
Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico

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IN 1552, FRANCISCO LÓPEZ DE GÓMARA, who had been chaplain and secretary to Hernando Cortés while he lived out his old age in Spain, published an account of the conquest of Mexico. López de Gómara himself had never been to the New World, but he could envision it nonetheless. “Many [Indians] came to gape at the strange men, now so famous, and at their attire, arms and horses, and they said, ‘These men are gods!’”¹ The chaplain was one of the first to claim in print that the Mexicans had believed the conquistadors to be divine. Among the welter of statements made in the Old World about inhabitants of the New, this one found particular resonance. It was repeated with enthusiasm, and soon a specific version gained credence: the Mexicans had apparently believed in a god named Quetzalcoatl, who long ago had disappeared in the east, promising to return from that direction on a certain date. In an extraordinary coincidence, Cortés appeared off the coast in that very year and was mistaken for Quetzalcoatl by the devout Indians. Today, most educated persons in the United States, Europe, and Latin America are fully versed in this account, as readers of this piece can undoubtedly affirm. In fact, however, there is little evidence that the indigenous people ever seriously believed the newcomers were gods, and there is no meaningful evidence that any story about Quetzalcoatl’s returning from the east ever existed before the conquest. A number of scholars of early Mexico are aware of this, but few others are. The cherished narrative is alive and well, and in urgent need of critical attention.²

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¹ Lesley Byrd Simpson, trans. and ed., *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary* (Berkeley, Calif., 1965), excerpted from Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de la conquista de México* (Zaragoza, 1552), 137. (Although all research was conducted in the Spanish originals, in the interest of communication I have here cited published English translations wherever there exists an edition that is generally considered definitive. Where there is none, I have provided translations myself.)

² Several scholars have recently alluded to the unlikelihood of the commonly accepted scenario, among them Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson, Ariz., 1989); James Lockhart, ed. and trans., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); and Ross Hassig, *Time, History and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* (Austin, Tex., 2001). None have made it the focus of any work. This stands in contrast to South Pacific history, at least as written by anthropologists. Gananath Obeyesekere set out to challenge the “fact” that Captain Cook was received as the god Lono in Hawai’i in 1779 in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), thereby earning for himself several awards but also the anger of Marshall Sahlins in *How “Natives” Think: About*

In order to dismantle a construct with such a long history, it will be necessary first to explain the origins and durability of the myth and then to offer an alternate explanation of what happened in the period of conquest and what the indigenous were actually thinking. In proposing an alternative, I will make three primary assertions: first, that we must put technology in all its forms—beyond mere weaponry—front and center in our story of conquest; second, that we can safely do this because new evidence from scientists offers us explanations for divergent technological levels that have nothing to do with differences in intelligence; and third, that the Mexicans themselves immediately became aware of the technology gap and responded to it with intelligence and savvy rather than wide-eyed talk of gods. They knew before we did, it seems, that technology was the crux.

In the last twenty years, scholars have made room for alternative narratives in many arenas, demonstrating that power imbalances explain the way we tell our stories. Yet despite our consciousness of narrative as political intervention, the story of the white gods in the conquest of Mexico has remained largely untouched. It is essentially a pornographic vision of events, albeit in a political rather than a sexual sense. What most males say they find so enticing about pornography is not violent imagery—which after all takes center stage relatively rarely—but rather the idea that the female is *not* concerned about any potential for violence or indeed any problematic social inequalities or personal disagreements but instead enthusiastically and unquestioningly adores—even worships—the male. Certainly, such a narrative may be understood to be pleasurable in the context of the strife-ridden relationships of the real world. Likewise, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the relatively powerful conquistadors and their cultural heirs should prefer to dwell on the Indians' adulation for them, rather than on their pain, rage, or attempted military defense. It is, however, surprising that this element has not been more transparent to recent scholars.

Perhaps this relatively dehumanizing narrative has survived among us—in an era when few such have—because we have lacked a satisfactory alternative explanation for the conquest. Without such a misunderstanding, how could a handful of Spaniards permanently defeat the great Aztec state?³ It is a potentially frightening

Captain Cook, for Example (Chicago, 1995). Prominent Mexicanists who have accepted the legends include David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago, 1982); Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531–1813*, Benjamin Keen, trans. (Chicago, 1976); Miguel León-Portilla, ed., *The Broken Spears*, Lysander Kemp, trans. (Boston, 1962); and H. B. Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: The Once and Future Lord of the Toltecs* (Boulder, Colo., 2001). Similar ideas about the Indians having accepted the newly arrived whites as gods developed elsewhere in the New World as well, but space limitations prevent treatment of that subject here. For musings on the situation in the Andean world, see Olivia Harris, "The Coming of the White People": Reflections on the Mythologisation of History in Latin America," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14, no. 1 (1995): 9–24.

³ On the word "Aztec": this was a term introduced generations later by outsiders to talk about a political conglomeration. The ethnic group who held power called themselves the Mexica (pronounced me-SHEE-ka). They, and most of the people they governed, were Nahuas, or speakers of the Nahuatl language. For ease of communication, I will most often use the more generally known term. On the nature of the Aztec state: it is now understood by experts that the "empire" in fact consisted of profoundly divided ethnic groups residing in separate city-states, thus rendering it particularly vulnerable to the invading Europeans, as will be discussed. However, in conversations with colleagues from other fields, I have learned that it is essential to state unequivocally that the Aztecs did represent an advanced state—with a capital city larger than any in Europe, a regularized taxation system in which

question—at least to those who do not want the answer to be that one group was more intelligent or more deserving than another. The notion that the Indians were too devout for their own good, and hence the victims of a calendric coincidence of tragic consequences, is highly appealing. We can argue that it was no one's fault if the Indians thought the Spanish were gods and responded to them as such. The belief was part and parcel of their cosmology and does not by any means indicate that they were lacking in intelligence or that their culture was "less developed." Thus even those participating in colonial semiosis with a sympathetic ear, who study Indian narratives alongside colonists' fantasies, often avoid or deny the Europeans' superior ability to conquer *in a technical sense*, making statements that simply are not believable. One has suggested that, "but for the cases of some spectacularly successful conquistadors," the indigenous might have killed off all approaching colonizers as successfully as the South Sea Islanders did away with Captain Cook, another that, if the last Aztec king, Cuauhtemoc, had met with better fortune, the Aztecs might have "embarked upon their own version of the Meiji era in Japan."⁴

The obvious explanation for conquest, many would argue, is technology. The Spanish had a technological advantage large enough to ensure their victory, especially if we acknowledge that their technology included not only blunderbusses and powder but also printing presses, steel blades and armor, crossbows, horses and riding equipment, ships, navigation tools—and indirectly, as a result of the latter three, an array of diseases.⁵ But even here we are in dangerous waters, as some would thereby infer a difference in intelligence. Felipe Fernández-Armesto writes: "I hope to contribute to the explosion of what I call the *conquistador*-myth: the notion that Spaniards displaced incumbent elites in the early modern New World because they were in some sense better, or better-equipped, technically, morally or intellectually."⁶ But why need we conflate the latter three? One group can be better equipped technically without being better equipped morally or intellectually. A people's technology is *not* necessarily a function of their intelligence. Even a superficial observer of the Aztecs must notice their accurate calendar, their extraordinary goldwork and poetry, their pictoglyph books: such an observer calls them intellectually deficient at his or her peril.

Science can now offer historians clear explanations for the greater advancement of technology among certain peoples without presupposing unequal intelligence. Biologist Jared Diamond presents this new knowledge coherently and powerfully in

accounts of collections and expenditures were kept, and a profoundly imperialist tendency toward expansionism. For a discussion of the great differences between, for example, the Aztecs and the more nomadic groups familiar to most U.S. historians, see John E. Kicza, *Resilient Cultures: America's Native Peoples Confront European Colonization, 1500–1800* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2003).

⁴ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, "Aztec Auguries and Memories of the Conquest of Mexico," *Renaissance Studies* 6 (1992): 303; Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés and the Fall of Old Mexico* (London, 1993), 601.

⁵ Scholars have argued that the Europeans' advanced agricultural lifestyle, alongside animals and their use of ships, contributed to the spread of disease and hence the development of antibodies that the American indigenous did not have. The point may be moot in the case of the defeat of the Aztecs, for, although their soldiers were brought low by smallpox, the same was true of the Spaniards' allies, on whom they relied for their victory. See Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* (London, 1994), 101–02.

⁶ Fernández-Armesto, "Aztec Auguries," 288.

Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, which has not received the attention it deserves from historians.⁷ He sets out to provide a non-racist explanation for “Why the Inca Emperor Atahualpa Did Not Capture King Charles I of Spain.” After marshalling well-known evidence that turning from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to sedentary farming leads to increasing population and the proliferation of technological advances—including guns, steel, and (indirectly) germs—he says that we must then ask ourselves why farming developed earlier and/or spread more rapidly in certain parts of the world. The answer lies in the constellation of suitable—that is, protein-rich—wild plants available in a particular environment at a particular time—which scientists can now reconstruct. It is a highly risky endeavor to turn from hunting and gathering to farming. It makes no sense to do so, except on a part-time basis, for sugar cane, bananas, or squash, for instance; it makes a great deal of sense to do it for the wheat and peas of the Fertile Crescent (and certain other species that spread easily on the wide and relatively ecologically constant east-west axis of Eurasia). In the case of the Americas, one rushes to ask, “What about corn?” Indeed, it turns out that after the millennia of part-time cultivation that it took to turn the nearly useless wild *teosinte* with its tiny bunches of seeds into something approaching today’s ears of corn, Mesoamericans became very serious full-time agriculturalists. But by then, they had lost valuable time—or so we say if they were in a race with Eurasia. In 1519, it would turn out that, unbeknownst to either side, they *had* been in a something akin to a race. Establishing that the Mexicans had not had protein-rich crops available to them for as long as their conquerors, and thus had not been sedentary as long, allows us to understand the technical disparities that existed without resorting to comparisons of intelligence or human worth. Diamond’s work relieves us of an old burden. We may proceed more freely with our business as historians.

OUR FIRST TASK MUST BE TO ASK OURSELVES whence came the myths associated with the conquest. The simple truth is that, by the 1550s, some Indians were themselves saying that they (or rather, their parents) had presumed the white men to be gods. Their words became widely available to an international audience in 1962, when Miguel León-Portilla published *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, translated from his 1959 *Visión de los vencidos*. The work was perfectly timed to meet with the political sympathies of a generation growing suspicious of the conquistadors’ version of events. The volume was printed in at

⁷ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York, 1997). Gale Stokes included this Pulitzer Prize-winning book in a review essay, “The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories,” *AHR* 106 (April 2001): 508–25. He begins, “Not many historians would subtitle their book, ‘The Fates of Human Societies,’” and goes on to say that it is biologist Jared Diamond who has had the nerve. Although Stokes’s overall argument is that macrohistory when done well (and he implicitly includes Diamond’s work in this category) certainly has its uses, Diamond’s theme of “Eurasia-meets-the-rest-of-the-world [and wins]” is lost in the rest of the essay, which focuses instead on the equally interesting question of why Europe, as opposed to China, became the leader of the modern world. Almost nothing has been written about the book in Latin Americanist journals. To my knowledge, only one recent textbook on colonial America opens with an explicit consideration of Diamond’s argument: Stanley N. Katz, John M. Murrin, and Douglas Greenberg, eds., *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development*, 5th edn. (New York, 2001).

least eleven other languages and has remained a common reference for a variety of scholars. It is an invaluable book, communicating the fear, pain, and anger experienced by the Mexica when their great city of Tenochtitlan crumbled.⁸ Yet, ironically, the same text that lets sixteenth-century Nahuas speak “within hearing distance of the rest of the world”⁹ also traps them in stereotype, quoting certain statements made at least a generation after the conquest as if they were transparent realities. “When Motecuhzoma heard that [the Spanish] were inquiring about his person, and when he learned that the ‘gods’ wished to see him face to face, his heart shrank within him and he was filled with anguish. He wanted to run away and hide.”¹⁰

Numerous scholars have analyzed these words while ignoring their context. The best-known such work is Tzvetan Todorov’s *Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Although quick to say there is no “natural inferiority” (indeed, he aptly points out that it is the Indians who rapidly learn the language of the Spanish, not the other way around), he insists that it is the Spaniards’ greater adeptness in manipulating signs that gives them victory. While the Spanish believe in man-man communication (“What are we to do?”), the Indians only envision man-world communication (“How are we to know?”). Thus the Indians have a “paralyzing belief that the Spaniards are gods” and are “inadequate in a situation requiring improvisation.”¹¹ Popular historians have been equally quick to accept this idea of indigenous reality, often with the best intentions. Hugh Thomas’s recent monumental 800-page volume is a case in point. Thomas uses apocryphal accounts as if they had been tape-recorded conversations in his portrayal of the inner workings of Moctezuma’s¹² court. “The Emperor considered flight. He thought of hiding . . . He decided on . . . a cave on the side of Chapultepec.” Thomas does this, I believe, not out of naïveté but out of a genuine desire to incorporate the Indian perspective. He does not want to describe the intricate politics of the Spanish while leaving the Indian side vague, rendering it less real to his readers.¹³

⁸ León-Portilla has done important work beyond the ivory tower as well, bringing Nahuatl-speaking indigenous poets to work at Mexico’s most prestigious universities and supporting *indigenista* movements in other ways. His political significance must not be underestimated.

⁹ Jorge Klor de Alva, “Foreword,” to León-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, xi.

¹⁰ León-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, 35. Most of the book conveys similar images, coming from texts written in the 1550s and later. As of 2000, a new textbook became available that translates Nahuatl primary sources into English (*Victors and Vanquished: Spanish and Nahuatl Views of the Conquest of Mexico*, published by Bedford/St. Martin’s). The book’s editor, Stuart B. Schwartz, is well acquainted with the work of his colleague James Lockhart on early Mexico, and includes mention of some controversy over the existence of the Quetzalcoatl myth—but unfortunately only after recounting the story as if it were true. Books that promise to be helpful in teaching include Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York, 2003); Stephanie Wood, *Transcending Conquest: Nahuatl Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico* (Norman, Okla., forthcoming); and another by James Lockhart (see note 18 below).

¹¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York, 1984), 63, 69, 75, 87. See Inga Clendinnen’s analysis of this text in “Cortés, Signs, and the Conquest of Mexico,” in Anthony Grafton and Ann Blair, eds., *The Transmission of Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia, 1990). See also Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty: Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico,” *Representations* 33 (1991): 65–100.

¹² On the spelling of the Mexican emperor’s name: the English and Germans later used “Montezuma,” but none of the players on the scene did. The correct spelling of the name in Nahuatl is debatable and, in any case, somewhat alienating to non-Nahuatl speakers. I am using the most common Spanish form (“Moctezuma”) except where quoting someone who uses a different version.

¹³ Thomas, *Conquest*, 180. There are many such examples in the book. Nor is this argument limited

With such friends, though, perhaps the indigenous and their cultural heirs do not need enemies. A different approach is definitely needed, or the white gods will continue to inhabit our narratives. In beginning anew, let us first ask what sources we have available. We in fact have only one set of documents that were undoubtedly written at the time of conquest by someone who was certainly there—the letters of Cortés. The *Cartas* are masterful constructions, loaded with political agendas, but we are at least certain of their origin, and Cortés never wrote that he was taken for a god. Andrés de Tapia, a Spanish noble who was a captain under Cortés, wrote an account predating López de Gómara's, and, in the 1560s, two aging conquistadors wrote their memoirs: Francisco de Aguilar, who by then had renounced worldly wealth and was living in a Dominican monastery, dictated a short narration, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, then a landholder in Guatemala, wrote a long and spicy manuscript that has come to be beloved by many.¹⁴

Besides the testimony of these few conquistadors, we have the writings of priests who were on the scene early, and who were bent on making a careful study of indigenous beliefs, the better to convert the natives. In 1524, twelve Franciscan "Apostles" arrived in Mexico City and were warmly greeted by Cortés. One of them, Fray Toribio de Benavente (known to posterity by his Nahuatl name, "Motolinía" or "Poor One"), wrote extensively.¹⁵ The efforts of the Franciscans led to the

only to Thomas. Viewers of Michael Wood's recent BBC series "Conquistadors" (2000) will not have failed to detect his interest in and sympathy for the Indians. Yet he, too, subscribes to the white gods theory and quotes the *Broken Spears* text verbatim—and without raising hackles. His reviewer in *The Chronicle Review* mentions that he might well be more critical of the "Black Legend" concerning Spain but argues that "his treatment of the natives is politically faultless" (Diana de Armas Wilson, "Killing for God and for Gold," May 4, 2001). There is a beautiful new trade book that likewise takes the old stories for granted: Neil Baldwin, *Legends of the Plumed Serpent: Biography of a Mexican God* (New York, 1998).

¹⁴ The most useful edition of Cortés is *Letters from Mexico*, J. H. Elliott, intro., and Anthony Pagden, trans. and ed. (New Haven, Conn., 1986). Bernal Díaz is valuable despite the fact that he takes the structure of his book, almost section by section, from López de Gómara, alternating between plagiarizing his words and arguing vociferously and explicitly with them. A few have even argued that he fantasized his own participation in the conquest, given that he situates himself at the heart of all the action and that his name fails to appear on one list of participants housed in the Archive of the Indies in Spain. But all the chroniclers plagiarized; all exaggerated their own role; and no extant list of men or equipment is complete. There is evidence that he was there (in 1540, both Cortés and the viceroy wrote to the emperor on his behalf), and the text includes many details that only a participant would have thought of or gotten right. The most careful positioning of Bernal Díaz in relation to his contemporaries has been accomplished by Rolena Adorno, "Discourses on Colonialism: Bernal Díaz, Las Casas, and the Twentieth Century Reader," *Modern Language Notes* 103 (1988): 239–58; and "The Discursive Encounter of Spain and America: The Authority of Eyewitness Testimony in the Writing of History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 49 (1992): 210–28. The edition of Bernal Díaz used here is *The Conquest of New Spain*, J. M. Cohen, ed. (London, 1963), trans. from *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la nueva España por Bernal Díaz del Castillo*, Joaquín Ramírez Cabañas, ed. (Mexico City, 1955). The chronicles of Andrés de Tapia and Francisco de Aguilar are found in Patricia de Fuentes, ed., *The Conquistadors: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Norman, Okla., 1993). Another supposedly firsthand account is now known as the chronicle of the "Anonymous Conquistador." It appears to have been written by someone who never actually saw Mexico City. Bernardino Vázquez de Tapia also left a brief military summary. Another conquistador named Ruy González later wrote a letter to the king, but, as the latter two do not help significantly with the issue under discussion, I will leave them aside. See Arthur P. Stabler and John E. Kicza, "Ruy González's 1553 Letter to Emperor Charles V: An Annotated Translation," *The Americas* 42 (1986).

¹⁵ He had some direct sources: in the earliest days, Motolinía worked with Malinche, the Indian woman translator who had worked with Cortés; later, he came to know well the young Indian nobles who studied Latin and other subjects with the fathers, even though communication was at first minimal.

founding in 1536 of a formal school for Indian noblemen in Tlatelolco in Mexico City and culminated during the 1550s in the work of Bernardo de Sahagún, who spent years orchestrating a grand project in which students did extensive interviews with surviving notables of the *ancien régime*. The most complete extant version is the Florentine Codex.¹⁶ The Dominican Fray Diego Durán, though not born until the 1530s, is also particularly valuable to us because he moved with his family from Seville to Mexico “before he lost his ‘milk teeth,’” was raised by Nahuatl-speaking servants, and became fluent in the language.¹⁷

The last group of sources were produced by the indigenous themselves, but here is the heart of the problem: we have none that date from the years of conquest or even from the 1520s or 1530s. There are sixteen surviving pre-conquest codices (none from Mexico City itself, where the conquerors’ book burning was most intense), and then, dating from the 1540s, statements written in Nahuatl using the Roman alphabet, which was then rapidly becoming accessible to educated indigenous through the school of Tlatelolco.¹⁸ The most famous such document about the conquest is the lengthy Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex. Although it was organized by Sahagún, and the Spanish glosses were written by him, the Nahuatl is the work of his Indian aides.¹⁹ At the end of the century, a few indigenous men wrote histories. Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a descendant of the last king of Texcoco, near Tenochtitlan, was prolific.²⁰ Though removed in time, he is worth

He noted with humor, “The first one who taught singing . . . was an old friar who barely knew a single word of the Indians’ language, . . . and he spoke as quickly as if he were speaking to students in Spain. Those of us who heard him could not help laughing . . . It was a marvelous thing that even though at first they understood nothing . . . in a short time they understood and learned the songs.” Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (Madrid, 1988), 271.

¹⁶ The original is housed in the Laurenziana Medicean Library, Florence. A facsimile edition is *Códice florentino* (Florence, 1979). An English edition is Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble, eds., *The Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain* (Salt Lake City, 1950–82). Sahagún’s earliest version of the text is published as *The Primeros Memoriales*, Thelma Sullivan, H. B. Nicholson, Arthur J. O. Anderson, Charles Dibble, Eloise Quiñones, and Wayne Ruwet, eds. (Norman, Okla., 1997). On the Franciscan agenda in general, see John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, 2d edn. rev. (Berkeley, Calif., 1970).

¹⁷ He interviewed extensively, often asking about codices he knew villagers still had, once venting his frustration at “Indian wordiness in telling fables—when anyone is willing to listen to them they go on forever,” but generally providing a sympathetic ear and recording certain perspectives that are obviously indigenous. Of course, we must approach his work cautiously: he did, for example, insert statements clearly made by contemporaries into the mouths of historical figures. He has Moctezuma make this bitter speech before the Spaniards arrive: “They will reign and I shall be the last king of this land. Even though some of our descendants and relatives may remain, even though they may be made governors and given states, they will not be true lords and kings but subordinates, like tax collectors or gatherers of the tribute that my ancestors and I have won. Our descendants’ only task will be to comply with the commands and orders of the strangers.” Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, Doris Heyden, ed. (Norman, Okla., 1994), 511–12.

¹⁸ James Lockhart in *We People Here* has gathered together the only six of these statements that describe the conquest and were written before 1560, after which date it is unlikely that people who had clear memories of the events still lived. This is an invaluable collection because it includes careful transcriptions of both the Nahuatl text and the Spanish summaries, and yet it is accessible to everyone because it includes translations of each. A “student-friendly” edition is in preparation at Stanford University Press.

¹⁹ On the methods of interviewing and the names and positions of those Indians who did the interviewing, see Lockhart, *We People Here*; and Alfredo López Austin, “The Research Method of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún,” in Munro S. Edmonson, ed., *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1974).

²⁰ There were a number of indigenous (or mestizo, but Indian-identified) writers in this period,

reading, having access to secretly preserved codices; he railed against Spaniards who had confused matters by making false assertions that were taken as truth.²¹

These, then, are the rather limited documents we have to work with. James Lockhart has used circumstantial evidence to argue that we must be mistaken in our notion that the Mexicans responded to the Spanish in the early years with fatalism and awe. Even though we have no indigenous records produced at contact, we have a corpus of materials from the 1550s, including not only explicit commentary on events but also the data preserved in litigation and church records:

What we find . . . is a picture dominated in so many aspects by patently untouched pre-conquest patterns that it does not take much imagination to reconstruct a great deal of the situation during the missing years. It would be a most unlikely scenario for a people to have spent twenty-five undocumented years in wide-mouthed amazement inspired by some incredible intruders, and then, the moment we can see them in the documents, to have relapsed into going about their business, seeking the advantage of their local entities, interpreting everything about the newcomers as some familiar aspect of their own culture.²²

It is in this context that we must approach the later understanding that the Aztecs were convinced that their own omens had for years been predicting the coming of the cataclysm, and that Cortés was recognized as Quetzalcoatl and the Europeans as gods. The most important source for all of these legends is Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex. Lockhart notes that it reads very much as if it were two separate documents: the first part, covering the period from the sighting of the European sails to the Spaniards' violent attack on warrior-dancers participating in a religious festival, reads like an apocryphal fable (complete with comets as portents), while the second part, covering the period from the Aztec warriors'

including a grandson of Moctezuma named Don Fernando de Alvarado Tezozomac, Diego Muñoz Camargo from Tlaxcala, and Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin from Chalco. None left work as extensive or as useful in the case of this particular project as Ixtlilxochitl, and so in the interest of space, I am leaving them aside. Chimalpahin, however, deserves special mention because he wrote for a Nahua audience. In his accounts, the Spaniards appear not as gods but as a set of foreign invaders. The year summaries for 1519–1522 resemble other year summaries. “The year Three House, 1521: At this time Quauhtemotzin [Cauhtemoc] was installed as ruler of Tenochtitlan in Izcalli in the ancient month count, and in February in the Christian month count, when the Spaniards still occupied Tlaxcala. He was a son of Ahuiztotzin.” Arthur J. O. Anderson and Susan Schroeder, eds., *Códice Chimalpahin* (Norman, Okla., 1997), 167. See also Susan Schroeder, “Looking Back at the Conquest: Nahua Perceptions of Early Encounters from the Annals of Chimalpahin,” in Eloise Quiñones Keber, ed., *Chipping Away on Earth* (Lancaster, Calif., 1994), 377–97.

²¹ For example: “No me he querido aprovechar de las historias que hartan de esta material, por la diversidad y confusión que tienen entre sí los autores que hartan de ellas, por las falsas relaciones y contrarias interpretaciones que se les dieron.” Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, “Sumaria Relación de la Historia General de Esta Nueva España desde el origen del mundo hasta la Era de Ahora,” in *Obras históricas*, Edmundo O’Gorman, ed., vol. 1 (Mexico City, 1975), 525. There is no question that Ixtlilxochitl is a problematic source if one is looking for a “pure” Indian voice: he sometimes relied, for example, on the “Codex Xolotl” (Charles Dibble, ed., *Códice Xolotl* [Mexico City, 1951]), which is clearly a post-conquest creation, and he was personally and politically embedded in elite Creole culture. For a discussion of the latter issue, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Historiographies, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, Calif., 2001), esp. 221–25. I read him, however, as having a distinctly indigenous perspective in subtle ways. For example, he inserts “por lengua de Marina” (through the words of Malinche) frequently when summarizing communications made with the Spanish—even, in one case, when a local king was asking Cortés and his men to accept some local girls as sleeping partners. “Historia de la nación chichimeca,” in *Obras históricas*, O’Gorman, ed., vol. 2 (Mexico City, 1977), 214.

²² Lockhart, *We People Here*, 5.

uprising against the Spaniards after the festival to their ultimate defeat over a year later, reads like a military archivist's record of events.²³ Indeed, this phenomenon makes sense: the old men being interviewed in the 1550s would likely have participated as young warriors in the battles against the Spanish, or at least have been well aware of what was transpiring. On the other hand, they would most certainly *not* have been privy to the debates within Moctezuma's inner circle when the Spaniards' arrival first became known: the king's closest advisers were killed in the conquest, and at any rate would have been older men even in 1520.

Still, the fact that the informants for the Florentine were not acquainted with the inner workings of Moctezuma's court only proves that they were unlikely to have the first part of the story straight; it tells us nothing about why they chose to say what they did. It seems likely that they retroactively sought to find particular auguries associated with the conquest. The Florentine's omens do not appear to have been commonly accepted, as they do not appear in other Nahuatl sources.²⁴ Interestingly, Fernández-Armesto notes that the listed omens fall almost exactly in line with certain Greek and Latin texts that are known to have been available to Sahagún's students.²⁵

Why would Sahagún's assistants have been so eager to come up with a compelling narrative about omens? We must bear in mind that they were the sons and grandsons of Tenochtitlan's most elite citizens—descendants of priests and nobles. It was their own class, even their own family members, who might have been thought to be at fault if it were true that they had had no idea that the Spaniards existed prior to their arrival. Durán later recorded some of the accusations against seers as they had been reported to him:

Motecuhzoma, furious, cried, "It is your position, then, to be deceivers, tricksters, to pretend to be men of science and forecast that which will take place in the future, deceiving everyone by saying that you know what will happen in the world, that you see what is within the hills, in the center of the earth, underneath the waters, in the caves and in the earth's clefts, in the springs and water holes. You call yourselves 'children of the night' but everything is a lie, it is all pretense."²⁶

Here Moctezuma himself is the speaker; whether any particular individual ever gave vent to such rage at the time is unknowable. What is clear is that the person speaking years later still felt deceived. It begins to seem not merely unsurprising, but indeed necessary, that Sahagún's elite youths should insist that their forebears *had* read the signs and had known what was to happen. In their version, the Truth

²³ Lockhart, *We People Here*, 18. It is worth noting that other sources purportedly based on interviews with those involved reflect this same bipartite treatment—a history that reads like a recitation of myths suddenly becomes a detailed and realistic description of battle scenes. See Ixtlilxochitl, "Compendio Histórico del Reino de Texcoco," in *Obras históricas*, vol. 1. Ross Hassig also concludes after working extensively with the second part of Book Twelve, "The Aztecs did not lose their faith, they lost a war." *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 149.

²⁴ The one exception was the Tlaxcalan Diego Muñoz Camargo. Writing in 1580, he claimed that people in his city were also preoccupied with the foretellings of the white gods, but as proof he offered the same set of omens that took the Aztec capital as their point of reference, "an unimaginable attribute of a source resting on authentic Tlaxcalan tradition" (Lockhart, *We People Here*, 17). The repetition of details shows that Muñoz Camargo clearly copied straight from the Florentine.

²⁵ Fernández-Armesto, "Aztec Auguries."

²⁶ Durán, *History of the Indies of New Spain*, 493. This is a motif in Durán's text.

was paralyzing and left their forebears vulnerable, perhaps even more so than they might have been.²⁷

The idea that Cortés was understood to be the god Quetzalcoatl returning from the east is also presented as fact in Book Twelve. Moctezuma sends gifts for different gods, to see which are most welcome to the newcomers, and then decides it is Quetzalcoatl who has come. There are numerous obvious problems with the story. First, Quetzalcoatl was not a particularly prominent god in the pantheon worshiped in Mexico's great city. The one city in the empire where Quetzalcoatl was prominent, Cholula, was the only one to mount a concerted attack against Cortés as he made his way to the Aztec capital. Many aspects of the usual post-conquest description of Quetzalcoatl—that he was a peace-loving god who abhorred human sacrifice, for example—are obviously European mythological constructs, thus rendering the whole story somewhat suspect. Furthermore, in the Codex itself, when the earlier explorer Juan de Grijalva lands on the coast in 1518, *he* is taken to be Quetzalcoatl. So much for the explanation that Cortés happened to land in the right year, causing all the pieces to fall into place in the indigenous imagination.

Susan Gillespie has made a careful study of every sixteenth-century text (pre- and post-conquest) where Quetzalcoatl appears, and has proven that the story as we know it did not exist until Sahagún edited the Florentine Codex in the 1560s. Quetzalcoatl certainly was a deity in the Nahua tradition. If we take as our only sources the pre-conquest codices, archaeological remains of temples, and recitations of pre-conquest religious ceremonies recorded elsewhere, we are left with certain definite elements. Quetzalcoatl was, as his name indicates, a feathered serpent, a flying reptile (much like a dragon), who was a boundary maker (and transgressor) between earth and sky. Like most gods, he could take various forms and was envisioned differently in various villages and epochs: he could be the wind, for example. His name became a priestly title, an honorific for those liminal humans whose role it was to connect those on earth to those beyond. In myth, he was associated with the city of the Toltecs, an ancient state-building people who had preceded the Aztecs in the Central Valley of Mexico. As the invading Mexica often claimed legitimacy by insisting that they were the heirs of the Toltecs, the symbol of Quetzalcoatl often appeared as an iconographic legitimator of a kingly line. In the Aztec ritual calendar, different deities were associated with each cyclically repeating date: Quetzalcoatl was tied to the year Ce Acatl (One Reed), which is correlated to the year 1519 (among others) in the Western calendar.²⁸

There is no evidence of any ancient myths recounting the departure or return of such a god, but, in the early years after conquest, discrete elements of the story that

²⁷ In other versions, less famous to us today, the seers and sorcerers similarly speak the Truth, but to no effect because Moctezuma has grown proud and will not listen. See Stephen Colston, "No Longer Will There Be a Mexico": Omens, Prophecies, and the Conquest of the Aztec Empire," *American Indian Quarterly* 9 (1985): 244. Ixtlilxochitl relies on this tradition in "Compendio Histórico del Reino de Texcoco," in *Obras históricas*, 1: 450–51. Additionally, Sahagún's young men were mostly from Tlatelolco, once a neighboring city-state, not Tenochtitlan proper, and although they were in many ways identified with the Aztecs, their ancestors had in fact been conquered; thus, as Kevin Terraciano has pointed out to me in a personal communication, they may have found it satisfying to represent the heart of the Aztec state as crumbling in panic.

²⁸ Gillespie, *Aztec Kings*, esp. 197–98. For a detailed study of the feathered serpent motif throughout Mesoamerica, see Enrique Florescano, *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl* (Baltimore, 1999).

has become so familiar to us do appear separately in various documents, with the main character being mortal rather than divine. The wandering hero is called Huemac or Topiltzin (“Our Lord” as in “Our Nobleman”); he is not given the name “Quetzalcoatl” until the 1540s, and then not in Nahuatl language texts. He is sometimes said to have ruled Tollan; the city is sometimes said to have fallen in connection with his exile; the prophecy of his return is occasionally made.²⁹ Motolinía rendered the story relevant to Cortés: Quetzalcoatl (in his version, a mortal apotheosized into a god, in good European tradition) was sent away to build up other lands, but people in Mexico awaited his return, and when they saw the sails of Cortés they said, “Their god was coming, and because of the white sails, they said he was bringing by sea his own temples.” Then, remembering that all the Spaniards were supposed to have been gods, Motolinía quickly added, “When they disembarked, they said that it was not their god, but rather many gods.”³⁰

The elements did not all appear in the same narration until Sahagún’s Codex drew them together in the 1560s—although references to the more traditional god Quetzalcoatl and a separate mortal hero named Huemac are also peppered throughout the Codex. By that time, Spanish priests had been interacting with the locals for years, and new European elements had been incorporated almost seamlessly: as they were wont to do elsewhere, the priests had theorized that a Christian saint had previously visited the New World, and such a man makes his appearance in these stories as the hero Quetzalcoatl, now a peace-loving man who is driven into exile because of the people’s belief in the devil (the god Huitzilopochtli), and who foretells his own return.³¹ In about 1570, the author of the “Anales de Cuauhtitlan” became the first Nahua to put all these elements together. To the generation of the 1570s, it seemed logical that their forebears had believed thus, for it provided a needed explanation why they had made such an ineffective defense.³²

²⁹ Following is a drastic oversimplification of the transformation of the narrative: I refer the reader to Gillespie’s *Aztec Kings* for further details (185–95). In the 1530s, in the first three Spanish texts recounting Aztec history, supposedly as told to the writers by locals, two would-be kings fight, and one ends up leading his followers away (also a common trope in the pre-Hispanic codices); in one version, probably recorded by a well-known friar and linguist, Andrés de Olmos, the important hero is named Ce Acatl (One Reed), which is as close as we come to the name “Quetzalcoatl.” In the early 1540s, however, while the mortal hero is still “Huemac” in the Nahuatl text “Historia Tolteca Chichimeca” from the Puebla area, he is in Spanish texts explicitly named Quetzalcoatl, apparently in honor of the god in several cases, or as a man who was deified after his death (a common element of European mythology) in Motolinía’s and Andrés de Tapia’s works.

³⁰ Motolinía, *Historia de los Indios*, 107–08.

³¹ For a full treatment of the church’s intellectual wrestling with the Indian question, see Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*. The most popular version among clerics held it that Quetzalcoatl had in fact been the apostle St. Thomas. It was not only the New World’s Christian missionaries who looked for evidence that God had sent previous emissaries to the lands they hoped to convert. By the late sixteenth century, the Jesuits in China also believed they had found proof of an earlier presence. (Personal communication from David Robinson.)

³² At the end of the century, various authors continued to “mix and match” the contrasting elements. In the case of Ixtlilxochitl, his personal trajectory regarding the legend closely paralleled that of his century. As a very young man, while he is still according to his own testimony struggling simply to decipher certain codices or stories and summarize them, he describes the rise and fall of the hero Topiltzin, making no mention whatsoever of Quetzalcoatl or of anyone fleeing by sea or promising to return. There is a fragmentary document attached to a later work, apparently intended to be a commentary on an accompanying picture, now lost, in which he suddenly says that Topiltzin at last went east and died there and was burned to ashes along with all his treasure, but that he promised to return

Even if it is untrue that anyone in 1519 thought Cortés was Quetzalcoatl, there remains the question of whether or not Cortés and his men were in general perceived to be gods. Cortés did not claim that he was accorded godly status. It is, however, apparently true that the Nahuas frequently referred to the Spanish as *teotl* or *teutl* (plural *teteo'* or *teteu'*), which the Spanish rendered in their own texts as *teul* (plural *teules*); they translated this word as "god." Sahagún's students in the 1550s clearly believed their parents had used *teotl* as a form of address in their dealings with the Spanish, and this was a matter less open to reinterpretation than some others.³³ Several conquistadors insisted on it. Perhaps the best question is not whether the Indians used the word *teotl* in their groping efforts to categorize the Spaniards before they had any political relation to them but rather why they did so, what it meant to them.

To turn an obvious point into a less obvious one, the indigenous had to call the Spaniards something, and it was not at all clear what that something should be. It is noteworthy that in Durán's history the issue first surfaces in the initial communication efforts of the Indian translator Malinche. "She responded, 'The leader of these men says he has come to greet your master Motecuhzoma, that his only intention is to go to the city of Mexico.'" But in the next interchange: "The Indian woman answered in the following way: 'These gods say that they kiss your hands and that they will eat.'"³⁴ In the Nahuatl universe as it had existed up until this point, a person was always labeled as being from a particular village or city-state, or, more specifically, as one who filled a given social role (a tribute collector, prince, servant). These new people fit nowhere; undoubtedly, they had a village or city-state somewhere, but it was not in the known world, and their relationship to it was not clear. Later, they were called "Caxtilteca" (people of Castile), but that came after closer acquaintance. There was no word for "Indian," of course, and the indigenous struggled in certain situations. How to describe the woman translator, for example, who came with the newcomers but was not one of them? She became "a woman, one of us people here."³⁵ If there were no "Indians," there were no "Spanish" in opposition to them. So what to call the new arrivals? One of them might be a *tecuhlli*, a dynastic lord ruling over his own people, but he was not so in relation to

in the year One Reed, which was when the Spanish came. In a later work, Ixtlilxochitl introduces a section on the pre-Toltec period, which he had never mentioned before, and here he presents a sinless virgin hero "whom they called Quetzalcoatl, or by another name, Huemac" who had come from the east and would come again. The character does not appear anywhere else in the volume; the narrative continues in a more traditional vein. In the magnum opus he wrote before his death, Ixtlilxochitl begins with a full chapter on Quetzalcoatl, who by now is a fully delineated character, indeed, the first great historian of the Americas (implicitly a precursor to Ixtlilxochitl himself), who leaves records of his own great works for posterity to find, and who passes away by sea, promising that when he returned his children would become "the lords and possessors of the earth." Thus Ixtlilxochitl left Aztec history intact yet framed it between the by-now expected departure of the early saint and the arrival of the Spanish. Ixtlilxochitl, "Sumaria Relación de las cosas de la Nueva España" [c. 1600] (273, 387), and "Compendio Histórico del Reino de Texcoco" [c. 1608] (529), in *Obras históricas*, vol. 1; Ixtlilxochitl, "Historia de la Nación Chichimeca," in *Obras históricas*, 2: 7–9. Durán inserts the story even more awkwardly into his manuscript.

³³ Lockhart, *We People Here*, 20.

³⁴ Durán, *History of the Indies*, 499–500.

³⁵ This phrase was used in writing a few more times in the sixteenth century, and Lockhart has taken it as the very apt title of his book.

“us people here.” The Nahuatl word for king was *tlatoani*, meaning “he who speaks.” Tellingly, in Nahuatl texts where the Spaniards have previously been referred to as *teotl*, first Cortés and then the viceroy become *tlatoani* after the Europeans vanquish the Indians and are in a position of authority over them.³⁶

In the Florentine Codex, the moment of political surrender is described by the warriors: “There goes the lord Cuauhtemoc going to give himself to the gods” (*teteu*). Yet, in the preceding pages, the enemy has been described as execrable rather than divine: in fact, when the Spaniards are temporarily expelled, the warriors perform ceremonies “in gratitude to their gods (*teotl*) for having freed them from their enemies.” Tellingly, in the negotiations *after* the surrender, when the Spaniards are demanding full restitution of all the gold and jewels they were ever given, they are termed “our lords” as in “our earthly overlords” (*totecuiovan*, from *tecuhtli*), but in a moment of rage, a leading priest whose tone indicates he does not yet feel he owes allegiance cries out, “Let the god (*teotl*), the Captain [Cortés] pay heed!” He then refuses to pay, until the defeated Cuauhtemoc calms him and uses the word *tecuhtli* again.³⁷

Sixteenth-century dictionaries say that *teotl* meant simply *dios*, but they, we must remember, were written years later, after semantic shifts had occurred in the process of Indians and priests working together.³⁸ Bernal Díaz first says that *teotl* meant “god” (*dios*) or “demon” (*demonio*). We might assume he meant “demon” only in the sense that the Christians called the entire Nahua pantheon “devils,” but an anecdote that he relates indicates otherwise. The Spaniards seem to have been given to understand—quite accurately—that the word could mean “devil” in the sense of a capricious immortal over whom mortals had no control, or a ceremonial human impersonator of such a character. After the Spanish had gleaned the word’s meaning, they thought to reinforce the notion as follows:

[Cortés said], “I think we’ll send Heredia against them.” Heredia was an old Basque musketeer with a very ugly face covered with scars, a huge beard, and one blind eye. He was also lame in one leg . . . So old Heredia shouldered his musket and went off with [the Indians] firing shots in the air as he went through the forest, so that the Indians should both hear and see him. And the *caciques* sent the news to the other towns that they were bringing

³⁶ “Annals of Tlaltelolco” and “Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca,” both in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 271, 287.

³⁷ “Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex,” in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 244, 179, 252, respectively. The priest’s resistance to using the term that binds him as a vassal is particularly noteworthy in that the Spanish tortured those Mexica leaders who did not participate in helping them locate missing gold and jewels.

³⁸ Louise Burkhart has studied the Franciscans’ early efforts to “translate” religion. Theirs was no easy task, as the Nahuas did not see the universe as a struggle between good and evil but rather between order and chaos. There was, for example, no word for “sin,” and so the word for “damage” was made to suffice. By the 1530s, the word chosen for “devil” or “demon” was *tlacatecolotl*, or human-owl, a shape-changing sorcerer of legends, so that *teotl* could mean “God” in the Christian sense. In 1519, however, the Spanish were on their own in trying to understand and translate Nahuatl concepts. They seem to have come remarkably close in their initial comprehension of what they were being called. “A single divine principle—*teotl*—was responsible for the nature of the cosmos, negative aspects of it as well as positive ones . . . *Teotl* could manifest itself in ritual objects, images, and human deity-impersonators—forms not necessarily consistent with the Western conception of deity.” Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson, Ariz., 1989), 36–42.

along a *Teule* to kill the Mexicans [Aztecs] who were at Cingapacinga. I tell this story here merely as a joke and to show Cortés' guile.³⁹

This story is barely comprehensible unless one accepts that the Spanish had been told the word *teotl* encompassed notions of "powerful one" and "deity impersonator." For the impression one is left with here is not that the locals thought the Spaniards were glorious and divine beings but rather that they envisioned them as bizarre sorcerers who owed allegiance to no one and whose powers could potentially be turned against the Aztec overlords and tax collectors. It is even conceivable that the indigenous were referring to "deity impersonators" as potential sacrifice victims for the Aztecs; certainly, *teotl* is used in that sense in descriptions of religious ceremonies elsewhere in the Florentine.

That the word had some ambiguity embedded within it is made clear in several texts. Durán's history—written in Spanish by a Spaniard who spoke Nahuatl and had Nahuatl sources—provides revealing examples. While the Spaniards are wending their way toward the city of Mexico, Moctezuma decides to send out medicine men to combat them. If the newcomers were really understood to be "gods" according to the term's definition in Spanish, then such an action makes no sense—since sorcerers fought human enemies, not gods. Durán's narrator deals with this inconsistency by having a close adviser to the king mention tactfully that such a step will probably be useless. Not long after, Moctezuma prepares to "receive the gods" in his city but then makes the following speech within the same paragraph: "Woe to us! . . . In what way have we offended the gods? What has happened? Who are these men who have arrived? Whence have they come?"⁴⁰ Given the varied implications of the term *teotl*, it is not surprising that the Spaniards chose to understand it simply as "god" and to forget about the Heredia incident. Bernal Díaz himself, after his initial avowal, never mentions the second definition again. In other cases, it is clear that the Spanish chose translations of ambiguous passages most in keeping with the notion that they were perceived as divine.⁴¹

Motolinía was the only Spaniard present in the early 1520s who explicitly addressed this issue. He asserted that, in the first villages the Spaniards entered, the locals thought that the horse-and-man figures were single beings, like classical centaurs, one imagines. Within days, they learned of their error, saw that "the man was a man and the horse a beast," and so had to seek new words. They used *mazatl* (deer) to refer to the horses, and they used the Spanish corruption of their own initial label (*teotl*), or *teul*, to refer to the people, as the Spanish were now introducing themselves as such. They knew no other word for the newcomers until after the victory, when they were instructed to call them *cristianos*. Some Spaniards complained about that shift, Motolinía says scornfully, preferring to be called *Teules*.⁴²

³⁹ Bernal Díaz, *Conquest of New Spain*, 112, 117.

⁴⁰ Durán, *History of the Indies*, 513, 524–25.

⁴¹ In the Florentine Codex, for example, Sahagún's students wrote that when Moctezuma was in hopes of establishing a tributary relationship with the Spanish by giving them annual gifts, he ordered his men, "Xicmotlatlauhtilican in totecuio in teotl." This translates best as "Address our political lord, the *teul*, in a courtly manner," but it was given in the Spanish gloss done by Sahagún as "Worship the god in my name." Lockhart, *We People Here*, 68–69.

⁴² Motolinía, *Historia de los Indios*, 193–94. A similar corruption that became a permanent name,

IN THE DEBATES ABOUT WHAT REALLY HAPPENED at the time of conquest, two facts stand out. Acknowledging them both simultaneously is perhaps counterintuitive, as they appear to be in opposition to each other; they are not. First, it was much more difficult than is commonly imagined for the Spanish to vanquish the Aztecs; the Europeans were in desperate straits on more than one occasion. Second, it was inevitable that Cortés and his men—or some other soon-to-follow expedition—would conquer the Aztecs. They had the technological advantage. The outcome was no coincidence. The Spanish conquest of the Mexicans against large numerical odds was replicated in innumerable other confrontations in the Americas—between Francisco Pizarro and the Incas, Hernando de Soto and the Alabama Indians, the English settlers and the Algonkians, etc.—and much later between Europeans and Africans. Yet the victory was never facile, for those less well equipped in a technological sense still did all they could to defend their own interests.

Cortés rapidly learned from his translators what he needed to know—that the Aztec army was the most powerful in the land, that the king offered city-states the alternative of joining the empire peacefully and paying an annual tribute or of fighting and facing brutal defeat, that the Spaniards' most effective strategy would be to turn people against the hated overlords. In July 1519, he scuttled his ships so his men would not be tempted to turn back, and struck inland to seek the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. First, however, he sent one ship to Spain with the news of his coastal explorations, the information he had received thus far about the Mexican empire, and his hopes of claiming that state on behalf of Carlos V. He did this partly because he was a traitor in a legal sense, having launched his expedition from Cuba without the governor's permission, and so needed to make a case in his own defense. Equally important, he knew he would need reinforcements and supplies. In order not to lose contact with the wider world, he left a number of men in the newly founded town of Vera Cruz who would be there to meet reinforcements (or enemies) when they arrived. That the Veracruzanos not starve or be killed, Cortés took several coastal Indian chiefs hostage.⁴³

The story has been told many times of how Cortés and his men made their way to Tenochtitlan—fighting when necessary, turning the Indians against each other through clever ruses, detecting plots and putting them down, and finally coming face-to-face with the great Moctezuma on the causeway leading to the island city. There, according to Cortés, Moctezuma welcomed him, and shortly after agreed to become a vassal of the Spanish king. One week later, following an ancient European tactic of war, Cortés claimed to have seized Moctezuma's person and placed him under house arrest, so that he could rule through him, and Moctezuma agreed to remain in custody even when Cortés later offered to release him upon a promise of good behavior. Cortés ruled the empire successfully for over five months and then

with no meaning attached, is "Malinche." After receiving her as a slave, the Spaniards christened her "Marina." As she was the all-important translator, the Indians added the honorific "-tzin" and called her "Malintzin." (They did not have the sound for "r" in their language.) The Spanish heard "Malinchi" or "Malinche," and that became her name, familiar to both groups, with few people knowing how it had come about.

⁴³ Cortés, "Second Letter," in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 51. It is important to note that, in the earliest dealings with the Nahuas, it was the lord of Cempoala who took the initiative and made overtures to Cortés, not the other way around.

learned that an army from the Caribbean under Captain Narváez had landed at Vera Cruz in pursuit of him. Leaving a contingent in the city, Cortés made for the coast, and there he brought the hundreds of newcomers over to his side. Yet the temporary division in the Spanish ranks had become visible to the indigenous, and they rebelled, ejecting the Spaniards from their city in the famed Noche Triste.

Even though posterity has tended to accept it, the story is in fact more than a little difficult to believe. The idea that the Aztecs peacefully surrendered their kingdom fits well with the notion that the Mexica responded to the Europeans as gods. If we do not proceed on that assumption, however, the story flies in the face of common sense. The Spanish numbered only about five hundred, the city folk a quarter of a million. The Spanish had only one translator to tell them what was occurring; Moctezuma's people could watch every move that every Spaniard made. Simply to eat every day, the Spaniards were desperately dependent on those they dreamed of ruling. How vulnerable they were in this regard becomes painfully clear in the Codex Aubin, in which a resident of Tenochtitlan recalled that, when the people later stopped feeding the invaders, the horses began to eat the straw mats that lined the floors. Although it is certainly true that the Spanish maintained a "seize the king" policy both before and after Tenochtitlan, early in their dealings with the impressive Aztecs, the newly arrived Spanish were unlikely to have been arrogantly sure of their course. They certainly did not have the power to arrest the emperor without bringing on a state of chaos, as events proved.⁴⁴

John Elliott and others have explained the content of Cortés's letter to the king, which subsequently formed the basis for the story as we have come to know it.⁴⁵ Besides justifying the actions he had taken without receiving royal permission, Cortés was using language to leap another legalistic hurdle: Carlos V could only annex territories that came to him voluntarily or through a just war. It was thus very important that Moctezuma swear fealty to the Spanish monarch early in the letter, *before* his people rebelled, when they technically became traitors. Placing Moctezuma under arrest without his protesting the Spaniards' right to do so was a crucial symbolic step.

Francis Brooks has argued that there is strong evidence against Cortés having immediately arrested Moctezuma. First, although he was supposedly in full control of the kingdom from November to May, Cortés made no effort to inform anyone else in the world of his successes, even though he had men perfectly capable of building ships, as they later proved. Second, Cortés's own story contradicts itself often, describing Moctezuma as a prisoner one moment and in control the next.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ James Lockhart and Stuart Schwartz have noted in *Early Latin America* (Cambridge, 1983) both that a standard mode of operation was developed early on in the period of conquest and that the Aztecs more than any other group gave the Spaniards pause. I would argue that by the time Pizarro faced Atahualpa in Peru, he had reason to have greater confidence than Cortés could immediately have had that he could use the techniques even when facing a great empire.

⁴⁵ J. H. Elliott, "Introduction," to Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*; Clendinnen, "Cortés, Signs, and the Conquest of Mexico." See also Eulalia Guzmán, *Relaciones de Hernán Cortés a Carlos V sobre la invasión de Anahuac* (Mexico City, 1958).

⁴⁶ Francis Brooks, "Moteczuma Xocoyotl, Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo: The Construction of an Arrest," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 75 (1995): 164–65. López de Gómara did see the awkwardness of the communication issue, and wrote, "Now that Cortés saw himself rich and powerful, he formed three plans: One was to send to Santo Domingo and the other islands news of the country and his good fortune." He then implied that Cortés had never quite had the time to see to it

Cortés himself describes what he was doing during those months—continuing to become acquainted with Moctezuma and the city, consulting the mapmakers, sending representatives to visit surrounding towns, collecting gifts of gold, and waiting for his ship to return with an answer from Spain.⁴⁷ It is perfectly possible to believe that he was doing all these things as an honored visitor but not as the leader of a handful of coup-staging interlopers.

It is, however, equally certain that Moctezuma was put in irons before the end of the drama. There is real evidence that it occurred in April of 1520, coinciding with the sudden appearance of his rival Captain Narváez. At that point, Cortés had nothing left to lose. On the one hand, a Spanish army larger than his own had arrived on the coast with the intention of arresting him; on the other hand, the Aztecs were aware of this turn of events and planned to use it to their advantage. Only with a gun to Moctezuma's head could Cortés assure the newly arrived Spaniards that he was in control of the kingdom and gain their allegiance, as well as stave off an indigenous uprising. Numerous sworn witnesses in later court cases claimed that Spanish soldiers guarded Moctezuma around the clock in this period. Durán mentions eighty days of confinement, which would indeed place the arrest in April.⁴⁸ Cortés claimed that Moctezuma begged to be of service to the Spanish king in defending the land against these evil new arrivals, but that scenario is so preposterous as to be laughable, except when considered in the legalistic light discussed above. Indeed, no other Spaniard writing about these events described them thus: the others universally described Moctezuma's obvious hostility (or duplicity).⁴⁹ One is left thinking that Cortés did protest too much; it is quite likely that, rather than swearing eternal friendship, he chose this moment to have Moctezuma clapped in irons. Yet precisely because his situation was so precarious, it was particularly important that he portray his control of the region as long-term.⁵⁰

The accounts of the other conquistadors are replete with inconsistencies concerning their purported power. "While I stayed . . . I did not see a living creature killed or sacrificed," wrote Cortés. "The great Moctezuma continued to show his accustomed good will towards us, but never ceased his daily sacrifices of human

before Captain Narváez and his men appeared. López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror*, 187.

⁴⁷ Cortés, "Second Letter," in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 113.

⁴⁸ Brooks, "Motecuzoma," 181; Durán, *History of the Indies*, 531.

⁴⁹ This even includes López de Gómara, usually faithful to the Cortesian narrative, in *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror*, 188–89.

⁵⁰ The fact that no Spaniard ever publicly accused Cortés of lying about his ability to arrest the Mexican king within a week of his arrival is not as significant as it first appears. Even those many conquistadors who later came to hate him (and even testify against him on other matters, financial and personal) would have understood, consciously and unconsciously, the importance of maintaining a united voice regarding the Spanish legal right to govern the indigenous population. Juan Cano, married to Moctezuma's daughter Isabel, did later claim in a lawsuit over his wife's inheritance that it was untrue that the Mexica lords had gathered before the conquest to swear loyalty to the Spanish and cede their property, or that, if they had gathered together, they could not possibly have understood the purport of the proceedings. Significantly, he reversed himself in his next document and attempted to use other legal precedents to protect his wife's property: someone had apparently made it quite clear to him how quickly he would lose the judges' sympathy if he touched on the issue of the Spanish right to rule in the first place. For the latter, see "Relaciones de la Nueva España" (Madrid, 1990), 153, cited in Thomas, *Conquest*, 325.

beings. Cortés tried to dissuade him but met with no success,” wrote Bernal Díaz.⁵¹ In the midst of describing Moctezuma’s palaces, Francisco de Aguilar seemed almost visibly to recall that he was supposed to be describing a prisoner: “They brought him . . . fish of all kinds, besides . . . fruits from the seacoast . . . The plates and cups of his dinner service were very clean. He was not served on gold or silver because he was in captivity, but it is likely that he had a great table service of gold and silver.”⁵² Aguilar went on to say (as per Cortés) that the arrest had taken place because the Spanish had learned that Moctezuma had plotted against them and had ordered one of the men left in Vera Cruz to be killed. Aguilar and Andrés de Tapia and a third man had been sent to the coast to ascertain the truth of the matter. But de Tapia’s own account says Indians were sent on that errand.⁵³ His description of the five-month period of supposed Spanish control seems odd: “In this manner we stayed on, the marques keeping us so close to our quarters that no one stepped a musket-shot away without permission.”⁵⁴

The friars who wrote about the events also undermined the notion of an immediate arrest,⁵⁵ and, although later indigenous sources accept it, the earliest known indigenous record does not. The Annals of Tlatelolco was probably written in the mid-1540s, possibly based on a story that had been memorized in the late 1520s. Here, Moctezuma is detained sometime after Cortés finds he must leave for the seashore and before the Spanish initiate a massacre at a religious festival, leading directly to their own expulsion. Until that point, the city’s only relationship with the newcomers had been to provide them with food, water, and firewood, as they would have done for any honored guests.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Cortés, “Second Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 107; Bernal Díaz, *Conquest of New Spain*, 276.

⁵² “The Chronicle of Fray Francisco de Aguilar,” in Fuentes, *Conquistadors*, 148.

⁵³ “The Chronicle of Andrés de Tapia,” in Fuentes, *Conquistadors*, 39.

⁵⁴ “Chronicle of Andrés de Tapia,” in Fuentes, *Conquistadors*, 44.

⁵⁵ Motolinía skipped from Moctezuma’s welcoming speech on the causeway to the arrival of Narváez, without addressing who ruled in the interim (*Historia de los Indios*, 55). Durán writes in his own inimitable style: “According to traditions and to paintings kept by certain [indigenous] elders, it is said that Motecuhzoma left the sanctuary with his feet in chains [the day he welcomed the Spaniards]. And I saw this in a painting that belonged to an ancient chieftain from the province of Tezcoco. Motecuhzoma was depicted in irons, wrapped in a mantle and carried on the shoulders of his dignitaries. This seems difficult to believe, since I have never met a Spaniard who will concede this point to me. But as all of them deny other things that have always been obvious, and remain silent about them in their histories, writings and narrations, I am sure they would also deny and omit this, one of the worst and most atrocious acts committed by them. A conqueror, who is now a friar, told me that though the imprisonment of Motecuhzoma might be true, it was done with the idea of protecting the lives of the Spanish captain and his men” (*History of the Indies*, 530–31). Durán, anxious to demonstrate the ways in which the Indians were victimized, is willing to move the day of arrest forward to the day of arrival—even more impossible to believe. But his source is a native picture that would, if in the standard format, only have been meant to portray a significant episode, not necessarily to give it a date. It was apparently that same native source that told Durán Moctezuma had been imprisoned eighty days. Interestingly, the “conqueror who is now a friar” was probably Aguilar, who said in his statement for public consumption that Moctezuma had been arrested as a traitor to the Spanish king, not in a desperate power ploy intended to protect their own lives.

⁵⁶ “Annals of Tlatelolco,” in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 257. There has been controversy surrounding the age of this manuscript, as it bears the date “1528” in the scribe’s handwriting, but this would not have been possible, as Nahuatl speakers had not yet learned to write their language in the Latin alphabet. Lockhart convincingly dates it to the 1540s in *We People Here*, 39–42. This document’s potentially very early date makes it essential that we consult it in the general matter under discussion in this article. Even though it makes no reference whatsoever to Cortés being taken for Quetzalcoatl,

Just as we must refrain from imagining that the Spanish arrived with the power to arrest Moctezuma immediately, we must also avoid the equally wrong-headed assumption that they were able to defeat the Aztecs militarily with a few well-aimed shots. When Cortés struck inland from Vera Cruz, he had only fifteen horses with him. Later, when the Aztecs rebelled and ejected the Spanish from the city, between four and six hundred men were killed as they fled along the causeways leading out of the city, along with at least a thousand Tlaxcalan allies. Narrow passages rendered the Europeans vulnerable to attack: on at least two different occasions, over forty Spaniards were ambushed and killed while traveling through gorges.

Yet, in the end, it was no accident that the Europeans won. I have recounted the difficulties the Spanish faced, the impossibility of their having taken over immediately, in order to be more credible in saying that Europeans were bound to destroy the Mexica eventually. Although it can be argued that diseases weakened both the Mexica and the Spaniards' Indian allies, and thus were not determinant, there remained a huge divide between the military capabilities of the two sides. Outside the city, on open ground, the Spanish were nearly invincible. After regrouping in the wake of their expulsion from the city, Cortés launched a campaign against Tenochtitlan. Several weeks and numerous battles later, one Spaniard died of his wounds, and Cortés mourned "the first of my company to be killed . . . on this campaign."⁵⁷ What nearby village chief could say the same? The Spanish had learned how to use what they had to enable groups of two hundred men to withstand masses of enemies. Both their arquebus and crossbow firings were able to slice through the Indians' cotton armor, and, because of their weapons' range, they could attack lethally when the Indians were still distant; furthermore, mounted Europeans carrying long metal lances could forge a path through the throngs. The Indians could fire their arrows at six times the rate of a Spanish blunderbuss, but to no avail, because metal armor rendered the Europeans nearly impervious.⁵⁸

The horses were of utmost importance. Three horses could turn a dire situation into a rout. They could even solve the problem of food supplies: clusters of armed horsemen could take a village or market by surprise and return with what the Spanish needed. The Europeans' own engineering experience was also crucial. As soon as they arrived in Tenochtitlan, Cortés put his master shipbuilder to work on four brigantines in case they should be needed to escape across the lake. They later came in handy in the final battles in the canals of the city: "The key to the war lay with them . . . As the wind was good, we bore down through the middle of them, and although they fled as fast as they were able, we sank a huge number of canoes and killed or drowned many of the enemy, which was the most remarkable sight in the world."⁵⁹

it does use the word *teotl* or "god" to designate the Spaniards, as we would expect, given the analysis of Book Twelve. What the speakers may have meant by this has been addressed by Anja Utgennant, University of Cologne, "Gods, Christians and Enemies: The Representation of the Conquerors in a Nahuatl Account," paper presented at "El Cambio Cultural en el México del siglo XVI," University of Vienna, June 6–13, 2002.

⁵⁷ Cortés, "Third Letter," in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 176.

⁵⁸ Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 52, 65–68. Hassig notes that a few did fall to slingstones, and others died when minor wounds became infected.

⁵⁹ Cortés, "Third Letter," in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 212.

It is true as many have maintained that the Spanish would have been crushed by greater numbers in the long run or starved to death had they not worked with Indian allies (“special forces” style). A few hundred Spaniards became an unbeatable force only when combined with thousands of indigenous pouring in behind them. Cortés himself and several other chroniclers willingly attest to this. “When the inhabitants of the city saw . . . the great multitude of our allies—although without us, they would have had no fear of them—they fled, and our allies pursued them.”⁶⁰ What we must understand, though, is that the technological advantage was what, in the last analysis, made it possible for the Spanish to retain their indigenous allies. The indigenous learned quickly that they did not have the requisite technology: they saw that their civilian populations could not survive the onslaughts of the Spaniards even in the short term, and they recognized the undeniable long-range importance of the Europeans’ maritime connections to distant lands.

Much ink has been spilt over the question of why the Tlaxcalans, for example, traditional enemies of the Mexica, briefly battled the Spaniards, then sided with them as their unwavering and most significant allies. The Tlaxcalans had little love for the Mexica and could not afford the luxury of acquiring another powerful enemy in the persons of the Spanish. Cortés, however, tells us what the clincher was. “I burnt more than ten villages, in one of which there were more than three thousand houses, where the inhabitants fought with us, although there was no one [no warriors] there to help them.” He kept ’round the clock guard of their camp with their long-range weapons to make sure the Tlaxcalans did not retaliate in kind, “which would have been so disastrous.” When they sued for peace, Cortés explained, “They would rather be Your Highness’s vassals than see their houses destroyed and their women and children killed.”⁶¹ Likewise, when Cortés and the other survivors of the Noche Triste made it back to Tlaxcala, they made it their business within days to attack villages that were not friendly to them. Most sued for peace. “They see how those who do so are well received and favored by me,” wrote Cortés, “whereas those who do not are destroyed daily.”⁶² Meanwhile, Moctezuma offered one year’s tax relief to those who refrained from going over to the Spanish, but that was a distant carrot compared to the immediate threat constituted by mounted lancers riding through town. When a set of villages received emissaries from Tenochtitlan, the Spanish torched the towns. “On the following day three chieftains from those towns came begging my forgiveness for what had happened

⁶⁰ Cortés, “Second Letter” (131) and “Third Letter” (218), in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*. There are numerous additional examples.

⁶¹ Cortés, “Second Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 60, 62, 66. In case Cortés had some unfathomable reason for making this story up, confirmation is easily found in the words of a Tlaxcalan warrior as recounted to Durán: “If you wish to have my opinion I shall give it to you: have pity upon your children, brothers, the old men and women and orphans who are to die, all of them innocent, perishing only because we [noblemen] wish to make a defense.” *History of the Indies*, 522. Some of the other conquistadors clearly felt squeamish about this, or wanted to defend themselves from the likes of Las Casas, for later accounts include strange stories of villages they could have plundered at this point but did not. (See Aguilar, Tapia, and Bernal Díaz.) Durán notes the inconsistency and says the Indians definitely remembered events the way Cortés did.

⁶² Cortés, “Second Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 156, 158.

and asking me to destroy nothing more, for they promised that they would never again receive anyone from Tenochtitlan.”⁶³

More important than any weapons or horses the Spanish had with them, however, were Spanish ships, which had the potential to bring endless reinforcements. One of Cortés’s first acts after fleeing from Tenochtitlan had been to send two expeditions loaded with treasure, which they were to use to purchase horses and weapons. Before they could return, in mid-1520, seven ships loaded with men and supplies appeared off the coast, for word had spread since Cortés had dispatched his initial messages in 1519.⁶⁴ Three more fully stocked vessels would arrive in early 1521. Even though we have since tended to overlook it, Europeans of the time understood how crucial this factor was. When Aguilar narrated his memory of the post-*Noche Triste* period, he said first that other ships had arrived and then that the Indian towns had chosen to “offer themselves peaceably.”⁶⁵ Cortés recalled, “One of my lads, who knew that nothing in the world would give me such pleasure as to learn of the arrival of this [new] ship and the aid it brought, set out by night [to bring me word], although the road was dangerous.”⁶⁶ Indeed, Cortés was so well aware of the importance of his connection to the rest of the world that he made it his first order of business to build and staff forts along the road from Tenochtitlan to the sea, before proceeding with a campaign against Tenochtitlan.

At last he was ready: “When, on the twenty-eight of April . . . I called all my men out on parade and reckoned eighty-six horsemen, 118 crossbowmen and harquebusiers, some 700 foot soldiers with swords and bucklers, three large iron guns, fifteen small bronze field guns and ten hundredweight of powder, . . . [t]hey knew well . . . that God had helped us more than we had hoped, and ships had come with horses, men and arms.”⁶⁷ After only a few days of battle, it was clear to many of the towns surrounding Tenochtitlan how well supplied the Spanish now were. “The natives of Xochimilco . . . and certain of the Otomí, . . . came to offer themselves as Your Majesty’s vassals, begging me to forgive them for having delayed so long.” After a major defeat suffered by the Spanish, in which forty were captured and sacrificed, many of the Spaniards’ allies withdrew again. It is commonly accepted that they returned only when the Nahua priests’ predictions of a great victory to occur within the ensuing eight days did not come true. Cortés, though, outlines events as follows: first messengers arrived from Vera Cruz telling of the arrival of yet another ship and bringing powder and crossbows to prove it, and then, in the next sentence, “all the lands round about” demonstrated their good sense and came over to the Spaniards’ side.⁶⁸ Perhaps, after all, the Indians’ decisions were less spiritually than practically motivated.

We must now expand our list of relevant technological implements to include

⁶³ Cortés, “The Third Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 181. The Florentine Codex, like Durán, confirms these stories, only telling them with a tragic rather than triumphant tone.

⁶⁴ Two were sent to the aid of Narváez; four constituted an independently got-up exploratory venture from Jamaica, and one was sent by Cortés’s father in Spain.

⁶⁵ Aguilar, in Fuentes, *Conquistadors*, 157; Bernal Díaz, in *Conquest of New Spain*, 309, also comments on the affection and joy with which new arrivals were greeted.

⁶⁶ Cortés, “Third Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 182. See also 147–48, 164–65, 191–92.

⁶⁷ Cortés, “Third Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 207.

⁶⁸ Cortés, “Third Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 221, 247.

printing presses. The comparatively quick and widespread communication channels available to the Spanish gave them a geopolitical perspective throughout the events that the Aztecs, for all their intelligence, even brilliance, simply lacked. At the end of sixteenth century, Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary to China, would make a comment about books that the Aztecs would have appreciated, although they themselves envisioned texts in other ways: "The whole point of writing things down . . . is that your voice carries for thousands of miles."⁶⁹ Matteo Ricci read the Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian explorers, who themselves read Ibn Battutah and Marco Polo. As Todorov put it, "Did not Columbus himself set sail because he had read Marco Polo's narrative?"⁷⁰ In 1504, Amerigo Vespucci published his suggestion that what Columbus had found was not the tip of the Orient but a New World, and, by 1511, Peter Martyr's Latin compendium of reported observations on the New World was available to educated Europeans everywhere—within five years, it would even make its way into the best-read fiction of the day.⁷¹ In 1509, the Spanish crown promulgated a law that no royal official was to do anything to impede the sending of any information about the Indies back to Spain.⁷²

Albrecht Dürer is known for having spoken with awe of Aztec art that had been shipped back by Cortés and that he saw in an exhibit in the town hall in Brussels: "All the days of my life I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart so much as these things, for I have seen among them wonderful works of art, and I marveled at the subtle intellects of men in foreign parts."⁷³ What is less well known is that Dürer saw these objects in July of 1520. Over a year before the conquest was complete, the Europeans were already putting on exhibits of their findings and spreading the word throughout their continent. Yet, on the other side of the sea, the Aztecs did not even know what to call the newcomers in their midst. The inequality of their positions is stunning, the subtle intellect of the Aztec artists notwithstanding.

WHAT, THEN, WERE THE INDIGENOUS THINKING? Available evidence indicates that the Aztecs responded to their situation with clear-sighted analysis of the technological differential, rather than by prostrating themselves before the "white gods."⁷⁴ As

⁶⁹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1984), 22.

⁷⁰ Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 13. Indeed, Columbus annotated his copy of Marco Polo's book.

⁷¹ One of the speakers created by Sir Thomas More in *Utopia* was supposed to have sailed with Vespucci: his utopia was thus a New World island. More drew explicitly from Vespucci's 1504 work as well as from Martyr's 1511 volume, seamlessly stirring in elements of ancient European tales of fantasy. It was a popular book: *Utopia* was published in Latin in 1516, 1517, 1518, and 1519, in German in 1524, and in English in 1551. Interestingly, the 1517 edition contained a map of "Utopia" drawn by Ambrosius Holbein (younger brother to Hans Holbein); it bears striking resemblances to a stylized map of Tenochtitlan that appeared in Nuremberg in 1524 in a Latin translation of Cortés's Second and Third Letters (supposedly based on a sketch sent back by Cortés).

⁷² Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia, 1949), 9. Jared Diamond in his previously cited chapter "Collision at Cajamarca: Why the Inca Emperor Atahualpa Did Not Capture King Charles I of Spain," in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, shows in an interesting way that Spanish guns alone could not have accomplished Pizarro's purpose for him but that the total constellation of Spanish technology was of paramount importance.

⁷³ Dürer's diary, quoted in Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1971), 69.

⁷⁴ We must sift our usual expectations. The Spanish, for example, imagined that the Nahuas were overawed by their first sight of European ships, and we have tended to repeat this. In fact, they seem

difficult as it is, let us first consider what we know of Moctezuma's thoughts. The version of the king's response that later became popular was the vision of Moctezuma sighing and lapsing into paralyzing depression, but the evidence that we have about the steps taken by Moctezuma indicates that he actually behaved like the experienced twenty-year sovereign he was. All sources agree that, after the first sighting of a Spanish ship in 1517, he had the sea watched from various vantage points. When Cortés and his men landed near today's Vera Cruz and began conversing with the locals, Moctezuma sent court painters to record the numbers of men, "deer," and boats.⁷⁵ Even though the Spaniards saw these paintings as quaint, we must keep in mind that Moctezuma moved within a world in which accurate counts concerning distant territories were kept as pictoglyphic records as a matter of course.⁷⁶ As the Spanish began their ascent toward Tenochtitlan, Moctezuma organized a veritable war room. "A report of everything that was happening was given and relayed to Moctezuma. Some of the messengers would be arriving as others were leaving . . . There was no time when they weren't listening, when reports weren't being given."⁷⁷ Cortés also reported that Moctezuma's messengers were present in every town they visited, watching every step they took. Bernal Díaz said by the time the Spaniards got to the capital, the sermon they had given frequently along the way had been repeated so often to Moctezuma that he asked them not to give it again, as the arguments were by now familiar to him.⁷⁸ Despite his intelligence and his organizational apparatus, however, Moctezuma still had the problem that his frame of reference was not as wide as that of the Spaniards: Durán's informant said that he called for priests and sages from different parts of the kingdom to consult their libraries and traditions and tell him who these

to have recognized them for what they were—boats that were larger and more impressive than their own. Durán asserts that the native messenger found them "wondrous and terrifying" but then elaborates that the messenger "described how, while he had been walking next to the seashore, he had seen a round [water]hill [the same word used for "village" or "settlement"] or [water]house [same word used for "boat"] moving from one side to another until it had anchored next to some rocks on the beach." Durán, *History of the Indies*, 495. Durán's text gives the Spanish for "hill" and "house," contributing to the myth that the Indians perceived the boats as floating mountains or great houses, like temples. However, any Nahuatl speaker cannot help but wonder what his Nahuatl source originally said, as the word for "village" or "settlement" in Nahuatl is "water-hill," and the word for "boat" is "water-house." Thus it is quite likely that the speaker meant to say, "He saw some sort of settlement, a boat, moving from side to side," and his Spanish hearer or reader mistakenly removed the prefix meaning "water" from the two words, thinking it referred to the fact that the messenger had seen these things in the water. This view is supported by another messenger's comment a few pages later (505): "Before showing him the paintings he narrated that some men would come to this land in a great wooden hill. This wooden hill would be so big that it would lodge many men, serving them as a home. Within it they would eat and sleep." In the Florentine Codex, after the famous hyperbole, Moctezuma's emissaries reached the Spanish ship by canoe and reported matter-of-factly: "They [the newcomers] hitched the prow of the [Indians'] boat with an iron staff and hauled them in. Then they put down a ladder" (Lockhart, *We People Here*, 70).

⁷⁵ Several conquistadors, Durán's source, and the Florentine Codex all refer to this event.

⁷⁶ Cortés, "Second Letter," in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 94. Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1995), studies Spanish resistance to seeing the kinds of information conveyed in Aztec records and maps; see esp. 296–313. On the topic in general, start with Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Aztec Pictorial Histories: Records without Words," in Boone and Mignolo, eds., *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes* (Durham, N.C., 1994).

⁷⁷ Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 94.

⁷⁸ Bernal Díaz, *Conquest of New Spain*, 222.

strangers were, but they could find nothing. Only one man said anything useful, describing the power of the Spaniards and mentioning that the first explorers were merely there to scout a route, that others would return.⁷⁹

The words of Moctezuma's that we have come from Cortés, who claimed to quote a long speech of greeting in which Moctezuma turned over his kingdom to the Spaniard.⁸⁰ The elaborate statement may well have been loosely based on something that Moctezuma actually said—minus the immediate surrender of his entire kingdom—as it employs the classic courtly Nahuatl style, makes no reference to Cortés being Quetzalcoatl or any other god, and mentions facts that would otherwise have been unknown to the Spanish at this early date—that the Aztecs themselves were migrants to the region and had a long history of banished kings—which Moctezuma found sufficient to explain the arrival of the newcomers. Later, Cortés actually has Moctezuma insist to his Spanish audience that he himself is *not* a god, and does not possess untold wealth: "I know that [my enemies] have told you the walls of my houses are made of gold, and that the floor mats in my rooms . . . are likewise of gold, and that I was, and claimed to be, a god; . . . The houses as you see are of stone and lime and clay . . . Then he raised his clothes and showed me his body, saying, 'See that I am of flesh and blood like you and all other men.'" This may have been invented by Cortés.⁸¹ But a Nahuatl speaker would have been very likely to use "floor mats" and "flesh and blood" as important metaphors; their poets did so frequently. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to think of a convincing political reason for Cortés to throw in this particular paragraph. On the other hand, Moctezuma had every reason to make the statement—to minimize the extent of his wealth and in order to work his way around in courtly and indirect speech in true Nahuatl style to his impolite punch line: he wanted it known that he did not believe the Spaniards to be gods. One is even more inclined to read the statement this way in that it is apparently how the Spanish read it then, judging from the style in which both López de Gómara and Bernal Díaz recounted the incident. Bernal Díaz embellished: "You must take the [stories] as a joke, as I take the story of your thunders and lightnings."⁸²

If we cannot be certain of what Moctezuma said, we can at least analyze his actions as a text of sorts: indeed, his decision to allow the Spaniards and many hundreds of their Tlaxcalan allies to enter his city has been analyzed for many years as if it were a declaration of sentiment. In lieu of the traditional interpretation that he was a coward or a fool, scholars have proffered various motivations—caution, a desire for secrecy, a need to wait for the dry season.⁸³ There is a central explanation

⁷⁹ Durán, *History of the Indies*, 503–06.

⁸⁰ Some form of the speech Cortés attributes to Moctezuma appears in most of the later Spanish accounts, and a variation in the Florentine Codex. For several centuries, it was assumed that these sources were quoting the king verbatim; more recently, it has been assumed that the king said nothing of the kind. The truth probably lies in between. For examples of courtly Nahuatl speech, see Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart, eds., *The Art of Nahuatl Speech: The Bancroft Dialogues* (Los Angeles, 1987).

⁸¹ J. H. Elliott, "The Mental World of Hernán Cortés," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 17 (1967): 41–58.

⁸² López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror*, 140–42; Bernal Díaz, *Conquest of New Spain*, 223–24.

⁸³ See esp. Clendinnen, "Cortés, Signs, and the Conquest of Mexico," 97–98; and Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 77.

for Moctezuma's decision, however. Besides attempting to turn the potential conquerors back by offering them annual tribute, the emperor apparently did try to have the Spanish killed at least twice while they were still distant; somebody certainly gave the order to attack them. Yet, when the Spaniards were nearing the city, "Moctezuma did not give orders for anyone to meet them in battle."⁸⁴ He could not: he knew now that the Spaniards won battles in the open field. Even if he had had time to arm every warrior in his kingdom and then surround and destroy the Spanish with the sheer force of numbers, he would have been politically destroyed. The casualties would have been immense, beyond anything ever seen, and the people of the Central Valley accepted the arrogance of their Mexica neighbors in exchange for peace and the privilege of living close to power. If the Aztecs could not deliver a quick victory on the outskirts of their own capital, they were doomed; so if his army could not win quickly and easily here—and Moctezuma knew they could not—then they could not fight. At the time, Cortés and his followers did not understand the political situation well enough to grasp this fact; centuries later, posterity tends to lose sight of the realities of that world. Not so those who wrote a few decades later. Said López de Gómara: "It seemed unfitting and dishonorable for him to make war upon Cortés and fight a mere handful of strangers who said they were ambassadors. Another reason was that he did not wish to stir up trouble for himself (and this was the truest reason), for it was clear that he would immediately have to face an uprising among the Otomí, the Tlaxcalans, and many others." Said Bernal Díaz: "Moctezuma's captains and *papas* also advised him that if he tried to prevent our entry *we would fight him in his subject towns.*"⁸⁵

It is reasonable to assume that, while Cortés and his men were in the city gathering information about the kingdom, Moctezuma was also attempting to gather information about them. It may have been his hope that they would eventually leave of their own accord. Almost all accounts except the letter by Cortés indicate that it was Moctezuma's messengers who first told of the arrival of Captain Narváez: it was the Mexican king who told the Spanish the news, not the other way around. Whether Moctezuma was initially behind it or not, his people did raise a rebellion against the Spanish as soon as Cortés returned from the coast. Moctezuma himself became known for the speeches he made from the rooftops in which he asked the warriors to lay down their arms. "Let the Mexica hear: we are not their match, may they be dissuaded [from further fighting]."⁸⁶ By then, he was in irons, and so has been seen as a coward doing his best to save his life. But it is possible that he, the warrior king who had led so many successful campaigns, preached peace in relation to the Spanish out of true conviction that his people would be destroyed if they pursued violence. In interpreting his actions, we would do well to remember that if so, *he was right*. Moctezuma, with his knowledge of the capabilities of both sides, was one of the few Mexica in a position to be able to see the *longue durée*.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 106.

⁸⁵ López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror*, 134; Bernal Díaz, *Conquest of New Spain*, 205 (emphasis added).

⁸⁶ Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 138. Almost all the sources mention such speeches on his part.

⁸⁷ It is possible to get a sense of what the commoners thought about the Spanish during all this time.

Inga Clendinnen has studied the reactions of the Mexica warriors to the Spanish. She finds evidence that, despite the great respect the Aztecs had for the horses, they held the Spanish men themselves in outright contempt. When the Spanish returned to retake the city, there is no evidence that the warriors operated according to sacred signs or astrology; instead, they put immediate practicality before all else. Contrary to popular opinion, they did not fight to take prisoners for sacrifice rather than to kill: they did not even want the Spanish for sacrifice, and, when they had a chance to destroy them, did so with a blow to the back of the head, as they did with criminals. In general, the only use the warriors made of sacrifice in this campaign was as a tool to instill terror in the hearts of the Spanish who were close enough to see what they were doing.⁸⁸

We have significant evidence about the military men's attitude toward technology. The Aztecs cleverly used their own inventions against their enemies whenever they could. When the Spanish approached the city in what was to be the final campaign, the Indians secretly opened a dike in an effort to trap the opposing forces on an island that was connected to land by only one causeway.⁸⁹ More often, though, the indigenous were in the position of needing to decode Spanish tactics and technology as quickly as possible, rather than showing off their own. Through keen observation, they were able to make remarkable headway. First, there was the question of seizing some of the Spaniards' powerful weapons and learning to use them. They quickly put captured lances to use but recognized that the Spaniards' other weapons were more powerful: "The crossbowman aimed the bolt well, he pointed it right at the person he was going to shoot, and when it went off, it went whining, hissing and humming. And the arrows missed nothing, they all hit someone, went all the way through someone. The guns were pointed and aimed right at people . . . It came upon people unawares, giving no warning when it killed them. However many were fired at died, when some dangerous part was hit: the forehead, the nape of the neck, the heart, the chest, the stomach, or the abdomen."⁹⁰ These weapons, however, were more difficult to use: at one point, some captured crossbowmen were apparently either forced to shoot at their countrymen or to give lessons to Aztec soldiers; in either case, the arrows went

Nahua sources refer not only to the foreigners' insatiable demand for gold but also to the overwhelming quantities of food and water that they consumed—and that the city folk were asked by Moctezuma to provide. Not only food, added Sahagún's students, but also hundreds of bowls, pitchers, and pans. One presumes that there may also have been the usual tensions over women, but only a single particularly egregious incident regarding lewd glances at sacred women made its way into the oral tradition that was passed on to Sahagún. "[Before the ceremonies] the women who had fasted for a year ground up the amaranth . . . in the temple courtyard. The Spaniards came out well adorned in battle equipment . . . arrayed as warriors. They passed among the grinding women, circling around them, looking at each one, looking upon their faces. And when they were through looking at them, they went into the great palace." Far from regarding the Spanish as gods, the city dwellers apparently saw them as dish thieves and profaners of the sacred. Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 122, 128.

⁸⁸ Clendinnen, "Cortés, Signs, and the Conquest of Mexico," esp. 107–14. She notes that there may have been one exception—a single incident in which the Indians seem to have come close to killing Cortés and apparently chose not to, perhaps hoping to take him alive so as to sacrifice his still-beating heart to the gods. Hassig, *Time, History and Belief*, echoes her incredulity that Aztec political and military leaders were making practical decisions based on religious tradition rather than realpolitik.

⁸⁹ Cortés, "Third Letter," in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 175.

⁹⁰ Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 146.

astray. And the guns of course would not work without powder, even if the Aztecs could have learned to make bullets. When they captured a cannon, they recognized they had neither the expertise nor the ammunition to make it useful to themselves. The best they could do was make it impossible for the Spanish ever to regain it: they wisely sank it in the lake.⁹¹ The second pressing concern was to thwart Spanish technology even if they could not harness it themselves. The natives made extra long spears and managed to take an occasional horseman by surprise, killing the beast and pulling down the rider. Canoe men learned to zigzag so rapidly that guns could not be trained on them, and, once, they were able to lure two Spanish boats into shallow water and capture them.⁹² Yet what they could do in this regard was limited.

As frustrated as they were by their technological shortcomings in comparison to the Spanish, at no point do the warriors seem to have responded as if they were awestruck. In one case, the Spanish decided to build a catapult to turn against the city. Cortés wanted to believe that the Indian observers were petrified: “Even if it were to have had no other effect, which indeed it had not, the terror it caused was so great that we thought the enemy might surrender. But neither of our hopes was fulfilled, for the carpenters failed to operate their machine.”⁹³ Little did he know that, in Indian memory, the incident would border on the humorous:

And then those Spaniards installed a catapult on top of an altar platform with which to hurl stones at the people . . . Then they wound it up, then the arm of the catapult rose up. But the stone did not land on the people, but fell [almost straight down] behind the marketplace at Xomolco. Because of that the Spaniards there argued among themselves. They looked as if they were jabbing their fingers in one another’s faces, chattering a great deal. And [meanwhile] the catapult kept returning back and forth, going one way and then the other.⁹⁴

Indeed, this relatively straightforward view of Spanish accomplishments is pervasive in Nahua accounts of the war. European technology is mentioned frequently—not as something mystifying in the hands of gods but as the clear and concrete explanation for indigenous military losses. As early as the Annals of Tlatelolco, writers mentioned at the key point in their narration that “the war leaders were dying from the guns and iron bolts.” As late as the end of the century, Ixtlilxochitl mentions that a local king decides to heed his sister and not try to stop Cortés: she warned of “a young man with a light in one hand that would exceed that of the sun, and in the other an *espada*, which was the weapon that this newly arrived nation used.”⁹⁵ The Florentine Codex, in the middle of the century, is full of the “We are not their match” concept to which Moctezuma gives full voice before he

⁹¹ Clendinnen, “Cortés, Signs, and the Conquest of Mexico,” 107; and Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 121, both working with the texts of Cortés, Bernal Díaz, Durán, and the Florentine Codex. It is possible that Indians were learning to make some of the Spanish goods, since Cortés mentions having nails, pitch, oars, and sails made locally, but he probably meant that Spaniards were manufacturing them. “Second Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 157.

⁹² The Spanish describe such memorable events as atrocities, but they are recounted with pride in the Florentine Codex; Lockhart, *We People Here*, 188, 192, 210, 232. For a thorough discussion, see Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 129–33.

⁹³ Cortés, “Third Letter,” in Elliott and Pagden, *Letters from Mexico*, 257.

⁹⁴ Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 230. Lockhart also comments on this incident in the same volume (7).

⁹⁵ Ixtlilxochitl, “Historia de la Nación Chichimeca,” in *Obras históricas*, 2: 244.

dies; indeed, it is the messengers' comment upon their first return from seeing the newcomers.

Reading Book Twelve from start to finish, including the first part, which contains the obviously revisionist account of the facts, as well as the more faithful second section, one is left with two predominant images—which surely speak to the most profound impressions the Indians received and passed on to their children. Both images are direct reflections of the technological discrepancy between the peoples involved, of which the narrators are clearly very much aware. First, page by page, the mounted Spaniards in their clanking armor with their metallic weapons move ever closer to the great city. That the Spanish had passed through the Iron Age was certainly not lost on the Mexica. The word *tepoztili* (metal, or iron) appears more than any other. The initial report Moctezuma is given is presented in three sections. First come the Spaniards' weapons. "Their war gear was all iron. They clothed their bodies in iron, they put iron on their heads, their swords were iron, their bows were iron, and their shields and lances were iron." Next, the horses are described, and last the vicious dogs who accompany their masters. Later, when the Indians attempt to fight, they lose dramatically. "Not just a few but a huge number of them were destroyed." After killing yet more Indians in Cholula, the Spanish set out again: "Their iron lances and halberds seem to sparkle, and their iron swords were curved like a stream of water. Their cuirasses and iron helmets seemed to make a clattering sound." When they file into Tenochtitlan, their metal weapons and armor are described in even greater detail, filling whole pages.⁹⁶

Secondly, throughout the narrative, although the Indians do not know who the newcomers were, the newcomers know enough about the world to search for Moctezuma; they will not rest until they find him. First, Cortés uses his knowledge to flatter. "I want to see and behold [your city], for word has gone out in Spain that you are very strong, great warriors." The Spaniards ask many questions. "When Moctezuma heard this, that many and persistent inquiries were being made about him, that the gods wanted to see his face, he was greatly anguished." Later: "When they saw [an Aztec general] they said, 'Is this one then Moctezuma?'" On the causeway, Cortés greets the king: "Is it not you? Is it not you then? Moctezuma?" and Moctezuma at last answers, "Yes, it is me."⁹⁷ This element makes the indigenous feel at least as vulnerable as do the metal weapons: the Spaniards have somehow used their knowledge to make their way to the heart of Aztec power, but the Aztecs could not begin to envision a similar expedition to the seat of Carlos V. They now knew about the ships, but only a few—probably Moctezuma, for example—had seen the compasses and printed books in the possession of the Spaniards. Ordinary people could only begin to piece together an explanation. What is remarkable is that they knew this is what needed to be explained.

THIS IS A CASE IN WHICH the ending is only the beginning. In the first few years after the conquest was complete, the Aztecs exhibited few signs of believing that gods

⁹⁶ Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 80, 90, 96, 110.

⁹⁷ Florentine Codex, in Lockhart, *We People Here*, 74, 86, 98, 116.

walked in their midst. Motolinía tells us that, for the first five years, no one paid any attention to the priests who were attempting to reach out to the people. In 1526, the Franciscans held a marriage ceremony for a prince, but when they tried to convince others to follow his example, the Indians said dismissively that Spanish men themselves had more than one woman. When the fathers opened a school and Cortés ordered the indigenous nobles to send their sons, the families sent servants as substitutes. They had no intention of turning their children over to such men and were confident that the newcomers were too stupid or ill informed to know the difference.⁹⁸ What would they have said if they could have known that posterity would insist they believed the Spaniards to be divine?

⁹⁸ Motolinía, *Historia de los Indios*, 147–48, 173, 276. If we believe that the 1540s write-up of the initial conversations between the Franciscan Apostles and the Aztec priests represents a close approximation of what was said, then we have a 1524 indigenous statement to the effect that not only are the Spaniards not divine but they do not even have the right to determine how the indigenous shall worship. The speech begins with exaggerated courtesy, “Our lords, leading personages of much esteem, you are very welcome to our lands and towns. We ourselves, being inferior and base, are unworthy of looking upon the faces of such valiant personages.” In true courtly Nahuatl style, the speaker builds gradually to his point: “All of us together feel that it is enough to have lost, enough that the power and royal jurisdiction have been taken from us. As for our gods, we will die before giving up serving and worshipping them. This is our determination; do what you will . . . We have no more to say, lords.” “Chapter 7: In Which the Reply of the Principal Holy Men to the Twelve Is Found,” *Coloquios y doctrina cristiana*, in Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, eds., *Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History* (Wilmington, Del., 1998), 21–22. Jorge Klor de Alva has worked extensively with the *coloquios* on the question of their veracity. See, for example, “The Aztec-Spanish Dialogues of 1524,” *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* 4 (1980): 52–193. While acknowledging that we have only a text based on notes made at the time, he asserts the probability that the notes reflect a genuine resistance to the Spanish priests, as other evidence suggests. The notion that the Aztecs simply accepted what the Christians had to say in a “spiritual conquest” has been abandoned by scholars. To begin, see Burkhart, *Slippery Earth*; and most recently, Viviana Díaz Balsera, “A Judeo-Christian Tlaloc or a Nahua Yahweh? Domination, Hybridity and Continuity in the Nahua Evangelization Theater,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 10 (2001): 209–28.

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