

On the following day, two brigantines came up loaded with troops, and the Spaniards united all their forces on the outskirts of Nonohualco. The soldiers in the brigantines came ashore and the whole army marched into the very heart of Tenochtitlan. Wherever they went, they found the streets empty, with no Indians anywhere in sight.

The Last Stand

Then the great captain Tzilacatzin arrived, bringing with him three large, round stones of the kind used for building walls. He carried one of them in his hand; the other two hung from his shield. When he hurled these stones at the Spaniards, they turned and fled the city.

Tzilacatzin’s military rank was that of Otomi, and he clipped his hair in the style of the Otomies. He scorned his enemies, Spaniards as well as Indians; they all shook with terror at the mere sight of him.

one hundred

When they tried their sword arquebuses, to kill or prevent the rest of that he was armor, with other times victims into bol on its circular bar. The brought the place called foot, along ranks, they The hualco. No escaped hair was grievor all night. Only temptuous their own s second, Te. At lasting. After drew to the behind.

one hundred
When the Spaniards found out how dangerous he was, they tried desperately to kill him. They attacked him with their swords and spears, fired at him with their crossbows and arquebuses, and tried every other means they could think of to kill or cripple him. Therefore he wore various disguises to prevent them from recognizing him.

Sometimes he wore his lip plug, his gold earrings and all the rest of his full regalia, but left his head uncovered to show that he was an Otomi. At other times he wore only his cotton armor, with a thin kerchief wrapped around his head. At still other times, he put on the finery of the priests who cast the victims into the fire; a plumed headdress with the eagle symbol on its crest, and gleaming gold bracelets on both arms, and circular bands of gleaming gold on both ankles.

The Spaniards came back again the next day. They brought their ships to a point just off Nonohualco, close to the place called the House of Mist. Their other troops arrived on foot, along with the Tlaxcaltecas. As soon as they had formed ranks, they charged the Aztec warriors.

The heaviest fighting began when they entered Nonohualco. None of our enemies and none of our own warriors escaped harm. Everyone was wounded, and the toll of the dead was grievous on both sides. The struggle continued all day and all night.

Only three captains never retreated. They were contemptuous of their enemies and gave no thought whatever to their own safety. The first of these heroes was Tzoyectzin; the second, Temocztzin; and the third, the great Tzilacatzin.

At last the Spaniards were too exhausted to keep on fighting. After one final attempt to break the Aztec ranks, they withdrew to their camp to rest and recover, with their allies trailing behind.

**one hundred and one**
1 Corresponding to June 22—July 11 in our calendar. The Aztec year was divided into eighteen months (group of twenty days) plus five unlucky days called nemontemi.

2 The first day of the eighth month was the fiesta of Huixtocihuatl, goddess of salt.

3 September 30—October 19.

4 The twelfth month, September 10—29.

5 The fifteenth month, November 9—28.

6 These vessels were built in Tlaxcala, dismantled, carried piece by piece to Lake Texcoco, then put together again and launched. The sails, rigging and ironwork were brought from the Gulf coast, where they had been stored since the march inland. Cortes ordered the fleet built because the disastrous Night of Sorrows had taught him the danger of using the causeways without having domination of the lake.

7 Double-reed woodwinds, similar to shepherd’s pipes; precursors of the modern oboe.

8 In the southwestern section of the island city.

9 Closer to Tenochtitlan than Xoloco, on the same avenue.

10 Although Tlatelolco had become a part of Tenochtitlan by the time of the Conquest, it had once been an independent city and still retained its name and its local pride. The majority of Sahagun’s informants were Tlatelolcas, and in this passage they may be glorifying their home quarter at the expense of Tenochtitlan proper.

11 See Chapter 5, note 1.

12 In the ceremony honoring the fire god, Huehuetotl, bound captives were hurled into a great bonfire. Before they could die, the priests dragged them out with hooks, cut open their chests and tore out their hearts.