PART ONE

Introduction: Civilizations in Conflict

The history of European expansion includes few stories of drama and tragedy equal to the Spanish conquest of Mexico and the fall of the great indigenous empire that controlled its heartland. In 1519 Hernán Cortés and a small contingent of Spanish adventurers arrived on the Mexican coast, and eventually encountered a great imperial state that was heir to a long tradition of civilization that dominated the land and held sway over millions of people. Within only three years that empire was destroyed, its ruler captured, the foundations of its cultural traditions toppled and hundreds of thousands of its people dead from warfare, famine, and disease (see Figure 1). Those who remained struggled to survive and adapt to the new Spanish colonial regime and to a new religion, Catholicism. In many ways the conquest represented both the death of a political state, or more exactly states, and much of their way of life and the birth of a new colonial regime in its place.

A LONG TRADITION: THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF MESOAMERICA

The Mexica were not the only people who occupied the lands of central Mexico, but they were the most powerful. Their story has come to symbolize what happened to all the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica (the cultural region that extended from north central Mexico southward to modern Nicaragua). One of the reasons for their representative role
Figure 1. Moctezuma in shackles next to a broken crown and broken weapons. Cortés holds the crucifix and his translator, doña Marina, supports the symbol of Tenochtitlan-Mexico.

Source: Relaciones geográficas del Siglo XVI: Tlaxcala, ed. René Acuña (Mexico City: UNAM, 1984). The original manuscript is in the Hunterian Museum Library, University of Glasgow. Glasgow University Library, Department of Special Collections.

surely has been the survival of a Mexica version of these events that parallels, confirms, and contradicts the Spanish accounts. The Mexica and the related peoples of Mexico had their own system of recording and remembering events through a combination of pictographic representation and oral history. It was after the conquest that they learned to write both in Spanish and in their own language, Nahuatl, using the Roman
alphabet. Because of these traditions and skills, there exists, perhaps more so than for any other indigenous people of the time, a written record of Nahua views and perceptions.

The Mexica who ruled central Mexico from their island capital, Tenochtitlan, were the inheritors of ancient cultural traditions. Agrarian societies based on the cultivation of maize and other crops had developed in Mexico and Central America in the centuries before the birth of Christ and had reached an apogee of cultural attainments between 600 and 900 C.E. in what has been called Mesoamerica’s Classic Era. In southern Mexico, the Yucatan peninsula, Guatemala, and other regions of Central America, the Maya peoples created a number of flourishing city-states. At places like Tikal (Guatemala), Copán (Honduras), and Palenque (Mexico) great advances were made in architecture, sculpture, mathematics, and astronomy. A complex writing system was developed that only recently has begun to yield to researchers the content of the inscriptions that cover Maya buildings, monuments, and pottery. At roughly the same time, farther to the north, beyond the Maya-speaking area, the great city of Teotihuacán, not far from modern-day Mexico City, developed its own distinctive culture that spread through conquest, trade, and missionary activity to other regional centers in Mesoamerica. For reasons still not fully understood, the classic Maya cities were abandoned (ninth century C.E.) and Teotihuacán first fell into decline and then to invaders around 750 C.E. By about 900 to 1000 C.E., the Classic Era had ended and a period of instability followed. (See Map 1.)

Although the reasons for the end of the Classic Era are much debated, pressure from outside forces was an important factor, especially in central Mexico. For example, nomadic peoples or those who had been brought under Teotihuacán’s influence constantly exerted pressure from the north on the stable agricultural areas in order to secure more resources. After Teotihuacán’s fall, one of the invading groups, the Toltecs, established their capital at Tula (Tollan) in the modern state of Hidalgo. By military means, the Toltecs established control over much of central Mexico and their influence eventually reached as far as the Maya cities of Yucatan. Yet by 1175 C.E. the Toltecs succumbed, apparently once again to new waves of peoples from the north.

During these cycles of imperial formation and dissolution, the Toltecs were especially important for the subsequent history of Mexico. The historical memory of the peoples who came after the Toltecs extended back to Tula and its glory but did not reach back to Teotihuacán. For the Mexico and others who came later, the Toltecs were transformed into the legendary creators of all the good things of civilized life: agriculture, crafts-
manshiep, the arts, the calendar, and so forth. Claiming descent from the Toltecs, as the families in some of the later cities did, gave their descendants legitimacy, authority, and political advantage. The legends of the Toltecs and their gods became a crucial element in the way later peoples viewed their world and their place in it.

After the fall of Tula, central Mexico was without a central authority. Many peoples lived there, speaking a variety of languages — Otomi, Tarascan, Totonac, and especially Nahuatl, apparently also the language of the Toltecs. The Nahua shared many cultural elements, but they were divided politically into a number of separate peoples or ethnicities, each organized around a city-state or altepetl, only a few of which could claim descent from the Toltec nobility. By the twelfth century, the population had concentrated around Lake Texcoco, a series of brackish and freshwater lakes in the central valley of Mexico. Larger cities like Azcapotzalco and Texcoco clashed and struggled for regional dominance and control of the agricultural lands around the margins of the lake. It was into this turbulent and competitive world that another Nahuatl-speaking group, probably immigrants from the northern frontiers, arrived. These
were the Tenochca or Mexica, a group of perhaps 10,000 people who, according to their legends, followed their patron deity Huitzilopochtli, the Hummingbird of the South — a form of the sun god — to the shores of the lake.1

The story of the Mexica’s rapid rise to power is a mixture of legend, myth, and history. From their mythic home, Aztlan, somewhere to the northwest, the Mexica migrated to the world of the lake around the year 1250 C.E. Driven to marginal lands, they were despised by the settled peoples of the lake, but they were sometimes used as mercenaries in the internecine fighting. Eventually, around 1325 C.E., they settled themselves on adjoining marshy islands in the midst of the lake. There, according to legend, they saw an eagle perched on a cactus devouring a snake, a sign from the gods, and so established their capital city, Tenochtitlan. From the security of this base, they established a political foothold in the surrounding area, first as dependents of Azcatzapotzalco but increasingly on their own. By the early fifteenth century, the Mexica had emerged from a subordinate role to one of increasing power. Under their ruler or tlatoani (speaker) Itzcoatl (1426–1440) and later under Moctezuma I (1440–1468), the Mexica controlled much of central Mexico and neighboring peoples like the Totonacs on the Gulf coast and the Mixtecs to the south in Oaxaca. By 1470 the Mexica had become the dominant power of central Mexico, extracting tribute from peoples who lived hundreds of miles away.

The process of Mexica imperial expansion was accompanied by increasing centralization and by changes within Mexica society itself. Perhaps under the influence of Tlacaehlel, who served as a sort of prime minister under a number of rulers over a sixty-year period, the cult of warfare and sacrifice became part of the Mexica way of life as society was militarized. Victories were celebrated with great pomp and display and with the ritual sacrifice of many captives. The old clan or calpulli system that survived from their nomadic days continued, but was transformed as the division between the nobility or pipiltin and the mostly peasant commoners (macehualtin) grew ever wider. Politically, Tenochtitlan conquered and then integrated the neighboring island city of Tlatelolco. Its people were also Mexica but they continued to maintain a separate local identity as Tlatelolcans. Tenochtitlan then created an

alliance with the lakeside cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan. Despite the alliance, Tenochtitlan always remained the predominant power. Some neighboring peoples remained politically independent and hostile to the Mexica. The Tarascans in Michoacán to the north were never conquered, and other Nahua to the east in cities such as Tlaxcala, Hueyotzinco, and Meztitlán remained bitter enemies. In the beginning decades of the sixteenth century the Mexica empire had reached its greatest extent but its power, while real, was also fragile. Subject peoples were restive and occasionally rebelled; traditional enemies continued to pose a formidable threat to their rule. The stability of the ruling alliance itself was precarious as court factions and ruling families jockeyed for advantage in each of the cities where Tenochtitlan's partners looked with envy and fear on its power.

**TENOCHTITLAN: THE FOUNDATION OF HEAVEN**

In these years, prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, Tenochtitlan grew in status and size. This city, a backdrop to much of the story of the conquest, was in comparative terms a world-class city. To the Mexica it was "the foundation of heaven," the political, symbolic, and ritual center of their universe. From humble beginnings as the marginal settlement of a marginal people, Tenochtitlan became a mighty metropolis covering approximately five square miles with a population estimated to be as high as 150,000 people. Its core was a central complex of palaces and temples surrounded by an enclosing wall. This central temple precinct was dominated by a sixty-meter-high great pyramid with twin temples, one to Tlaloc, the rain god, and one to Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of the Mexica. Around it were grouped some seventy to eighty other palaces and temples, including the ruler's residence and the school for the priesthood. Beyond the enclosing wall were other palaces, temples, markets, and the adobe residential buildings, some of them two stories high with gardens on their roofs. The architecture and craftsmanship, especially of the public buildings was remarkable. "It could not be bettered anywhere," noted one Spanish eyewitness. Tlatelolco, at first a separate city on an adjacent island was eventually incorporated as part of greater Tenochtitlan. It too had palaces, temples, and markets, but was most famous for its great marketplace.

Because of its location in the midst of the water and its maze of canals, a number of the first Spanish visitors to Tenochtitlan compared the city to Venice. The island location gave the city its peculiar character with the constant traffic of canoes carrying goods to and from the city. Fresh
Map 2. The valley of Mexico.

Source: Adapted from Figure 12 in Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism by Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 1995), 12. Reprinted with permission.
water was supplied by aqueducts, and away from the city center many families farmed “floating gardens” or chinampas, rectangular plots of silt on which multiple harvests could be made in a single year in a kind of hydroponic agriculture. A dike had been constructed to hold out the brackish waters of the eastern side of the lake and protect crops near the city. Four great causeways extended from the lake shore to connect the city to the other cities and towns that surrounded the lake. Bernal Díaz, the young soldier who saw the city in 1519 gave voice to the awe that many of his companions felt:

Gazing on such wonderful sights, we did not know what to say, or whether what appeared before us was real, for on one side, on the land there were great cities, and in the lake ever so many more, and the lake was crowded with canoes, and in the causeway were many bridges at intervals, and in front of us stood the great city of Mexico.

But Tenochtitlan was much more than Bernal Díaz perceived. In many ways it was also a plan of the Mexica social and religious universe. Its causeways represented the four cardinal directions. Neighborhoods were organized in pairs of twenty communal corporate groups or calpulli and in temple-maintenance groups, each with its own temple and school to look after. Thus, the cosmology and calendar were physically represented by the city’s organization and by the placement of different sectors of the population.

The tlatoani of Tenochtitlan was in theory just another ruler of an altepetl, like the rulers of the fifty or so other city-states, but the Mexica’s swift rise to power had made their tlatoani far more powerful and important than the others. Tenochtitlan had become a great urban center rivaling Venice, Seville, or Paris in complexity and size. The Tenochtitlan of 1519, in the autumn of Mexica greatness, seemed to be an impregnable fortress and a symbol of the very favor of the gods. Little did the Mexica suspect that in three short years it would be mostly destroyed. Bernal Díaz reflected on the loss of the city as he wrote his account in the 1560s, “today all is overthrown and lost, nothing is left standing.”

MEXICA CIVILIZATION AND SOCIETY

Certain aspects of Mexica culture repeatedly emerge in the story of the conquest and deserve close attention. Mexica religion was a powerful and unifying force that penetrated every aspect of life and shaped their world in innumerable ways. Like many other religious traditions, the Mexica were concerned with the basic issues of human existence: What
is life? What constitutes moral behavior? Is there life after death? What is the proper relationship between human beings and the gods? Reli-
gious thinkers and philosophers wondered if the pleasures of this life
were transient or if life was simply a “veil of tears.” As part of the great
Mesoamerican tradition, Mexica religion had a complex cosmology and
mythology that sought to explain the existence of the universe and the
relationships within it. For the Mexica, little distinction was made be-
tween the natural and the supernatural world. They knew and honored
the ancient Mesoamerican gods: the deities of the sky, the earth, the
corn, and the sun. Although there was recognition of a unifying life-
giving force, there was a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses. Often the
same basic force could manifest itself in male and female forms. Xoch-
pilli, the god of sport and leisure, for example, was really the male form
of Xochiquetel, the goddess of beauty and eroticism. This extensive pan-
theon was honored through the yearly religious calendar by complex
ritual and ceremonial activities of feasting, fasting, dancing, penance,
and sacrifice.

The many gods and goddesses can perhaps be grouped into three ma-
jor categories. As an agricultural people, the Mexica gave particular
devotion to the gods of the earth and of fertility, to gods like Tlaloc, god of
rain, or his sister Chicomecoatl, the goddess of maize. A second group
consisted of the creator deities who had brought the universe into being
and whose actions formed the core of Mexica cosmology and mythol-
ogy. Tonatiuh, the sun god, and Tezcatlipoca, god of the night sky, were
especially important. Finally, there were the deities who formed part of
the cult of war and sacrifice. Chief among them was the Mexica’s main
patron, a form of the sun god, the Hummingbird of the South, Huitzilo-
pochtli.

The great deities of the imperial cult were the first to be recognized
by the Europeans. The Spaniards looked with fear and horror at the
great temple of Tenochtitlan dedicated to Tlaloc and to Huitzilopochtli,
whom they called Huichilobos. But above all, in the story of the con-
quest, Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, god of the wind, of creation,
and of civilization, figures most prominently.

Quetzalcoatl, an ancient god of the sky and wind, had been worshiped
by the Toltecs. Apparently one of their kings or priests, Topiltzin, also
had taken his name; from that point forward, god and man became con-
fused in legend and history. Eventually, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl left or was
forced from Tula in a power struggle with the followers of another deity.
With his followers, Topiltzin migrated down to the coast where accord-
ing to legend he departed on a raft made of snakes for “the Red Land,”
or Yucatan. In fact after 990 C.E. evidence of a Toltec presence and the
cult of the Feathered Serpent are widely found in Yucatan. The god Quetzalcoatl came to represent the arts and civilization and he was suppos-
edly opposed to human sacrifice. Because of his special importance to
the Toltecs, he also was worshiped by the Mexica who wished to claim
legitimacy not only based on their military prowess but as cultural de-
scendants of the ancient Toltecs. To that end, Moctezuma Xocoyotzin
(Moctezuma II) built a great temple to Quetzalcoatl in Tenochtitlan.

Two aspects of the feathered serpent legend bear special notice. First,
there was a belief that Quetzalcoatl would someday return to reclaim his
position and lands. He had been born in the year Ce Acatl one-Reed and
had supposedly left in the year one-Reed as well, exactly fifty-two years
later, or one cycle of the Mexica calendar. Curiously, the year of Cortés’s
arrival, 1519, also corresponded to the year one-Reed in the Mexica cal-
endar. Second, in some of the legends Quetzalcoatl was described as
white or bearded. In fact, it is difficult to know whether these legends
were truly part of Mexica mythology before the conquest or whether
they were developed afterward to explain events. In the indigenous ac-
counts of the conquest, the idea that Cortés might be the returning
Quetzalcoatl is used to explain Moctezuma’s seeming inaction, confu-
sion, and failure of his leadership. Yet the Mexica claimed to be the
successors of the Toltecs and they believed Tenochtitlan to be the new
Tula. This may have made their ruler particularly susceptible to prophecies
about the ancient deity-ruler who would someday return to claim his
throne.

Here the knot of legend and history becomes even more difficult to
untie because of the embroideries and glosses that Nahua commentators
added to the story after the conquest. Perhaps in an effort to please
Spanish overlords and missionaries, Nahua informants and later histori-
ans claimed that the Quetzalcoatl of the myths was a bearded white man
who opposed human sacrifice and the cult of war. Seeking to explain
Moctezuma’s vacillation in the face of the Spanish challenge, the Nahua
historians claimed that he truly believed Cortés to be the returning god-
ruler that the prophecies foretold. Cortés’s letters contain no mention of
this theme, but the later Nahua accounts and those of the Spanish chronic-
lers like Bernal Díaz usually mention it. Cortés’s arrival in the year one-
Reed is either the fulfillment of prophecy, extraordinary coincidence,
the later Nahua construction of a tale to fit the circumstances, or the in-
tentional use of the Mesoamerican calendar and legends to bolster Span-
ish claims.

When the Spaniards arrived in central Mexico, they encountered a
great civilization with a powerful political and military force. Warfare for
the Mexica served as a political tool but it was also a way of life with deep ritual and religious meaning. The Mexica mobilized large armies and sent them long distances despite logistical problems caused by their lack of wheeled vehicles and beasts of burden. Mexica armies usually campaigned in the dry season from December to April when the roads were better and the peasants who comprised the bulk of the troops were free from labor in the fields. This was also the time when food was available to support the army along its march. The armies were led by distinguished warriors whose accomplishments were recognized by specific uniforms, decorative clothing, hairstyles, and other symbols. There were military organizations of distinguished warriors, the Eagle warriors, the Jaguar warriors, similar in some respects to the medieval European orders of knighthood. Although sometimes a simple threat of force was often enough to gain submission, faced with resistance, the Mexica were an implacable foe. From the comments of their hostile neighbors and from the Spanish observations it is clear that the Mexica were a powerful and dreaded military threat.

This was a society geared toward warfare. Boys were prepared from birth for a warrior's life and death and inculcated with military virtues. Military accomplishment was the measure of manhood and a means of social mobility. While campaigns had political goals, there was also a strong individual component. While the Nahua peoples had projectile weapons like slings and bows and arrows, their preferred weapons were those for close combat where individual skill and bravery could best be demonstrated. Their primary weapon was a kind of wooden sword set with obsidian blades designed for slashing and incapacitating rather than killing an enemy. In this way battle was a scene for personal demonstrations of bravery where the individual taking of a captive was the greatest achievement. These were formidable weapons. Spanish accounts tell of a horse's head lopped off by a blow from one.

The Mexica believed that the gods, especially the sun god, required "precious water," or human blood, to nourish them. The best and most noble sacrifice as a messenger to the gods was that of a warrior taken in battle. Thus the presentation of captives for sacrifice was a main goal of battle and an occasion of great religious significance surrounded by ritual obligations and responsibilities. These sacrifices were usually accompanied by a strict set of observances including forms of ritual cannibalism. As the Mexica and their allies controlled more and more of the country and subjected additional neighbors to their control, it became difficult to find suitable warrior opponents. "Barbarian" nomads from the frontiers were held in low esteem and were not viewed as worthy opponents or sacrifices. Therefore, war with other Nahua peoples who
were political opponents but who shared the same culture as the Mexica
was considered best. Sometimes they fought in arranged battles or
*xochiyayotl* ("flower wars") designed for each side to demonstrate its
valor and to have the opportunity to take appropriate captives for
sacrifice. The cities of Tlaxcala, Huejotzinco, and Cholula, all of which
joined Cortés as allies, were traditional opponents in these flower wars.

Despite the Mexica's experience in warfare their military objectives,
weapons, tactics, and experience put them at a decided disadvantage in
the face of Spanish steel and Spanish objectives even though they out-
numbered the Spaniards. The Mexica could not compete with Spanish
artillery, steel weapons, crossbows, and firearms, although they quickly
learned to adjust their tactics. They sought terrain that neutralized the
advantage the Spaniards gained with horses, and they learned to avoid
the firearms' line of fire. Transforming their concept of battle and the
goals of warfare itself, however, was a more difficult change to make.

**RENAISSANCE CONQUERORS**

The Spaniards themselves represented a society no less impressive or
interesting than the Mexica, a society of transition from the late Middle
Ages to the Renaissance. The Iberian peninsula had been part of the Ro-
man Empire, and that experience was reflected in its language, laws, and
customs, as were the Germanic traditions brought by later invaders.
Above all, perhaps more so than any other place in Western Europe,
Spain had been for some seven centuries a multicultural region where
Muslims, Christians, and Jews had lived in close and continuous if often
hostile contact and proximity. At the close of the fifteenth century, how-
ever, that coexistence was ending. In 1492, Granada, the last Muslim
kingdom, fell to Catholic arms. A few months later the Jews were forced
to either convert or leave the country. With these events, the Christian
kingdoms of the peninsula — independent Portugal to the west, Aragon
to the east, and the largest of all, Castile, in the center — were now free
of internal religious challenge. In 1485 the unification of Aragon and
Castile under the same monarchs created the political basis of modern
Spain.

Religious unification was seen as a necessary element in the same
process. Spain had undergone considerable religious reform, and in 1479
Spain established the Inquisition to insure and enforce the orthodoxy of
society, especially of those recently converted from Judaism and Islam.

The last two decades of the fifteenth century had been a time of poli-
tical and religious consolidation and of war. The final struggle against
the Muslim kingdom of Granada was primarily a war of small-scale raids and the seizing of booty and captives. Campaigns had mobilized thousands of young men and convinced them to make their fortune through military prowess, courage, and skill. Throughout Europe the use of arms and horses was a privilege of the nobility, but in Spain many young men of common birth knew these skills and used them to their advantage. By the early sixteenth century, through Aragon’s interests in Italy, Spain also had become involved in further conflicts and these wars provided additional military experience.

Meanwhile, the voyages of Columbus beginning in 1492 had opened up a new outlet for Spanish interest and activity. The conquest, colonization, and exploitation of the Caribbean was fully under way by 1500. The Spaniards explored the islands and coasts of their territories and established control of the major islands along with a few places on the mainland: Española or Hispaniola (1493–1508), Puerto Rico (1508), Jamaica (1509), Cuba (1511), and Panamá or Castilla de Oro (1509–13). The indigenous populations were quickly defeated, suffering rapid decline as a result of war, exploitation, and the impact of Old World diseases. Each conquest further raised individual Spanish hopes of fame and fortune, and all were justified as expeditions that extended the sovereignty of the Spanish crown and the truth of the Roman Catholic faith. With each conquest a few, usually the leaders and their close associates—friends, relatives, or those from their home province in Spain—reaped the rewards, but many others were left unsatisfied. There never seemed to be enough treasure. The crown always received its 20 percent and the “Indians” assigned to the control of the conquerors often resisted imposed control or disappeared quickly in the face of disease, mistreatment, and social disruption. Cortés’s expedition to the mainland of Mexico was in no way unusual. It followed two earlier ones which had gone westward from Cuba to nearby Yucatan, about 120 miles away, in search of new islands and new kingdoms to conquer. The difference was not in the expedition’s leadership, composition, or goals, but in the nature of the indigenous peoples encountered. In Yucatan and Mexico the Spaniards encountered for the first time ancient civilizations that were structured in hierarchical societies, organized in large kingdoms, and willing to defend their way of life.

In many ways the Spaniards and the Mexica were well-suited opponents. Both were the heirs of a long process of cultural development and fusion, both had a warrior ethos, both held fervently to a religious faith, and both justified their imperial expansion in terms of theological ideals. However, despite all their remarkable achievements, the peoples of
Mesoamerica, like the Mexica, remained essentially Stone Age civilizations. Metallurgy was limited, the wheel had no practical applications, there were no large beasts of burden, and other technologies known in the Old World like the milling of grain by mechanical means were unknown in the Americas. Nothing like the great semitheocratic imperial state of the Mexico had been seen in Eurasia since the time of Babylon or Assyria, yet even those empires had the wheel, livestock, horses, and metal tools and weapons. In confrontation with the Europeans, the New World civilizations, for all their size and power, remained at a great technological disadvantage.

Great controversy exists over the size of the indigenous populations when the Europeans arrived. In all estimates, however, central Mexico is usually considered to have been the most densely populated region of the Americas. Most estimates place the population of Tenochtitlan somewhere between 150,000 to 200,000 in the early 1500s. Historical demographers Woodrow Borah and S. F. Cook have estimated that central Mexico alone had a population of about twenty-five million people in 1519. Not all scholars agree and some have placed the estimate at half that figure, but almost all concede that central Mexico was densely populated at the moment of conquest. By 1580, after the conquest and colonization of Mexico, only about one million indigenous people remained. Thus, the process of conquest implied a terrible demographic disaster.²

The size of the invading force of Spaniards is easier to calculate. Various participants spoke of the numbers involved. Bernal Díaz himself noted that Cortés's original expedition had 550 men. Later, with the addition of other Spaniards including a few Spanish women after 1520, Cortés's forces swelled to perhaps over 1,500, but many were lost in subsequent fighting. Before the final siege of Tenochtitlan on April 28, 1521, Cortés reviewed his troops and counted 86 horsemen, 118 musketeers and crossbowmen, and 700 foot soldiers, as well as perhaps another 400 men who manned the ships he built to sail on the lake.

The disparity in numbers makes the Spanish victory particularly impressive, and so the great mystery remains as to the number of indigenous allies that supported the Spaniards. In the first entry into Tenochtitlan, Cortés's forces included perhaps 2,000 Tlaxcalan allies. In the final siege of the city, not only Tlaxcalans, but troops from Huezotzingo, Texcoco, Cholula, and many other towns and cities fought alongside

the Spaniards in the last battles. Cortés himself noted 50,000 Tlaxcalans alone at the final siege and over 75,000 indigenous allies supporting the Spanish units. Bernal Díaz mentioned 100,000 indigenous allies in the engagements. Such figures emphasize the fact that in many ways the conquest of Tenochtitlan and the fall of the Mexica Empire was as much a struggle among indigenous peoples as it was a clash of the Old and New Worlds. Moreover, in terms of scale, the battle for Tenochtitlan was a major military effort, equal to the great contemporaneous battles of the Old World.

THE SPANISH SOURCES

We know a great deal about the conquest of Mexico because participants and observers on both sides recorded their impressions, opinions, and stories. There are a variety of sources from Spaniards who participated directly in the conquest. These accounts reflect the personal, political, economic, and social interests of their authors. Hernán Cortés, the leader of the Spanish expedition wrote a number of reports or “letters” which were sent back to Charles I, the Spanish king. These were quickly published and became the basis of the “official” story of the conquest. Cortés’s observations were realistic and direct, lacking the fantasy found in other, earlier European observations of the New World. Naturally, Cortés’s reports tended to justify his decisions and actions and placed him always in a positive light. Later, Francisco López de Gómara, a distinguished author met Cortés and was hired by him to write a history of the conquest. Using Cortés’s letters, notes, and personal papers, López de Gómara produced in 1553 a laudatory biography, very favorable to his patron. Luckily, these official versions written or paid for by Cortés

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were not the only accounts from the Spanish side. A few of the participants and eyewitnesses also wrote down their experiences. One of these stands out above all the rest and is drawn on extensively for this volume.

It is generally agreed that the great chronicle of the Spanish conquest of Mexico was written by Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Like many of the conquistadors he was not a soldier by profession but he knew the use of arms and he served as a common foot soldier. He had actually gone to Mexico prior to Cortés in two earlier expeditions and later participated in subsequent campaigns, finally settling down in Guatemala where he died around 1580, respected but not very wealthy. The events of his youth marked him deeply and Díaz del Castillo had a remarkable memory and eye for detail which he used effectively in his narrative. By the time he began to write down his version of the conquest he was an old soldier, veteran of the great campaigns of the conquest, and frustrated by the hopes of his youth. He wished to set the record straight about the efforts of the common men like himself who with their blood and steel had delivered heathen souls to the Church and a mighty empire to their king. Here is how Bernal Díaz introduced himself and his book:

I, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, citizen and regidor (alderman) of the most loyal city of Santiago de Guatemala, one of the first discoverers and conquerors of New Spain and its provinces... a Native of the very noble and distinguished town of Medina del Campo, and son of its former regidor, Francisco Díaz del Castillo, who was also called, “the graceful” (may his soul rest in glory), speak about that which concerns myself and all the true conquistadors my companions who served His Majesty by discovering, conquering, pacifying, and settling most of the provinces of New Spain, and that it is one of the best countries yet discovered in the New World, we found this out by our own efforts without His Majesty knowing anything about it.

Here in this introductory paragraph we see some of the motives that drove Díaz and his companions: localism, pride in their lineage and origins, a great sense of self-worth and accomplishment, a hope for recognition (and reward), and a desire to set down a “true” story of their deeds and triumphs.

There are a number of studies of Díaz and his book. See, for example, Carmelo Saenz de Santa María, Historia de una historia: Bernal Díaz del Castillo (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1984), and his Introducción crítica a la “Historia verdadera” de Bernal Díaz del Castillo (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1967). There is a biography in English: Herbert Cerwin, Bernal Díaz: Historian of the Conquest (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).
We know relatively little about his early life. Born in Medina del Campo about 1496, of honorable but not titled family, he received some education. As a teenager he left home and made his way to Seville, and in 1514 at the age of nineteen he joined a great expedition under Pedro Díaz de Sola, which sailed for Castilla del Oro, modern-day Panama. The expedition was punished for mutiny and dismasted, and Díaz returned to Cuba with reports of a densely populated land where people wore fine cotton garments, lived in stone dwellings, cultivated fields of maize, and possessed gold. The Spaniards had encountered the Maya civilization of Yucatan. The government of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, impressed by these reports, immediately organized another expedition under a nephew named Juan de Grijalva, and sent him north along the coast, with the gold and reports moved the governor to immediately start plans for yet another, larger expedition to the west. Thus by 1519 when Grijalva returned to Cuba, Díaz was a young man of twenty-three with military experience in three expeditions, and, as he liked to point out, he had been to Mexico twice before.
Díaz and the crown during the 1540s may have motivated Díaz to set the record straight by pointing out what the conquerors had in fact accomplished. We know he had taken an active role in defending the colonists' behavior against the criticism of reformist clerics like Bartolomé de Las Casas who wished to remove native peoples from the control of the colonists.

Whatever the origins of the project, Bernal Díaz was shocked to learn that others had published first. The work of Francisco López de Gómara, a noted scholar and Cortés's private secretary, fell into his hands as did some of the other chronicles of the conquest. Although Gómara and the others wrote with an elegance that the old soldier could not hope to match and Díaz was tempted to give up the endeavor altogether, these were books by scholars who had not been eyewitnesses like him and they contained many factual errors. Above all, the work of Gómara like the letters or reports of Cortés himself celebrated the captain's role and gave little credit to the common soldiers, men like Bernal Díaz who felt they had been overlooked. He called his book *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* because it was written against the "false" histories of Gómara and others (see Figure 2). The old battler wished to set the record straight and, in doing so, bring his own accomplishments and those of his companions to the forefront so those in authority might reward them.

Much of the book was written in the 1560s when Bernal Díaz was in his seventies. Friends who read the manuscript were impressed that he could remember so many details about the campaigns and his companions. Perhaps they doubted his accuracy. Here was his response:

I replied it was not so remarkable, because there were only 550 of us and we were always together conversing before and after campaigns and following a battle it soon became known who were killed or who were sacrificed; when we came from a bloody and doubtful battle, we always counted our dead—I retained in my memories all the details about them and if I could paint or sculpt, I would fashion them as they were, their figures, their faces, and their manners—I would like to paint all of them, according to life, with the full expression of courage which was on their faces when they entered battle.

Díaz's "true history" was completed about 1567 and sent to Spain in 1575. There it remained unnoticed in the papers of the Council of the Indies until other historians began to make use of it at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was not published until 1632, long after Bernal Díaz, the last of the Spanish conquerors of Tenochtitlan, had passed away.
Figure 2. The frontispiece of the first edition of Bernal Diaz's *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*. Cortés is on the left under the Latin word “manu” signifying “by his hand.” He is faced on the right by the friar Bartolomé de Olmedo, under the Latin word “ore” or “by his word.” Thus the conquest as deed and word is summarized on the title page.

Later, years after the conquest in the following generation, a number of authors like the Dominican friar Diego Durán or the civil judge Alonso de Zurita wrote about Nahua society and what happened to it. These works often incorporated evidence from eyewitness accounts and sometimes provided new information, but they also reflected the interests of their times and their authors. They have been used only sparingly in this collection.

THE INDIGENOUS HISTORICAL TRADITIONS

Different peoples have different ways of thinking about, narrating, and recording the past. For the peoples of central Mexico, there was a profound belief in a cycle of time in which events repeated themselves and in which prediction was possible. For them, the past was essential and its recounting served both sacred and political ends. In 1427, the Mexica ruler Itzcóatl ordered that all historical accounts and manuscripts be destroyed so that only the “official” record would survive to guide the memory of the Mexica rise to power as the sun god’s selected people. In this, the Mexica rulers like the ancient Egyptian pharaohs displayed a practical concern for how the past could be used to influence the future.

But history was also a sacred trust and remembrance of the past essential for the continuation of their identity. The postconquest historian Tezozómoc in his Crónica Mexicayotl captured the pre-Columbian importance of history in this verse:

Thus they have come to tell it,
thus they have come to record it in their narration
and for us they have painted it in their codices,
the ancient men, the ancient women.
They were our grandfathers, our grandmothers . . .
Their account was repeated,
they left it to us;
they bequeathed it forever
to us who live now,
to us who come down from them.
Never will it be lost, never will it be forgotten,
that which they came to do,
that which they record in their paintings:
their reknown, their history, their memory.
Thus in the future
never will it perish, never will it be forgotten
always will we treasure it,
we their children, their grandchildren . . .
we who carry their blood and their color,  
we will tell it, we will pass it on  
to those who do not yet live, who are to be born,  
the children of the Mexicans, the children of the Tenochcans.⁶

The cadence or rhythm of such texts suggests that they were recited out loud. The drawings and symbols used to record the legends, myths, and events of history served as a basis for an accompanying oral tradition in which commentaries and analysis of the written or pictorial record created a composite kind of history that made up the indigenous form of presentation. The tlacuilo or artist-scribe, “the master of the black ink and the red ink,” as the Mexica poetically referred to him, was a respected and essential figure in the preservation of indigenous culture. We should notice, however, that this skill and knowledge was socially limited. Only a few people, always boys, were trained to be a tlacuilo and the books or codices they produced became the exclusive possessions of the priesthood, rulers, and nobility.⁷

Prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, the peoples of central Mexico used a system of images that were ordered in patterns based on a number of criteria to record and transmit knowledge. Unlike the European tradition where writing and painting were discrete activities, for the Nahuas, Mixtecs, and others, the two activities were fused and often accompanied by oral explanation as well. These people had no alphabetic script, and so images were patterned and accompanied by symbols or icons that “readers” could readily identify. These were usually painted into books on deerskin or a paper made from the maguey plant and then folded into panels like an accordion. In certain instances it is not known exactly how a text was read, but the scale of objects, their position on the page, and their relationship to each other determined how they were interpreted. There were a number of genres or types of texts. Preconquest

⁶Miguel León-Portilla, Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 117.

books recorded annals or the chronology of important events, prophecies, calendrical information, rituals, lists of merchant goods, boundaries, and tribute or tax records. Because the Spaniards later came to believe that these texts preserved the ancient religion of the conquered peoples, many were destroyed and few preconquest texts survive to this day. In fact, at present there are about five hundred Mexican codices in existence, but less than twenty of these pre-date the conquest and of those surviving, probably none is from the heart of the Nahua region. The vast majority of surviving codices, therefore, were created after the conquest and reflect some European influences.

Because indigenous writing systems had not developed an alphabet, had only a limited syllabic component, and had recorded a somewhat limited range of concepts, some authors have drawn a sharp distinction between the alphabetic writing of Europeans and the pictorial forms used by the indigenous peoples. They have argued that the limitations of symbols and images placed indigenous peoples at a considerable disadvantage. This position may privilege writing too much and disregard the effectiveness of the composite nature of Mesoamerican texts. Contemporary European observers were not always convinced about indigenous disadvantage in recording what they wanted to remember. Fray Diego Durán believed that the Mesoamerican system was effective. He stated:

they have written and painted it all in books and large sheets (pape-
les), with the count of the years, the months, and days in which things happened. They have written in these paintings their legends and laws, their customs, etc. all with great order and care. From this they have most excellent historians that, with these paintings, compose the fullest history of their forebears.  


In the years immediately following the conquest, a curious double-headed process took place which transformed indigenous ways of perceiving and recording. The ancient tradition of the tlacuilos who had been specially trained in priestly schools underwent modification through their contact with Europeans. The old forms of symbolic representation and glyphs continued to be used but the artists were now influenced by images and techniques introduced from European art. Perspective, shading, and other techniques now were used alongside traditional methods of composition and presentation. But, at the same time, the indigenous peoples were also acquiring alphabetic writing. Through missionary instruction and schools, a generation of indigenous youth not only learned Spanish and Latin, but also began to write their native languages, Nahuatl, Mixtec, Maya, Purepecha (Tarascan), and others, in the Roman alphabet. The two traditions were combined sometimes as in the case of the Florentine Codex or the Codex Mendoza to produce a new "colonial" kind of writing. The mixture of the two traditions produced not just new texts, but a new kind of text altogether. A large number of these postconquest texts exist, reflecting various degrees of indigenous and European elements and presenting a variety of viewpoints.\(^{10}\)

Among the various postconquest indigenous texts are a number that record aspects of the conquest itself. The peoples of Mexico did not form a single political entity, and these political and ethnic divisions contributed to the success of the Spanish conquest. Peoples subject to the empire of the Mexica used the arrival of the Spaniards to break free from Mexica control and to settle old scores. Traditional enemies of Tenochtitlan like Tlaxcala, after initial opposition, became loyal allies of the Spaniards, and even former allies of Tenochtitlan like the old cultural center of Texcoco abandoned the alliance during the war. These political and ethnic differences were also reflected in the later accounts of the conquest. Those narratives produced by native sons of Tlaxcala, Texcoco, Chalco, or other city-states told the story from their perspective and usually in a way favorable to their historical role and the glory of their city-state. We can note specifically the work of the Chalco historian Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahín, as an example.\(^{11}\) In this volume short excerpts from Chimalpahín, from the pictorial Tlaxcala

\(^{10}\)Gruzinski, *Painting the Conquest*, provides a beautifully illustrated discussion of the different kinds of writing practices by indigenous peoples and Europeans.

canvas (*Lienzo de Tlaxcala*), Diego Muñoz Camargo from Tlaxcala, and a few other non-Mexica postconquest indigenous sources have been included. Readers should be aware that together these sources do not form an “indigenous” vision of events that can be placed in opposition to a “Spanish” view. The indigenous sources are often at odds with each other over details and interpretations of events, and just like the Spanish sources they reflect social, political, geographic, and other interests of their authors.\(^\text{12}\)

Of all the indigenous accounts, one group or collection stands out above all the others. It was a collaborative effort, compiled by a Spanish Franciscan missionary who used indigenous informants. As early as 1533, some missionaries advocated recording and collecting information on the culture of the indigenous peoples of Mexico as a way of facilitating their conversion. Of these projects, by far the most ambitious and complete was that of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a missionary with interests in the language and culture of the Nahua of central Mexico. To learn their language and to understand their traditions as a means to bring them into the Church, around 1547 Sahagún began to interview indigenous informants who had lived before and during the conquest. The work was done with the help of young Nahua men of noble birth who had been trained in the *calmecac*, the Mexica school for the priesthood, and subsequently had been instructed by the missionaries and converted to Christianity. They collected information on the calendar, rituals, social organization, and philosophy of the Nahua. This was done in three different locales: Tepeyac, Tlatelolco, and Tenochtitlan itself. The information was cross-checked in a method akin to what a modern anthropologist might do. Informants sometimes drew pictures illustrating their responses and then added commentary, which was then translated by Sahagún’s young informants. The text that resulted was organized in parallel columns of Nahuatl and Spanish translation and commentary. The text went through a number of versions. The most famous of them is today called the *Florentine Codex* because it is located in the Laurenziana Library in Florence, Italy. Sahagún called his work the “General History of the Things of New Spain.” It was not published in his lifetime but only in 1579. It has been called one of the greatest ethno-

graphic works ever done, a remarkable encyclopedia of Nahua culture which is simultaneously a dictionary and a grammar as well.

There are two aspects of Sahagún's work which merit special attention. The conversion of the indigenous peoples of New Spain (Mexico) was carried out in the sixteenth century primarily by missionary orders: the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and after 1574, the Jesuits. The first generation of these missionaries were often men of considerable ability and fervent beliefs, but the deep divisions and factions within each order mirrored the profound differences between the orders on how best to convert the indigenous peoples. The Dominicans tended to take a more formal position in terms of theology and were less willing to look for parallels in indigenous religions which might lead native peoples to convert more easily. The first Franciscans were often moved by a messianic belief that the New World was God's gift to the Church and would restore the souls that had been lost in the Protestant Reformation. Many of them emphasized the learning of indigenous languages and an understanding of local custom and behavior as a way to bring converts to Christianity. This was Sahagún's position. He was sympathetic toward the people he was studying. As he put it, "These people are our brothers, descendants from the trunk of Adam like ourselves, they are our fellowmen whom we are obliged to love as ourselves." Despite his horror at Nahua ritual practices, especially sacrifice, and his disgust at their "pagan" worship, Sahagún came to appreciate and even celebrate much of Nahua culture. Others did not share his enthusiasm. Both from the rival Dominican Order which was much less sympathetic to the integration of some indigenous beliefs into Catholic practice and from more conservative elements within the Franciscan Order itself, Sahagún's project encountered opposition. Fear that his work preserved too much of the ancient beliefs and thus preserved the works of the Devil led to opposition. At one point the manuscripts were taken from him,

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presumably because some missionaries and civil authorities believed that the old ways had to be completely eliminated. Although he regained his manuscripts in 1575, the project later encountered political difficulties in Spain.

Book Twelve of the *Florentine Codex*, “How the War Was Fought Here in Mexico,” is essentially a Nahuatl account of the conquest, filtered through Sahagún and his informants. Due to its content and size, it is the most important Nahuatl version of the conquest. This account also has its biases and problems. First, many of the informants were from Tlatelolco, the junior partner of Tenochtitlan. Thus, the accounts tend to be highly critical of Tenochtitlan and especially of its leader Moctezuma, laying the blame for defeat on his indecision and weakness and viewing any successes as due to the bravery of the Tlatelolcans. Second, the accounts were written down some thirty years after the events described, and it is difficult to know to what extent the passage of time clouded memories and provided time for reflection on events. Also unknown is the extent to which the subsequent conversion of the informants to the Church may have colored their view of their historical past. Scattered throughout the texts are postconquest elements. The ancient deities are called “devils,” and metaphors such as “lusting after gold like pigs” are used even though there were no domestic swine in Mexico before the Spanish brought them. It is difficult to tell how much the young Nahuatl translators, already tied to Spanish culture, shaded meanings, molded their informants’ accounts, or even misunderstood what the elders told them. Nevertheless, these accounts provide the basis of our knowledge of Nahuatl views of the conquest and its aftermath. They are surely indigenous texts, but they are postconquest and they reflect the subject position and colonial situation of the Nahuatl peoples at the time they were recorded.

The Nahuatl accounts have been translated into English a number of times, but the most recent version and the one represented in this volume is that of James Lockhart. He was for many years a professor of Latin American history at the University of California in Los Angeles where he worked on postconquest Nahuatl texts and where he trained a generation of graduate students in the philological and historical skills needed to use and analyze these documents. His translations of Book Twelve directly from the Nahuatl are particularly important because they are sensitive not only to the literal meaning of the Nahuatl, but also to its common usage and the problems of converting it into idiomatic English. Lockhart has pointed out that Sahagún’s original translation into Span-
ish was often a paraphrase in which the friar inserted commentary and other observations. To what extent Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex is Sahagún’s interpretation or to what extent it is really a Nahua account is open to much debate, but Lockhart is convinced that these texts reflect “indigenous ideas, frameworks, and imperatives.” In terms of language, narrative technique, and structure, Book Twelve presents an indigenous view of the conquest, albeit a partial one biased by the passage of time, localism, and the peculiar circumstance of its composition.

Finally, the Nahua and Spanish accounts also differ in their form, structure, and content. Both Bernal Díaz and Cortés, whatever their differences, sought to tell a connected story, linking events in chronological order, mixing discussions of personality with analyses of motives and actions. The Nahua accounts are more episodic, a series of vignettes in which feats of individual bravery and the designs of capes and uniforms receive as much attention as the decisions of leaders. This is typical of the indigenous tradition where visual images were often used alongside oral accounts. The fact that those pictures which accompanied Sahagún’s manuscript lack the detail of the written texts seems to confirm their use as markers or aides and the composite nature of Nahua texts. Traditional Nahua ways of remembering depended on song, dance, and formal oratory as well as on images. It is difficult to know how the Nahua understood the symbols they saw, when metaphor replaced literal understandings, or when irony was used. With the adaptation of the Spanish alphabet to write Nahuatl, a whole new range of possibilities and cultural fusions opened up. The Nahua texts of the conquest provide a rich and complex vision of history but one that is opaque and complicated as well.

Finally, as important as documents are to historians, attention must be paid to the “silences” as well as to the documents. Certain groups or sectors of society are not represented in the surviving sources and may not have had access to the means of having their voices heard and recorded. First there is the bias of class. Literacy was limited among both Europeans and Nahua to certain groups in society. Although Bernal Díaz is seen as a representative of the common man, he was not from the lowest rungs of society but rather from the provincial middle class and, unlike many of his companions, he was educated. The indigenous accounts were written often by or for the nobility. How Mexica peasants or macehualtin saw these events remains open to question. Then there is the issue of gender. Although women are mentioned throughout these pages and one woman in particular, doña Marina or Malinche, Cortés’s
translator and mistress, figures importantly in the story of the conquest, no sources on the events of the conquest are written by women.\textsuperscript{15} Surely, they witnessed these events through different eyes but we can only surmise what they thought. Unfortunately such absent voices are not uncommon in history. The story of the Conquest of Mexico presents not only an opportunity to consider moments of heroism, greed, and despair born of this clash of cultures, but challenges us to think about the problems that confront all historians: How can we understand and interpret other cultures? How can we evaluate conflicting sources? How can we read and understand such divergent styles of representation? And, how can we try to recapture the presence of those whose voices have been lost?

\textsuperscript{15}The lack of sources by and studies about indigenous women is now being rectified. See the essays presented in Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., \textit{Indian Women in Early Mexico} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997). An excellent collection in Spanish is Margo Glantz, ed., \textit{La Malinche, sus padres y sus hijos} (Mexico City: UNAM, 1994).