

Reexamining the Lore of the “Archetypal Conquistador”: Hernán Cortés and the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire, 1519-1521

The real power of those who control is constrained by the power of the weak.

– Ward Stavig¹

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IN HIS STUDY on the myths of the Spanish conquest, Matthew Restall classified Hernán Cortés² as an “archetypal conquistador”—a testament to Cortés’ enduring legend as a ruthless, pragmatic, and manipulatively intelligent Spanish conqueror.³ The image of a heroic Cortés and his band of Spanish adventurers, as seen in both popular history and more serious academic scholarship, had dominated narratives of the Spanish conquest of Mexico for decades. More recently, however, historians have begun to question how a makeshift group of four hundred Spaniards was able to defeat the triple alliance of Tenochtitlán, Tlacopan, and Texcoco—the most formidable indigenous alliance in the “new” world.⁴

This paper will examine the legend of Hernán Cortés through the lens of three key elements of the conquest that popular history and the earlier historiography had largely ignored: the protracted nature of the conquest, the role of indigenous allies, and the disparate ideologies of war and society between the Spanish and the indigenous.⁵ In most popular histories and earlier scholarly portrayals, Hernán Cortés is seen through a colonial worldview that presents the conquistador

as the embodiment of a Spanish quest for cultural ascendancy over a “primitive” and “backward” civilization. Yet this is a notion not rooted in indigenous traditions, but one fueled, to use Gananath Obeyesekere’s phrasing, in “European culture and consciousness.”⁶ My aim is to outline the evolution of the historiography as it pertains to Hernán Cortés and raise questions concerning the agency of the conqueror vis-à-vis his Mexica⁷ adversaries and indigenous allies.⁸ Although Hernán Cortés first reached the city limits of Tenochtitlán almost five centuries ago, popular historical consciousness and contemporary debates surrounding the polarizing leader continue to shape Latin American society and culture long after Spain gained and lost a “new” world empire. The legend of Cortés has evolved into a grand narrative that blends historical reality and pure fantasy; it is, to use anthropologist Dennis Tedlock’s phrase, a “mythistory.”⁹

I argue that the legend of Hernán Cortés as a brilliant conqueror represents a myth of sixteenth-century European superiority that had been reappropriated by both popular and academic history as a way to explain the formation of European world empires in a way that gave Europeans a heightened sense of self vis-à-vis indigenous actors. I understand myth to mean a socially constructed and historically contingent representation that gives additional meaning to historical reality and moves beyond it. It may be partly or entirely different from historical reality, though it is largely more universally accepted and, therefore, more powerful than the reality from which it is based.¹⁰ The legend of Cortés, however, is a myth that does not withstand scholarly scrutiny. A closer look at the Spaniards’ mid-sixteenth-century conquest of Mexico demonstrates that despite an eventual Spanish victory, the indigenous had significant agency and potentiality. It is my objective to remind non-expert readers, especially undergraduates, of these complexities, encourage them to read historical accounts critically (even ones that may appear scholarly), and provoke their desire to turn to the documents themselves to rethink a world previously defined primarily by Spanish chronicles, earlier academic studies, and popular historical accounts.

Early Conquest Accounts and Histories

Hernán Cortés’ landfall in April of 1519 represented the first European encounter with an organized nation-state. The meeting

between the two civilizations marked a new age in global history. It furthered European notions of cultural superiority over their indigenous contemporaries in the “new” world and served as a useful—and for Europeans, legitimate—justification for conquest. In the early 1540s, just over twenty years after Cortés reached the shores of what is today Mexico, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, the chronicler and chaplain to Spanish Emperor Charles V (1519-1556), wrote a history of the conquest titled *A Second Democritus: On the Just Causes of the War with the Indians*. Sepúlveda juxtaposed an intelligent and heroic Cortés with a naïve and cowardly Moctezuma (1502-1520), the leader of the Aztec Empire at the time of Cortés’ arrival and the figure most commonly associated with the defeated nation.¹¹ Although earlier historical accounts and popular history of the conquest have tended to disparage and even mock Moctezuma, historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto has argued that Moctezuma was the most effective ruler in Mexica history and “the most triumphantly self-confident of all.”¹² Sepúlveda’s unfavorable depiction of Moctezuma, though inaccurately critical, did not compare to his denigration of the empire’s indigenous inhabitants, whom he viewed as “natural slaves.” Sepúlveda, borrowing from Aristotle’s analysis of philosophy and his concept of “lower forms” of civilization, explained that the indigenous inhabitants of Tenochtitlán were “as children to parents, as women are to men, as cruel people are from mild people and as monkeys to men.”¹³ Such a declaration, as historian Anthony Pagden has noted, represents “the most virulent and uncompromising argument for the inferiority of the American Indian ever written.”¹⁴

In 1585, the Franciscan Fray Bernardino de Sahagún revised and expanded the earlier work of Sepúlveda in his *Florentine Codex*. Sahagún’s historical account, however, sought to elevate further the agency of Hernán Cortés, justify acts of Spanish hegemony, and defend the actions of Catholic Spain against the harsh criticism of its Protestant contemporaries, particularly England, which began to rise as a world power in the late-sixteenth century.¹⁵ For Sahagún, the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire was an inevitable consequence of the meeting of two distinct worlds: one “progressive” and Iberian and the other “backward” and Mesoamerican.¹⁶ Sahagún’s narrative, written from an indigenous point of view and based, in part, on the recollections of indigenous peoples, nonetheless highlighted the

accommodating flexibility of European myths. Sahagún's indigenous contributors were primarily from Tlatelolco, a Mexica island city that became part of the Mexica imperial project in the fifteenth century, but still maintained a degree of autonomy and independent identity. Tlatelolco's inhabitants largely considered themselves independent of Mexica rule and resented the Mexica for losing indigenous territory to the Spanish.¹⁷ Thus, the indigenous memories referenced by Sahagún must be read with some degree of scrutiny. Moreover, these accounts passed through the hands of European translators and scribes (who intentionally and unintentionally altered meanings).¹⁸ In addition to the indigenous inhabitants of Tlatelolco, several indigenous groups, especially the Tlaxcalans, had resented decades of Mexica domination and sided militarily with the Spanish in their efforts to dismantle the Mexica triple alliance.¹⁹

Issues of collective memory in the propagation of ideas of European superiority and "inevitable" Mexica defeat also arise in the writings of Bernal Díaz, a foot soldier who wrote what he claimed to be a "true history" of the conquest at the age of eighty-four. Despite the significant temporal gap between the fall of Tenochtitlán and Díaz's published account, he argued that his writings would serve as a "true and remarkable story" for a younger generation of Europeans eager to learn about the conquistadors' epic triumph.²⁰ While Díaz's writings were heavily cited and largely taken as the "true history" the author proclaimed in early historical scholarship and popular histories of the conquest, perhaps no source has been cited more heavily than the letters Cortés wrote to the Spanish crown—a genre that has come to be termed *Probanzas* ("proofs of merit").²¹ Cortés, who had violated the orders of Cuban Governor Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar (1511-1524) and went inland into the world of the Mexica, was in violation of formal Spanish authority. His letters served as a way for the conquistador to validate his actions and avoid the hand of royal punishment. As Inga Clendinnen has observed, "His letters are splendid fictions, marked by politic elisions, omissions, inventions, and a transparent desire to impress Charles of Spain with his own indispensability."²² While the writings of Sepúlveda, Sahagún, Díaz, and Cortés have great historical value, they must be read in the context of a Spanish imperial project. Accepting this early rhetoric without scrutiny works to re-appropriate Spanish discourse and further subjugate indigenous inhabitants to Spanish exploitation.

The lack of scholarly rigor in early historical narratives is perhaps most evident in W. H. Prescott's 1843 bestseller *History of the Conquest of Mexico*.²³ Prescott presented Spanish victory as an inevitable result of Cortés' superior thinking and military skill over Moctezuma. Throughout Prescott's narrative, the reader witnesses a despotic and incompetent Moctezuma and a rational and intelligent Cortés. Inga Clendinnen writes, "Prescott found in the person of the Spanish commander the model of European man: ruthless, pragmatic, single-minded, and (the unfortunate excuse of Spanish Catholicism aside) superbly rational in his manipulative intelligence, strategic flexibility, and capacity to decide a course of action and persist in it."²⁴ The unequal dichotomy of Cortés and Moctezuma that pervades Prescott's narrative speaks to European ideas of social and cultural ascendancy that dominated nineteenth-century discourse surrounding the meeting of two civilizations, a conquest language that has its origins in the writings of Sepúlveda, Sahagún, Díaz, and, especially, Cortés.

Scholarship that enhanced the agency of Cortés and the Spanish over Moctezuma and the indigenous inhabitants of Mesoamerica extended beyond the nineteenth century and continued to inform popular and academic consciousness well into the twentieth century. In 1984, Tzvetan Todorov published *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*.²⁵ In Todorov's analysis, the Mexica "other" are doomed to defeat at the hands of the Spanish due to their provincial customs and inability to improvise when faced with Spanish attacks. Todorov explained, "The Indians' mistake did not last long...just long enough for the battle to be definitively lost and America subject to Europe."²⁶ In Todorov's binary of an old and "new" world, the Spanish embody a "natural" tactical superiority that allows them to out duel their less-gifted indigenous adversaries. However, Spanish Captain Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, in his highly read 1599 book *The Indian Militia and the Destruction of the Indies*, argued that patterns and practices of European warfare and fighting were ineffective in the Americas.²⁷ Machuca, in what some historians have described as the first manual on guerrilla warfare, asserted that covert search-and-destroy campaigns carried out over multiple years were the only way Spanish conquistadors had, and would continue to have, military success in their quest to gain control of indigenous territory.²⁸

This sense of a “natural” European advantage is most notable in Jared M. Diamond’s widely popular *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1998).²⁹ Diamond’s argument regarding the reasons behind Spanish victory, which can be found in the book’s title, reduces the agency of all human actors (Spanish and indigenous alike) by analyzing the conquest solely through the lens of weaponry and disease. Although the Spanish did have superior military technology, it was by no means revolutionary.³⁰ Additionally, the Spanish often borrowed from the Mexica concept of “theatrical violence”—public displays of brutality designed to frighten enemies into submission—as a way to avoid increased combat.³¹ As the Scottish cartographer and translator John Ogilby explained in 1670, the Spanish conquistadors practiced “fear conquering more than slaughter.”³² With respect to the role of disease, Diamond is correct in his assertion that disease had a devastating impact on the indigenous inhabitants of the Aztec Empire. Still, the effect of disease in assuring Spanish victory was more pronounced in the Incan Empire, where smallpox was ravaging that civilization as Francisco Pizarro defeated the Incan leader Atahualpa at the Battle of Cajamarca in November 1532.³³ When examined together, the sampling of scholarly and popular histories highlighted in this section ignore issues of the protracted nature of the conquest, the role of indigenous allies in assisting Spanish victory, and the disparate notions of war and society felt by the Spanish and indigenous. As we will see, attention to these lesser-analyzed elements of the conquest paint a far different portrait of the sixteenth-century encounter between Iberian and American worlds, an encounter that changed the fate of human history.

The Protracted Conquest

Although Spanish accounts of the conquest, particularly Cortés’ letters to Emperor Charles V, presented the conflict between the two civilizations as a rapid and thoroughly one-sided affair, a closer examination of the conquest complicates Spanish documents by demonstrating the protracted nature of the conquest and the prevailing uncertainty of Spanish victory. More contemporary scholarship on the conquest of Mexico agrees that the conquest falls into two distinct phases. The first phase encompasses Cortés’ 1519 landfall through

the 1520 Spanish massacre of unarmed indigenous warriors dancing at a temple festival. This led to the Mexica expulsion of the Spanish (with many Spanish casualties) from Tenochtitlán, an event that the Spanish had termed *La Noche Triste* (“The Sad Night”). The second phase, which also lasted a little over a year, covers the Spanish retreat to Tlaxcala to heal physically and mentally and the final siege and fall of Tenochtitlán in August of 1521. Much of the popular history and earlier scholarship of the conquest has centered the narrative on the first phase of the conquest, focusing on a perceived battle of wills between Cortés and Moctezuma. Yet immediately before the Mexica expelled the Spanish from Tenochtitlán, the Spanish murdered the Mexica leader, whom they had been holding hostage.³⁴ Thus, Moctezuma was absent from the struggle for more than a year before the Spanish finally brought the fighting to a close.

Nevertheless, it is the first phase of the conquest that offers a more exciting storyline and, despite over an additional year of warfare, documents produced by the Spanish during the first phase presented Spanish victory as imminent. In 1519, the Spanish, after burning all of their ships on the shoreline, marched uncontested into the Mexica imperial city of Tenochtitlán—a lake-borne city of more than 200,000 inhabitants linked to the surrounding land by three great causeways. The Spanish were immediately struck by the size of the city. Bernal Díaz wrote, “We could compare it to nothing but the enchanted scenes we had read of in Amadis de Gaul, from the great towers and temples, and other edifices of lime and stone which seemed to rise out of the water. Many of us were not sure whether we were asleep or awake...”³⁵ Over the next year, the Spanish successfully captured Moctezuma and held the leader in captivity for some six months. Cortés boasted of the capture to Charles V, emphasizing that he would keep the Mexica leader “alive in chains or make him subject to Your Majesty’s Royal Crown.”³⁶ While attempting to rule the city through the captive Moctezuma, Cortés’ troops witnessed the arrival of a second, and substantially larger, Spanish command under the direction of Pánfilo de Narváez that had arrived with the intention of arresting Cortés and extraditing him to Cuba. Cortés defeated Narváez’s brigade and incorporated his crew into his band of adventurers. After the victory, Cortés briefly left Tenochtitlán and, in his absence, the Spanish incited violent indigenous reaction following the Spanish killing of unarmed

indigenous warriors dancing at a local temple. The Mexica forced the Spanish out of the capital city of Tenochtitlán and, even with the death of Moctezuma, it appeared the luck of Cortés and his men may have finally run its course.

Following the Mexica expulsion of the Spanish from Tenochtitlán and the large number of Spanish deaths, the Spanish ventured to Tlaxcala (a region openly hostile to Mexica rule) to mend both physical health and mental psyche. In addition to improving their health and morale, the Spanish also gained large numbers of indigenous allies. Given that the Mexica outnumbered the Spanish following the Spanish expulsion from Tenochtitlán, the acquisition of indigenous allies proved to be a critical and necessary addition to the Spanish cause.³⁷ With the help of indigenous allies (which we will later examine in more depth), the Spanish surrounded Tenochtitlán in May of 1521. The Mexica agricultural system of *chinampas* (a system of farming that used small rectangular areas of fertile land outside of the city to grow food) allowed the Spanish to prevent the Mexica from accessing their food supply.³⁸ It proved to be a critical blow to Mexica resistance. Bernal Díaz, who had witnessed years of killing and destruction as a foot soldier, remarked that upon Spanish entry into Tenochtitlán, the Mexica looked “so thin, sallow, dirty and stinking that it was pitiful to see them.”³⁹ In August of 1521, the city of Tenochtitlán fell to the Spanish, ending the second phase of the conquest and marking the beginning of a Spanish myth of total imperial dominance over the indigenous Mexica. As Cortés would declare after the fall of Tenochtitlán, “Spaniards dare face the greatest peril, consider fighting their glory, and have the habit of winning.”⁴⁰

While the Spanish did capture Tenochtitlán in 1521, it is important to emphasize that this did not represent the complete toppling of the Aztec Empire. Even after the Spanish gained control of the capital city, power and imperial influence was minimal outside city limits and many indigenous customs continued. In more rural settings, guerrilla fighting was commonplace and the Spanish often feared venturing outside city limits even after their 1521 “victory.”⁴¹ As Matthew Restall and Kris Lane have emphasized, the conquest was incomplete even after the fall of Tenochtitlán. They note, “As speedy as the early ‘conquest chains’ were started, creating lasting colonies proved a protracted and highly contested process. Toppling the Mexica of the Mesoamerican center had taken several years, but

truly subduing the fringes would take centuries.”⁴² Although Spanish conquest accounts, popular history, and early scholarship portrayed the conquest of Mexico as an almost medieval romance that allowed a few hundred Spaniards led by a gallant Cortés to conquer thousands of indigenous warriors rather swiftly, the sequence of events was more drawn out and Spanish victory was not apparent until later in 1521—and even then, Spanish hegemony was relatively weak outside the former Aztec capital. By securing Tenochtitlán, Cortés had delivered the decisive blow he had promised. Still, it was a victory that arose only after lengthy fighting, Mexica resistance, and a Spanish advantage in physical location and access to food that, ironically, came about only after the Mexica forced the Spanish to flee the capital, putting ideas of a Spanish triumph in peril.

Indigenous Allies

As we have seen, following the Spanish expulsion from Tenochtitlán in 1520, the Spanish traveled to Tlaxcala and solidified indigenous alliances in order to compensate for their now numerical disadvantage and increased Mexica momentum following “The Sad Night.” The role of indigenous allies in the Spanish cause has been largely absent from earlier scholarship and contemporary popular history, leading Matthew Restall to label Spanish indigenous allies “invisible warriors.”⁴³ While the Spanish enjoyed alliances with numerous indigenous groups, their main (and strongest) base of indigenous support came from the Tlaxcalans.⁴⁴ Like the Mexica, the Tlaxcalans also spoke Nahuatl, but (along with their allies of Huejotzingo and Cholula) resented the Mexica tributary system and their overall subordination vis-à-vis the triple alliance.⁴⁵ The city-state of Tlaxcala (located halfway between the Gulf Coast and Tenochtitlán) managed to maintain its autonomy and independence even in the wake of continued Mexica expansion. Inga Clendinnen has theorized that the Mexica exclusion of the Tlaxcalans was not an unfortunate quirk, but rather a strategic decision by Moctezuma to maintain a strong “ruling circle.”⁴⁶ She has noted that although the Mexica alliance was powerful enough to defeat the Tlaxcalans and incorporate them into the military coalition, Moctezuma chose to use them instead as an enemy against whom he could test his warriors and showcase solidarity and strength.⁴⁷ The Tlaxcalans,

like other indigenous peoples who joined the Spanish, believed the Spanish were interlopers primarily interested in material wealth, not an imperial project. Desperate to improve their social standing and access to power, the Tlaxcalans joined the recovering Spanish troops in their fight against the Mexica.⁴⁸ According to conquest historian Ross Hassig, the final Spanish capture of Tenochtitlán witnessed the aid of nearly 200,000 native allies, the majority of whom were Tlaxcalans.⁴⁹

The majority of Spanish documents produced at the time failed to credit the aid of the Tlaxcalans.⁵⁰ Cortés, by contrast, did mention his alliance with the Tlaxcalans on several occasions, though in a grossly inaccurate light. Cortés took full credit for the Spanish allegiance with the Tlaxcalans and other indigenous civilizations, emphasizing to Charles V that he identified “the opportunity to subdue them more quickly, for, as the saying goes, “divided they fall.”⁵¹ By classifying the Spanish allegiance with indigenous peoples as a product of his own endeavor, Cortés increased his own agency vis-à-vis Tlaxcalan and Huejotzincan rulers. Earlier scholars and popular histories also adopted this narrative. Tzvetan Todorov, for example, commended Cortés for engineering a divide-and-conquer strategy and even noted that it was a technique where a Spaniard “succeeds very well.”⁵² Even at the close of the twentieth century, the words Cortés penned to Charles V in the early 1500s were still dictating contemporary consciousness of the conquest.

When mentioning the Tlaxcalans and other indigenous allies to Charles V, Cortés often labeled them as “friends.” However, Cortés was also quick to blame his newfound “friends” when the Spanish seizure of Tenochtitlán reduced the city to ruins and inflicted unthinkable devastation. Cortés explained in a letter to Charles V, “No race, however savage, has ever practiced such fierce and unnatural cruelty as the natives of these parts.”⁵³ Cortés strategically depicted his new “friends” as barbaric people who had little concern for human suffering. The role of Cortés’ indigenous allies in the 1521 seizure of Tenochtitlán allowed the conquistador to offer an apologia for the destruction of the city and its people, an important rhetorical approach given the continual attacks from Spain’s Protestant imperial foes who alleged that Spanish acts of imperialism were unnecessarily exploitive and cruel. It is in this light that we see the Cortés whom Tzvetan Todorov described as a “specialist in human

communication.”⁵⁴ Yet his very acknowledgment of the presence of indigenous allies in the fall of Tenochtitlán, however subtle, places his own agency (as well as that of his men) into question.

The agency of Cortés is further complicated when we consider the role of his most crucial indigenous ally: his interpreter Malintzin.⁵⁵ A former Mayan slave sold to a Nahua community on the Mexican Gulf Coast, Malintzin was one of twenty women given to the Spanish as slaves in 1519 by the indigenous people of Tabasco. In addition to serving as Cortés’ mistress, Malintzin became the conquistador’s advisor and confidant. She would later give birth to Cortés’ son Martín, believed to be one of the first mestizos (people of mixed indigenous and European ancestry) in the Americas.⁵⁶ Matthew Restall points out that Malintzin was most likely not permitted to be Cortés’ mistress during the march to Tenochtitlán and subsequent war with the Mexica because she was too important to the conquistador’s success for her to become pregnant. Their relationship became sexual only after she was no longer needed as Cortés’ interpreter.⁵⁷ Cortés was in dire need of a translator to carry out his mission, so much so that he had gone through the trouble of rescuing Gerónimo de Aguilar (a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked on the Yucatec coast seven years prior), believing that he had learned the native language.⁵⁸ However, Aguilar could only speak Yucatec Maya, which would not help Cortés communicate with the Nahuatl-speaking Mexica. Fortunately (and rather serendipitously) for the conquistador, Malintzin could speak both Yucatec Maya and Nahuatl. After working with Aguilar, she was soon taught Spanish and became Cortés’ exclusive interpreter.⁵⁹

In contemporary discussions, Malintzin has emerged as a cornerstone in popular and academic accounts of the conquest of Mexico. Nevertheless, Malintzin, like the Tlaxcalans and the Huejotzincans, endured a long silence in both scholarly and popular narratives before emerging into historical focus, albeit in the largely negative light as a “traitor” to her people.⁶⁰ Yet Malintzin’s agency is both complex and paradoxical. While she has a historical voice, her role as an interpreter forced her to speak the words of others, leaving her oddly silent.⁶¹ Camilla Townsend has observed that despite Malintzin’s central role during the conquest, “almost no one” discussed her involvement for almost two hundred years after the fall of Tenochtitlán. During that time, Townsend explains, the

presence of an indigenous helper was “altogether too commonplace to merit notice.”⁶² Beginning in the nineteenth century, when Mexico severed its ties with Spain, Mexican writers resurrected the myth of Malintzin as the symbol of a conniving conspirator who had deserted her own people in favor of material gain.⁶³

Perhaps more than any other individual figure (including Cortés), Malintzin, despite her earlier omission, has captivated contemporary conquest discourse in North America. Literary critic Jean Franco has explained that Malintzin has come to serve as a sort of hybrid in contemporary minds, as “the transfigured symbol of fragmented identity and multiculturalism.”⁶⁴ Malintzin’s polemical nature has allowed her to claim her place in conquest history, albeit often more negatively than she reasonably deserves. Popular and scholarly acceptance of her role in the conquest has forced succeeding narratives to consider the larger role of indigenous allies in Cortés’ encounter with the Mexica and has created a portrait of the conquest that appears markedly different from the original accounts offered by Cortés and Díaz.

Differing Conceptions of War and Society

In addition to benefiting from indigenous allies, the Spanish were able to capitalize on their “otherness” vis-à-vis their indigenous opponents. Spanish conceptions of war and society contrasted sharply with indigenous beliefs and customs, creating an advantage for the Spanish in the siege of Tenochtitlán in 1521. As Bernardino de Sahagún’s posited in the *Florentine Codex*, Mexica warriors customarily sought face-to-face combat, but the Spanish positioned themselves behind cannons and often fled when faced with direct combat.⁶⁵ Although cannons were not numerous in Cortés’s Mesoamerican campaign (partly because their transportation was a major challenge) and volley fire techniques had yet to be fully developed by Europeans, this type of distance fighting was entirely new to the Mexica.⁶⁶ Sahagún went on to admit that when Mexica warriors did come into close contact with the Spanish, they “turned their backs” and “fled.”⁶⁷ The Mexica were confined to specific battle customs that the Spanish chose to ignore.

Yet despite indigenous frustrations with Spanish battle strategies, Mexica fighters preferred to quell Spanish advances by capturing

their enemies, rather than killing them. Clendinnen notes that Mexica warriors refused to beat the Spanish in the back of the head during battle, since such an act would “deny them an honorable warrior’s death.”⁶⁸ Additionally, the Mexica refused to eschew their celebration of pre-battle ceremonies and refused to undertake surprise attacks because they believed in capturing their enemies for ritual execution rather than killing them at the site of capture.⁶⁹ Historians have pointed to the Mexica customs of warfare, and those of other indigenous Mesoamericans, as a sign of great respect for human life, in contrast to the Spanish who were rather indiscriminate in their practices of pillage and killing.⁷⁰

Still, ironically, the Spanish expressed outrage over Mexica practices of human sacrifice, arguing that they demonstrated a disdain for human life.⁷¹ To be sure, the Mexica had in fact practiced more human sacrifice than most indigenous communities in the “new” world. The most notable spectacle of Mexica human sacrifice was the “Flowers War,” an event where the Mexica sacrificed their enemies to the gods in front of mass crowds. The “Flowers War” represented a form of theatrical violence used to frighten and subdue enemies, a strategy the Spanish also adopted in battle by firing cannons at trees and attaching bells to horses.⁷² When faced with imminent death and possible destruction, however, it was the Mexica who refused to abandon their ancestral customs of warfare and resort to increased brutality.

The Spanish, on the other hand, had no such qualms about employing violence. Cortés and his men grew increasingly frustrated by the perceived stubbornness of the Mexica and their refusal to surrender the city of Tenochtitlán, even after the Spanish had surrounded the city and caused a famine within the city’s walls by cutting off the capital’s access to available food. Clendinnen notes, “Starvation was so extreme that even roots and bark had been gnawed, with the survivors tottering shadows, but shadows who still resisted.”⁷³ When the Spanish forced their way into the city in August of 1521, they unleashed a fury of destruction against a people they viewed as barbarous for refusing to surrender. Cortés estimated that his men had killed more than twelve thousand indigenous inhabitants, but reasoned to Charles V, “I said many things to persuade them to surrender but all to no avail, although we showed them more signs of peace than have ever been shown to a vanquished people...”⁷⁴

Cortés' rhetoric transformed the aggressor into a victim, underscoring the irrationality of his enemies. The conquistador concluded, "We could not help but be saddened by their determination to die."⁷⁵ This 'sadness', however, did not prevent the Spanish from pillaging and destroying Tenochtitlán, a city whose grand size and unexpected beauty had entranced Cortés and his men upon their first visit.

In addition to differing strategies of war, the Spanish benefited from fighting on foreign soil. The Spanish, particularly Cortés, had nothing to lose but their lives. With respect to the conquistador, he had already defied the orders to Governor Velázquez and would either secure Tenochtitlán or be forced to return to Spain in shame and, most reasonably, shackles. As Cortés explained in a letter to Charles V, the Spanish defeated the Mexica, in part, because "we had to protect our lives."⁷⁶ However, the Mexica were also responsible for protecting the lives of their families, as well as their homes and communities. These circumstances made them quicker to capitulate to the Spanish despite their intense resistance. Charles Dibble has argued that although the Spanish emphasized the uniqueness of Mexica society, which advocated specific times for planting, harvesting, and fighting, other indigenous communities (as well as the Spanish) would have undertaken the same practice had they been on their home soil.⁷⁷ For Cortés and his men, fame and fortune remained their only objectives—whereas the Mexica had the moral obligations of community and family that came with defending their homeland.

Conclusions

The Spanish seizure of Tenochtitlán in 1521 represented a watershed in world history. It set the stage for Spanish colonialism on the American mainland and solidified Spain as a leader in the sixteenth-century race for the establishment of empire and international hegemony. However, much of our understanding regarding the Spanish conquest of Mexico has been overtaken by myth. As anthropologist Samuel Wilson has explained in reference to the Spanish conquest, we have sought to "blur history into myth and thereby confine it." For, as Wilson reasons, "It is politically safer and emotionally less taxing."⁷⁸ As we have seen, earlier academic studies and popular history have misrepresented the complex nature of the struggle between the Spanish and indigenous and have allowed

sixteenth-century Spanish voices, such as that of Hernán Cortés, to define the conquest for us, even well into the twenty-first century.

This article has represented an attempt to contribute to the growing body of recent scholarship on the Spanish conquest of Mexico by highlighting the protracted nature of the struggle, the role of indigenous allies, and the differing notions of society and war felt by the Spanish and Mexica. Although this is not a comprehensive overview of the clash between these old and “new” world powers, I hope it will allow readers to better question conquest myths that give primacy to Spanish, particularly conquistador, agency at the expense of the indigenous inhabitants of Mesoamerica. As Bernal Díaz reminded readers in his 1570 *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, “there is much to ponder.”⁷⁹ It is my hope that undergraduate readers and other curious students of history will turn to the historical record themselves and read both documents and scholarship through a critical lens. A more comprehensive examination of the conquest of Mexico reveals a greater degree of agency for the indigenous inhabitants of Mesoamerica. Although it is harder to find the voices of the indigenous in the historical documents at our disposal, their role in the two-year clash between old and “new” worlds is no less important when trying to reconstruct the conquest of Mexico—a rich mosaic that historians have begun to piece together, but like the conquest itself, remains incomplete.

Notes

1. Ward Stavig, *The World of Túpac Amaru: Conflict, Community, and Identity in Colonial Peru* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), xxv.

2. I have chosen to use the name Hernán instead of Hernando since the former is more commonly used in both English- and Spanish-language scholarship. However, both names are correct.

3. Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xv.

4. It would be impractical to enumerate all of the works of conquest history. For a useful overview, see Matthew Restall, “The New Conquest History,” *History Compass* 10, no. 2 (February 2012): 151-160.

5. I have chosen to use the term “indigenous” rather than “Indian” or “Amerindian.” As Susan Kellogg has noted in her study on the history of

indigenous women in Latin America, the term “Indian” is a re-appropriation of Spanish discourse and, in present-day Latin America, the word *indio* has a stigmatizing connotation that best be avoided. See *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehistoric Period to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7-8.

6. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 123.

7. Note that the rulers of the Aztec Empire are called “Mexica,” not “Aztecs.” The term “Aztecs” is inaccurate and anachronistic.

8. Although there were many indigenous groups within the Aztec Empire, the Mexica represented the dominant ruling group.

9. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 64.

10. My understanding of historical myth has been influenced by Ronald Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); Marysa Navarro, “Wonder Woman Was Argentine and Her Real Name Was Evita,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 24, no. 48 (1999): 133-152.

11. Moctezuma, whose formal name is Moctezuma II, has various spellings that include: Montezuma, Moctezoma, Moteuczoma, and Motecuhzoma. For more detailed analysis of Moctezuma, see the various essays in David Carrasco, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, and Scott Sessions, eds., *Moctezuma's Mexico: Visions of the Aztec World* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1992).

12. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, “‘Aztec’ Auguries and Memories of the Conquest of Mexico,” *Renaissance Studies* 6, no. 3-4 (September 1992): 287-305, at 298. It is worth noting that the Mexica, particularly Moctezuma, did not think Cortés and the Spanish were gods, despite popular perception to the contrary. See Camilla Townsend, “No One Said it was Quetzalcoatl: Listening to the Indians in the Conquest of Mexico,” *History Compass* 1, no. 1 (January-February 2003): 1-14.

13. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, *Tratado Sobre las Justas Causas de la Guerra Contra los Indios*, ed. Manuel García-Pelayo, second ed. (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económico, 1941), 101. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

14. Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 117.

15. Criticism from these Protestant nations would later be termed the “Black Legend” by Julián Juderías in his 1914 work, *La Leyenda Negra: Estudios Acerca del Concepto de España en el Extranjero*.

16. S. L. Cline, “Revisionist Conquest History: Sahagún's Revised Book XII,” in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún, Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, ed. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988), 93-106.

17. Restall, 113-114.

18. For a better sense of the Spanish use of scribes, see Fernando J. Bouza Alvarez, *Communication, Knowledge, and Memory in Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

19. See the studies Stuart B. Schwartz, *Victors and Vanquished: Spanish and Nahua Views of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston, MA: Bedford Press, 2000); and Felipe R. Solís Olguín, *The Aztec Empire* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004).

20. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, ed. Joaquín Ramírez Cabañas (Mexico City, Mexico: Porrúa, 1966), 45.

21. See Matthew Restall's discussion of *probanzas* in *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 12-13.

22. Inga Clendinnen, "'Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty': Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico," *Representations* 33 (Winter 1991): 65-100, 68.

23. W. H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1843).

24. Clendinnen, 66.

25. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), especially 63-67 and 83-89.

26. *Ibid.*, 97.

27. Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, *The Indian Militia and the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. Kris E. Lane (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). The original is titled *Milicia y Descripción de las Indias* (1599).

28. See, for example, Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*, second ed. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 120.

29. Jared M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998). Note that Diamond also made a popular documentary in 2005 adapted from his monograph.

30. In his study of the Spanish Empire, Henry Kamen rejects the notion that Western weaponry was superior to all other forms of artillery. See *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763* (New York: Perennial, 2004), xxvi.

31. See David Carrasco's discussion of the Mexica use of theatrical violence in *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), especially chapter 1.

32. John Ogilby, *America* (London, United Kingdom: no publisher listed, 1670), 83.

33. Restall, 48.

34. At the time (and long after the Conquest), the Spanish claimed that they were not responsible for Moctezuma's death, arguing that a stone thrown by his own people had killed him.

35. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico*, trans. Maurice Keatinge (Congleton, United Kingdom: no publisher listed, 1800), 130-131.

36. Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico [1519-26]*, ed. Anthony Pagden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 50.

37. Douglas A. Daniel, "Tactical Factors in the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs," *Anthropological Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (October 1992): 187-194, at 192-193.

38. For a discussion of the Mexica chinampas, see Michael D. Coe, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (New York: Times and Hudson, 1994), 12-13.

39. Díaz del Castillo, *The True History*, 156.
40. Hernán Cortés, as quoted in Restall, 131.
41. Restall, 74.
42. Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 92.
43. Restall, 45.
44. It is worth noting that Cortés' indigenous allies from Huejotzingo would later write to the Spanish king denouncing the "cowardice" of the Tlaxcalans in the battles against the Mexica and emphasizing that Spanish victory would not have been attained without Huejotzincan assistance. Their writings can be viewed as an adaptation of the Spanish narrative style of *probanzas*. See Restall, 48.
45. Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1993), 7-8.
46. Following the work of Serge Gruzinski, I have chosen to classify the Mexica triple alliance as a "ruling circle," not an empire, which was neither monolithic nor continually stable. Gruzinski, 7.
47. Clendinnen, 93.
48. See Peter O. Koch's discussion in *The Aztecs, The Conquistadors, and the Making of Mexican Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 255.
49. Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Longman, 1994), 101-102.
50. For a better sense of the history of Tlaxcalans after the fall of Tenochtitlán, see the classic study, Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952).
51. Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, 69-70.
52. Todorov, 57.
53. Hernán Cortés, "Third Letter," in *The Fall of Natural Man*, ed. Anthony Pagden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 262.
54. Todorov, 80-81.
55. The Spanish referred to her as Doña Marina and the indigenous gave her the name Malintzin, which the Spanish misheard as Malinche. I have chosen to use the name Malintzin to preserve her indigenous heritage.
56. Jean Franco, "La Malinche: Del Don al Contracto Sexual," *Debate Feminista* 6, no. 11 (January 2005): 251-270.
57. Restall, 83.
58. Díaz del Castillo, *The True History*, 66.
59. Cortés details these events himself in several letters. See Rubén Medina, "Masculinidad, Imperio y Modernidad en Cartas de Relación de Hernán Cortés," *Hispanic Review* 74, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 469-489.
60. Mary Louise Pratt, "'Yo Soy La Malinche': Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism," *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 859-873.
61. Restall, 86.
62. Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 3.

63. An anonymous 1826 novel titled *Xicoténcatl* was the first to describe Malintzin as a “sneaky” and “conniving” traitor against her people. In the 1970s, Mexican and Mexican-American feminists came to question that paradigm and more recent writers have in turn argued that Malintzin was not entirely “victimized.” See Townsend, 3.

64. Jean Franco, *Critical Passions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 66.

65. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Salt Lake City, UT: School of American Research, 1982), 89.

66. This can be seen throughout Machuca, *The Indian Militia and the Destruction of the Indies*.

67. Sahagún, 87.

68. Clendinnen, 84.

69. Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 10.

70. See, for example, Restall, 144.

71. Ibid.

72. For a more in-depth analysis of the “Flowers War” and Mexica practices of sacrifice, see Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*.

73. Clendinnen, 90.

74. Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, 258.

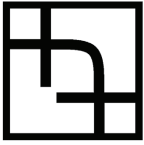
75. Ibid., 232-233.

76. Ibid., 166.

77. Dibble, 24.

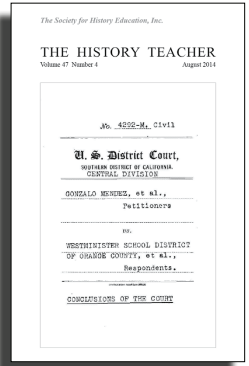
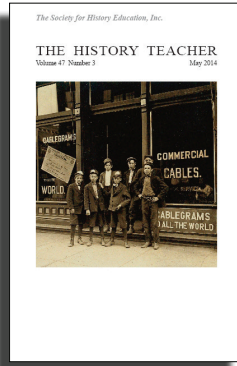
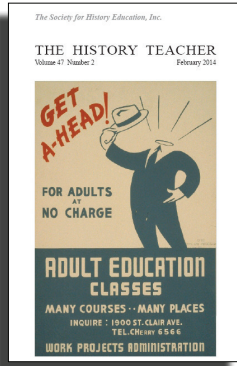
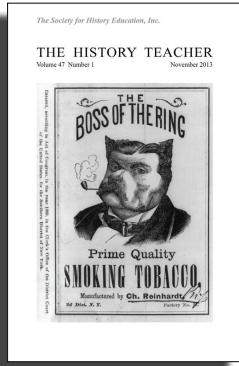
78. Samuel L. Wilson, *The Emperor’s Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), 5.

79. Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera*, 160.



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