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The Environmental and Cultural Effects on the Conquest of Mexico

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The Environmental and Cultural Effects on the Conquest of Mexico

A Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies of
Bard College

by

T.T. Siegel

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, May 2012
Dedicated to Buttons Siegel

Who Died Tragically Rescuing Her
Family From The Wreckage Of A
Destroyed Sinking Battleship

(September 14, 1996 – July 10, 2010)

I don’t know who I’d be today if it weren’t for you.
Acknowledgements

Thanks to my parents for editing the various drafts of this work.

Thanks to my sister Elizabeth for her constant encouragement.

Thanks to my friends from home who were so understanding of why I was always busy.

Thanks to my friends from Bard who helped me get through the tough times of writing.

Thanks to all the professors for teaching me much of what I know.

Special thanks to my advisor Alice Stroup whose weekly meetings were invaluable.
“When we gazed upon all this splendour at once, we scarcely knew what to think, and we doubted whether all that we beheld was real. A series of large towns stretched themselves along the banks of the lake, out of which still larger ones rose magnificently above the waters. Innumerable crowds of canoes were plying everywhere around us; at regular distances we continually passed over new bridges, and before us lay the great city of Mexico in all its splendour.”

– Bernal Diaz del Castillo, Memoirs of the Conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo

“He [Hernán Cortés] said to them[Cuauhtémoc and his nobles]: “What of the Gold? That which was guarded in Mexico?”

– Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Florentine Codex, Book XII

“We wander here and there in our desolate poverty.
We are mortal men.
We have seen bloodshed and pain where once we saw beauty and valor.”

– Unknown Author, “Flowers and Songs of Sorrow,” The Broken Spears
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Pronunciation Guide

Vowels:
- a as “ah” in far
- e as “ay” in ace
- i as “ee” in deep
- o as “oh” in tote
- u as “oo” in rule

Consonants that are not pronounced the same as in English:
- x as “sh” in shell
- z as “s” in suit
- hu as “w” in waste or weed
- ll as in fu
- que, qui as “kay” or “kee” in case or keep
- cu as “kw” in quasar, query
- tl as in Tlingit (soft emphasis on the l)
- tz as in pretzel

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When talking about the Conquest of Mexico there are certain terms and names that are incorrectly used. For example, there was never an “Aztec Empire”; the term Aztec is a modern derivation of Aztlan, the mythical homeland of the Mexica, the ethnic group commonly referred to as the Aztecs. Aztec can also refer to the people in and around the Valley of Mexico because they share the language Nahuatl and many of the same gods. However, I prefer to use the term Nahuas for these people due to their linguistic kinship. The peoples of Mesoamerica commonly referred to themselves by their ethnic group, such as Mexica, Alcohua, Tepanec, etc., or by their city-states, such as Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan, etc. The three ethnic groups and cities mentioned are the people who constituted the Triple Alliance. The Triple Alliance’s conquests resulted in what is referred to as the Aztec Empire. The Mexica of Tenochtitlan were the predominant ethnic group in the Alliance and their tlatoani, essentially a king, became the de facto leader among the Empire. See map 2.

There has been debate whether or not the Triple Alliance actually constituted what is in the Western view an “empire.” The Triple Alliances’ power was that of an indirect empire; it was created by conquering other city-states, who acknowledged the Alliance’s dominance in the form of paying tribute. The Alliance had a loose control over conquered city-states, and low cost management because they did not have an extensive bureaucracy. The Alliance’s empire is often compared to that of Athens’

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during its classical period. Furthermore, towards the end of the Empire, it was increasingly bureaucratized in order to deal with logistical problems of the Empire’s size, which unprecedented in Mesoamerica. Part of this process of bureaucratizing was the dividing the conquered city-states into thirty-eight tributary provinces, centered around the dominant city-state in ethnic enclaves. This process involved record keeping and the appointing of meritocratic nobles to supervise the flow of tribute. It is tempting to speculate how the Empire would have continued to develop if Hernán Cortés had not truncated its growth.

The Triple Alliance’s Empire encompassed a large area of what is called Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica is less of a geographical distinction, but rather an area that constituted peoples of similar cultural beliefs and attitudes when compared to other regions of the Americas. Mesoamerica is geographically diverse and spans all of modern day Mexico and even to parts of Costa Rica. See map 1. The Alliance’s Empire spanned many ecological ranges; it controlled areas on the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. The climates ranged from the tropical lowlands to those of the Valley of Mexico high in the central Mexican plateau. Land along the Gulf of Mexico and the other areas below 1,000m in elevation are considered the tropical lowlands. The land between 1,000-2,000m in elevation is considered the Mesoamerican highlands, and finally the central Mexican plateau, which is all the land above 2,000 m in elevation.

The Valley of Mexico is situated in the mountainous central plateau. A mix of mountain ridges and semi-dormant volcanoes cradles the Valley; these features created

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3 Smith, Aztecs, 173-4.
5 Smith, Aztecs, 6-7.
an internally drained continuous lake system. The Lakes Zumpango and Xaltocan were the northern most and their lower elevation made them brackish; conversely, the southern most lakes, Xochimilco and Chalco were higher in elevation and were fresh water. Lake Texcoco, in the middle, was moderately brackish. The Mexica founded Tenochtitlan, their city-state, on an island on the western side of Lake Texcoco. The lakes themselves provided abundant natural food sources, and the Valley itself had rich fertile soil from the erosion and run off of the surrounding mountains and volcanoes. Beyond having incredible potential for agriculture, the Valley is located near two obsidian sources, Otumba and Pachuca. Pachuca obsidian was the highest quality and had a green hue making it the most appealing variety of obsidian to the Valley’s various inhabitants.\(^6\) The importance of obsidian to the development of Mexica’s culture was nearly as great as it’s abundant agricultural resources.

Introduction

The Conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés is often written and examined from the view of the European victors. This approach inevitably minimizes the actions and roles of the majority of the people involved, the Mesoamericans themselves. The lines of the conflict have traditionally been drawn as the Spaniards versus the Triple Alliance, commonly known as the Aztecs. In reality, the Spaniards, with the aid and complicity of dozens of native city-states, were able in the end to conquer the Alliance of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, the Alcohua of Texcoco, and the Tepanecs of Tlacopan. In addition this conquest has often been simplified as a conquest in which European technology and disease trumped the Amerindians’ stone weaponry and lack of immunity.

The above explanations, however, have begun to change with the addition of a more recent view that the Spaniards with the guile of Hernán Cortés were able to take advantage of the internal dissatisfaction within the Triple Alliance’s Empire. As anthropologists Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest phrase it, the Triple Alliances’ “loosely knit empire flew to pieces” as the tributary states sided with or directly aided Hernán Cortés. Nonetheless, the deathblow to the Triple Alliance is still commonly seen as the result of smallpox that allowed Cortés to swoop in and claim victory.

Because of these views, the Conquest is often seen as the inevitability of European dominance of technological and societal advancements along with the impact of disease. This view of inevitability of indigenous defeat is epitomized in Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. His work sets out to explore and understand why it was the Europeans who were the dominant world powers, and not some other civilization.
from another continent. His argument is not based on race but geography and the environment as an attempt to trace the root causes of European success and why civilizations developed the ways that they did. The focus of his work is to explore and better understand why history unfolded “differently on different continents,” and what factors made European states the initial world powers and why this dominance did not originate elsewhere. Diamond’s argument is essentially that environmental factors such as, the large size of Eurasia, the larger number of wild plants and animals, and the horizontal axis of Eurasia leading to similar climatic zones – were stacked in favor of Eurasian advancement. He views the collapse of the Triple Alliance as the combination disease, and the “overwhelming military superiority” of the Spaniards along with their “political skills at exploiting divisions within the native population, did the rest.” 7 Put simply, Jared Diamond argues that Eurasian success was an inevitability that derived from environmental determinism, which was slanted in Eurasians’ favor. This advantage, ultimately, culminated in societies with advanced technology and fortuitous early exposure to diseases, which societies on other continents did not have.

Jared Diamond identifies the environment as the predominant and determining factor in European conquests and subsequent colonization. He avoids cultural factors impacting history, and thereby, pushes human agency aside. Historian Joachim Radkau warns against placing too strong an emphasis on the environment, writing, “A history of human environmental awareness cannot be written as the history of a sense of nature’s right to exist on its own terms, but only as the history of a coevolution of a culture and

nature.”\textsuperscript{8} Nature must be understood as not only a force that shapes human development but is also in turn shaped by that development. Man and nature’s coevolution have been and will continue to be inextricably connected and influenced by one another.

Radkau admonishes Crosby, an earlier proponent of environmental determinism, stating that “when he describes the victory and defeat of ecosystems, what he presents is a substantially constructed history, one which assumes that the Old World and the New World exist as more or less compact, large-scale ecosystems above all ecotopes and ecological niches.”\textsuperscript{9} Diamond also views continents as “more or less compact ecosystems” and follows in Crosby’s footsteps. This is evident in Diamond’s view of the importance of Eurasia’s horizontal axis contributing to the spread of farming, which gave a “head start” in Eurasian societies. However, Diamond’s biggest flaw in his argument is that he focuses only on what sets Eurasia apart and how it developed from its advantages. From there he assumes that because the other continents lack these features, the success of Europeans in conquest was inevitable. His argument, because of its scale, lacks the finesse of actually examining on an individual basis the ways that the non-Western societies developed from the environment in which they existed. Furthermore, his argument removes culture as a contributing factor to a society’s advancement.

Anthropologist Heather Lechtman has made invaluable contributions to the understanding of the ways that culture affects technology. Her focus specifically on Andean metallurgy has provided important insights into both understanding the


\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 158.
metallurgy of Mesoamerica as well as its astounding lithic technologies. Lechtman argues that technological style (style being the “manifest expression, on the behavioral level of cultural patterning,” and technological style is one of the ways a culture is physically expressed) is “rarely if ever dictated solely by the environment.”

Technological style reflects cultural choices more than it does an environment because the environment is a set of “immutable conditions” that a culture is structured around.¹⁰ Meaning that while the environment shapes culture, technology is, ultimately, a reflection of the culture that made it.

Geography, climate, flora, and fauna constitute the ecosystems and the environments in which human societies develop; however, human culture affects the ways in which societies interact with their environment. Part of this work will explore the ways that the environment of Mesoamerica impacted the development of Mesoamericans, and specifically on the Mexica and the Triple Alliance. I will explore why the Triple Alliance developed into, arguably, the most advanced lithic society, and why metallurgy was largely reserved for religious and status items.

There are three known factors that contribute to the development of advanced metallurgy, that is metallurgy of bronze, iron, and steel: warfare, wheeled transport, and agriculture.¹¹ Therefore, to understand Mesoamerica’s technological development I will need to examine the ways that Mesoamerica’s agriculture developed and how it differed from Eurasia’s. I will also examine how abundant deposits of high quality obsidian

developed a culture and society focused on lithic technology whose physical and aesthetic attributes filled the roles metallurgy would have. The difference in agriculture led to a different style of farming and this was also influenced by the lack of large domesticated animals. Both of these factors, as I will show, hindered an impetus to develop advanced metallurgy. In addition, I will show how the cultural attitudes towards obsidian along with its unique abundance and physical qualities, too, hindered the development of advanced metallurgy.

Finally, I will examine how the Conquest of Mexico actually unfolded. One assumption is Cortés’ use of indigenous animosity towards the Triple Alliance, especially of the Tlaxcalans. Yet the alliances Cortés formed, aside from that with the Tlaxcalans, were often tenuous and based on a display of power or rather as a means to avoid Cortés’ wrath. Furthermore, Cortés was nowhere near as cunning as he is given credit for. Disease’s role was by no means clear since the overwhelming majority of Cortés’ army, and even logistics, depended on Amerindians who were just as vulnerable to smallpox as were those of the Triple Alliance. Technology, too, played an ambiguous role in the Conquest. Cortés certainly had superior weapons and technology, but it was the contrasting view of warfare stemming from cultural attitudes towards war that aided Cortés the most. Finally, I will show that it is perhaps the Tlaxcalans’ unwavering anathema towards the Mexica combined with a continuous chain of cultural misunderstandings that aided Cortés the most.

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Chapter One
From Aztlan to Tenochtitlan

“And they placed their trust in Uitzilopochtli.” – Florentine Codex

To understand the effects of environmental and cultural factors on the Conquest of the Triple Alliance by Cortés, one must first examine the ways in which the Alliance came into power in 1428 CE. As the Mexica ethnic group, commonly known today as Aztecs, was the principle leader of the alliance this chapter, like much of this work, will focus on them. The Mexica entered the Valley of Mexico in 1325 CE as a minor, semi-barbarous ethnic group from the larger Chichimec peoples of Northwestern Mexico. See map 3. Within a hundred years they would supplant dominant powers of the Valley and begin ruthless conquests and consolidations of power until contact with Cortés. The Mexica became the de facto power of the Triple Alliance and over many conquered peoples. This was achieved by restructuring their religion and society; they glorified their own tribal god to a new position that could only be satiated by the hearts of enemies captured in war. The Mexica created a political system built on religion that was fueled by warfare; however, these changes were built on already existing cultural norms. This chapter will examine the general history of the Valley of Mexico, the ways in which the Mexica took power, the societal restructuring after they took power, the ways in which the empire was created, and how it maintained unstable control.

The religious, societal, and organizational changes of Mexica society had dramatic effects on the expansion of their empire but also contributed to its collapse by

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Montezuma Xocoyotzin, the *tlatoani* (king) in power at the time of Cortés arrival, had been trying to consolidate and stabilize the Mexica Empire immediately prior to contact, and those efforts will also be discussed.

The supra-ethnic group known as the Chichimecs began migrating into the Valley of Mexico from just outside its north/northwest mountain range sometime after 900 CE. They mixed with the remnant Teotihuaca people whose dominant empire had suddenly collapsed around 750 CE for unknown reasons. The subsequent mixing of people revitalized the area that the Teotihuacan had ruled over, and together the mixed groups formed the Toltecs. The Toltec state lasted from around 950 to 1200 CE. They began to fragment as new waves of Chichimec peoples flooded into the valley. Remnant Toltec cities were the sources of legitimating heritages because the Toltecs were considered civilized while Chichimecs were considered barbarous. If a city-state wanted to establish itself it needed a link to the Toltecs to legitimize themselves.\(^{14}\)

Between 1200 CE, around the end of the Toltec civilization, and 1500 CE, the population of the Valley of Mexico increased eightfold from approximately 200,000 to over 1.6 million. Population doubled every century from a combination of population growth and migrations into the valley by Chichimec groups.\(^{15}\) The Mexica claimed that they were the last of the seven Chichimec tribes to leave their mystical home of Aztlan and enter the Mexican Valley. Although Aztlan is likely a fantasy it is true that the Mexica were latecomers in the valley. Most of the fertile land was had been inhabited;

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the Mexica were forced to settle on the swampy island on the near the western shores of Lake Texcoco.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite being on an island, Tenochtitlan was founded in 1325 CE at the confluence of three city-states, meaning that their subjugation was likely inevitable. The city was divided into quadrants due to the religious importance of the cardinal directions. Each section was controlled by a \textit{calpulli}, essentially a kinship group with its own internal stratifications ranging from commoners to an elected leader, and was allowed to develop as it so pleased.\textsuperscript{17,18} Soon after the founding, the Mexica were subjugated by the Tepanecs, an ethnic group ruling from Azcapotzalco, the capital of the Tepanec Empire, on the western shores of Lake Texcoco. Undeterred, the intrepid Mexica went to work building their city, draining the swampy island, and creating fields around the island, known as \textit{chinampas}.\textsuperscript{19}

In addition to building their city, they also began adapting themselves to the political systems of the valley. When the Mexica had first migrated, and even when they had settled in Tenochtitlan, they followed a more “primitive” system of rule, that of the \textit{calpulli}. While some \textit{calpullin} (plural of \textit{calpulli}) were of higher status than others, all were flexible and could absorb migrants or lose members if people desired to emigrate. The \textit{calpullin} also allowed for some social mobility, which was the basis for individual gains during the imperialistic phase of the Mexica described below. The Tepanecs, now in control, imposed a new political structure on the Mexica, in effect forcing them to

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 440-2.
\textsuperscript{18} Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World} (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 60.
\textsuperscript{19} Evans, \textit{Ancient Mexico & Central America}, 446.
mimic the valley’s political structure. Foremost they imposed a *tlatoani*, essentially a
king.\(^{20}\)

With the creation of a *tlatoani* comes the creation of nobility – called the *pipiltin*. The *pipiltin* were an important group of warriors, supposedly, with the all-important Toltec heritage, and were the pool from which a new *tlatoani* would be selected. Together, the *tlatoani* (king) and the *pipiltin* (nobility) once independent, ran the Empire and drove its conquests. Another change to the Mexica’s political tradition that came from the Tepanecs was the ending of the *calpulli*’s tradition of communally owned land, on which small farmers could prosper, but which limited the power of the budding nobility. During the Mexica’s conquests the nobility would be similar to feudal lords ruling over the *mayeque* (essentially non-Mexica serfs) who would owe tribute to the *pipiltin*.\(^{21}\) The Mexica were now primed to expand; that is, they had the socio-political structure that allowed for military expansionism and tributary gain, but first they would need to stop being vassals themselves.

The rise of the Mexica and of the Triple Alliance can be linked to a war between the city-states of Azcapotzalco and Texcoco. Texcoco was an Alcohua (an ethnic group in the Valley) city-state on the eastern shore of lake Texcoco and was the only true rival to Tepanec power. Ixtlilxochitl, the *tlatoani* of Texcoco, waged war against Azcapotzalco. The Mexica were in an awkward position as their current *tlatoani*, Chimalpopoca, was the grandson of the *tlatoani* of Azcapotzalco, and Ixtlilxochitl was married to Chimalpopoca’s half-sister. Still, Chimalpopoca was faithful to his grandfather and fought against Texcoco, and with the help of the Mexica, the Tepanecs

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 15-6.
were victorious against the killed Ixtlilxochitl. The Mexica were rewarded for their help, and Texcoco became their tributary.\textsuperscript{22} Even though Texcoco was at the time a de jure tributary, Texcoco was treated as, and would ultimately become, an ally to the Mexica.

The Tepanecs, worried about the Mexica’s increasing strength, sought to curtail Mexica political and military power. Relations between the Tepanecs and the Mexica soured when the Tepanecs, in 1426, began an embargo against the Mexica to curtail their economic growth.\textsuperscript{23} In addition to the embargo, which was strangling the supply of materials they needed to maintain life on the swampy island, the Tepanecs raised the amount of tribute required from the Mexica. Tensions rose rapidly in 1427 with the death of Tezozomoc, the \textit{tlatoani} of Azcapotzalco, and the assassination of Chimpalpopoca, the \textit{tlatoani} of the Mexica. The Mexica, likely, assassinated Chimpalpopoca themselves because he was an ineffective leader, and by assassinating him the Mexica cut their consanguineous tie to the Tepanecs and could then act to counter the embargo. These incidents led to the ascension of leaders on both sides who were determined to bring about war. Itzcoatl became the new Mexica \textit{tlatoani} because he was an excellent warrior capable of facing the Tepanecs, and he was likely behind the assassination plot. After the death of Tezozomoc, ruler of Azcapotzalco, Maxtla, a nobleman with strong anti-Mexica sentiments, usurped his brother, who the Mexica had supported for ascension.\textsuperscript{24} See fig.1.

This was not just a rebellion for the Mexica; it was their chance at greatness. No one knew this more than the Machiavellian Mexica nobleman Tlacaelel. Tlacaelel was the nephew of Itzcoatl, who was praised by Durán as “the greatest warrior, the bravest

\textsuperscript{22} Smith, \textit{The Aztecs}, 48-9.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{24} Alan Knight, \textit{Mexico from the Beginning to the Spanish Conquest} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 143.
and mightiest, that the Aztec nation has ever had – the most cunning man ever produced by Mexico.” Working with Itzcoatl, Tlacaéllel’s first step was to incentivize the noblemen to back a war against Azcapotzalco, and to do this he needed to make the commoners of Tenochtitlan into serfs in order to reward their compliance. According to Durán this was achieved by making a deal made with the commoners: if the Mexica won, the peasants would serve the nobles, but if they lost, the peasants could literally eat the nobles “in cracked and dirty dishes,” so that their “flesh” would be “totally degraded,” which was meant to disgrace their bodies. It is doubtful that any commoner would have agreed to this lose-lose agreement, and is likely a fictional part of Mexica history to justify the nobility’s dominance. If the Mexica had won, the peasants would have owed the nobility tribute, and if Tepanecs had won, the peasants would have owed Azcapotzalco tribute. However, the concocted wager served its purpose of inducing the nobility to fight, reinforcing their importance as well as legitimating their high status.

In order to dislodge the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco from power, the Mexica needed to both make alliances and exploit Tepanec weaknesses. In 1428 this culminated in an agreement that would initiate the Triple Alliance, so named because of the three city-states that formed it: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. The Mexica began by recruiting their newly conquered tributary, Texcoco. This was an easy alliance because of the long-standing rivalry between Texcoco and Azcapotzalco. The Mexica next exploited the internal divisions among the Tepanecs; they successfully had the Tepanec

26 Ibid., 78.
city of Tlacopan ally with them and the Alcohua of Texcoco. As mentioned, these three

city-states would form the Triple Alliance. ²⁸ ²⁹

In that same year the Mexica, the Alcohua, the unfaithful Tepanecs of Tlacopan,
with the help of two groups from outside the Valley of Mexico, the Tlaxcalans, and the
Huexotzinca formed a transitory alliance and attacked Azcapotzalco. After 112 days
Azcapotzalco fell, and the Tlaxcalans and Huexotzinca returned to their individual city-
states. ³⁰ ³¹ Afterward the Mexica, Alcohua, and the unfaithful Tepanecs formed a
triumvirate alliance; it was meant to aid one another in military defense and campaigns.
The spoils of future of conquests and tribute would be divided between the city-states of
Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan as two-fifths, two-fifths, and one-fifth
respectively. ³² The lesser distribution to Tlacopan represents their minor status in the
Alliance both militarily and politically.

Along with gaining independence the Mexica gained the farmland of
Azcapotzalco and used this to reward those nobles and warriors who fought courageously
for independence. According to Durán, Tlacaehl advised Itzcoatl to distribute the lands
amongst those “who had distinguished themselves in war.” ³³ This was no egalitarian act
considering it was only nobles who were granted these lands. Even so, this act shows the
break from traditional calpullin centered societal structure to that of more distinct social
strata. The wager with the commoners in essence was “fulfilled,” and they were

²⁸ Smith, The Aztecs, 49-51.
²⁹ Aguilar-Moreno, Handbook to Life in the Aztec World, 41.
³⁰ Smith, The Aztecs, 50.
³¹ Aguilar-Moreno, Handbook to Life in the Aztec World, 66.
³² Smith, The Aztecs, 50.
³³ Durán, History of the Indies, 95.
increasingly marginalized.\textsuperscript{34}

After their victory, Itzcoatl and his advisors took the opportunity to continue to diminish the influence, of the \textit{calpulli} – the commoner class that constituted the cities population. The first step in shifting power was to formalize how the position of \textit{tlatoani}, the equivalent of a king, was transferred. The \textit{calpullin} were no longer the decision makers in the selection of the new \textit{tlatoani}, rather it was a newly founded oligarchy called “‘Council of Four,’” which consisted of the previous \textit{tlatoani}’s personal council. The Machiavellian-like Tlacaelel went further and reorganized religious and civil offices. Unfortunately, the histories are vague about what exactly occurred. Montezuma Ilhuicamina, who would later become \textit{tlatoani} and from now on referred to as Montezuma I, rigidified social classes’ dress and privileges and created separate schools for the nobility and commoners. Conrad and Demarest assert that these changes, which occurred over the forty-two year period of Itzcoatl and Montezuma I’s rules, had only put them on the same level as the Tepanecs.\textsuperscript{35}

Beyond inheriting Azcapotzalco’s territories, the Mexica also inherited its problems. The most pressing problem was the lack of a cultural authority from not having Toltec heritage. When Tezozomoc (the \textit{tlatoani} of Azcapotzalco) died, the Tepanec state, which he created and ruled, weakened under his successor, Maxtla. This weakness contributed to the decision of the Tepanecs of Tlacopan to side with the Mexica. The largest obstacle to Tepanec authority was the absence of Toltec heritage to legitimize their rule within the Valley. Toltec ancestry was important because Toltecs

\textsuperscript{34} Knight, \textit{Mexico}, 144.
\textsuperscript{35} Conrad and Demarest, \textit{Religion and Empire}, 36-7.
were considered to be descendants of the god Quetzalcoatl. Royal sanguinity trumped ability to rule, at least for the transfer of power from Tezozomoc to Maxtla. Itzcoatl, Tlacaelel, and Montezuma I knew this, and in an Orwellian maneuver had all of the Mexica’s pictographic histories burned and rewritten, or drawn rather. Their new histories downplayed the Mexica’s “barbarous” ancestry and linked them instead to Toltec ancestry. A large part of the new and “official” history revised the course the Mexica took from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan. By having the Mexica “visit” many city-states that had Toltec heritage, they could link themselves to and claim they were of the Toltec lineage. The Mexica also claimed that Colhua, a city-state that was a bastion of Toltec ancestry, granted them a princess in arranged marriage, which gave them a link to the all-important Toltec heritage.

After their revolution, the Mexica needed a figure to become a central god that was unique to their own people, and Itzcoatl, Tlacaelel, and Montezuma I found what they were looking for in Huitzilopochtli. He was a figure unique to the Mexica and could be manipulated into a powerful motivational figure through his need for human sacrifice. See fig. 2. His viciousness in the new histories served this purpose by linking Huitzilopochtli’s violent tendencies and both his literal and metaphorical thirst for blood through human sacrifice. The selection of Huitzilopochtli demonstrated that the Mexica had, and would continue to have, no choice but to follow the rituals Huitzilopochtli demanded of them. Those rituals included supplying Huitzilopochtli, the sun god, with the human blood he needed to sustain himself after his daily battles fighting to cross the sky, specifically by the sacrifice of captured warriors. This made war an integral part of

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37 Conrad and Demarest, *Religion and Empire*, 21-3.
Mexica’s culture and ritual sacrifice a powerful incentive for the Mexica to go to and perform well in battle.\textsuperscript{38}

The origins of Huitzilopochtli are complex. He was an amalgam of the more common, older gods of Mesoamerica Tonatiuh and Tezcatlipoca. Tonatiuh had been the god of the sun for the Toltec people circa 950 CE. According to legend, he was created when a lesser warrior god willingly immolated himself in order to become the sun. He was originally a humble, sickly figure before casting himself into a pyre wearing only paper armor. However, after he became the sun, he became greedy and would only move around the earth if the other gods sacrificed their hearts for him. And so, the other gods agreed and did so, and people had to continue this process by sacrificing human hearts to Tonatiuh.\textsuperscript{39} In a poem Huitzilopochtli is described as “he who is dressed in paper, he who inhabits the region of heat.” This is a clear reference to Tonatiuh who originally wore paper armor and became the sun.\textsuperscript{40}

Also like Tonatiuh, Huitzilopochtli was originally a hero-like figure who was minor, but unique, to the Mexica. The important new part of Huitzilopochtli was his need for \textit{daily} human sacrifices. Sahagún recounts veneration to Huitzilopochtli: the priest “had taken his heart from him [a captive], he [the priest] raised it in dedication to the sun.”\textsuperscript{41} Sahagún also included a song that venerated Huitzilopochtli calling him the “leader in war” and Mexica warriors wore a dress in a “yellow feathered cape, which

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 27-30.
\textsuperscript{39} Karl Taube, \textit{Aztec and Maya Myths} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 33, 41-4.
\textsuperscript{40} Miguel León-Portilla, \textit{Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahua Mind} trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 162.
\textsuperscript{41} Sahagún, \textit{Florentine Codex}, II: 197.
\end{footnotesize}
through me is the sunshine.”\textsuperscript{42} Through the imagery of the sun, Huitzilopochtli is equated to Tonatiuh, the earlier warrior sun god. Karl Taube, an anthropologist, believes that aspects of Huitzilopochtli were not only drawn from Tonatiuh, but also done so to replace him as a central figure. Huitzilopochtli being the actual sun god validated the Mexica’s ascension to power as a necessity because it was their god who was the sun. And through their conquests and sacrifices they kept the sun moving through the sky.\textsuperscript{43}

The second god to be incorporated into Huitzilopochtli was Tezcatlipoca, whose name translates to the “Lord of the Smoking Mirror.” He was a major deity to many Mesoamericans. The smoking mirror refers specifically to mirrors ground from obsidian; “smoking” refers to the way the black volcanic glass obscures reflections. Obsidian mirrors were believed to have divination-like powers, and Tezcatlipoca could gaze back through the mirror.\textsuperscript{44} Mirrors were not always made from obsidian but also pyrite, known colloquially today as fool’s gold.\textsuperscript{45} The Nahuatl term for pyrite is \textit{tezcatl}, which literally translates to “mirror stone.”\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Tezcatl} is also Nahuatl for mirror itself.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, \textit{tezcatl} is a linguistic link to the Lord of the Smoking Mirror and his namesake mineral. Tezcatlipoca, beyond being metaphysically connected to the mirror stone also had one physically attached to his foot.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{42} Sahagún, \textit{Florentine Codex}, II: 221.
\textsuperscript{43} Taube, \textit{Aztec and Maya Myths}, 50.
\textsuperscript{45} Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, 368.
\textsuperscript{46} Sahagún, \textit{The Florentine Codex}, XI: 228.
\textsuperscript{47} Olivier, \textit{Aztec God}, 14.
\textsuperscript{48} Taube, \textit{Aztec and Maya Myths}, 32-4.
Tezcatlipoca’s place in the pantheon is by no means clear. He was the child of Ometeotl, the little mentioned hermaphrodite who birthed the four gods that created the various worlds. Ometeotl had four Tezcatlipoca sons: Red, White, Black, and Blue Tezcatlipoca. Each colored Tezcatlipoca was a different god and each was assigned to a cardinal direction: Xipe Totec (Red, east), Quetzalcoatl (White, west), Tezcatlipoca (Black, north), and Huitzilopochtli (Blue, south). Huitzilopochtli’s position is unique to the Mexica as he was exclusively their god.\footnote{50}

The Black Tezcatlipoca is the figure that has been and will be discussed; he was a benevolent god. At times he would give “riches to men,” but at other times he was malevolent and would bring “men misery, [and] affliction.”\footnote{51} Young warriors who tried to imitate him also admired him, and they practiced in a cult whose followers were known as telpochtli.\footnote{52} Like Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca had been an important deity to the Toltecs, and he was transmogrified into a central figure for the Toltecs. The Toltecs attributed some of the powers of rain god Tlaloc to Tezcatlipoca. This melding of Tezcatlipoca and Tlaloc occurred simultaneously as their religion and politics merged, similarly to the Mexica’s sacrificial oblations with Huitzilopochtli.\footnote{53} This tradition of veneration for Tezcatlipoca carried into the Mexica culture; they referred to Tezcatlipoca as “‘he whose slaves we are.’”\footnote{54}

In the same song about how warriors sang to venerate Huitzilopochtli, there is a line that reads, “you have but one foot”; this might be a allusion to Tezcatlipoca, who as

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\footnote{49} Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, 138.  
\footnote{50} Taube, \textit{Aztec and Maya Myths}, 32-4.  
\footnote{51} Sahagún, \textit{The Florentine Codex}, III: 11.  
\footnote{52} Olivier, \textit{Aztec God}, 27-8.  
\footnote{53} Knight, \textit{Mexico}, 123-4.  
\footnote{54} Taube, \textit{Aztec and Maya Myths}, 32.
mentioned had only one real foot while the other was an obsidian mirror. In 1486, after Ahuitzotl, a Mexica tlatoani, returned from a successful military campaign, the Mexica held a ceremonial coronation for him. During this ceremony the Mexica placed a mirror stone on the head of a Huitzilopochtli. This is significant because when a new tlatoani was crowned, he needed to thank and ask Tezcatlipoca for guidance. Part of this process of thanks involved the new tlatoani repeating a speech in which he refers to a “two-faced mirror wherein we commoners lie.” Placing the mirror on Huitzilopochtli’s head seems to connect the awesome powers of Tezcatlipoca to Huitzilopochtli. This symbolism might allude to the fact that Huitzilopochtli is also referred to as the Blue Tezcatlipoca in some creation myths. Or it might reference the guidance this warrior sun god figure had over the Mexica.

In the Mexica’s mythical journey from Aztlan, Huitzilopochtli is their guide, and he often mimics Tezcatlipoca’s capriciousness. He bestows fortune on them by bringing them to their new preordained home of Tenochtitlan; however, he also brings upon them misfortune by having them purposefully offend the Colhua in order to be cast out from their lands. At the end of their journey Huitzilopochtli guided the Mexica to the island where they were to found their city. They Mexica they were home when they saw an eagle clutching a rattlesnake on a cactus on a stone. Supposedly, the island itself had grown from a heart that a Mexica priest had excised and threw into the lake as Huitzilopochtli ordered him to. The balance between the good and bad acts of Huitzilopochtli mimics the ways in which Tezcatlipoca could bestow fortunes or miseries

55 Sahagún, Florentine Codex, II: 222.
56 Oliver, Aztec God, 248, 252.
57 Sahagún, Florentine Codex, VI: 41, 44.
58 Durán, History of the Indies, 32.
on men. This similarity goes further, and at the end of Sahagún’s account of the birth of Huitzilopochtli, he records that the Mexica “placed their trust in Uitzilopochtli” (an alternate spelling for Huitzilopochtli). This is not unlike the faith the newly crowned tlatoani Ahuitzotl, placed in Tezcatlipoca, and both these figures were guides to the Mexica.

For these changes to become official canon, the Mexica’s society needed to undergo drastic changes. Itzcoatl’s first order of business was to burn their old histories and rewrite them in a more favorable light, which justified the extreme stratification of classes and the nobility’s right to rule.59 Tlacaeelel and Montezuma I created schools for the commoners called telpochcalli, which taught boys how to be warriors and girls to be housekeepers. But more importantly, the schools taught children the basics of their history and religion.60 There was a separate school for the nobility and young priests called a calmeca; here students would also be indoctrinated and taught religious practices and “official” Mexica history. Part of this schooling involved teaching the pupils how to identify “good” teachers and priests, that is, people who knew the sanctioned histories and religious beliefs. Another tool to shape public understanding were artworks commissioned to represent the newly transformed gods and customs. However, this artwork never seemed to make it far out of the Valley of Mexico, which stresses how confined these views were.61 The new schools – along with new pictographic histories,

59 Conrad and Demarest, Religion and Empire, 38.
60 Aguilar-Moreno, Handbook to Life in the Aztec World, 75.
61 Taube, Aztec and Maya Myths, 45.
new religious practices, and new artwork – replaced original oral histories and quickly imbedded itself into Mexica society. ⁶²

The Mexica had come to be told that their success, militarily, was in essence the divine fortune of their god and their god alone. In return for Huitzilopochtli’s guiding the Mexica to their homeland and aiding their military endeavors, they owed him sustenance. This came in the form of human sacrifice, specifically hearts from warriors. For the Mexica, the fate of the entire world was in their hands; if they did not provide Huitzilopochtli with hearts he could not complete his daily battle through the sky. In effect, there would be no sunrise the next day. This was an intense motivation for their conquests, and the drastic changes that the Mexica psyche experienced from this transformation in religious ideology is difficult to understate. No matter how violent the acts were, in the Mexica mind, these acts were literally saving the world and their civilization.

Beyond the religious pressure to capture soldiers in war, there also was a socioeconomic incentive for warfare. Success was measured in captives taken and brave deeds performed in battle. From success in war, nobles were allotted lands and administrative positions, which dealt mostly with tribute. But this also could be said of the commoners who were rewarded with certain privileges of dress and status within their class. This was an important tool because everyone had a stake in conquest, both earthly and heavenly. Demarest and Conrad encapsulated this view the best, “if successful, the freeman warrior would gain privilege in this life, and if he perished in the divine quest he

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⁶² Conrad and Demarest, Religion and Empire, 43-4.
would gain immortality in the next, as a warrior-companion to the sun.™ Warfare was so important to the Mexica that even dying was in battle was sacred. Success in warfare meant bringing in captives to sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli, and if you were successful enough you could gain heritable status, which marked your children apart from the rest of society.

The Mexica had successfully created a society that tied religious imperialism to personal incentives. This was incredibly successful as the Mexica began to expand. Itzcoatl next sought to takeover the rest of the Valley of Mexico, and around 1430 CE the Triple Alliance did just that by conquering the southern lakes covered in rich and highly productive chinampas, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, Chalco, the city-state on the western portion of Lake Chalco, remained stubbornly independent until the mid 1440’s. See map 4. Next, in the late 1430’s, they expanded southward out of the Valley and took control of important semi-tropical agricultural lands of what is today part of the Federal District of Morelos. In 1440 Montezuma I assumed control after Itzcoatl had died. In 1458, the Triple Alliance continued their conquests; they took control of the rest of Morelos, parts of modern day Oaxaca, and moved eastward – gaining access to the Gulf Coast.™ Montezuma I died in 1468, and his successor was his grandson Axayacatl. Axayacatl made some westward expansions, reaching the border of the Tarascan Empire, but the Tarascans halted this expansion by crushing his army. The rest of Axayacatl’s rein was spent consolidating previous conquests and solving the logistical problems the bureaucracy faced from collecting and managing tribute. This meant creating new

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™ Ibid., 50-2.
™ Smith, The Aztecs, 50-3.
bureaucratic roles and reconquering rebellious areas. Axayacatl finally cemented control of Tenochtitlan’s sister city, Tlatelolco, by officially conquering it. Strangely, the Mexica had allowed the city-state, founded simultaneously by a separate group of Mexica on the same island, to remain independent. They likely were left independent because of ethnic ties and because the Mexica of Tenochtitlan did not want to disrupt Tlatelolco’s economics. Tlatelolco had become a major trading hub even before Tenochtitlan became powerful, but at the time of its conquest it was the largest center of trade in Mesoamerica. Axayacatl replaced Tlatelolco’s tlatoani with a military governor giving the Mexica control over their merchant class. Axayacatl’s consolidations were attempts to strengthen political control, prevent unrest in amongst the tributaries, and with the addition of Tlatelolco increase control over trade.65

Axayacatl died in 1481 and Tizoc, an ineffective leader, replaced him and was assassinated five years later leading to the ascension of Ahuitzotl in 1486. By this point, the Triple Alliance had shifted from being relatively equal partners to favoring the Mexica, but under Ahuitzotl the Mexica were the de facto leaders of the Triple Alliance. Ahuitzotl began his career by reconquering troubled areas. He continued campaigns taking over the rest of Oaxaca and advancing westward, pressing against the Tarascan Empire, to the Pacific Ocean. Ahuitzotl was focused on securing the important trade routes through these areas and fortifying the western border with the Tarascans to secure his control.

Ahuitzotl’s conquests underscored an important shift in Mexica expansion. Early on the Alliance focused on conquering areas that were important for food production.

65 Ibid., 53-5.
Now however, conquests began to focus on regions important for their trade routes and luxury goods. These changes were making the Empire incredibly wealthy. The shift in strategy reflects one of trying to gain power but also support its growing population. By Ahuitzotl’s reign the Empire was more focused on generating wealth and prestige. This stemmed from a growing demand for status and religious items as all the classes of Tenochtitlan grew in size and wealth. The growing demand for luxury items can be seen in the increase of full time artisans, the dwindling number of part time craft producers, and the centralization of specialists in key cities, specifically Tenochtitlan. With a few exceptions, which will be discussed later, the areas in and around the Valley of Mexico shifted from part time craft production exclusively to agriculture in order to support the burgeoning population as well as increased demand for high quality goods.

With Ahuitzotl’s death in 1502, Montezuma Xocoyotzin, known here on as Montezuma II, became the Mexica’s new tlatoani. Montezuma II had many problems to address. One problem was weakening the Tlaxcalan kingdom, a plucky Nahuatl group to the east of the Valley of Mexico. Another problem was suppressing uprisings within the Triple Alliance. Montezuma II did manage to subjugate a few new territories to the south. Montezuma II, like his predecessors, struggled to maintain control over subjugated city-states and regions because the Triple Alliance never really had full control over them in the first place. Originally, this process of reconquest was a normal and agreeable part of the Empire; rulers proved themselves in war and nobles and

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66 Ibid., 55-7.
commoners used it to gain privileges which in turn fed the priests sacrificial needs. However, by the time of Montezuma II the Empire became too large to maintain the constant warfare that expanded it so quickly. Montezuma curtailed the reward system by restricting upward mobility within all the Mexica classes. The nobility was rigidified and focused on lineage rather than ability in war. This was meant to curtail the Mexica’s internal motivations for warfare.  

Paradoxically, Montezuma II needed to be perceived as an effective general in control of a powerful army as perceived power was just as important in maintaining and conquering new tributaries.

Warfare in Mesoamerica came in two forms, combative and flowery, and through both system soldiers were rewarded for their captives. A combative war is in a sense a traditional form of warfare meant to conquer an enemy town or city-state. Opposing armies, which consisted of small units of a mix of veteran and novice warriors, would face each other and begin battle by firing long distance projectiles. After these munitions began to dwindle the arms infantry would advance using atlatls, spear throwers, until they came close enough to switch to hand-to-hand weapons. Units were kept about a two-meter distance from one another so that opposing warriors could pair off and fight one another. The purpose in these fights was not to kill but to maim an opponent until they were disabled enough to be taken off the battlefield and used as sacrificial victims. However, this is not to say that there were no outright fatalities from wars of conquest.

Flowery war, despite its deceptive name, was not a matter taken lightly. It was conducted in a much more regulated fashion than wars of conquest. An equal number of equally skilled warriors would square off in a flowery war. A flowery war was meant to

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70 Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 98-103.
display the military prowess of a power’s soldiers. Therefore, combatants would only use hand-to-hand combat weapons such as the *maquahuitl*, a sword like weapon, and the *tepoztopilli*, a lance-like weapon. These weapons will be discussed in greater length in the obsidian chapter. These weapons required diligent training, which both commoners and nobility received in their respective schools although the nobility was better trained. Therefore, winning in a flowery war was achieved when one side took more captives by carefully disabling them in combat. While this seems similar to regular combat, there were much less outright fatalities, and a flowery war was a protracted conflict that could go on, potentially, indefinitely. At its best a flowery war was meant to demonstrate that to an enemy the futility of fighting in a combative war, and at least it served to syphon off strong enemy’s best warriors.\footnote{Ibid., 254-5.}

Ross Hassig views flowery warfare as a development to overcome the logistics of warfare as the Empire expanded. The Triple Alliance’s large empire with its constant upheavals did not have enough soldiers or the logistical capability of supplying entire armies for a season worth of campaigns in various places. Therefore, they developed the flowery war to be used amongst its neighboring enemies such as Tlaxcalans to display power and eliminate strong warriors. In combination with flowery warfare the Empire sought to strangle trade routes and chip away at enemy territories in a process known as circling. Because the Empire had enmeshed itself so strongly into trade, once a territory was encircled it would see extra-territorial trading cease. This was the case with the Tlaxcalans.\footnote{Ibid., 255-6.}
Conquered peoples did not suddenly live under Triple Alliance law; rather, they were expected to pay yearly tributes often based on whatever goods were plentiful within the region. This process facilitated conflict because the loose control and high tribute demands led to rebellion, which once reconquered were raised higher. The conquered areas owed the Triple Alliance a mix of goods ranging from foodstuffs to extreme luxuries such as live eagles. See fig. 3. Some tribute items were unobtainable in a local region and could only be acquired through trade. This became a standard practice as the Empire had grown in order to enrich its own merchants because it was through their merchants that some tributaries would gain the items needed. Tribute originally was brought to Tenochtitlan where it was divided amongst the three city-states of the Triple Alliance with, as mentioned, two-fifths going to Tenochtitlan and Texcoco and a fifth going to Tlacopan. Whether or not this was the way goods were actually shared, seems dubious because of the immense power the Mexica held.73

Montezuma II radically altered the manner in which tribute was collected. Traditionally, tribute flowed from conquered areas to closest city-state that was conquered and then to Tenochtitlan. Montezuma II reorganized the tribute system by creating a bureaucracy. Tributaries were now organized into thirty-eight provinces that were focused around tributary capitals. Tribute from areas still pooled to local towns but now those local towns sent what they owed to the tributary capitals. From the tributary capital the tribute was sent to Tenochtitlan; each level had nobles who were only concerned about that levels tribute and sending along the chain. This process became even more efficient as tribute was delivered based on standard times, quarterly or every

eighty days; perishables were the exception and brought when ready. Montezuma II made these changes for several reasons: to make it easier to keep track of the flow of goods; to impress the local leaders that would arrive at times that would awe them; and to gauge the fealty of the provinces by whether or not the tribute was timely or even if it arrived.74

Tribute was more complex than simply bringing the goods to the island city. Some regions could not naturally produce certain valuable goods, and they needed to trade in order to obtain them. This process of trading went through channels controlled by the Mexica regime. This allowed Mexica traders to travel all edges of the empire to use its trading ties, establish new ones, and even spy for the government. Spying was an important function, since traders were the only group allowed into enemy or foreign states. The traders belonged to guilds that had their own stratification and could advance within them. The Mexica Regime subsidized their profession, and technically the Mexica government controlled the goods being traded.75 However, the merchants were rewarded like the other classes and could gain special privileges and status.76 Professional traders dealt almost exclusively with luxury items. These consisted of goods ranging from furs and cloth to obsidian and copper items.77

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75 Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, 31-6
Chapter Two

Indian Corn

“It has dried husks, maize silk, tassels at the top” – Florentine Codex

Central American ecology played a major role in shaping Mesoamerican society; consequently, understanding Central American ecology is essential to appreciate the very different developmental path Mesoamerica took when compared to Eurasia. The ecology of the New World would had far reaching consequences in agriculture, technology, and socio-political formations. This chapter will explore what the ecological differences were and how they led to the style of agriculture that spread across all of Mesoamerica. Jared Diamond is correct to trace civilizations to their roots to understand why events, such as the Conquest of Mexico, played out the ways in which they did. He is also correct the Americas lacked some of the potentials in flora and fauna, but Mesoamericans made up for these “deficiencies” and created elaborate systems of agriculture. The ecology and style of agriculture had a strong influence on the ways in which Mesoamerican culture and technology developed. I will begin to explore these differences in this chapter as well as the following two chapters.

Arguably, the largest difference between the Americas and Eurasia was the Americas lack of large animals capable of being domesticated. Many animals capable of being domesticated became extinct around the end of the most recent ice age. The reason for this is hotly debated. Some scholars believe it was climate change, while others believe Paleo-Indians overhunted large game animals driving them to extinction. However, it is more likely a combination of the two theories: rapid climate change altered

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78 Sahagún. Florentine Codex, XI: 279.
habitats, which when compounded with occasional hunting was enough to push large mammal species with slow reproductive rates over the edge and into extinction. These extinctions left the Americas with fewer animals that could be domesticated. Not all animals can be domesticated. Some species have problems with breeding in captivity, and others have too wild a disposition to ever be tamed. Therefore, with many large mammals becoming extinct, Amerindians had fewer choices for domestication.

The lack of large domesticable mammals led to noticeable differences in the diet and agricultural techniques of Mesoamerica and Eurasia. Without large mammals, there was no dairy and little meat in the Mesoamerican diet. Some historians have seized upon this difference and see it as the reason for the practice of cannibalism. In fact, however, it led to the development of a diet that focused on plants with high fat and protein content. Mesoamericans domesticated a wide variety of crops to fill nutritional needs. Mesoamericans relied on a combination of maize, beans, squash, and a variety of other crops. Of course, old world agriculture also had pulses and other plants, such as wheat, barely, and flax that filled fat and protein needs.

Mesoamericans also used a technique of intercropping known as the milpa system, which not only was highly productive but also important in maintaining soil fertility. However, one must first understand how the more “conventional” agricultural practices of Eurasia developed and worked in order to understand the differences between new world and old world agriculture. Southwestern Eurasia, the Fertile Crescent, is

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81 Ibid., 119-28.
arguably the area of the oldest developed form of agriculture, and the first step towards agriculture is the domestication of the crops.

According to Jared Diamond, the Fertile Crescent had several distinct advantages that facilitated crop domestication. Geographically the Fertile Crescent was part of the largest area in the world with a Mediterranean climate, a climate with mild wet winters and long dry summers. This climate favored annual grasses that would sprout rapidly and be able to grow in drier conditions. They would not grow long, and tended to have large seeds to be dispersed for the following growing season. Diamond includes a study of the world’s wild grasses, of the fifty-six best, grasses with seeds at least ten times as large as the median grasses, thirty-six are native only to Eurasia’s Mediterranean zone. In addition many of these plants were self-pollinating, but could occasionally cross-pollinate. This meant that useful hybrids were more likely to develop and retain their traits, because they could not easily cross-pollinate again. This ability would facilitate domestication by making new and better hybrids that could be easily sown. Diamond also postulates that because of a decline of gazelles and a lack of aquatic resources, proto-farmers were pushed to focus on the use of grasses as a new staple in their diets.  

Maize is much more difficult to cultivate than the eight “founder crops” Diamond mentions for the Fertile Crescent. The history of maize is still controversial; the most reliable date for domestication is around 4,000 BCE, but maize is potentially much older. Maize’s closest wild relative is teosinte, which may not even be its actual ancestor and

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looks nothing like a stalk of maize. Teosinte is a shrubby grass with many thin stems and small “ears” and no cob. The seeds of teosinte, numbering seven to twelve, have a hard inedible shell, and all of a seeds on an ear of teosinte combined still have less nutritional value than a single kernel of modern maize. Farmers tended to breed out a feature of wild plants that led to the dispersal of seeds in cereal crops, and thereby keeping the seeds from falling off and making harvesting easier. Teosinte has at least sixteen genes that control how seedpods shatter and disperse in nature. By comparison wild cereals in the Fertile Crescent have only one gene controlling the shattering effect.  

Maize is also not self-pollinating, but instead is pollinated by the wind so that one maize variety can pollinate another, introducing new and different plants in the same area. This forced a Mesoamerican farmer to comb through and choose the desirable varieties, a difficult task since modern Mesoamerica might have as many as 5,000 cultivars. A cultivar is one variety of a crop bred for certain attributes and can be thought of as a breed. Maize is unique in being a domesticated species that has more genetic diversity than its wild ancestor, which might be explained by multiple domestications or the interbreeding with multiple wild species.  

Maize was not enough to fill all the nutritional needs, which led Mesoamericans to develop a different style of farming all together. Another noticeable difference was that Mesoamericans did not grow their fields in straight furrows. Rather, Mesoamericans developed a unique style of intercrop farming known as the *milpa*, a Nahuatl term that

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84 Ibid., 217-9.
meant cornfield but has come to mean more.\textsuperscript{85} To understand the \textit{milpa} it must again be examined in comparison to farming in the Fertile Crescent.

Along with its amber waves of wild grains, Southwestern Eurasia was also gifted with numerous species of large mammals that could be domesticated. Eurasians domesticated thirteen of their seventy-two large mammals, compared to one out of twenty-four in the Americas, the llama. By 6,000 BCE cows had been domesticated in Southwestern Eurasia.\textsuperscript{86} Oxen pulled plows developed in Southwestern Eurasia around 4000 BCE.\textsuperscript{87} The technology was perhaps inspired by an ingenious farmer watching oxen drag rudimentary carts and replaced the cart with a digging stick to drag instead. A person dragging a digging stick was a common practice to score the earth. So using knowledge of ox drawn carts, early farmers lashed the digging stick to the horns of an ox or by attaching a bar across the head of an ox. The ox then walked forward, cutting into the earth.\textsuperscript{88} As the ox dragged the rudimentary plow, the farmer scattered seeds of cereals across the just upturned ground.\textsuperscript{89} This practice of scattering seeds after an ox drawn plow is part of the explanation of why straight furrows were a common feature of Eurasian plow agriculture.

Mesoamericans had ample time to watch the natural world around them when they began developing maize, and their forms of agriculture demonstrates this by mimicking natural cycles. The \textit{milpa} system which grew mainly maize used an

\textsuperscript{85} Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, 203.
\textsuperscript{86} Diamond, \textit{Guns, Germs, and Steel}, 162, 167.
\textsuperscript{89} Diamond, \textit{Guns, Germs, and Steel}, 126, 128.
innovative technique that not only mimicked natural cycles but also enhanced yields while being ecologically sustainable on the scale that it was practiced. While many crops can be grown in a milpa, the three most important are maize, beans, and varieties of squash. Other crops include tomatoes, chilies, peppers, amaranth, chia, avocados, and a variety of other vegetables.  

Maize, beans, and squash were the three to spread far across the Americas and have become known colloquially as the “three sisters,” and they grow particularly well with each other. Maize grows a thick tall stalk and requires many nutrients from the soil and thereby depletes it. Beans grow tendrils that run up the maize stalk so as to get adequate sunlight; the roots of the bean nitrify and rejuvenate the soil. The squashes’ lush leaves spread out and protect the base of the other two plants and deter weeds. This interplay may have natural origins; beans and squash often grow in the same areas as teosinte, and wild beans have been noted to climb teosinte as domesticated beans climb maize. At its highest output a milpa was believed to have produced somewhere around 3,000 kg/ha; it is estimated that a return of this value could feed approximately fifteen and a half people beyond the farmer.

The ways that maize, beans, and squash were grown on farms in Mesoamerica might be due to the long time it took to domesticate the maize. Perhaps through the

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90 Mann, *1491*, 220.
91 Ibid., 220-1.
difficultly of finding the right variety of teosinte the farmer found how to grow crops that worked in a symbiotic manner. The *milpa* system also owed much of it success, and possibly its existence, to the lack of any animals that would make plowing viable. The relatively limited agricultural tools, mainly the digging stick and simple hoes, made the *milpa* style practical because using a digging stick meant manually digging the hole for each seed. The *milpa* demanded more attention and planning because crops were often intercropped in small mounds. This is far different from farming in the old world where the farmer simply scattered the wheat grain as the oxen plowed the land. 

Metallurgy’s incorporation into Mesoamerican agriculture was far different than they way it was used in the Fertile Crescent. Mesoamerican agricultural tools included digging sticks, which tips were mostly fire hardened but occasionally had metal tips, and hoes, which also sometimes had metal blades as well. Eurasia invented the plow and because of plowing they scattered the seeds. Farming in Mesoamerica, however, did not significantly advance with its tool assortment for agriculture. And while this is partly because of the lack of a plow, it is also because the crops and style of agriculture were adapted to fit the tools at hand. Seeds were purposefully planted individually and intercropped which did not need the plow. However, metals were not designed principally for tools as they often were in the old world. Copper and bronze advancement

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95 Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, 323.
focused more on status items rather than tools such as axes and hoes, which will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on metallurgy.  

Households in Mexica Valley had *calmili* (the plural form), or gardens, but they were a more substantial source of food than what is now known as a garden. Susan Evans, an anthropologist who studied farming practices of the valley, notes that in the north a *calmil* (the singular form) was around half a hectare and would supply many vegetables for the household. *Milpas*, she claims, tended to have more maize while *calmili* were more diverse and had a heavier emphasis on vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, herbs along with some traditional *milpa* standards – maize, beans, and squashes. The *calmil* served as a reservoir for seeds for the next year’s *milpa* and *calmil* plots along with much of the farmer’s food. The farmer’s *milpa* plot was focused more on crops that were required for tribute or used in trade; the main four crops of tribute were maize, beans, amaranth, and chia.  

Possibly the most famous form of agriculture used in the Mexica Valley was the *chinampa*, known colloquially as a floating garden. Floating garden is a misnomer because the artificial islands were attached to the lakebed; however, this stemmed from confusion around the floating reed mats that were used to germinate seeds to allow *chinampas* to be in continuous use. A *chinampa* was made by driving stakes into the lakebed and then weaving them with sticks and reeds to make a border. The woodwork was filled in with rotting vegetation and sediment from the bottom of the lake. Planting trees along the border allowed roots to take hold and secure the *chinampa*. Water from

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98 Evans, “The Productivity of Maguey Terrace Agriculture,” 125.
99 Smith, *The Aztecs*, 76.
the lake would then irrigate the *chinampa* and create a sort of hydroponic garden, which was incredibly productive. See fig. 4.1 and 4.2. Historian Aguilar-Moreno claims that the *chinampas* of Lake Xochimilco, the southernmost freshwater lake of the valley’s lacustrine system, were much more extensive than those of Tenochtitlan, which surrounded the city itself, and supplied about half of the food for Tenochtitlan.\textsuperscript{100}

Terracing was also common throughout the Mesoamerican world and, especially, on the more vertical landscapes. These terraces were not as well planned and precise as those of the Incas, nor were they always made of stone. Some of the terraces’ walls were made of rough stone, compact earth, or cacti and agave. The maguey terraces not only prevent erosion but also retained soil moisture, which was very important for the higher and drier altitudes. The average amount of maguey planted on a farm could provide farmers with three liters a day of *aguamiel*, a potable sap-like product. This was extremely important and should not be underestimated since farms did not have a constant supply of water. The *aguamiel* could also be fermented into *pulque*, an alcoholic beverage, which was very important to Mesoamericans and was traded widely. The leaves of the maguey plant were also used to produce fiber used as cordage, clothes, and even for roofing.\textsuperscript{101}

Within Mesoamerica, all fields were well taken care of, and the Amerindians of Mexico had many husbandry techniques. Fields were either ridged furrows to deter erosion or had a series of small mounds in which crops were planted.\textsuperscript{102} Beyond using the *milpa* style of intercropping to maintain fertility, farmers also used various sources of

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\textsuperscript{100} Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, 58.
\textsuperscript{102} Whitmore and Turner II, “Landscapes of Cultivation,” 407.
biodegradables to fertilize fields. Once a stalk of maize reached maturity and was picked, the stalk had little purpose, and a farmer would sow the stalk and other vegetable waste back into the soil. Human waste was also collected and used for fertilizer among other things.\(^\text{103}\) Additionally, pond scum accumulation between *chinampas* had the added benefit of being an extra source of fertilizer.\(^\text{104}\)

Beyond the fertilizing, sustainability, and hyper-productivity associated with hydroponic *chinampas*, ordinary fields were irrigated or drained to increase yields or to make agriculture possible. Levees were crucial in maintaining proper irrigation and drainage; the tops of which were even farmed. Farmers would even cultivate wetlands through elaborate drainage systems making the land suitable for agriculture. The mountain range known as the Sierra Madre had steep slopes that hampered agriculture, but intrepid farmers terraced the slopes and were to have two annual yields because of fog moisture at the high altitudes.\(^\text{105}\) The Mesa Central, which includes the Valley of Mexico and Tenochtitlan, used essentially one method of irrigation; although, agriculture often relied on rain as the main source of water. Farmers used a system of dams and weirs that would collect silt from runoff during floods and then spread the water onto fields. Similarly, they utilized springs, streams, and collecting pools to do the same.\(^\text{106}\)

As productive as agricultural styles were, they have come under attack by some scholars, not because of the feasibility of their large-scale production but because of skepticism about the nutritive value of the crops. Most specifically maize, which lacks the essential amino acids lysine and tryptophan. Michael Harner famously, or infamously

\(^{103}\) Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, 325.

\(^{104}\) Smith, *The Aztecs*, 75.


\(^{106}\) Ibid., 408.
for some scholars, theorized that cannibalism in the Mexica culture was a response to an increased population. For Harner, the lack of domesticated animals would mean no fats and no animal protein.\textsuperscript{107} This ignores the immense population of both Tenochtitlan, estimated from 200,000 to 250,000 in 1519, and the Valley of Mexico, with a population estimated at 1.6 million in 1519, which would require more than cannibalism to sustain themselves.\textsuperscript{108,109}

Harner ignored the nutritional value of the Mexica diet. The “three sisters” were not only ecologically complementary but also nutritionally complementary. Maize provided much of the nutrition for Amerindian societies but lacked the key amino acids lysine and tryptophan and the vitamin niacin. Beans were rich in lysine and tryptophan, but lacked the other essential amino acids cysteine and methionine. Squashes provided vitamins and minerals that rounded out the farmer’s diet. Therefore, these three crops provided a nutritionally balanced diet.\textsuperscript{110}

Additionally maize in many Mesoamerican cultures underwent an additional processing step that made viable a diet of only maize and beans. Once shucked, the maize kernels were soaked in a mixture of limewater, calcium hydroxide, and then boiled. This chemical process freed niacin from the kernels and added calcium to the diet. The kernels were then washed and shelled to remove the pericarp, and, once dried, the maize would be ground into flour.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{108} Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{109} Evans, \textit{Ancient Mexico & Central America}, 438.
\textsuperscript{110} Mann, \textit{1491}, 221.
\textsuperscript{111} Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, 374.
The Mexica also harvested *tecuitlatl*, which can be considered a miracle crop. *Tecuitlatl* is the Nahuatl name for a food made from *spirulina geitlerii*, a type of algae. *Tecuitlatl* was collected by fine nets from the lakes in the Valley of Mexico and then squeezed and pressed into cake shapes. The pressed cakes of algae were dried and sold in the markets of Tenochtitlan. Bernal Diaz, one of the conquistadores who helped topple the Mexica, described *tecuitlatl* as tasting “very much like cheese.”\(^{112}\) *Tecuitlatl* was incredibly rich in protein; it was comprised of 70% protein and a complete source of amino acids. Anthropologist Bernard Ortiz de Montellano calculated that harvesting only .25% of Lake Texcoco for the algae could feed the population of Tenochtitlan for a year, which he estimated around 300,000.\(^{113}\)

The agriculture grown over a variety of these regions became incredibly important to the Triple Alliance as the population of the Valley increased. As mentioned the Empire began its expansion based on its need to secure its food supply. The *chinampas* around Xochimilco were major producers of Tenochtitlan’s food supply early; however, Susan Evans believes that even by the 1450’s the population of the Valley of Mexico was reaching the limit of its carrying capacity under farming techniques of the time.\(^{114}\) By the time of Montezuma II this made tribute demands of staples an important matter.

\(^{114}\) Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America*, 438
In total, the Alliance was owed twenty-eight bins of maize, twenty-one bins of beans, twenty-one bins of chia, and eighteen bins of amaranth. This amount has been estimated to feed around 360,000 people, which Alan Knight cautions at being somewhat high. Based on my own calculations it could feed at most 100,000 people. According to Knight this food, once received, was then distributed or sold to the population of Tenochtitlan. Historian Ross Hassig contends that some of these foodstuffs were meant to be prepared for soldiers on way to battle and that runners would be sent in advance of an army to have tributaries still loyal to Alliance to assemble needed supplies. In either case tribute in the form of agricultural goods was an important matter for the Empire, in feeding both its people and its army. These foodstuffs along with whatever else was required by a province were collected in the tributary’s capital then carried to Tenochtitlan by porters over the cities’ causeways or up to the lakeshore where canoes did the rest. See maps 5.1 and 5.2.

Agriculture developed radically different in Mesoamerica than in Eurasia. It domesticated an important number of crops that were nutritionally complete. Rather than developing a style of agriculture based on technology, Mesoamericans developed agriculture to mimic natural processes. This allowed for a much more sustainable form of agriculture. However, the negative aspect of this style was the limited impact it had on advancing metallurgy. Yet, as the next chapter will discuss, this was not a priority for

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117 Ibid., 181.
118 Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 63-5.
Mesoamericans. Furthermore, agriculture played a large role in determining the original course of Alliance expansion to sustain population growth, and it affected military campaigns by supplying soldiers with supplies. Nonetheless, the reliance on food from outside Tenochtitlan would be one advantage Cortés would use during the conquest.
Chapter Three

Itztli

“It Takes Its Name From Itself” – Florentine Codex

To understand the path of technological development that Mesoamerica, and more specifically the Nahuas, undertook we must examine obsidian’s material uses and cultural aesthetic. Obsidian was pervasive throughout every part of a Nahua’s life, including linguistics, household objects, tools, deities, and religious practices. In this section I will examine all of these uses and their connection to obsidian in order to show that Mesoamericans emphasized lithic technology because of the cultural importance of obsidian. Compared to metal, stone was much more important to Mexica and Nahua societies as a whole. Stone was a link to the gods, through physical items, and the spiritual and metaphysical powers they represented. It is because of these connections and obsidian’s physical properties that it was emphasized in tools. Anthropologist Nicholas J. Saunders encapsulated many of the important reasons for obsidian’s importance:

Obsidian’s peerless utility in a world without metal tools, together with its occurrence only at particular geological locations, generated an enduring Mesoamerican aesthetic, which saw the controllers of obsidian sources and the makers of obsidian blades connected to cosmic forces. This in turn endowed subsequent acts of obsidian use with potency and significance, whether in acts of sacrifice and bloodletting, or in producing a web of regional exchange networks throughout Mesoamerican prehistory. From this perspective, obsidian can be considered unique in its capacity to create social relationships, and stimulate symbolic connections between materiality and culture across Mesoamerica.

120 Sahagún, Florentine Codex, XI: 226.
While Mesoamericans did have some metallurgy – beginning in Western Mexico around 650 CE, Saunders is accurate in that many of the important civilizations in this region had developed solely with lithic technology.\textsuperscript{122} Saunders believed that the aesthetic qualities of obsidian were the reason for its ubiquitous uses throughout Mesoamerica. It was these unique qualities that gave it an enduring mystique in the Mesoamerican mind, and which I will explore throughout this chapter.

Sanders’ statement about the few geological sources of obsidian refers not to its scarcity, but to the mystique of only being able to obtain the material in a few locations. In addition, perhaps further supporting his geographic and aesthetic theory is the specificity of some types of obsidian. For example, obsidian from Pachuca has a unique green hue that allows archeologists to easily identify the source of obsidian tools. Similarly, even if some obsidian stones look alike, each obsidian source has a unique chemical composition, which leads to minor differences in appearance and might explain another part of the aesthetic of obsidian.\textsuperscript{123} Pachuca obsidian was widely traded. It was used in prismatic blades, sacrificial tools connecting users to their religion and gods, and lapidaries made it into religious and status objects, which, too, were widely traded. It is the cultural attributions of status and religious connections to this material that shaped the development of technology in Mesoamerica. In fact obsidian, along with other lithic materials, were so essential to ways of life that controlling their sources shaped the expansion and policy of the Alliance.

\textsuperscript{123} Smith, \textit{The Aztecs}, 126-7.
Before exploring the worldly uses of obsidian, we must understand Nahuatl societies’ linguistic connection to it. In the Florentine Codex the section on obsidian reads, “it takes its name from itself”\textsuperscript{124}; Sahagún’s seemingly existential phrase is actually referring to the fact that in the Nahuatl language itztli, the word for obsidian, is what modern linguists describe as a morpheme. Morphemes are the smallest units of meaning within a word; for example, the English word “iconify” contains the morphemes “icon” and “-ify.”\textsuperscript{125} Other morphemes related to stones are tetl (stone), xiuitl (turquoise), chalchiuitl (emerald), and tecpatl (flint or sacrificial knife).\textsuperscript{126}

The Nahuatl word for obsidian, itztli, functions as a morpheme that is often used in words relating to sacrifice, such as: tentitzania (tentli-itztli), a verb that translates as “to sacrifice and cut ones lips for the idols.”\textsuperscript{127} The Florentine Codex describes an act called neçoliztli, which translates to “the bloodying.” Sahagún’s entry reads as, “When they bloodied themselves, thus did they do it: with an obsidian blade one cut [the lobes of] one’s ears, and then they let the blood flow from about the ears.”\textsuperscript{128} This entry is listed under a section about different Nahua forms of offerings to the gods. The entry directly links the act of blood letting with obsidian; even the entry header appears to have itztli, the Nahuatl word for obsidian, as a root. Itztli is also a morpheme associated with words

\textsuperscript{124} Sahagún, Florentine Codex, XI: 226.
\textsuperscript{125} Mark Liberman, Morphology, http://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/Fall_2007/ling001/morphology.html
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{128} Sahagún, Florentine Codex, II: 198.
that refer to sharpness of cutting edges, such as: *tenitzić* “something sharp or which has a cutting edge” and *tenitzićayotl* “edge, or sharpness of a knife, etc.”

Obsidian is a remarkable natural material. Obsidian is formed as silica rich lava that cools quickly with its small crystallites, essentially seedlings from which larger crystals form, being packed closely together. This close packing and lack of large crystals gives obsidian its typical jet-black appearance. When fractured its edges have a smoky luster, becoming clearer and less hazy as it comes to a microscopic edge. It is obsidian’s lack of a crystalline structure that allows it to be knapped into blades that are the sharpest in the world. Experimental archaeology has shown that the edges of obsidian blades are 500 times sharper than a razor blade as it can fracture down to the last molecule; this results in points that can penetrate 25% deeper than steel. Obsidian is also ranked as one of the easiest lithic materials for knappers and lapidaries.

Obsidian tools were ubiquitous in Mesoamerica, and archaeologist Michael E. Smith notes that the only material that surpasses obsidian in quantity in archaeological sites are ceramics. Beyond the physical characteristics that made obsidian popular as tools, there are about seven natural deposits that were all located in the Mexican highlands. See maps 6 and 7. The Mexica themselves were located close to two obsidian sources, Otumba and Pachuca. The latter, Pachuca, is a source of high quality obsidian,

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131 Smith, *The Aztecs*, 86.
132 David Wescott, *Primitive Technology: A Book of Earth Skills*, (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1999), 80-1. The text does not say what is pierced or what type of weapon was used in the experiment, but it references bow hunting so it is presumably not armor and likely a soft target struck with an arrow.
and as such is better suited for production of prismatic blades.\textsuperscript{133,134}

Prismatic blades are made by creating and grinding the bases of the obsidian core, and occasionally other stones, then using a tool to apply large amounts of pressure to the edges of the base of the core. This is an advanced form of knapping known as pressure flaking. The results of this are long thin slivers of obsidian, or prismatic blades, which have incredibly sharp edges. One obsidian core could produce up to 200 prismatic blades, which could vary in length with some examples longer than 23 cm. These blades could then be worked into a variety of tools and weapons. The production of prismatic blades dates back to the archaic period, approximately 4000 BCE. However, it is not until the early formative period, an archeological period from 2000 – 700 BCE, that obsidian prismatic blades were traded all over Mesoamerica.\textsuperscript{135} Common household items made from prismatic blades include knives, razors, and blades for sickles.\textsuperscript{136}

Mesoamerican weapons made from obsidian included the famous \textit{maquahuitl}, a malicious looking slender cricket paddle fringed with prismatic blades on its two edges. The \textit{maquahuitl} was constructed from hard wood to which were glued the prismatic blades in either contiguous or serrated fashion; the blades could not be removed or broken. Another intimidating weapon was the \textit{tepoztopilli}, a thrusting spear whose diamond shaped point was brimmed with prismatic blades. See fig. 7. The weapons date back to the Olmecs, 1200-800 BCE, and were used as far south as the Yucatan Peninsula. Unfortunately, the only extant copies of a \textit{maquahuitl} and \textit{tepoztopilli} were destroyed in

\textsuperscript{133}Kenneth Hirth, “Craft Production in a Central Mexican Marketplace,” \textit{Ancient Mesoamerica} Vol. 20, No. 1, (Spring 2009), 90.
\textsuperscript{134}Smith, \textit{The Aztecs}, 86-7.
\textsuperscript{135}Dan M. Healan, “Ground Platform Preparation and the ‘Banalization’ of the Prismatic Blade in Western Mexico,” \textit{Ancient Mesoamerica} Vol. 20, No. 1, (Spring 2009), 103.
\textsuperscript{136}Smith, \textit{The Aztecs}, 87-9.
the fire of the Royal Armory of Madrid in 1884. Bernal Diaz del Castillo describes the
“arsenals” of Montezuma where he mentions both the *maquahuitl* and the *tepoztopilli*:

> These arms consisted in shields of different sizes, sabres, and a species of
> broadsword [*maquahuitl*], which is wielded with both hands, the edge
> furnished with flint stones, so extremely sharp that they cut much better
> than our Spanish swords: further, lances [*tepoztopilli*] of greater length
> than ours, with spikes at their end, full one fathom in length, likewise
> furnished with several sharp flint stones. The pikes are so very sharp and
> hard that they will pierce the strongest shield, and cut like a razor; so that
> the Mexicans even shave themselves with these stones.\(^{138}\)

It is unclear what is meant by “sabre” and “pikes” if they other kinds of *maquahuitl* and
*tepoztopilli*, or perhaps these words were poorly translated. There were two forms of the
*maquahuitl*, a one-handed and two-handed variety, which might account for the “sabre”
and “broadsword” confusion. The sword-like *maquahuitl* was occasionally pointed and
was meant primarily to be a one or two-handed slashing weapon. The pike might be
another kind of *tepoztopilli*; the one destroyed in the fire was drawn and looks very
different from other depictions of *tepoztopilli*. See fig. 9. The *tepoztopilli* was used to
slash and thrust, and its prismatic blades were incredibly effective.\(^{139}\) Bernal Diaz del
Castillo personally attested to their effectiveness saying, “I myself received a heavy
thrust from a lance, which completely pierced my armour, and I should certainly have
lost my life on the spot if my cuirass had not been strongly quilted with cotton.”\(^{140}\)

The *maquahuitl* and *tepoztopilli* were developed to take advantage of the
incredible sharpness of obsidian. To use these weapons effectively required intensive

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\(^{137}\) Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 81-5.
\(^{139}\) Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, 113-4.
training, especially the *maquahuitl*. Therefore, the weapons are associated with the nobility who could afford training. Distance weapons such as the bow and arrow and the sling were associated with commoners. The battle tactics of Mesoamericans were highly organized and viewed through a ritual lens. Captives would be taken in warfare to be ritually slain for the gods.\(^{141}\)

One type of sacrifice was known as *tlahuahuanaliztli*, “gladiatorial sacrifice,” is a form of sacrifice meant for enemy warriors who were captured early in battle.\(^{142}\) In a gladiatorial sacrifice the victim would be placed on a raised stone platform to which his waist was tethered. See fig. 6. He was also given “a war club [*maquahuitl*] decked with feathers, not set with obsidian blades.”\(^{143}\) Giving the victim a weapon without obsidian was essentially neutering him. His ineffective weaponry was in stark contrast to the warriors fighting him who not only wielded weapons with obsidian, but also performed ritual dances in which they raised “their obsidian-bladed clubs in dedication to the sun.”

The Mexica warriors would then stand below the captive and attack him. The Mexica warrior did not want to kill him quickly, but slowly slice him with their obsidian sided weapons. The act was known as “striping” and was meant to lace the body with blood as well as display the swordsmanship of the warrior. Once the victim collapsed of blood loss, his heart was excised, his skin was flayed, and the warrior wore the “striped” flesh of his victim for a full month of their calendar, or twenty days.\(^{144}\)

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141 Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, 113-4, 121.
142 Ibid., 121-3, 126.
143 Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II: 51-3.
When Mesoamericans excised hearts, they used a sacrificial knife known as a *tecpatl*. The *tecpatl* is the namesake of the minor Mesoamerican deity *Tecpatl*. Artworks of *Tecpatl* are knapped flint blades inlaid with white flint teeth and sclera and a black obsidian pupil. See fig. 10.1.\(^\text{145}\) It is not exactly clear whether or not obsidian was also a material used for sacrificial knives. Scholar Guilhem Olivier postulates that both obsidian and flint are integral in sacrifice, but in different ways. Obsidian to him is reserved for self-sacrifice, such as bloodletting, and flint is for the excision of hearts. This is because obsidian is associated with atonement and divination and flint is associated with the sky and its physical ability to spark and make fire.\(^\text{146}\)

The few extant examples of sacrificial knives with their original handles have flint blades. The handles are commonly depicted as a god or warrior. One existing example of a sacrificial knife’s handle depicts the sun god Tonatiuh; his hands are portrayed as holding the flint blade. There is also a depiction of the *xiuhcoatl*, the fire serpent atlatl associated with Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica’s main god.\(^\text{147}\) See fig. 11.2. As mentioned, Huitzilopochtli became a god of central importance to the Mexica who essentially replaced Tonatiuh. Huitzilopochtli became the warrior sun god demanding hearts from victims, and this knife handle depicts this the merging of Tonatiuh with Huitzilopochtli represented by the iconic weapon, the *xiuhcoatl*. The knife’s original blade was unfortunately lost and contemporarily replaced with a flint blade, so it is difficult to draw further conclusions about this particular artifact.

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\(^{146}\) Olivier, *Mockeries and Metamorphoses*, 110-1.

Other handles have been found that are more innately adorned in mosaics and are actually thought to be offerings rather than actual knives used for sacrifice. This is because plain handled, non-mosaic, knives have been found with victims, while the more ornate handles were discovered in “offering caches.” One such example of an ornate handle is of an eagle warrior, who traditionally was part of a warrior class among the Mexica. See fig. 11.1. This particular eagle warrior is holding a white chalcedony knapped blade. The plain sacrificial knife of Tonatiuh would physically connect its user to the gods themselves, who through the priests guiding hands would slice open a captive’s abdomen in order to excise his or her heart. The ornate knife of an eagle warrior would represent the warrior, through whose bravery in war the captive was taken. Perhaps as an offering it could potentially be the opposite metaphysical link of the Tonatiuh sacrificial knife. The ornate knife would connect the warrior to the gods by representing the warrior holding the white chalcedony blade as an inverse to a god holding a black obsidian blade. However, these are merely hypothetical meanings of the eagle warrior effigy knife, since there is no real way to confirm any meaning.

Tezcatlipoca is the god associated with developing the act of heart excision. As mentioned earlier Tezcatlipoca has a close association to Huitzilopochtli. Tezcatlipoca was often associated with obsidian, partly from his being the black Tezcatlipoca, the obsidian mirror attached to his foot, his obsidian sandals, and even some obsidian statues of him. The color black, beyond its association to Tezcatlipoca and obsidian, is a color important to penance and self-sacrifice. Priests and even occasionally commoners would paint themselves black with soot as a way to observe some religious practices as well as

148 Ibid., 437, 474.
149 Saunders, “A Dark Light,” 223.
to become closer with Tezcatlipoca. Priest-historian Diego Durán mentions that there was a statue of Tezcatlipoca “made of a shining stone, black as jet, the same stone of which sharp blades and knives are fashioned.” This is a physical tie between the Lord of the Smoking Mirror and obsidian. Another tie was the obsidian mirror, which is associated with divinatory practices; polished obsidian is remarkably reflective. The “smoking” aspect of the mirror is likely alluding to ways in which the black surface obfuscates the reflection. The Nahuatl word for one of these mirrors is *tezcatl*, which shows a linguistic link to Tezcatlipoca. The obsidian mirror also was a way for Tezcatlipoca to see people as well as for a person to catch a glimpse of the god. Furthermore, the mirror was given to the Mexica king, and he could reportedly see the commoners while they only saw their own reflection.\footnote{150}

Lapidaries comprised a very important artisanal class in Mesoamerica and to the Mexica. Lapidaries had their own four gods that “they attributed the art [of the lapidary]. Their creations were lip pendants, lip plugs, and ear plugs, ear plugs of obsidian, rock crystal, and amber; white ear plugs; and all manner of necklaces,” and any other precious stone jewelries were considered “their creation, their invention.”\footnote{151} See fig. 10.2 and 10.3. These four gods were Chiconauititzcuintli, Naualpilli, Macuilcalli, and Cinteotl, and once a year the lapidaries would have one person represent each of the gods and sacrifice them in an act of veneration.\footnote{152}

A lapidary used a variety of stones in his craft – from rock crystal, to jade, to turquoise, to obsidian – but particular focus will be given to the large number of craft

\footnote{151} Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, IX: 80.  
\footnote{152} Ibid., IX: 79-80.
items created from obsidian.\footnote{Ibid., IX: 80.} Ear spools, a type of earplugs that resemble spools for thread, are incredibly thin and delicate and require great expertise to fabricate.\footnote{Smith, \textit{Aztecs}, 105-6.} In the market place there were sellers who sold finished necklaces, which were of “[worked] obsidian, of rock crystal, of amethyst, of amber, of black mirror-stone,” obsidian mirror. The sources are not clear if the seller was in fact the lapidary or just a dealer. But there were specialized sellers of obsidian and pyrite mirrors who are described in the \textit{Florentine Codex} as “the mirror-stone maker [is] a lapidary.”\footnote{Sahagú\'n, \textit{Florentine Codex}, X: 86-7.} See fig. 5.

Lapidaries were fulltime specialists with their own hereditary class who often made goods directly for nobles or priests. Nobles either consumed these goods for themselves, using them to display their status and wealth, or they were given as gifts for other nobles in order to facilitate and strengthen social and political relations. Priests often used luxury goods in offerings to gods and would bury them in offering caches. Priests also bought many mosaic works for ceremonial displays. They were often made of turquoise, shells, and obsidian, which held special religious significance. Commoners were excluded from purchasing some goods, but there were some items that they could purchase if they could afford to do so.\footnote{Smith, \textit{Aztecs}, 99-100, 106.} Only nobles were allowed to wear lip plugs, ear spools, and nose plugs of precious materials, gold or stone; commoners who were successful warriors were allowed to wear these items, but they had to be made of wood or bone.\footnote{Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, 110.}
The production of specialized products, which included those of lapidaries, became increasingly centralized to the city of Tenochtitlan while many of the surrounding subjugated areas focused more on agriculture. However, one location that also intensified its production of luxury items was the city-state of Otumba. Otumba produced various specialty items including textiles, pottery, and lapidary, but again I will focus on its obsidian production. Otumba is located near a gray obsidian source, but the majority of the waste and finished obsidian products found there were that from the higher quality Pachuca obsidian, which has a green coloring. Lapidaries from Otumba would use cores left over from prismatic blade production. These goods were created for various levels of “local, regional, and extra-regional elites,” and the objects most commonly exported were ear spools and labrets.\(^{158}\)

Lapidaries’ products were so important to the Mexica that they were able to hold influence expansion of the Empire. Montezuma II expanded south to conquer the city-states of Tototepec and Quetzaltepec. According to Diego Durán,

“the lapidaries of the city of Tenochtitlan, of Tlatelolco, and of other cities heard that in the province of Tototepec and Quetzaltepec there existed a type of sand that was good for working stones, together with emery to clean them and polish them until they became bright and shining. The stone workers told King Motecuhzoma about this and explained the difficulties in and obtaining the sand and emery from that province and the high prices for that were asked. Motecuhzoma, after consulting with his council, decided to send envoys to Tototepec and Quetzaltepec to ask as a favor that this sand be sent to his master lapidaries.”\(^{159}\)

Montezuma conquered the two city-states solely to support the craft specialists of the Empire, specifically those of Tenochtitlan. This demonstrates how important the

\(^{158}\) Charlton, Nichols, and Charlton, “Aztec Craft Production and Specialization,” 105.  
\(^{159}\) Durán, The History of the Indies of New Spain, 417.
lapidaries’ crafts were to a society heavily focused on the artisanal works to display status and honor their gods.

As can be seen, luxury goods made of obsidian were highly valued and even though they were made of a common material, they were regarded just as highly as those made of jade or gold. Yet the lapidary crafts were only minor consumers of obsidian. It is important to examine the daily usage and ubiquity of obsidian. Otumba, besides exporting luxury items of obsidian, also exported prismatic blades, and it was the remaining cores from prismatic blade production that were then used for luxury craft production. 160 See fig. 8. These finished and semifinished goods were traded all over the empire.

Obsidian played a tremendous role in local and long distance commerce. As seen in Otumba, despite being near its own obsidian source, it used the superior Pachuca obsidian. Other towns, near their own deposits of obsidian, also opted for Pachuca obsidian even for simple domestic tools; 90% of the obsidian artifacts found in Nahuatl sites were of Pachuca obsidian. Under Mexica control, Pachuca obsidian was traded all over Mesoamerica and even as far as the Yucatan peninsula. The stone was even traded into the Tarascan Empire, the Triple Alliance’s western enemy. Likewise, goods entered the Triple Alliance’s Empire despite their hostilities; judging from archeological finds, merchants crossed imperial borders and traded. 161

Long distance trade like this was carried out by the pochteca, professional merchants. These merchants were a part of a special class and were organized in special guilds that only existed in twelve city-states exclusively in the Valley of Mexico, this

160 Charlton, Nichols, and Charlton, “Aztec Craft Production and Specialization,” 105.
included Tenochtitlan, its sister-city Tlatelolco, and Texcoco. The most economically active of all these cities were Tlatelolco, Otumba, and Xochimilco. The *pochteca* would go on month long trading trips with expert merchants, novices, and porters; all of whom were expert soldiers armed to defend themselves if necessary. On these trips the *pochteca* would trade state goods as well as their own goods. From these merchants many luxury items came to Tenochtitlan in response to the demand of the nobility. The *pochteca* carried only the most expensive and lightest of luxury goods to maximize their energy expenditure and profits. Pachuca obsidian was among these items.\(^{162}\)

Pachuca obsidian had been extensively used by various civilizations such as those of the city-states of Teotihuacan and Tula, but it was never so exhaustively used as by the Triple Alliance. During previous civilizations, part-time specialists, who were also farmers in the local area, did the extraction and knapping of the green obsidian of Pachuca. However, the Triple Alliance turned part-time labor into full-time work. The highly organized operation had the workers in a sort of guild. The work was done in phases rather than one or a few people finding the cores of obsidian and then knapping them. The labor was not paid, but was part of the tribute demand that Pachuca owed the Alliance. Despite the distance from Tenochtitlan, 70 km, it was still the most important source of obsidian for the Alliance, and its quality outweighed the use of closer lower quality obsidian.\(^{163}\)

Laborers needed to find the deposits then tunnel them out to remove them. This involved creating tunnels sometimes 50 m in depth. Once excavated, the workers of

\(^{162}\) Ibid., 120-3, 126-7.
Pachuca would create uniform cores and blanks, which could then be fabricated into various items. Large cores could be used in prismatic blade production or for large religious items such as vessels. Smaller blanks could be knapped into bifacial knives or arrowheads. It should be noted that blanks were ten times heavier than the tools constructed from them. Depleted cores, as mentioned, were then used to produce various luxury items. The mines had temporary houses built around them, which archaeologists Alejandro Pastrana and Silvia Dominguez believe were moved when needed to begin new mineshafts. These settlements were supported with food and tools brought in from an outside source. Just as the blanks and cores moved along established trade routes within the empire, so did the food and tool supply for the settlements. The trade of blanks and cores supplied the craft centers of Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, and Otumba as well as other areas. Controlling and exploiting this Pachuca was of both strategic and economic importance to the Triple Alliance as its obsidian made their weapons and tools as well supplied the growing market for status and religious items.  

Perhaps the place where all of the forms of obsidian met was in the market place. Here lapidaries sold their goods, and porters carried the merchants’ finished and unfinished obsidian goods. The obsidian seller, iznamacac, is described in the Florentine Codex as actively making obsidian tools and prismatic blades for his customers:

“The obsidian seller is one who, [with] a staff with a crosspiece, forces off [blades; he is] one who forces off [blades], who forces off obsidian blades. He forces off obsidian blades, he breaks off blades. He sells obsidian, obsidian razors, blades, single-edged knives, doubled edged knives, unworked obsidian, scraping stones, V-shaped [pieces].”

\[164\] Ibid., 140-7.
\[165\] Sahagún, Florentine Codex, X: 85.
It was here in the market place that a chinampa farmer could buy prismatic obsidian blades for a new sickle, a nobleman could purchase ear spools as a gift for a colleague, and a priest could buy a knife for bloodletting. Obsidian was used in almost every part of daily life and the tight control of obsidian was important to support the increasing demand of obsidian as the population of all classes grew. The Triple Alliance increased both the extraction of obsidian as well as its own borders to keep prices and materials cheap for knappers, artisans, and consumers. Obsidian’s importance was, more than a physical material, but also a way to connect with the gods. In fact, after the conquest, obsidian would be used in religious iconography such as atrial crosses.\(^\text{166}\)

Beyond Saunders claim of the metaphysical and spiritual link to obsidian stemming from the latent development of metallurgy, obsidian weaponry was developed and viewed as a part of a complex relationship to nobility, who were the few people that were taught to use such weapons. Nobility also were the few people who were allowed to wear obsidian lip, nose, and earplugs. Obsidian’s physical qualities might have also been contributing factors in the ways in which metals developed in Mesoamerica. Obsidian, unlike metals, once mined is immediately ready to be worked. Where as the only metal that this can also be done with is telluric copper, which is a copper occurring in a natural form that can be cold worked without smelting. Yet copper is a duller and softer material than obsidian.

Obsidian’s sharpness had been exploited for centuries as past civilizations developed advanced weaponry based around techniques to exploit this sharpness. Furthermore, the flowery wars further ingrained these weapons and style of ritual

\(^{166}\) Saunders, “A Dark Light,” 226.
fighting. These wars were viewed in religious terms with the most skilled warriors pairing off fighting with their obsidian weapons and displaying their swordsmanship by disabling one another in an attempt to capture and sacrifice the opponent. This style of fighting is the clearest representation of the Mesoamerican view of war as a sacred duel between equally strong forces to determine whose gods were more powerful and to provide sacrifices to that god. Therefore, obsidian was the material means to prove oneself and one’s god as the best.

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Metallurgy, traditionally, filled two roles: utilitarian and ornamental. Early utilitarian developments in metallurgy were in one of three areas: weaponry, transport, and agricultural tools. Metallurgy for ornamental use was originally relegated to jewelry and status items. As I have shown in the previous chapter, obsidian filled both of these roles in Mesoamerica. To understand the use of metals in Mesoamerica I will first examine the origins of metallurgy in the old world. While the cultural motivations that spurred this branch of technology have never truly been investigated, the technological advances in metallurgy often had clear new uses – harder metals held sharper stronger edges that were used in weaponry, transport, and agricultural tools. Next I will examine the origin of metallurgy in the Americas, the Andes. Finally, I will examine metallurgy in Mesoamerica, and how it arrived via cultural diffusion from modern Ecuador to the Pacific coast of Mesoamerica circa 650 CE.

The origins and notable advancements between the various metal ages in the old world all occurred in the same area, Southwestern Eurasia. The earliest known examples of true copper smelting comes from Tepe Yahya, Iran. These tools date to approximately 3800 BCE and ushered in the chalcolithic, or copper, age. From here true bronzes, bronze made with tin and copper rather than arsenic (like alloys seen today), stem from

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Mesopotamia. The first known appearance of bronze was an axe head found in a grave and dated approximately to 2800 BCE, but it is possibly even older.\footnote{Ibid., 25. Being found in a grave suggests the relative rarity and skill required to make such a product, and was likely cherished for the labor put into it as well as the then novel qualities of the material.}

Next iron comes into play, possibly created as a waste product of copper smelters who realized the iron oxides added as a flux, meant to help separate copper from impurities, were producing a malleable new metal along with the slag at the bottoms of their furnaces. Actual ironworking does not occur until a little after 1,500 BCE, in the Anatolian-Iranian region. Originally iron was used for small pieces of jewelry, but when ironworking techniques improved the metals were immediately applied to the manufacturing of blades. The Eurasian metallurgic tradition developed harder and stronger metals that could hold an edge better and were fracture resistant in combat. For example, if an iron sword was swung and hit a shield it would not break, which was one of the great advantages of iron weapons over those of bronze.\footnote{Ibid., 47.}

Archaeologists assume that the driving force for the advancement of metals was the perpetual arms race of weapon against armor, piercing versus protection. Next came metal use in transportation and, later, in agriculture.\footnote{Lechtman, “Andean Value Systems,” 1-2.} That being said, the cultural importance of those metals are relatively unstudied and need more scholarly attention. According to sources, there seems to be an implicit assumption that copper, bronze, and iron had largely utilitarian values. This, however, is not the case for the Americas. Anthropologist Heather Lechtman has made important contributions in understanding the cultural values towards metallurgy in the Andes. Even though metallurgy had different
values in Mesoamerica, the Andes is where the technology originated and where the first cultural values in the Americas towards it were formed.

Lechtman not only explores how metallurgy developed but also why it developed. Andean cultures valued gold and silver as holy materials, each seen, respectively, as the “sweat of the sun” and the “tears of the moon.” Andean metallurgists had a unique method of making and casting gold and silver objects that had only coatings of the precious metals, but this should not be confused with gilding. Copper would be mixed with a small amount of gold or silver during the smelting process, for example a four to one ratio. This would create a homogeneous mixture of the metals, and then metallurgists would treat the surface to remove the copper and create a gold or silver surface. Lechtman stresses that this was done not solely for the stronger physical properties of the alloys, but also for the knowledge that the prized metal was present throughout the material. Although this mixture made the material easier to cast and work, Lechtman believes it was the knowledge that the precious metal was present throughout the amalgam was the leading factor in the development of this method.\textsuperscript{174}

Lechtman points to three factors that were detrimental to the advancement of metallurgy in the Andes: warfare, transportation, and agriculture. Hand to hand combat in the Andes focused on the crushing power of blunt maces. Maces were often in the shape of stars and made of stone or bronze. The hardest defense against the mace was a small wooden shield; otherwise, the mace came against tightly woven cloth armor. Consequently, the ability of a metal to hold an edge or to be resilient against blows was not a deciding factor in developing a fitting metal. In contrast, in Mesoamerica the

\textsuperscript{174} Lechtman, “Style in Technology,” 6-9
opposite was true for their most valued weapons. They developed weapons that had extremely sharp cutting edges.

As mentioned, obsidian is the sharpest material in the world, and it was this physical quality that drove technology in Mesoamerican warfare. An obsidian blade could break if a *maquahuitl* were to strike another *maquahuitl*; otherwise, it would come against cotton armor or wooden shields, which did not seem to affect the blades. A nobleman in warfare showed his majesty by successfully crippling a warrior and then, displaying his swordsmanship, delicately slicing an opposing warrior until he collapsed, and then his heart would be excised. The most successful warrior was, in fact, not the deadliest on the battlefield, but rather the one capable of crippling and capturing the most enemies so that they could be sacrificed later. Such a victorious warrior could then display his success by being granted privileges of dress.\(^{175}\)

This style of combat, based around the sharp quality of obsidian, was long embedded in Mesoamerican warfare. In fact, I postulate that because this style of warfare was so embedded in the culture that Mesoamericans were likely resistant to replacement of obsidian weapons with metal ones. Without another culture introducing iron or steel technology, Mesoamericans could not develop iron weapons on their own, which, while duller, had the benefit of durability over the delicate obsidian blades. Metallurgy must be developed in stages, unless the technology was passed through cultural diffusion. The Americas would have had to develop metallurgy as was done in the old world with the chalcolithic, bronze, and iron ages. This would mean that the Mesoamericans would have to undergo duller weaponry, which would clash with ingrained cultural views and

\(^{175}\) Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 37-42, 102.
battle tactics. Battle tactics of the Mexica and their neighbors will be discussed in depth in the following chapter on the Conquest of Mexico.

As for transportation and the invention of the wheel, Stuart Piggott, an archeologist, offers one hypothesis for its creation by examining the factors for the invention of the wheel. The criteria necessary for wheel development appears to have emerged in areas of relatively flat and firm terrain, along with suitable timber, and domesticated animals “stronger than man.” The wheel, which also benefited from advances in metallurgy, would have little use in the environment of the Andes with its massive mountainous and rocky terrain and lack of strong animals. In fact, the strongest animal able to pull a cart was the llama, and adult llama could carry no more than sixty pounds. The Valley of Mexico is in an even worse position with its own mountainous terrain, but only having the dog as the largest domesticated animal.

As for fauna, Piggott sites the domestication of cattle specifically oxen, castrated bulls, as the solution – domesticated 6000 to 5000 BCE approximately 2,000 years earlier than the invention of the wheel. Additionally, and perhaps more interestingly, he notes that the first communities to utilize the wheel “were among the first to possess stone axes and adzes and, soon thereafter, copper and bronze tools suitable for elaborate carpentry.” It seems that metallurgy is not only important to actually helping to construct lighter and stronger frames and wheels, but also were important in the fabrication of carts and wagons. Despite the lack of suitable fauna, Mesoamerica did in fact invent the wheel as early as 1000 BCE by the Olmecs. However, due to their boggy coastal surroundings

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178 Aguilar-Moreno, Handbook to Life, 251.
they lacked the suitable roadbeds for wooden wheels, and their use was reserved only as
the wheels of clay toys. The Olmecs used canoes for most of their transportation needs,
and men could pull skids effectively for their more difficult tasks. Lechtman places
agriculture in a close third as an impetus for metallurgy, but again it is of little
significance for its development in Mesoamerica. As mentioned in the agricultural
section, Mesoamericans developed a form of intercropping built around the digging stick
and seeds were planted individually, often in mounds. This system is incompatible with
the plow, and while metallurgy helps with a digging stick, it does not have the same
incentive for develop as a metal plow would. Plow agriculture is meant to slice into the
land and churn soil. Whereas, Mesoamerican agriculture was designed to be self-
sufficient, with the plants mimicking natural cycles. The only agricultural tool that
received a significant advantage from metallurgy was the blade of a hoe, but no
significant advances came from it. As with transport, perhaps the largest hindrance to
metallurgy was the lack of domesticated animals. That is while there are examples of the
man pulled plows in the old world, there is less motivation to form this technology
without an animal to pull it, similar to conundrum of the cart.

Mesoamerica followed in the Andean footsteps of having metals that mimic the
quality of precious metals in color; however, the advances in Mesoamerica did so by
unique techniques. To understand why these techniques developed, one must first
investigate how Mesoamericans, specifically the Nahuas, viewed metals. To the Nahuas,
gold and silver were the excrement, specifically diarrhea from the Sun. The word for
gold derives “from [the fact that] sometimes, in some places, there appears in the dawn

179 Mann, *1491*, 249.
something like a bit of diarrhea. They named it ‘the excrement of the sun’; it was very yellow, very wonderful, resting like an ember, like molten gold.”\(^{181}\) The Nahuatl word for gold is *cuztic teocuitatl*, which translates literally to “‘yellow divine excretions’” and the word for silver is *iztac teocuitatl*, which translates literally to “‘white divine excretions.’”\(^{182}\) Thus the word that comes before *teocuitatl*, *cuztic* or *iztac*, determines to which substance it is referring.

Archaeologist Dorothy Hosler has interpreted silver as being the excrement of the moon; however, in the *Florentine Codex* silver is listed in the section on gold in the chapter that “telleth of all the metals in the earth.” In the gold section, gold is listed as “the yellow” and silver as the “the white”; the Nahuas only make the distinction in color, but they do not do the same for the other properties of the two metals.\(^{183}\) It seems that the Nahuas did not make the distinction of them being two separate metals, but only a variation of the same metal. The Nahuatl word for mica is *metzcuitlatl*, which comes from the words *meztli* meaning moon and *cuitatl* meaning excrement. Nahuas believed that mica was the excrement of the moon, not silver. They also seem to have considered that mica was a metal, since it was placed in the same metal section in the *Florentine Codex* as gold. However, both gold and silver were sacred, even the words for them convey this meaning, and like the Andean cultures they sought to mimic the visual properties of precious metals in their metallurgic technologies.


\(^{183}\) Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI: 233.
Neither the Mexica nor any other Nahua group were premier metal smiths in Mesoamerica; the Tarascans were. The Tarascan state is situated on the western coast of Mexico, and was on the northwest border of the Triple Alliance’s Empire. The Tarascans were fierce enemies of the Mexica; the Tarascan city of Tzintzuntzan was the Carthage to the Mexica’s Rome, Tenochtitlan. The Tarascans were the cultural inheritors of the copper and bronze metallurgists. The first Mesoamerican smithies began smelting copper around 650 CE; they learned copper-smelting techniques from the peoples of what is now Ecuador. Traders from Ecuador made balsa rafts and travelled along the western side of Central America, and Western Mexico was an important stop. Western Mexico was the only place that spondylus oyster grows; the shells of this particular spiny bivalve were highly prized in Ecuador. Judging from the artifacts found in both Western Mexico and Ecuador, it appears that the copper objects were traded and then the skills of metallurgy were learned by cultural diffusion. The budding coppersmiths in Mexica mimicked the goods received through trade with Ecuadorians, and made similar but distinctly Mesoamerican second-generation items. Meaning that they had unique chemical properties that occurred from using local copper sources.

Bronze and coppersmiths were primarily focused on the colors of the metal items they made because they were trying to replicate gold and silver colors. This was achieved through bronzes that used levels of tin or arsenic in higher than necessary levels, which would change the color of the resulting bronzes; typically metalworkers used somewhere around between five and twenty percent of the alloying metals. The

effect, depending on the increasing concentration, would change from red to gold to silver. There are a smaller number of utilitarian objects that used lower levels of arsenic or tin that created strong bronzes, but did not alter color. Because the finds of utilitarian objects to those of ceremonial or status objects are much smaller it seems that this was not the focus of metal development.\footnote{Holser, “Sound, Color and Meaning,” 101-2.}

The main focus of metallurgy in Mesoamerica was the production of colored, well sounding bells. Even though the Tarascans were the predominant metal workers, their techniques were also used in many areas that the Mexica controlled. These two kingdoms had very similar religious and cultural practices, even overlapping gods – Tlaloc, Xipe Totec, and Quetzalcoatl. And in both societies bells were used for ceremonial practices, protection in war, and status among the upper class.\footnote{Ibid., 108-11.} \footnote{Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life}, 115.}

Bells were used in various religious activities with the gods, Tlaloc (the god of rain), Xipe Totec (the god of agriculture and goldsmiths), Quetzalcoatl (the god of wind and knowledge), Huitzilopochtli (the god of war, the Mexica, and the sun) are among a few gods whose rituals are characterized with bells.\footnote{Ibid.} For the Mexica, bells, counterintuitively, provided protection in warfare. This practice stemmed from the myth in which Huitzilopochtli’s brothers wore bells when they went to war against him and were quickly slaughtered. Perhaps it was a way of mimicking Huitzilopochtli who right before the battle “just then was born” and only had a shield and magical \textit{atlatl}.\footnote{Sahagún, \textit{Florentine Codex}, III: 4.} After slaying his brothers, he “he took their finery” and he “appropriated them” and
“incorporated them into his own destiny” making them apart of his own “insignia.”

Perhaps warriors were paying more reverence to Huitzilopochtli’s accomplishments than wearing them as protection.\(^\text{192}\)

While bells were an important focus of Mesoamerican metallurgy and were often made of bronze, they were meant to mimic gold and silver, and they are actual examples of gold and silversmithing. The making of bronze bells was the specialty of Western Mexico; however, the Mexica were adept gold and silversmiths. Perhaps their skill came from immigrant Mixtecs, an ethnic group from southwest Mexico, but, nevertheless, Tenochtitlan had adroit smiths. They used the lost wax method to cast lip, nose, and earplugs along with bells, pendants, and many other kinds of jewelry. Like the lapidaries, smiths were organized into their own class-like structure of the \textit{calpulli}, and also like lapidaries, much of their work was made directly for nobles because only the nobility was allowed to wear gold or silver ornaments.\(^\text{193}\)

So as we’ve seen, metal was not the material for tools or warfare, which perhaps has led to the incorrect belief that the Mexica were still in the Stone Age. The Mexica were in fact in the “Bronze Age.” However, their “Bronze Age” is dissimilar to the Eurasian Bronze Age. In contrast to Eurasia, the Mexica, and many other Mesoamericans, used obsidian for their tools. In fact it has been so commonly used that it has been known as the “steel of Mesoamerica.” However, obsidian was much more than a utilitarian material. Obsidian held important prominence in the ranking of social status; it was associated with gods; and it was the material that used in sacrifice, the ultimate tribute to the gods. Having examined the technologies and advances of

\(^{193}\) Smith, \textit{The Aztecs}, 103-5.
Mesoamerica, and the Mexica in particular, the next chapter will explore how these cultural and environmental impacts on technology and society played out in the contact between the Old and New Worlds.
In this chapter I will examine the contact between Europeans and the Triple Alliance, and Cortés’ travel to and expulsion from Tenochtitlan. I have relied on Hugh Thomas’ narrative account of the conquest for many of the details because of his thoroughness; I have struggled to find another scholarly account that examines the Conquest in such detail. While Thomas’ account is amazingly thorough and a pleasure to read, he relies mainly on Spanish sources and is writing from their perspective. This is partially from the paucity of Mexica sources about the conquest compared to the Spaniards. However, my work is an attempt to understand the events from an indigenous standpoint, consequently, I also draw on insights of the Conquest from Inga Clendinnen and Camilla Townsend.

On April 20, 1519 Hernán Cortés landed off the shore of what is today, Veracruz. He had three distinct advantages: advanced technology, diseases, and two interpreters, Gerónimo de Aguilar and Malintzin. (Cortés had other interpreters, but they were largely ineffective; I will discuss them in more detail later.) Aguilar was a Spaniard enslaved by the Chontal Maya for eight years after he had the misfortune of being shipwrecked off the coast of the Yucatán. Malintzin was an indigenous woman, originally a Southern Nahua, who also was a slave to the Chontal Maya. These two interpreters would translate from Spanish, to Chontal Mayan (a dialect of Mayan) to Nahuatl (Malintzin spoke a southern

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dialect of Nahuatl, but could still communicate with the Mexica). Some historians claim that these interpreters allowed the Spaniards to triumph on August 13, 1521, when Cuauhtémoc, the last tlatoani of the Mexica, forcibly surrendered to Cortés.

Throughout my examination of the Conquest I will assess not only the previously three mentioned advantages of Cortés, but also the cultural misunderstandings that compounded one another throughout the Conquest. I believe it was these cultural differences and misinterpretations that gave Cortés the largest advantage. I will first give a brief account of the first half of the Conquest of Mexico. The Conquest can be divided into two parts: The first half of the Conquest extends from Cortés leaving Cuba, in February 18, 1519, until the Noche Triste, his expulsion from Tenochtitlan on June 30, 1520. The Noche Triste is both the end of the first half and beginning of the second half of the Conquest of Mexico. I make this distinction because the first half is largely devoid of combat. In fact, until the Noche Triste, Cortés never fought the Triple Alliance or even the Mexica themselves. There are some minor skirmishes with the Tlaxcalans, the Massacre of Cholula, but none of these conflicts brought Cortés against an Alliance army.

The first half of the Conquest is important because it marked Montezuma’s attempt to understand who Cortés was and what his purpose and intent was. Montezuma struggled to understand who these foreign people were, what they wanted, what they were capable of, and whether they were friend or foe. Cortés, arguably, was in a better position, his nation and people were not in any danger, and while there were certainly high personal risks, there was also the possibility of great rewards. He was an outsider

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from an unknown place guided only by interpreters for his basic insight into a foreign culture. Even though Cortés was hardly tactful with the foreign cultures he encountered, he had to only look for weaknesses in what he quickly learned was an Empire full of unhappy city-states. While the Mesoamericans were more advanced than the Amerindians of the Caribbean, Cortés knew he had a technological military advantage. For the first half of the Conquest, technology was only an advantage in that it kept him and his men alive, rather than making the Spaniards an unstoppable force.

The first half of the Conquest culminated in the drawing of sides, and there would no longer be any ambivalence about the Spaniards. The Mexica knew that the Spaniards were not ambassadors but solely enemies. However, this knowledge cost the Mexica almost all of the political power they held over the Empire and culminated in the drawing of sides. I will examine the events of Cortés’ arrival and travel to Tenochtitlan, and attempt to glimpse the reasons for Montezuma’s actions.

The second half of the conquest is important in that while the Spaniards suffered a terrible military loss, they maintained the advantage as they were forced into indigenous politics. In addition, they fought not only with European weapons, but also a European view of war. This was an immense factor in the second half of the conquest; others included the indigenous view of weapons and combat, the effects of a smallpox out break shortly after the Noche Triste, and finally the way in which Cortés took advantage of the indirect rule of the Triple Alliance Empire.

On February 18, 1519, Hernán Cortés left Cuba with ten ships on the third exploration of the Yucatán with approximately 530 soldiers (thirty of whom had crossbows and twelve with harquebuses, a musket common of the time), sixteen horses,
and fourteen artillery pieces. Cortés also had with him four Indian interpreters, all given Spanish names – or at least nicknames, who were captured in a previous expedition to the Yucatán. They were, “Old Mechor,” “little Julián,” “Pedro Barbara,” and a boy renamed “Francisco.” “Old Mechor” and “little Julián” spoke Chontal Maya and some Spanish; Pedro Barbara spoke both Yucatec and Chontal Maya, but had a limited knowledge of Spanish, and “Francisco” spoke Nahuatl, but not until later in the Conquest did he learn enough Spanish to be useful as an interpreter. However, all of these interpreters would be play only a minor role, once Cortés had Aguilar and Malintzin the other interpreters would not be needed.196

From Cuba, Cortés headed for Cozumel, a large island off the east coast of the Yucatán Peninsula. Here the locals told him that there were two Spaniards living on the Peninsula, and Cortés set forth to find them in hopes of having native speakers of Castilian. To repair a ship’s hull from rot, Cortés and crew stopped at what they called the “Isla de Mujeres” (the Island of Women) and sent a small crew of men to in search of the two Spaniards on the mainland. Around March 12, 1519, a canoe from the mainland, carrying three people, approached Cortés and his men. To the Spaniards’ surprise, one man spoke Spanish.197 It was Gerónimo de Aguilar; in fact he looked so much like an Amerindian in appearance and dress that when “Cortés beheld the man in this attire, he, as all the rest of us had done, asked Tapia where the Spaniard was? When Geronimo heard this, he cowered down after the Indian fashion, and said: “‘I am he.’”198

196 Ibid., 93, 99, 107, 150, 153.
197 Ibid., 157, 162.
198 Díaz, Memoirs, I: 64-5.
Aguilar would constitute the first half of Cortés’ translating duo. He was shipwrecked off the coast of the Yucatán in 1511 with a few other Spaniards; only he and Gonzalo Guerrero, a fellow crewman, had survived. They became slaves of the Maya, and while Guerrero assimilated and started a family with a Mayan woman, Aguilar refused and remained at heart, if not in appearance, a Spaniard. Aguilar was freed when he had received a letter sent by Cortés’ scouting party, and, unable to convince Guerrero to join; he left for the coast to find salvation from his servitude. Aguilar, for much of the early conquest, was invaluable as an interpreter. He was likely fluent in Chontal Mayan having been a slave with them for eight years; in fact, he had initially had difficulty speaking Spanish upon joining the expedition.\(^{199}\)

With one half of arguably the world’s most famous translator duo, Cortés sailed westward hugging the coast of the Yucatán, soon to complete the other half. Around March 22, 1519, Cortés arrived off the coast of the Chontal Mayan city-state Potonchan, in what is today part of the Mexican State of Tabasco. Cortés landed with a few men and demanded provisions from the Maya of Potonchan. It is not clear if Aguilar had at this point effectively replaced the original two Mayan translators, but all three were present. The locals were hesitant and fled to the surrounding woods. After a day or so the Mayans gave Cortés some food and gold, but they claimed this was all their food and that the Spaniards should leave or else they would be killed by their warriors. Cortés refused and demanded more supplies. Relations soured after several days, and Cortés sent out 250 men divided into three groups to explore the land for supplies. Mayan warriors engaged one of these groups, leading to two days of skirmishes. Finally, with sixty Spaniards

\(^{199}\) Thomas, *Conquest*, 162-3.
wounded, an estimated 200 Mayans killed, and the desertion of their translator the “Old Mechor,” the Mayans sued for peace. The Spaniards were given around twenty women including Malintzin, the second half of the translating duo.\textsuperscript{200}

Information surrounding Malintzin’s origins are foggy at best. The only account of her origins comes from Bernal Diaz, who calls her, “a lady of distinction, the daughter of a powerful cazique [the Taino word for ruler, which the Spaniards used as a blanket term for chief or ruler] and a princess who had subjects of her own.” He goes on to state that after her father’s death, while Malintzin was just a child, she was sold into slavery, as her mother wanted her half-brother to inherit the land.\textsuperscript{201} It is impossible to know whether or not Malintzin’s father was \textit{a tlatoani} or not, but she was from Jaltipan, a city-state south of what is today Vera Cruz. As a child, her age unknown to scholars, she was sold into slavery and ended up in Potonchan. Scholar Anna Lanyon believes that, as she lived and learned Chontal Mayan, she was taught womanly duties, such as weaving, until the age of fourteen when she would have become a concubine. At around the age of eighteen or nineteen she was given to Cortés.\textsuperscript{202} And, although Malintzin would learn enough Spanish to eventually replace Aguilar, the famous translator duo was now complete.

These two translators would be the only ones that Cortés relied on for the rest of the conquest because of their superior quality in translating. Aguilar was a native speaker of Spanish, and Malintzin was a native speaker of Nahuatl, and both learned Yucatec Maya fluently. Therefore, the other indigenous translators were ineffective because

\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 165-72.
\textsuperscript{201} Diaz, \textit{Memoirs}, I: 82, 84.
either they did not know Nahuatl or, in the case of “Francisco,” they did know enough Spanish to be useful.

While the two translators were incredibly important to the conquest, their translating abilities need to be assessed. Malintzin and Aguilar were effective in basic translating, but it is unclear how effective they were at conveying ideas and cultural insights. Specifically, Malintzin’s effectiveness as a cultural insider needs to be assessed. Malintzin, despite her royalty, was still a slave and a woman; this means that her understandings of political protocols and customs, which were affairs reserved to male nobility, would be limited. Furthermore, it is unclear how much her royalty had helped her in understanding the political customs of elites, as she was only a child when she was sold; the exact age remains a mystery. Therefore, it seems that her political knowledge and diplomatic skills would be slight. Aguilar, being a slave to a Chontal Mayan lord, was no better off in understanding such procedures. Historian Inga Clendinnen believes this is why Cortés saw the diplomatic acts of gift giving of Montezuma as signs of submission rather than in the Mesoamerican tradition as a display of power because it was never explained to him otherwise. 203

Furthermore, Malintzin, being from the southern extremity of the Triple Alliance’s Empire, spoke a dialect of Nahuatl, which would have made the chain of communication between Nahuatl, Chontal Maya, and Spanish more difficult an endeavor. 204 Clendinnen argues that the “daisy chain” of translation created a struggle to force cultural concepts through unfamiliar languages. 205 It, therefore, seems doubtful that

203 Clendinnen, ““Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,”” 70
204 Thomas, Conquest, 172.
205 Clendinnen, ““Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,”” 70-1.
Cortés held the upper hand by having translators; rather, it placed him on a more equal footing now that he could communicate with locals. Gestures between Amerindians and Europeans would remain difficult to grasp for both sides.

On 17 April 1519 Cortés and his fleet left Potonchan and arrived three days later off the coast of what would become modern day Veracruz; the Vera Cruz Cortés founded was a bit farther north than today’s. On the day he arrived, his fleet was greeted by a canoe of Nahuatl speakers who historian Hugh Thomas believes not to be locals. This is likely the case because the Amerindians that lived on the coast where Cortés had anchored were Totonacs, and while living under Mexica rule these people did not speak Nahuatl. It is likely Cortés’ first contact was with the watchmen whom Montezuma had stationed along the Gulf Coast after a Spanish ship was first spotted in 1517. According to Durán’s History, Montezuma even had the sighting from 1517 drawn and recorded. It would seem that Montezuma was worried about newcomers even before Cortés’ arrival.

The Totonacs treated Cortés well, and on Easter Sunday, April 24, 1519, emissaries of Montezuma met with Cortés. The two explained who they were; Cortés claimed he was an ambassador of King Charles V of Spain. It is dubious if they believed this, as both the emissaries and Montezuma already knew of the skirmishes at Potonchan. Either way, gifts were exchanged; the Mexica meant to show the splendor of their

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206 Thomas, Conquest, 175.
tlatoani, but Cortés saw it only as goodwill. Cortés displayed the pinnacle of Spanish military might and fired his cannons. Unsurprisingly for people who have never seen such a weapon, the emissaries fell to the ground in fright. The emissaries recorded the number of men and “deer” (horses) through their pictographic writing system and returned to Tenochtitlan.

As the weeks passed, Velázquez de León and other members of the expedition who were allies to Diego Velázquez, the Governor of Cuba who had funded the expedition, wanted Cortés to return to Cuba. In order to prevent mutiny Cortés needed to validate his actions. Technically, Cortés was only under orders to explore the coast of the Yucatán, look for a river that could potentially lead to China or India, and search for the explorer Grijalva. The latter request is particularly confusing because Grijalva was not lost. The arguments for return were that Cortés had completed his contract, freed a Spaniard, and amassed some gold. Furthermore, from explorations inland, the Spaniards encountered evidence of human sacrifice that made them reluctant to stay. On the 7th of June, 1519, to avoid returning to Cuba and to free himself from the contract, Cortés moved northward up the coast and found la Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz. La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz was officially founded on June 28, 1519, while the supporters of Governor Velázquez were away on an expedition. Cortés did this to exploit a loophole and have himself elected by his men as the town’s Chief Justice and Captain. Thus, he was no longer under orders from Governor Velázquez, just King Charles V, and could pursue, unrestrained, a new plan to venture to Tenochtitlan.

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209 Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 70.
210 Thomas, Conquest, 176-8.
211 Ibid., 138-9, 197-8, 211.
All along the journey to Vera Cruz, Cortés had encountered Totonacs complaining of the tribute demands from the Triple Alliance; he would use this as a justification to make some political blunders. While visiting a Totonac town, Cortés encountered Mexica bureaucrats who were collecting tribute. He had the tax collectors arrested by the Totonacs, and then he secretly freed two. He told the two that he did so to save their lives from the Totonacs, and that he was a friend of Montezuma and had them relay that message to the tlatoani himself.\footnote{Ibid., 198-203, 209-11} Perhaps Cortés thought of himself as clever for displaying “friendship” towards Montezuma and the tax collectors, but he unknowingly declared an act of war against the Triple Alliance. Refusal to pay tribute was akin to a declaration of war in Mesoamerica. According to Inga Clendinnen, after Cortés released the remaining tax collectors the chief of the town lied and sent Cortés and his men after phantom Mexica warriors in order to remain in good standing with the Triple Alliance.\footnote{Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 75.}

Cultural misunderstanding continued as Cortés returned from the fruitless venture. The Spaniards passed through the village of Cempoallan, where the locals further assured the Spaniards that there was evidence of the phantom Mexica warriors. Conquistador Bernal Diaz claims that when they reached the town they were told that there was a “Mexican garrison in their township, which, however, had returned home.”\footnote{Diaz, Memoirs, I: 117.} Cortés perhaps feeling emboldened by the non-combat and his deep sense of religiosity preached conversion and had his men tear “down the idols from their pediments, broke them to pieces, and flung them piecemeal down the steps.” This caused a great commotion and
almost led to a battle as natives began to shoot arrows at the Spaniards. Ultimately the chieftain stopped the skirmish. Cortés subsequently whitewashed the broken idols’ temple and replaced them with a cross. Cortés’ actions, in a way, mimicked the ways that victory was declared in Mesoamerica. A city-state was defeated when its temple was burned and idols destroyed thereby signifying that the local deities had lost. The Mexica would on occasion take idols from the conquered people for themselves. Vaguely, Cortés had conquered Cempoallan and once again mimicked cultural cues that were unknown to him.

Around August 16, 1519, Cortés set out westward with 300 conquistadors (with about forty crossbowman and twenty harquebusiers), fifteen horses, and three small cannons. See map 8. Many of the men had donned light but tight woven cotton armor worn by natives. 800 Totonacs helped to carry all sorts of supplies along with the cannons. His plan was simple: to either “take him [Montezuma] alive in chains or make him subject to” Charles V of Spain. Cortés would change his mind as he suspected the Mexica of treachery and wrote, “now I intended to enter his land at war doing all the harm I could as an enemy, though I regretted it very much, for I had always wished rather to be his friend and ask his advice on all things that must be done in this land.” This statement, according to Townsend, is part of Cortés’ legal rhetoric to justify his actions because King Charles could only gain territory if it was justifiable.

Along the way, Cortés and his men were brought through Tlaxcala. The territory

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215 Ibid.
that was under the control of a loose federation of small Tlaxcalan and Otomi city-states that was similar to the Triple Alliance. This area is commonly referred to as Tlaxcala, taking its name from its dominant city-state. Cortés initially sent native emissaries to Tlaxcala to ask for their aid against the Triple Alliance, but they never returned. Despite this, Cortés set forth, but he and his men were attacked by a large number of Tlaxcalan warriors, perhaps numbering in the thousands. They killed two horses, but the Spaniards killed between sixteen and sixty, leading the Tlaxcalans to retreat. Over the next several days, as the Cempoallan guides tried to assuage the Tlaxcala to side with Cortés, the Spaniards fought various skirmishes with both Tlaxcalans proper and Otomí warriors.

Montezuma had sent emissaries to the Spaniards who advised them against going to the city of Tlaxcala and watched the Spaniards in battle. Cortés lost between forty-five and fifty-five Spaniards and at least three horses, and in one instance a horse was captured for sacrifice. Cortés almost died from injuries and a subsequent fever. This did not stop Cortés from burning villages and killing their inhabitants.  

On September 18, 1519, Cortés and his men peacefully entered the city of Tlaxcala. They knew that if it were not for their Totonac allies, they would have been killed, so they must have been thankful to have new indigenous allies. Montezuma’s emissary, still with Cortés, urged him not believe the Tlaxcalans, and to head to the city of Cholula where he would be well received. The Tlaxcalans, in turn, told Cortés that this was a trap, and that the city was secretly preparing to slaughter them. Cholula ambassadors came to Tlaxcala to assure Cortés that this was not the case and invited him to their city. On October 12, Cortés and his expedition set out for Cholula with their new

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Tlaxcalan allies in toe. The Spaniards were, by all accounts, well fed; however, after a few days the Tlaxcalans convinced Cortés that the Cholulans had set a trap for them. Cortés asked to meet with the Cholulan nobles in a courtyard. A hundred or so, unarmed, amassed in the courtyard, and Cortés, locking them inside, confronted them about the conspiracy. They promptly confessed to it as a plot devised by the Montezuma and that 20,000 warriors were waiting along the road to the Mexico to attack the Spaniards. Cortés took this as license to execute all of them and destroy the city. Cortés estimated that 3,000 people were killed as the Spaniards and their allies sacked the city for two days. Cholula was an important city sitting just outside the Valley of Mexico; it was one of the oldest cities with its population second only to Tenochtitlan, an estimated 180,000 people. 3,000 people seems too small a figure for two full days of sacking. The city was razed, destroying many of its hundreds of temples.^^221

Historian Hugh Thomas insists that there were the inklings of an impending attack on the Spanish.^^222 This is doubtful because there was no resistance, which would be expected if the city were preparing for to attack. The Mexica warriors, just like the resistance, never materialized. Inga Clendinnen believes that the trap was a ruse by the Tlaxcalans to, with the aid of their new Spanish allies, attack an enemy city. She also believes Cortés had done so to raise the morale of soldiers who had realized their vulnerability at the hands of Amerindians in their fights against the Tlaxcalans.^^223 She is likely right in both cases, and the supposed planned attack on Cortés was just as fake as the warriors Cortés chased after he arrested the tax collectors.

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^^221 Ibid., 251, 255-64.
^^222 Ibid., 264.
The emissaries of Montezuma witnessed the destruction of Cholula, and were forced to send a message to Montezuma asking for a meeting between him and the conquistador. Despite his reservations, Montezuma could no longer delay the meeting. Cortés departed Cholula, and besides a Maginot Line-like defense on a trail that Cortés routed and a Montezuma impersonator who Cortés realized was the real tlatoani, Cortés was unimpeded in arriving at Tenochtitlan. On November 8, 1519 Cortés and Montezuma met; the usual gift giving and pleasantries were exchanged. Cortés, his men, and allies were invited over the causeway into the city.224

Later, in a famous exchange between Cortés and Montezuma, Montezuma called the Spaniards gods and willingly became a “vassal” to Charles V. However, this account of events is hotly debated. Camilla Townsend has analyzed the writings of the native accounts and compared them to the Spanish accounts and has found that the reason the Spaniards are called gods is two fold. First, the natives called people based on their city-state, ethnicity, or position, had no word to call the Spaniards since their native land, ethnic group, and position was unknown. Second, the word for god was not as definite as it is in Spanish, and had a broad connotation including demons and god-impersonator, such as those in ritual killings.225 Furthermore, it has been shown that the notion that Montezuma thought that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl returning to Mexico was a post-conquest construction immortalized in the Florentine Codex.226 Montezuma’s emissaries witnessed the Spaniards fight and die against Tlaxcalans, information he would have received. Mortals make for weak gods.

224 Thomas, Conquest, 267-9, 279.
226 Ibid., 17-8.
The matter of accepting to be the “vassal” of Charles V is also unbelievable, and it appears to be a complex form of miscommunication that stemmed from the problem of translation. Inga Clendinnen notes that at the time there did not seem to be a translation of vassal because politics in Mesoamerica did not work in such a fashion. Cortés also misinterpreted indigenous hospitality and abused it. Cortés receiving gifts and meeting with local leaders was part of his treatment as a guest of honor of the Mexica, not as a head of state. Furthermore, it has been shown that had Cortés been in control during the entirety of his stay then he would have made his success known. Instead he did nothing until he heard from Narváez, and only then did he arrest Montezuma, which will be discussed later.

The immediate question is why had Montezuma allowed for the Spaniards to arrive safely at his city? Why did he not confront them on the coast? Why did he let them pass through his Empire? Inga Clendinnen cautions against reading too deeply into Montezuma’s actions, remarking, “Much of Montezuma’s conduct must remain enigmatic.” She explains that this caution and permanent uncertainty is because all of the sources have a bias against him, and that none of them could accurately portray his thinking process for his decisions. The Florentine Codex was written using native interviewers who, while being witnesses of the Conquest, were too young to have been in Montezuma’s close circle of advisors. Diego Durán’s History goes further in misinterpreting, and has Montezuma immediately imprisoned by Cortés after their first

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228 Thomas, Conquest, 284-5.
meeting. Spanish accounts conflict over how much power Montezuma maintained while captive. It seems that Montezuma was in full control of his Empire from November 1519 to May 1520. Cortés claimed that Montezuma voluntarily relinquished the Empire to Charles V, which has been shown as legal justification for Cortés’ actions because Charles V could only have gained territory through just war or voluntary submission. Cortés used the notion that he and his men were gods returning to take over the Empire as another attempt to show that Montezuma voluntarily submitted his Empire.  

However, we can still make some basic assumptions about Montezuma and his actions. While Cortés was gallivanting through Alliance territory – proselyting, forging relationships with natives, advancing towards Tenochtitlan, and gathering information along the way – Montezuma, too, was gathering intelligence. Montezuma’s emissaries recorded military information about the Spaniards in their meeting, and Montezuma had messengers in every town Cortés and his men visited. This should not be seen as a surprise, as mentioned earlier, merchants’ roles in Mesoamerica included spying. Montezuma had ordered messengers stationed along all the roads so that he could be told of news without delay. In fact, after the Massacre of Cholula, Spanish notes accompanying the Florentine Codex indicate that these information channels were flooded as Montezuma’s “messengers came to tell him of them [the massacre]; the whole road was full of messengers.”

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232 Ibid., 69.
235 Lockhart, We People Here, 95.
The following are some assumptions we can make about Montezuma as a ruler. Montezuma was an experienced general when he was unanimously elected tlatoani; the reasons given was that his “advice and decisions were always correct, especially in matters of war.”\textsuperscript{236} His utmost concern, as shown, was gathering information as any experienced general and ruler, having governed for twenty-seven years, would have done. He had all towns, on “pain of death,” provide provisions for Cortés and his men.\textsuperscript{237} This is likely because Cortés had repeatedly claimed to be an ambassador with peaceful intentions. Mesoamericans took the treatment of ambassadors very seriously, which might explain the initial kindness and provisions from Montezuma.\textsuperscript{238} Yet it is unlikely that Montezuma believed Cortés was an ambassador. The combination of the news from the fighting in Potonchan, the arresting of tax collectors, the pseudo-conquest of Cempoallan, and the massacre at Cholula would belie Cortés’ true intentions. Furthermore, Cortés’ insistence on seeing Montezuma’s “face,” which could only be seen by his closest family members, makes for another cultural ambiguity that would be difficult for the ruler to interpret. Finally, war in Mesoamerica was a sacred contest, and the inequality of provisions would spoil the sacred results of such a conflict.\textsuperscript{239} Therefore, Montezuma likely also supplied Cortés expedition with staples during their stay in his land, so if there were a fight it would be a fair one.

The Spaniards, when they arrived off the coast, were an entirely new people and potential enemy. Reports trickling in from the Yucatán, before Cortés made landfall, must have been unnerving, first because of the casualties of Potonchan, and second

\textsuperscript{236} Durán, \textit{History of the Indies}, 389.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 511.
\textsuperscript{238} Thomas, \textit{Conquest}, 177.
\textsuperscript{239} Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 71, 78.
because the reports’ potential unreliability and novelty. In Cortés’ first meeting with Montezuma’s emissaries, he had his men in battle formation displaying their arms, the horses, and the cannons. The display as a show of military force would not have been lost on Montezuma; however, he did not yet know of how the new weapons and soldiers would fare in battle. Hugh Thomas mentions that a Mexica guide might have tricked Cortés expedition to Tenochtitlan by bringing the Spaniards through Tlaxcala so that they would be killed. The Tlaxcalans themselves remark that if Montezuma was responsible for sending the Spaniards through their territory he was also responsible for saving them from destruction.\textsuperscript{240}

It is possible Montezuma did this so that he could simultaneously gain important reconnaissance about the Spaniards as well as weaken them if not annihilate them. Montezuma knew the fighting abilities of Tlaxcala, and this plan would be a far better yardstick to judge the Spaniards by than the distant battle of Potonchan and some cannon shots in front of his emissaries. While under attack by the Tlaxcalans and Otomí, Montezuma’s emissaries watched the Spaniards in battle. They advised Cortés not to trust the Tlaxcalans.\textsuperscript{241} Could Montezuma’s hope of the Spaniards’ destruction have come unraveled?

Perhaps it did, and Montezuma realized the folly of his decision to have his old enemies battle and test the mettle of his new ones. Montezuma, like any other Mexica, knew that his city’s rise to power over Azcapotzalco was one in which various powers of the Valley and beyond came together to end Tepeanec rule. Upon the flood of information about the massacre of Cholula, Montezuma must have seen the irony: By trying to have

\textsuperscript{240} Thomas, \textit{Conquest}, 242, 244.  
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 245.
his enemies eliminate each other and buy time to learn more of the Spaniards, he had united an ambitious and ferocious city-state with an outside power. The significance of Cholula’s sacking is hard to understate, yet its impact is rarely touched on in accounts of the conquest. It was the first joint conquest between Cortés and Tlaxcalan. Still, after the massacre and sacking of Cholula, Cortés claimed to be an ambassador only seeking friendship and amiability with Montezuma. Even if Montezuma never did claim Cortés intentions to be otherwise, the idea that Montezuma saw Cortés as peaceful is laughable. The unjustified slaughter and destruction of such a large city with the aid of your bitter enemies is a sign of aggression that communicates itself across any cultural boundary.

Montezuma could not stop Cortés from coming to Tenochtitlan, and was presented with a dilemma of whether or not to allow him into the city. His options for war were limited as the month of November was an important time for harvests, leaving peasants, who would constitute the majority of his army, unavailable. In addition, Montezuma at this point gathered enough military intelligence to know that the cost of fighting an open field battle against the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans would have been militarily and politically disastrous. Camilla Townsend believes that had Montezuma fought them he would have faced major political upheaval. There would have been a high amount of casualties just a causeway away from the perceived indomitable city. Other city-states would have seen even a victorious battle as a sign of Mexica weakness and seized upon it. Furthermore, had Montezuma allowed Cortés to continue to explore the Valley and its city-states, he would have allowed Cortés to potentially seize upon internal dissatisfaction with the Mexica. Montezuma had already seen Cortés gain

the favor of the Tlaxcalans; the idea that he could have free rein over the Valley would undermine Montezuma’s actual and perceived power.

Cortés claims that on November 14, 1519, he placed Montezuma under arrest, which he justified because of an attack by the Mexica on the Totonacs and Spaniards near Vera Cruz. The Totonacs had refused to pay their tribute to the Alliance, and the Spaniards supported the decision. Taking the act as a sign of rebellion, a Mexica garrison under orders of a nobleman attacked the Totonacs. Four Spaniards were killed, and the head of one was sent to Tenochtitlan. The Mexica nobleman in charge of the province was subsequently executed, which upset Cacama, tlatoani of Texcoco, because of the growing influence of the Spaniards. Cortés and Montezuma working together invited Cacama to Tenochtitlan and arrested him. From my own research, I have not found any of these events mentioned in an indigenous account beyond that of the Ixtlilxochitl’s Historia de la Nación Chichimeca, which was written about a century after the Conquest as a testament to his Texcoco family’s unrewarded aid to the Spaniards in the Conquest. It suffers from having a known prejudice against the Mexica.244 As previously mentioned, Cortés’ claim that he had complete control until the “Noche Triste” has been largely repudiated. Cortés’ political actions in his own letters were legal rhetoric to explain his arrest of Montezuma as justifiable. Historian Francis Brooks believes that the events in fact took place closer to May, and this might have played a part in Cortés arresting Montezuma. Camilla Townsend sees as a desperate gamble by Cortés to

244 Thomas, Conquest, 304-6, 774.
maintain power after having overstayed his welcome and the arrival of Spaniards in April to arrest him on behalf of Governor Velázquez.\textsuperscript{245}

In mid-April, 1520, Pánfilo Narváez arrived off the coast of Vera Cruz with around 900 men; this event made the situation more confusing for Montezuma. Narváez’s goal was to arrest Cortés on behalf of Velázquez and take Cortés’ place in Mexico. When Narváez landed, he made good relations with the Totonacs and publicly denounced Cortés as a villain. He began a relay of messengers from the coast to Montezuma himself. Narváez was granted permission to come to Tenochtitlan and was given gifts and supplies. Montezuma finally told Cortés about his rival, and urged Cortés to leave the city.\textsuperscript{246} Townsend argues that Cortés, desperate to maintain his position and avoid an uprising, had to have “a gun to Montezuma’s head” to convince the newly arrived Spaniards to join him.\textsuperscript{247}

Native unrest was beginning to be felt by Cortés with the incidence among the battle orchestrated with Totonacs and Cacama’s arrest. Attempting to quell native unrest, Cortés arrested Montezuma. Afterward, Cortés set out for the coast in early May in order to defeat Narváez. How he planned to do this with only 80 or so men and some Tlaxcalans seems unknown. The remaining men were left under the charge of Pedro de Alvarado. Narváez was situated in Cempoallan with all his men. Cortés sprung a surprise attack against Narváez on the rainy night of May 28, 1520. Despite the disparity of numbers, the attack was a success, and Cortés captured Narváez, who lost an eye and

\textsuperscript{246} Thomas, \textit{Conquest}, 358-65.
\textsuperscript{247} Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” 34.
was slightly burned in the process.\textsuperscript{248} While Cortés’ fortunes improved, those of Pedro
de Alvarado’s had soured.

Before Cortés had left to intercept Narváez, Montezuma had asked permission to
hold the immensely important festival of Toxcatl. Cortés and Alvarado when asked
separately allowed it. However, Alvarado panicked at the sight of the bizarre preparation
of the festivities and had several Mexica tortured until they confessed to a plot against the
Spaniards. Tlaxcalan warriors further undermined his confidence. Around May 16,
1520, Alvarado, frightened at the sight of noblemen dancing in front of the great temple,
had the plaza closed off, and then slaughtered a hundred or so unarmed dancers as well as
those attending the festival. This night would not mimic Cholula as the Mexica rose in
arms against Alvarado and his men. Alvarado delayed direct conflict for a few days by
threatening to kill Montezuma. Still, Alvarado and his men were holed up in the palace
without food or means of escape. With over a thousand Spaniards and at least twice as
many Tlaxcalans, Cortés made haste to the city upon news of the uprising. Cortés arrived
on June 28, 1520, to a seemingly deserted Tenochtitlan; however, it became obvious after
four days that the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans were now trapped on the island city.\textsuperscript{249}

After a few days, Cortés made a last ditch effort to escape. He forced Montezuma
to the roof of the palace where they were staying in. On the roof, protected by two
Spanish soldiers, Montezuma waved his hand for his fellow Mexica to stop yelling so
that he could speak.\textsuperscript{250} He told his people, “We are not the equals of [the Spaniards]!

\textsuperscript{248} Thomas, \textit{Conquest}, 369, 377-82.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 383-400.
\textsuperscript{250} Durán, \textit{History}, 540.
Let [the battle] be abandoned! Let the arrow, the shield be held back!”\textsuperscript{251} The Mexica shouted back that they had elected a new ruler, Cuithahuac, and fired bows and slings at the soon to be former \textit{tlatoani}. Montezuma was hit three times and quickly taken inside. Wounded, he begged the Spaniards to kill him; before Cortés fled from the palace he did just that. As the Spanish and Tlaxcalans fled on the night of June 30, 1520, Montezuma and the noblemen who had stayed by his side were found by the vengeful Mexica, already stabbed to death.\textsuperscript{252}

Camilla Townsend views Montezuma’s plea for peace as his insight into the military strength of the Spaniards, and the inevitability of the Spanish victory from his ability to see the “longue durée.” This view is plausible as Montezuma’s emissaries had watched Spaniards in battle coupled with the knowledge of that more Spaniards had arrived. Montezuma might have realized that the Spanish weaponry and style of fighting were superior to that of the Mexica. He might also have known that more Spaniards could follow.\textsuperscript{253} Yet Narváez’s arrival was a strange happening that surprised Cortés who told Montezuma he was not to be trusted, which Narváez also told Montezuma about Cortés.

I believe that Montezuma was more worried that Tenochtitlan would be the next Cholula. His great city had suffered a similar slaughter, which, according to the Codex Aubin, Montezuma had been warned of when preparing for the festival. His nobles told him they should hide weapons in case they were entrapped by the Spaniards like the

\textsuperscript{251} Sahagún, \textit{Florentine Codex}, XII: 57.
\textsuperscript{252} Durán, \textit{History}, 545.
\textsuperscript{253} Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” 40, 49, 55.
Cholulans, to which Montezuma responded, “‘Are we among enemies? Disregard it.’” Whether or not this conversation occurred, Montezuma must have had the image of a burning Tenochtitlan in his mind when he addressed the warriors crowding the palace walls. At this point, there were even more Spaniards and Tlaxcalans in Tenochtitlan than there had been in Cholula. The fighting and the massacre were both new for the citizens of Tenochtitlan, who had lived in a city that stood out above all others as invulnerable. It was also unheard of having elected a new tlatoani while another was still alive. Montezuma’s death by Spanish steel was an all too fitting end for a ruler who had been actively attempting to consolidate his city’s control only to realize that he gave the Tlaxcalans, the people he had been wearing down, the allies they needed to overthrow their oppressor.

Even though Cortés had been allowed to return to Tenochtitlan after Alvarado attacked the noblemen in the festival, there was no longer a doubt in any Mexica’s mind that the Spaniards were enemies. Cortés had used his novelty to its fullest advantage, his actions with the Totonacs, arresting the tax collectors and whitewashing a temple, were forgiven. Montezuma brushed aside Cholula’s destruction because he could not stop him from arriving, face him directly in battle, nor ignore Cortés’ constant insistence that he was an ambassador. Montezuma had no choice but to allow him into the city because he allowed him unchallenged to travel through the Empire itself. Retrospectively, it easy to see that he should have immediately engaged Cortés, but Montezuma was a ruler of an Empire who came from a culture that treated strangers kindly. Furthermore, Cortés was an enigma claiming to be an ambassador. Despite the consequences of Montezuma’s

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254 Lockhart, *We People Here*, 275.
255 Clendinnen, “‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,’” 75-6.
decisions, it is difficult to say that they were based on naïveté or superstition. More likely they were poor decisions based on novel circumstances.
Chapter Six

The Fall of the Mexica

“Long live the emperor, our master! Spain forever! Tlascalla forever!”

In this chapter I will now explore the clash of indigenous culture’s technology and views of warfare with those of the Spaniards. The Mexica would face many problems after the successful expulsion of the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans from Tenochtitlan. Cortés and his army would officially merge aspirations with Tlaxcala. The Mexica and their allies would be faced with new technologies, new diseases, but most importantly a European view of warfare. Towards the end of the Conquest these were problems the Mexica would face alone; for all intents and purposes the Triple Alliance was no more by the time of the Siege of Tenochtitlan. The Spaniards and Tlaxcalans would replace the violence that the Triple Alliance used to exert control over surrounding city-states with their own, and, effectively, take the place of Alliance as the dominant power to ally to. The final military clash of these cultures would occur where they began, in Tenochtitlan.

Leaving Montezuma and his advisors dead, Cortés and his army headed west for the Tacuba Causeway in an effort to make it to the western shores of Lake Texcoco. They left the palace at midnight on June 30, 1520; this night would be forever remembered as “La Noche Triste,” the sorrowful night. The Spaniards were attacked throughout the city as the headed to causeway. The causeway had been partly damaged and its bridges removed by the Mexica to prevent escape from the island. The Spaniards were attacked on all sides as canoes moved along with the caravan of soldiers packed onto the causeway. Dead bodies filled up the holes of the bridges allowing the Spanish to

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256 Diaz, Memoirs, II: 384.
walk across. Before making it to Tacuba, Cortés would lose 600 of his roughly 1,200 Spanish soldiers, thousands of Tlaxcalans, and seventy of his hundred horses. This was the first battle the Mexica fought against the Spaniards, and it was an incredible victory for them.

The expulsion of the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans, however, had cost the Mexica more than just manpower and a tlatoani; it cost them their image as the dominant force in the region. The Mexica in had held the overwhelming majority of power in the Triple Alliance, which was keeping the Empire together. As Cortés and the Tlaxcalans retreated to Tlaxcala, the window for the Mexica to maintain their control closed with them. Mexica authority was in disarray, and it is common when a tlatoani dies that tributaries attempt to rebel. Because of the events of Montezuma’s death, the temptation for city-states to rebel would have been even stronger. Cortés brutality toward Alliance towns and cities would only worsen the situation. Cortés and the Tlaxcalans attacks on surrounding city-states were not only playing on this weakness but also resulted in the new dominating force and subjugating power in the Valley. In essence, Cortés and the Tlaxcalans sapped power away from the Mexica by conquering their tributaries.

The goal of Cortés was not to crush Tenochtitlan, but to have it succumb to the tactic of “example-at-a-distance,” that is, the sight of the destruction of the cities surrounding Tenochtitlan would result in its surrender. Cortés, seeing the beauty of the city of Tenochtitlan, which dwarfed any Spanish city, wanted to keep it intact through a

258 Hassig, _Aztec Warfare_, 245-6.
259 Clendinnen, “‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,’” 83.
This would ultimately be an impossible goal; nevertheless, Cortés, after destroying Tenochtitlan, finally forced the city to surrender on August 13, 1521. This would be the culmination of different views of war and weapons, disease as well as the usurpation of power by Cortés and the Tlaxcalans, which disrupted the Empire of the Triple Alliance. I will now briefly examine instances of how all these factors they affected the Conquest.

The Mexica, along with their allies from Texcoco and Tacuba, had created a loose knit empire built on passive rule of conquered city-states. Their conquests originally focused on the Valley of Mexico, and all of their new subjects owed tribute as an expression of the Alliance’s dominance. City-states closer to the Alliance owed foodstuffs along with luxury items, this was especially true of cities along the southern stretches of Lake Texcoco as well as cities on the other side of the southern mountains of the Valley. However, the farther the cities were from the Valley the more likely that their tribute would be paid in luxury items or assistance in maintaining borders. As the Empire expanded the nobility grew in size and wealth, and to some extent the lower classes did too. Consequently, demand for luxury items also grew. In turn, select cities focused on luxury craft specialists, while others turned to agriculture, and the Alliance turned outward for raw materials. The pochteca, merchant class, expanded with the Empire to new cities and areas. The Alliance sought to stabilize trade routes and increase trade among regions to promote Mexica merchants.

The control of the Alliance over tributaries was not always military; often it was the projection of power. Certainly if a rebellious area rose against the Alliance and

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refused to pay tribute, they would be attacked and subjugated. An example of how this fear instilled obedience can be seen when Cortés arrested the Mexica tax collectors. The Totonacs, the natives living near Vera Cruz, feared far more from a reprisal by the Mexica than Cortés, so they sent Cortés off against imaginary Mexica soldiers. Yet Cortés’ immediate military presence began to change this view as the Totonacs sided with him and aided him in his original journey to Tenochtitlan and fought with him against the Tlaxcalans. Cortés’ military exploits would continue to damage the image of the powerful Mexica.

Another method used to maintain power by the Alliance when some territories were difficult to conquer was to choke them off from trade and engage them in flowery wars. These tactics sought to impoverish areas and drain them of their most confident warriors. The Alliance used these strategies to win wars and minimize losses because conquering difficult areas would be costly in terms of manpower and potentially weaken the image of the Alliance’s strength. This was the fate of the Tlaxcalans, who were confined by the Alliance and subject to indefinite war and poverty.\textsuperscript{262} That is, until the arrival of Cortés; the Spaniards were a volatile catalyst in this unstable system. They had managed to bring a Tlaxcalan army to the heart of the Alliance, Tenochtitlan. Despite the heavy losses from the Noche Triste were, at least a fifty percent casualty rate, the Alliance was left in disarray.

The loss of Montezuma was disastrous for the Mexica because the election of a new \emph{tlatoani} was usually a time of uprisings where subjugated polities took advantage of the change in leadership. The unprecedented circumstances of Cuithahuac’s election,

\textsuperscript{262} Hassig, \textit{Aztec Warfare}, 255-6.
Montezuma’s death, and the presence of a new power in the appearance of Cortés made these uprisings more likely. However, to try to consolidate his power, Cuithahuac followed the success of the Noche Triste by continuously attacking the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans on their retreat to Tlaxcala. While Cortés’ numbers dwindled, the conflict came to a head at the Battle of Otumba. Outside the city of Otumba, which was vital for all things obsidian, the Spaniards, exhausted from their flight, met a large Mexica army. The Mexica began the battle with the upper hand, well-rested men with high morale, and the battle was going in their favor. In a last ditch attempt to swing the battle his way, Cortés and five horsemen attacked what appeared to be the commanding officers of the Mexica. The attack was a success, and Cortés and his men road back with the Mexica’s banner in hand. Historian Hugh Thomas sees this as a moment where the lack of Mexica organization was key; without the banner to direct soldiers, the Mexica fled in disarray. To Thomas this is evidence of the power of horses to disrupt soldiers who had no experience against cavalry.

Inga Clendinnen, however, offers a very different and illuminating view on the significance of the battle. Clendinnen writes that “the taking of a banner was to Indians less a blow to collective pride than a statement: a sign that the battle was to go, indeed had gone, against them.” When Cortés and his men killed and grabbed the banner of the director of war, the Mexica saw it as a sign that the battle was lost. They were not thrown into disarray but saw that the battle, which was a sacred contest, had shifted to the Spaniards. Mesoamericans did not view war to be simply the conflict between two parties but as a predetermined conflict in which they could foresee who the victor would be from

263 Ibid., 245.
264 Thomas, Conquest, 424-6.
subtle signs. The taking of the banner was one such sign. At Otumba, the warriors were not, as Hugh Thomas claims, unorganized but in fact very well organized. However, they believed that the battle was not theirs to win.

The assumption that warfare in Mesoamerica and Europe were fought with the same beliefs was and has been a characteristic misconception by both Cortés and subsequent scholars. Warfare in Mesoamerica was replete in rituals that were reflections of cultural beliefs. As mentioned earlier, in Tenochtitlan there were schools established for both the nobility and commoners where they learned the art of war. The nobility received more training, especially with shock weapons such as the maquahuitl and the tepoztopilli, and they did not use bows or slings in battle. The maquahuitl was the most venerated weapon as it took the largest amount of training to use. The maquahuitl was the same weapon used in the gladiatorial sacrifices where the captive’s obsidian blades were removed while the captor used his fully functional maquahuitl to slowly slice the captive.

Warfare was a highly organized affair. A battle began at a relatively close distance of 50 to 60 meters; this distance might seem large, but in actuality Mesoamerican bows and slings could fire farther, but effectiveness and accuracy of these weapons would have been sacrificed. Arrows were standardized and bows had a range of 90 to 180 meters; slings threw standard size stones well over 200 meters. Projectile weapons were associated with the lower classes, and the only projectile weapon the nobility used was the atlatl, a spear or dart thrower, due to its association with the gods.

265 Clendinnen, “‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,’” 78-9, 85.
266 Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 97.
267 Clendinnen, Aztecs, 94-5.
An *atlatl* had an effective range of about 45 meters. Both *atlatl* darts and arrows were fletched, standardized in length and weight, yet they could have a variety of points, from fire hardened to obsidian tipped or even barbed. The *atlatl* was a medium ranged weapon, which with rear support of bows and slings could disrupt the front of formations. As long distance weapons depleted munitions, the formations closed and the front line moved forward throwing darts from their *atlatls*. As lines closed in, elite warriors switched to the highly regarded *maquahuitl* and novice nobility and commoners switched to the *tepoztopilli*.\(^{268}\)

The foremost soldiers were known as the *cuahchicqueh*; these soldiers were not organized into units but in pairs meant to end the battle quickly, aid an ally under duress, attack a retreating armies rearguard, or hold a position no matter the consequences. Warrior units, comprised of soldiers ranking from novice to expert with a high status veteran leading each individual unit, followed the *cuahchicqueh*. Units were highly organized and veterans were meant to aid novices. The units moved together and maintained careful cohesion with ranks closing in as soldiers died or were captured. In fact breaking rank for an unwarranted reason or defying command was punished with death. Orderliness prevented enemies from pushing into the ranks and lessened the confusion of retreat. If an enemy was too strong the units would retreat and projectiles would resume. If all went well in battle, soldiers and units stayed together, pushed forward, and attempted to surround an enemy.\(^{269}\)

As a person rose in rank so did his attire and privileges, providing a social incentive to combat. The number of captives and brave deeds achieved in battle

\(^{268}\) Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 79-81, 97-9.
\(^{269}\) Ibid., 99-102, 104.
promoted one’s rank; anyone was eligible for promotion, but the process favored nobles because they were better trained and armed than commoners. Soldiers did not try to kill their enemy but rather to wound and disable him, so that he could be captured as a sacrificial victim. Warriors did not always capture an enemy because some were able to escape or they fought to their death rather than being taken, which seemed more honorable. One’s military rank depended not only from the number of captives taken, but the city-state they were from. In fact, warfare was so strongly tied to status that even a tlatoani would enter combat with his generals surrounding him. Cuithahuac was absent from the battle of Otumba, so this must have made the loss even more humiliating to the Mexica, who desperately needed to show old allies that their new tlatoani was a capable leader.

Otumba was not just a battle but also a sacred duel among warriors. The battle followed the traditional Mesoamerican view of war, likely beginning, as was customary, at dawn. The Mexica followed their traditional loose formation of a two-meter or so distance between one another, so that the warriors could pair off with infantryman. This positioning would allow a warrior to parry the Spanish infantryman and try to slice him with his maquahuitl or tepoztopilli. However, the effectiveness of these weapons would be compromised if the Spaniards wore any metal armor. Nonetheless, they persisted with their tradition of fighting and indeed, tried to capture Spaniards as this style of fighting was ingrained in them. The Mexica fought valiantly for hours, and the battle was going their way. Yet seeing their banner waving as Cortés galloped back to

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270 Ibid., 37-46, 100, 114-5.  
271 Thomas, Conquest, 425.  
272 Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 95, 102.
his line, so did, in their eyes, the favor of battle. Throughout the Conquest, Spanish
banner carriers remained significant targets, yet the Spaniards’ obliviousness towards
their loss must have been frustrating to the Mexica. Clendinnen notes that this traditional
view of war changed as the Mexica realized the Spaniards did not heed signs so obvious
to the Mexica.\textsuperscript{273}

The Mexica had continued the tradition of reinforcing control and forging
alliances. However, after the loss at Otumba the Mexica feebly tried to gain support
through gift giving.\textsuperscript{274} The Mexica were so desperate after Otumba that they failed to
make a bargain with the Tlaxcalans to kill the Spaniards. The Tlaxcalans, too, continued
to view alliances and war in traditional terms seen in their rejection of the Mexica’s offer
and requested for an alliance with Cortés. The Tlaxcalans demanded traditional
conditions: to be given control of Cholula, have a Tlaxcalan manned fortress in the heart
of Tenochtitlan, to be given a fair share of spoils, and not to have to pay tribute to
whomever ruled Tenochtitlan after it was conquered. The Spaniards did not stay true to
their word.\textsuperscript{275}

Mexica attitudes towards warfare, despite how ingrained they were, did adapt to
the Spaniards’ tactics, but this would occur after an outbreak of smallpox that ravaged all
of Mexico following the “Campaign of Tepeaca.” Tlaxcalans put forth the idea to siege
Tepeaca, which was a hub for tributary items before being brought to Tenochtitlan. This
campaign was really a series of slaughters. The city of Tepeaca, itself, refused to
succumb and fought Cortés, but other towns willingly surrendered. In one instance

\textsuperscript{273} Clendinnen, “‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,’” 86.
\textsuperscript{274} Hassig, \textit{Aztec Warfare}, 246.
\textsuperscript{275} Thomas, \textit{Conquest}, 428, 737.
Cortés’ men rode up to a group of warriors outside their walled city ready to do battle, but the fighters were dissuaded from fighting, laid down their arms, and brought to speak with Cortés. Cortés had all the men executed and their families enslaved.²⁷⁶

It was traditional in Mesoamerica that defending armies would not engage an army, especially if they knew they were not likely to win. A traditional sign of submission and acknowledged defeat was for an army to literally lay down their arms. Historian Ross Hassig notes that “expectations of victory and defeat played a significant part in Mesoamerican warfare.” A town or city that expected to lose would surrender in order to minimize losses both in manpower and goods as submission without conflict was rewarded with lesser tribute demands. The Spaniards, however, did not recognize the cultural subtleties of Mesoamerican warfare, which led to bloodier conflicts.²⁷⁷ Cortés, likely, understood acts of blatant submission, but knew that violence was a universal language, writing to his king, “we always routed them and killed many […] we had pacified and subdued many towns and villages and the lords and chieftains had come forward and offered themselves as His Majesty’s vassals.”²⁷⁸ As the Campaign ended, the native people of Mexico were visited by an even more horrific plague than Cortés, smallpox.

Disease, while it did not weaken the empire in terms of manpower, it did shift politics of the Alliance and gave extra support and time to Cortés. Disease, when mentioned with the conquest, is often seen as the factor that left the Mexica in huddling masses that Cortés swept down upon and conquered. This is not the case, but it did

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 434-6.
²⁷⁷ Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 113-4.
²⁷⁸ Thomas, Conquest, 438.
indeed favor Cortés for political reasons. Smallpox spread throughout the Mesoamerica from a sick slave named Francisco de Eguía, who beyond having the misfortune of being a slave is also the known source of smallpox on the Americas’ mainland. From him the disease spread to the Totonacs and followed the Spaniards’ path of conquest. It swept through the Valley northwestward and arrived at Tenochtitlan in October of 1520. The disease killed many; estimates of infected populations range from loosing a third to a half of their original size. This is partially from being a naïve population, a group of people who have never been afflicted with a disease before, but also because of how native peoples sought to heal ailments and lack of care for the sick. All indigenous remedies for skin ailments involved bathing and breaking of blisters, and both would spread this disease.\textsuperscript{279} \textsuperscript{280} This obviously affected all indigenous peoples equally; however, the Spaniards, despite some of their own soldiers being sick, were spared fatalities. This is attributed to their inherited and acquired immunity, the latter from when they were children.\textsuperscript{281}

The impact of the smallpox epidemic on the conquest has been the subject of much debate. Camilla Townsend views disease as having little effect on the outcome of the Conquest.\textsuperscript{282} Inga Clendinnen is largely in agreement and notes that while the Mexica did view ailments as the cause of gods, they did not associate Spanish related events and smallpox in the Florentine Codex.\textsuperscript{283} I myself have been unable to find any connection of the smallpox outbreak in relation to the Spaniards, who are not mentioned

\textsuperscript{279} Sahagún, Florentine Codex, X: 137.
\textsuperscript{280} Sheldon Watts, Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 89-91.
\textsuperscript{281} Ibid., 86, 89-91.
\textsuperscript{282} Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” 38.
\textsuperscript{283} Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 77, 97.
as being spared by nor the cause of the epidemic. In fact, in the chapter of the *Florentine Codex* that discusses the outbreak, the smallpox epidemic is immediately followed by how the Mexica soldiers recovered enough to leave the city. And “the brave warriors [the Mexica] came following after them [the Spaniards]. None of the Mexicans died. Then the Spaniards turned their backs.” If the Mexica saw the disease as punishment and the Spaniards as divine they certainly did not show it. The peoples of the Triple Alliance would have been well aware that both allies and enemies of the Spaniards were suffering.

Nevertheless, the contrarian argument lingers despite the lack of evidence to support it; William H. McNeill laid out the typical argument more than thirty years ago. He argued that, since both the Spaniards and Mesoamericans were very religious, “from the Amerindian point of view, stunned acquiescence in Spanish superiority was the only possible response.” And that “the gods of the Aztecs as much as the God of the Christians seemed to agree that the white newcomers had divine approval for all they did.” The Spaniards certainly felt this way about the latter statement – with one conquistador writing, “When the Christians were exhausted from war, God saw fit to send the Indians smallpox.” Yet Amerindians seem silent on both assertions. Furthermore, there is an account that, after the Conquest of Mexico, the Zapotecs, about 400 km south of Tenochtitlan, reverted back to their “idolatry” believing the outbreak of smallpox was punishment by their old gods for converting to Catholicism. There is also no Spanish account of natives viewing or even implying disease was an act of any

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god(s) favoring the Spaniards. Yet this view persisted in the European mind; when, half a century later, an epidemic in Mexico combined with the defeat of Spanish Armada led Philip II to ban writing in indigenous languages, thinking these events were God’s punishment to the Spanish Empire.\footnote{287} Despite the lack of indigenous sources viewing disease as proof of European exceptionalism, many scholars perpetuate this belief, including Jared Diamond and Alfred Crosby.\footnote{288}289

Perhaps this argument stems from the zealotry, flagrant among both Spaniards and Mesoamericans, and the fact that after the outbreak Cortés, literally, became a kingmaker. The epidemic raged for about sixty days and killed almost every important leader around: Cuithahuac, \textit{tlatoani} of Tenochtitlan, the \textit{tlatoani} of Tacuba, the \textit{tlatoani} of Cholula, and the \textit{tlatoani} of Tlaxcala amongst many others.\footnote{290}291 Cortés appointed new \textit{tlatoani} of the latter two cities, among others. Bernal Diaz reports that when Cortés was asked who should be the new \textit{tlatoani} he “made a point of nominating those who had the best claim.” Often these were the sons of the previous rulers, whether or not they were fit to actually rule.\footnote{292} Cortés appointed the sons of the previous \textit{tlatoani} for both Tlaxcala and Cholula; the latter being a twelve-year-old boy.\footnote{293}294 Cortés was unaccustomed to indigenous politics and was unaware that a council appointed a new \textit{tlatoani}, so Cortés likely went by the European assumption that a king was determined by primogeniture.

\footnote{287}{Ibid., 107.} 
\footnote{288}{Diamond, \textit{Guns, Germs, and Steel}, 210.} 
\footnote{289}{Crosby, \textit{The Columbian Exchange}, 57.} 
\footnote{290}{Thomas, \textit{Conquest}, 445-6.} 
\footnote{291}{Diaz, \textit{Memoirs}, I: 384.} 
\footnote{292}{Ibid., I: 377.} 
\footnote{293}{Cortés, \textit{Letters From Mexico}, 165.} 
\footnote{294}{Diaz, \textit{Memoirs}, I: 384.}
Part of Montezuma’s tightening of the Empire’s control over tributaries had been the replacement of troublesome rulers with puppet ones. Yet city-states in and surrounding the Valley of Mexico had willingly become more subordinate towards the Empire because it offered stability for the area.\textsuperscript{295} In effect Cortés had disrupted Valley politics dramatically by undoing this stability; this made Cortés the power to seek both safety under and from. Since his expulsion from Tenochtitlan, Cortés had begun a campaign against anyone who was not on his side. This increasingly made being an ally of the Triple Alliance a liability. The sudden loss of leaders of almost every city through smallpox was further impetus to side with Cortés and the Tlaxcalans. Cortés was a stable leader when compared to the Mexica, who had lost Montezuma, most if not all of his council during the Noche Triste, and countless nobles as well as Cuithahuac from smallpox.

When the outbreak subsided, the Mexica then elected Cuauhtémoc, their final tlatoani. Scholar Manuel Aguilar-Moreno believes that had he been elected instead of Cuithahuac the Mexica could have defeated Cortés and the Tlaxcalans.\textsuperscript{296} Even so, Cuauhtémoc was newly appointed, and his ability to rule was untested. As stated, the beginning of new reigns was a traditional time of revolt for city-states, underscoring a city-states’ desire to seek approval from Cortés and to be spared any further destruction by him. Deaths from disease and the resulting chaotic change in Mexica leadership were smallpox’s most useful effects for the Spaniards.

Cortés began his campaign into the Valley of Mexico itself on December 31, 1520. On that day, Cortés arrived unharmed in the city of Texcoco, situated comfortably

\textsuperscript{295} Hassig, \textit{Aztec Warfare}, 258-9.  
\textsuperscript{296} Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, 48.
on the western shores of its namesake lake. The Triple Alliance no longer existed. Why the tlatoani of Texcoco sided with Cortés remains unknown but perhaps he had a falling out with Cuauhtémoc. From here Cortés made various excursions around the lake, conquering either by force or by immediate surrender. Occasionally the Mexica would chastise cities for switching sides, but in reality, neither the Mexica nor the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans had enough forces to maintain allegiance. Both sides depended on a display of power to keep the fidelity of towns and cities. The vacillation of alliances continued until the Spaniards permanently conquered the southern lakes after razing the city of Tepotzlan. Surrounding city-states surrendered and supported the Spaniards. Then, on May 26, 1521 Tenochtitlan suffered a serious blow with the severing of its aqueduct. Cortés had with him ninety cavalrmen, 120 crossbowmen and harquebusiers, 700 infantrymen, three large cannons, and fifteen small cannons dispersed unequally on his thirteen brigantines.

From this point it has become, retrospectively, an inevitability that the technology savvy Spaniards were destined to win as they indeed would. However, the average Mesoamerican and Mexica warriors were not so easy to conquer and were adaptable to the new technological threats posed by the well-armed Spaniard. Much of the Mexica’s adaptation dealt with their view of war rather than any technological deficiency. As stated before, Mexica combat was at its best a one-on-one predetermined contest between evenly matched warriors. There was no stigma in dying in combat in any type of warfare in the Mesoamerican mind; dying in war was referred to as the “flowery death,” and it

297 Thomas, Conquest, 458.
298 Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 246-9.
299 Thomas, Conquest, 491.
was honorable to die spread-eagled and sacrificed. Dying in a gladiatorial fight, if you fought well enough and injured or killed your captor, could give you fame even as the opponent’s swordsmanship slowly “striped” you until you were sacrificed.\footnote{Clendinnen, \textit{Aztecs}, 94-5.}

This view of combat was alien to the Spaniards, who did not understand its procedures or its meaning. The gladiatorial sacrifice was meant to stripe a victim slowly and carefully; the obsidian blades could cut deep, but the captor did not. Instead the captor cut delicately in order to display his ability as a warrior and by extension his status in society. Inga Clendinnen views the \textit{Florentine Codex}’s thorough account of the Spaniards killing nobles before the “Noche Triste” as an attempt to understand how they used their swords and why the Spaniards would inflict devastating rather than debilitating wounds.\footnote{Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 81.} See fig. 12. Similarly, on any battlefield, a Mesoamerican warrior attempted to disable his opponent, not kill him. An opponent that realized capture was imminent would choose the flowery death on the battlefield over capture. In fact, it was considered shameful if a captive was freed and not sacrificed.\footnote{Hassig, \textit{Aztec Warfare}, 115.}

The Mexica began to realize that the Spaniards were not worthy of sacrifice; they fought as cowards, killing from a distance with European arms. This shift is seen in how captured Spaniards were dispatched; early on, captives from the Noche Triste would be placed under the sacrificial knife. Towards the end of the Conquest, when the Siege of Tenochtitlan was well under way, Spaniards were killed in the most disgraceful way.
Spaniards would be stripped of their armor and clothes, and the back of their heads would be beaten in. This was a death reserved for disobedient slaves.\(^{303}\)

These differences became clear during the constant skirmishes for dominance along the lakeshore. In one instance two elite warriors stepped forth and challenged Cortés to an equal fight; Cortés sent two cavalrymen at the warriors. One warrior, wielding his maquahuitl, cut the charging horses legs and then its neck as it fell to the ground. Fearing for his riders, Cortés had a cannon shot at the whole unit of opposing warriors. The two horsemen lived.\(^{304}\) There is another account where a Mexica warrior could not be subdued by three or four horsemen, and, after catching a lance thrown at him by a cavalryman, he defended himself for another hour until he was shot twice by a crossbow and then stabbed to death. These accounts show the Mexica warriors as incredibly brave and adaptable. Despite this being the first war in which Mesoamericans fought cavalrymen, they routinely grabbed lances from riders.\(^{305}\) See fig. 13.

The European measure of success in battle by casualty count was nowhere to be found within the Mesoamerican culture of warfare. Despite this, Mexica warriors did adapt to all the new threats of European warfare remarkably fast and as best as they could. The Mexica despised the crossbowmen, harquebusiers, and cannons not only because of their effectiveness, which they acknowledged, but also because of the lowly way they were used to disrupt the sacred contest of war. Commoners killed at a distance. Mesoamerican battle formations were traditionally loose and good for equally armed enemies but not suited for Spanish cavalry. Mesoamerican battle formation did not

\(^{303}\) Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 73, 84.
\(^{304}\) Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 80-1.
\(^{305}\) Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 237.
change because a tight formation would have taken too much time to retrain soldiers, and a tight formation would have provided better targets for cannons and harquebusiers. Mexica soldiers learned to duck and dodge on open field battles. Knowing that they lacked the advantage on open and even terrain, the Mexica adopted the tactic of retreating to towns or ravines where they were on a more equal fighting level. The Mexica also constructed pits filled with sharpened sticks to trap horses and enemy soldiers. These changes also extended into the lake as canoes learned to zigzag from cannon fire, and the Mexica successfully trapped two of Cortés brigantines.306307

The Mexica did attempt to use the weapons of Spaniards; they used captured pikes and turned swords into lances. They used these to attack horses, especially from below. They saw that horses could be frightened away by a barrage of projectiles. The Mexica forced captive Spaniards to show them how to use crossbows. At one point, a Mexica unit surprised a cannon squad, and pushed it into the lake.308 It is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of Mesoamerican weapons on Spaniards. I mentioned before that the tepoztopilli was so effective it pierced Bernal Diaz’s steel armor and it was only stopped by his cotton armor underneath. Diaz also mentioned how effective arrows were at penetrating the thickest cotton armor and that some Amerindians could fire three arrows at a time very effectively. Diaz viewed the sling as the most effective enemy projectile because it could wound even the best-armored Spaniard.309 Yet no information on the effectiveness of obsidian weapons against metal armor is known, and historian’s claims are based on assumptions. However, if Diaz was not exaggerating about the

307 Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 238-41.
308 Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 79, 84.
309 Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 80-1.
there should be some attention paid to obsidian weaponry, perhaps using experimental archeology.

Possibly what saved the Spaniards was the Mexica preference for disabling their enemies rather than killing them. Ross Hassig and Inga Clendinnen agree that had the Mexica originally fought to kill, uninhibited by their social construct of warfare, the Mexica or the Tlaxcalans could have defeated the Spaniards.\footnote{Ibid., 241-2.} The Mexica soldier did not compromise on taking captives as a means of status until the end when they marked their hatred by subjecting Spaniards to the death reserved for slaves. The Mexica only understood this when it was too late, when they realized that Cortés was not fighting them to win battles but to begin an unconscionable act, a siege. As Clendinnen puts it, “For the Mexica, siege was the antithesis of war.” A siege was slowly killing an enemy by having their resources dwindle, to the point that starvation forced the enemy to surrender. For the Mexica, a siege was not sacred combat between equals.\footnote{Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 80, 83.} Even Hugh Thomas remarks that part of Cortés’ decision to lay siege was to prevent loss of Spanish lives in direct combat.\footnote{Thomas, \textit{Conquest}, 489.}

Ultimately, the Mexica realized that Cortés’ campaigns around the lake were part of a plan to encircle them and cut off their food supplies. This is why the southern shores, which produced most of their food, were the last to be under Cortés’ control. The Mexica even realized the importance of their aqueduct, but that, too, was unsuccessfully defended and severed.\footnote{Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 79.} The siege formally began on May 13, 1521 when Cortés divided his forces and attacked Tenochtitlan from the north, south, and east. With his
brigantines, Cortés controlled both the lake and the land around the causeways that led to the city. The city was cut off from water and food, unless canoes could make it past the embargo and smuggle in supplies.

Siege was not an entirely foreign concept to Mesoamerica, but Cortés’ was. For example, during Montezuma II’s campaign to control the areas that possessed the sand so valuable to his lapidaries, he came against the walled city of Quetzaltepec. It was rare that towns had walls; more often they had small fortresses for their women and children to retreat to.\textsuperscript{314} Montezuma used a common strategy in which “many ladders were to be made so the soldiers could climb the walls and many wooden digging sticks were to be prepared in order to dig into the adobe and thus destroy the walls.” The people of Quetzaltepec expected this and covered the edges of the walls with planks and the tops with sharp stones, while men kept guard should any climbing be attempted. However, the next day the Quetzaltepec army came out, and was defeated by Montezuma’s armies. They retreated inside the multi-walled city and refused to submit. Montezuma had the planks torn down and his men dig through every wall until they reached the city. By this time, its inhabitants fled, and Montezuma burned the temple. Seeing their city being sacked and their temple burning, the nobles of Quetzaltepec sued for peace and the looting was stopped. According to Durán’s account, these actions lasted not much longer than a week.\textsuperscript{315}

The siege of Tenochtitlan was more severe than that of Quetzaltepec. Water was cut off, food supplies dwindled, and Cortés was slowly killing everyone. During the battles along the causeways the Mexica captured and killed several banner carriers, but

\textsuperscript{314} Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 107-8.
\textsuperscript{315} Durán, History of the Indies, 421-3.
the Spaniards kept coming. Seeing the Spaniards continually ignore the “signs” of battle combined with the siege, the Mexica’s view of war had finally changed. The Mexica sent the skin and skulls of dead Spaniards and horses to cities along the shore. This was certainly an act of psychological warfare, but it was also a show of defiance that the Mexica would not surrender. How could they? They were not allowed a fair fight as the Spaniards sought to starve them to death rather than to do battle. Instead of warrior vs. warrior, maquahuitl vs. sword, it was cannon and famine vs. Tenochtitlan.

Even though Cortés did not want to, because of the Mexica’s determination, he had the city burned by brigantines. The Mexica fought valiantly and with fortitude at every causeway and in the water. At night they launched surprise attacks, which they normally regarded as deceitful. But Cortés had innumerable allies to keep the attack going and to fill in the perpetual holes of the causeway made by the Mexica. Cortés and his men would attack the same causeway day after day slowly gaining ground. By the end of June, 1521, Cortés men had begun camping in the city itself. Even still, in early July Cortés suffered a dramatic defeat where almost sixty Spaniards were killed in addition to over 2,000 indigenous allies. This was when Cuauhtémoc sent body parts to cities.

The Mexica’s last attempt to stave off defeat is described in the Florentine Codex. Cuauhtémoc had the Mexica’s best warrior dressed in “quetzal-owl armor,” which had been the armor of Cuauhtémoc’s father, Ahuitzotl – the famed ruler preceding Montezuma. They gave this warrior the xiuhcoatl, Huitzilopochtli’s legendary fire-

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316 Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 86.
317 Hassig, Aztec Warfare, 250.
318 Cortés, Letters From Mexico, 222-3.
319 Thomas, Conquest, 492-514
serpent *atlatl*. He was sent into battle, and Cuauhtémoc and his council decided that if he struck “one or two of [their] foes” Huitzilopochtli was still with them. So the quetzal-owl went forward and terrified the Spaniards and their allies. The four soldiers who accompanied him took three captives. The next day there was no fighting, but that night a small “meteor” crashed onto the island city, and “the blazing coal broke into many pieces” and fell into lake.\(^{320,321}\) The Spaniards recorded neither of these events. Inga Clendinnen views the meteor as story constructed after the Conquest to justify the end of the city.\(^{322}\) This is likely the case as the city was, according to legend, to have grown out of a heart thrown into the lake by Mexica priest as directed by Huitzilopochtli.\(^{323}\) Likewise, Huitzilopochtli would need to signal the death of the city, and his message of a “bloodstone” falling on the city and quenching itself in the water was an obvious sign to the Mexica.

Cuauhtémoc refused Cortés’ peace offerings believing him to be untrustworthy. Although the accounts differ, on the day of the quetzal-owl warrior, Cortés says the Spaniards and the Tlaxcalans pushed into the last Mexica stronghold. The Tlaxcalans, whose forces Cortés estimated at 150,000, were ruthless, and Cortés told King Charles V, “forty-thousand were killed or taken that day.” Cortés was grateful to get away from the “stench of the dead bodies.” The day following the fabled meteorite, Cortés and his allies forced the Mexica onto the *chinampas*, and trying to escape, they “drowned amid the multitude of corpses.” Cortés estimates another 50,000 died. Cuauhtémoc, however, escaped in a fleet of canoes, but was intercepted by the brigantines and brought to Cortés.

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\(^{321}\) Lockhart, *We People Here*, 238-243.  
\(^{322}\) Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 88.  
“Speaking in his language,” Cuauhtémoc told Cortés he had done his duty as *tlatoani* and placing “his hand upon” Cortés’ dagger asked that he be killed. Cortés declined and told him “he need fear nothing,” so Cuauhtémoc was denied his flowery death. The siege ended on August 13, 1521 after seventy-six days of fighting.\footnote{Cortés, *Letters From Mexico*, 261-5.}

Cortés likely exaggerated both the number of Tlaxcalans and the number of Mexica killed (those figures alone would have been almost the entire population after the smallpox epidemic). Their violence, however, was not exaggerated. Inga Clendinnen views the intense violence and hatred the Tlaxcalans exhibited in sacking the city as uncommon even for a land that routinely held human sacrifice. The Tlaxcalans had been left unconquered and unincorporated in the Alliance’s Empire. For decades the Mexica subjected the Tlaxcalans to flowery war, outright conquests, and Montezuma II had begun a campaign isolating them from trade. This hatred had built up and the Spaniards were the means by which the Tlaxcalans could unleash their hatred of the Mexica. Clendinnen views this hatred as stemming from the Empire’s need for contest, which was actualized through their flowery wars with Tlaxcala. The other city-states watched from afar, disgusted by these disgraceful tactics; only the Tlaxcalans went into the city with the Spaniards.\footnote{Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty,” 92-3.}

But Clendinnen exaggerates the violence of the Tlaxcalans’ break from traditional view of war. There are numerous accounts of the Triple Alliance’s forces slaughtering whole cities. Ross Hassig has convincingly showed that the flower war’s etiquette was a symptom of the Empire’s chronic rebellions and need to save manpower while displaying
strength.\textsuperscript{326} However, Clendinnen is correct about the pent up violence the Tlaxcalans sought to afflict upon the Mexica. Cortés had come to Mesoamerica at a crucial time for the Mexica, who were trying to consolidate their control on their empire. Cortés weakened the powerful city of Tenochtitlan by killing its nobles and their tsłatoani inside the city itself, and by violently imposing his power on every town he passed through.

Cuauhtémoc failed to defeat Cortés at Otumba and failed to actively defend the towns and cities Cortés harassed afterward. Disease exacerbated the situation, as Cortés was one of the few leaders the epidemic did not effect. Indigenous leaders subsequently flocked to Cortés. Cuauhtémoc showed little power beyond offering gifts to cities, and by the time he did begin using brutality, Cortés had already begun encircling the city. Cortés was vicious and effective; he cut off traditional tribute not only from outside the Valley of Mexico but even from within. To the Tlaxcalans, Cortés had led by example, and viewing themselves as equal partners, they acted as they saw fit. Only Cortés and his small group of Spaniards understood what the results of the Conquest would mean. It is easy to look back retrospectively and chastise the Tlaxcalans for their naiveté, but they were used to a very different understanding of how events would proceed after victory.

Cortés found the Tlaxcalans even more to his advantage than his guns and germs. For there were several occasions where the Spaniards could have been defeated despite their advantages: at Otumba, at Tlaxcala after the Noche Triste, and before they had originally entered Tenochtitlan. What kept Cortés alive were the Tlaxcalans, who saw a rogue agent unbound by any known rules of engagement. The Mexica, on the other hand, had to gauge the novel situation in terms of political and military costs that could

\textsuperscript{326} Hassig, \textit{Aztec Warfare}, 225-7.
dramatically shift the dynamic of their Empire. Cortés only had to worry about staying alive; promises meant little for his post-victory aspirations. Scholar after scholar has noted that had the Mexica sought to kill in combat, they could have defeated the Spaniards. But to the Mexica it would have been a hollow victory. They fought as they had been taught for generations: in battle, one displayed his skill as a warrior in order to capture victims for Huitzilopochtli, who needed blood and hearts to continue his daily battle through the sky.
Conclusion

As I have shown, the peoples of Mesoamerica had established a unique society based both around their environment and culture. Their flora and fauna were different from those of Eurasia, so subsequently they developed different methods of agriculture. Theirs more closely mimicked natural cycles, best seen in the three sisters. A maize stalk functioned as a pole for beans, which rejuvenated the soil, and the large, low growing squash leaves covered the ground conserving moisture and protecting the roots of the beans and maize. Even though Mesoamericans lacked large domesticated animals, which may have contributed to their “failure” to progress in metallurgy, they developed as their culture desired to without them.

Before the conquest and before smallpox, Tenochtitlan was one of the largest cities in the world, built of stone and wood. While a driving force of Eurasian metallurgy may have been weaponry, the availability of obsidian, which produced a sharper edge than any Eurasian metal, gave the Mexica not only a weapon, but also a spiritual material that as their culture developed became inseparable from everyday life.

The Mexica and the peoples of Mesoamerica had a sophisticated societies, with complex trade routes, productive agriculture, and well-organized social structures. Their culture was by no means perfect, but it was no worse than the Spain’s Inquisition or Spanish rule in the Caribbean. The ultimate question addressed in this thesis is not a comparison of moral superiority of one society over the other, but the fundamental causes that led to the destruction of a Mesoamerican society by Cortés and his army. It was to examine whether or not the it was the development of guns, germs, and steel an ocean
away were the determining factors. Rather, I have aimed to show that it was a combination of a multitude of both external and internal factors that led to the fall of the Mexica and the Triple Alliance’s Empire. I have tried to show it was truly a conquest by Hernán Cortés and the Tlaxcalans.

Yet the Conquest of Mexico is often used as one of the examples of the inevitability of European conquest during the Age of Exploration and afterward. Cortés’ conquest, from a glance, epitomizes and validates this misconception. Cortés with a few hundred Spaniards and a dozen or so cavalrymen, all clad in their state of the art armor and wielding the most advanced arms – steel swords, crossbows, guns, and even cannons – conquered the entire Triple Alliance’s empire within a mere two years. New additions to this story have added some more truth with people thinking Cortés arrived, disease spread and killed, and he conquered. Even when the version acknowledges the aid of indigenous allies, the story is still seen as the inevitability of European dominance. Inga Clendinnen even mentions that when scholars discuss the Conquest of Mexico they often stop after the Noche Triste as if after this point there was nothing the Triple Alliance could have done to prevent defeat.  

However, this is not the case, and I believe that if there was one singular instance where the tides of war shifted in Cortés’ favor it was the Battle of Otumba. Cortés had suffered devastating losses from the Noche Triste, and he was under constant attack by small bands of soldiers while he retreated to Tlaxcala. Morale was low, most of his men were injured, and they were outnumbered by the Alliance’s army whose morale was high. The battle was going in the Alliance’s favor, and then Cortés and a few cavalrymen flew

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through the loose ranks of Alliance soldiers and killed the banner carrier. Had the Mexica and their allies remained undeterred by these events they would likely have won the battle. Instead they dispersed; this is the Conquest of Mexico’s Gettysburg.

Afterward, the Mexica were so desperate that they sent emissaries to intercept Cortés’ and the Tlaxcalans return to Tlaxcala. The Mexica pleaded for the Tlaxcalans to betray the Spaniards and kill them.

The Tlaxcalans could not have seen this act as anything other than an obvious sign of how weak the Triple Alliance was at that moment. The Tlaxcalans fought bitterly for decades to remain independent of the Empire, and in return the Empire cut off their trade connections and relentlessly fought them in flowery and combative wars. The Tlaxcalans knew that Cortés was their chance to take the battle from Tlaxcala to the Alliance’s territories. They already had a taste of retribution with the destruction and massacre of Cholula. Now they took war to into the Alliance’s territory as Cortés began his Campaign of Tepeaca. The Alliance by not having finished Cortés at Otumba allowed him to recover and begin campaigns in the eastern provinces of the Empire.

It is after this point that the outcome of the Conquest can be seen as an inevitability, but only because of the Alliance’s inaction. Cuithahuac was an ineffective leader who, for unknown reasons, did not partake in the Battle of Otumba. If he had showed more fortitude by participating, which was not unheard of, it is possible the Triple Alliance’s army would not have lost their confidence as easily. Even afterwards Cuithahuac leadership proved ineffective as he failed to fight Cortés in Tepeaca. The subsequent outbreak of smallpox rather than contributing to the Mexica’s decline may have been fortuitous as it took the life of Cuithahuac and allowed for the ascendance of
Cuauhtémoc. Yet Cuauhtémoc’s elevation to *tlatoani* was too little, too late. By this time the confidence and the perceived power of the Triple Alliance and of the indomitable Mexica were in tatters, forestalling any help that might have come from vacillating neighboring city-states. This is most clearly seen in Texcoco’s welcoming of Cortés in December of 1520.

Not only had Cortés entered the Valley of Mexico unhindered, but also the Mexica’s most important and longest standing ally had welcomed him. Texcoco was the Mexica’s most important ally in its war for independence, yet even they sided with Cortés. The city of Texcoco became an important area for Cortés to launch attacks on the other city-states along Lake Texcoco that remained aligned with the Mexica. It was also in Texcoco where Cortés built and launched his brigantines. And it was in Texcoco where Cortés finally set out to lay siege to Tenochtitlan. However, the Mexica and their remaining allies fought valiantly until the end at the siege and destruction of Tenochtitlan. Cuauhtémoc’s determination and political leadership was likely the strongest factor of the tenacity that kept the Tenochtitlan going for so long.

Nevertheless, Cuauhtémoc was captured as his city was destroyed and sacked, and the Tlaxcalans slaughtered his surviving, starving people. Still he had lasted for seventy-six days, but on August 13, 1521 he surrendered to Cortés and begged for death. Instead Cortés lied to him saying, “He need fear nothing.” Cuauhtémoc was later tortured in an attempt to find out where the *tlatoani*’s hidden treasure was; whether or not it existed, Cuauhtémoc never said anything. In 1525 Cortés took Cuauhtémoc with him on a campaign in Honduras. Cortés feared that the Mexica and other natives of the
former Empire might rise again if Cuauhtémoc remained alone. In Honduras Cuauhtémoc was executed by hanging for charges of conspiracy against the Crown.\textsuperscript{328}

The defeat of the Triple Alliance, which was largely the defeat of the Mexica people, was a complicated matter. Technology, disease, and the instability of the Empire itself were all factors in the Empire’s quick collapse. However, it seems that the largest factor was a combination of cultural differences in societal organization and particularly in areas of diplomacy and warfare. Before Cortés arrival Montezuma II struggled to reconcile the tenacity of the Tlaxcalans and to maintain the traditional means of power of conquered areas. His bureaucratization of the Empire and dividing it into distinct provinces might have eventually made it into a cohesive state rather than a grouping of conquered city-states that acknowledged Alliance dominance by yearly payments. However, Tlaxcala remained stubbornly out of his grasp, which he attempted to chip away until it too could be incorporated into the Empire.

I find Montezuma to be the biggest loser in the Conquest of Mexico. He attempted to reform the way in which the Empire functioned and curb the religious and social motivations for individuals to go to war. He is invariably considered cruel in all the native sources written after the Mexica’s fall. These have left him an unworthy legacy. This hatred stems from his failure to stop the Conquest, to stop the Spaniards. Indigenous histories show him as an incapable leader who failed in war and stifled social mobility. However, what Montezuma’s policies were actually doing was attempting to dampen the constant uprisings, which made the Empire unstable. He did tighten social mobility, but in order to slow down the internal drive for warfare. Today he is seen as a

\textsuperscript{328} Aguilar-Moreno, \textit{Handbook to Life in the Aztec World}, 48-9.
classical example of an ineffectual leader, who did not act, obvious to us now, when he should have. A leader, so stupid, that he believed Cortés to be the god Quetzalcoatl, returning to claim power.

Montezuma believing Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl is one of the most popular myths of the conquest. It fits in so well with explaining how an outsider marched into the heart of an empire and tore it asunder. It fits nicely with the belief that he accomplished this act with guns, germs, steel, and European ingenuity. Cortés is believed to have been the master Renaissance Machiavellian (despite *The Prince* being published after the conquest) who arrived on the New World’s shores in a suit of armor that might as well have been a space suit. The story is romantic in its ideas and its assumption. It is a story of how various European factors were decisive in destroying Tenochtitlan. However, Cortés was, from as soon as he landed off the shores of the Triple Alliance’s Empire, supported by thousands of Amerindians, including, at first, Montezuma, who followed the native custom of treating ambassadors well.

The army of Cortés may have been fronted by Spaniards, but was overwhelmingly made up of Mesoamericans. These people fought for him, provided him food, shelter, and information. He relied on Malintzin, who is now viewed in Mexico as a traitor, to translate and on the Tlaxcalans to finally conquer Tenochtitlan. European technology played an important role, but many of these were factors that, at the time, could have been overcome by the sheer numbers of Amerindians facing the barrel of his harquebusiers and cannons. It is difficult to decide which technology aided Cortés the most, if it was his cannons or the brigantines. It was not just European technology and
indigenous support that led Cortés to win. Perhaps the overriding factor was the differing views of warfare between the indigenous peoples and the Spaniards.

Warfare as a religious and sacred contest was ingrained in Mesoamerican cultures. It was not only acts of trying to take captives, although that certainly saved many Spaniards lives, but also the indigenous belief that warfare should be a contest between equals in hand-to-hand combat. It was predetermined, but for man to undertake to find out who was the winner. Projectile weaponry that Cortés relied on was seen as cowardly, so, too, was the act of siege. But Cortés saw warfare as a European, as body counts and territory gained or lost. The differences in not only technology but also the concept of warfare were shaped by the environments that fostered the two cultures.

Ultimately, Mesoamerica developed a culture within a very different set of parameters than Eurasia. This led to its own advances and discoveries, but these did not stack up to an inevitable set of outcomes. There were chances for the Triple Alliance to win, but it came down to human decisions that were shaped by their judgment, which is arguably the most basic influence of a culture. These choices unfortunately led to the destruction of a magnificent city, but it was also the beginning of the painful experience from which Mexico would rise; the beginning of the syncretism of Mesoamerican and Iberian cultures.

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Terms and Definitions*

Alcohua: The Ethnic group that constituted the city-state Texcoco.
Amaranth: A type of herb whose seeds were collected as food.
Atiltli: Spear thrower.
Aztlan: The mythical home of the Mexica.
Azcapotzalco: The capital of the Tepanec Empire on the western shores of Lake Texcoco.
Aztec: A modern term derived from the Mexica’s mythical homeland Aztlan.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo: Wrote an important memoir on the Conquest of Mexico. Bernal Diaz had participated in all three expeditions to Mexico. His memoir is an invaluable primary source about the Spaniards experience during the Conquest of Mexico. It was written when he was over seventy years old and was meant to correct incorrect accounts of what happened (Aguilar-Moreno 25-6).

Calmeaca: A school for nobility and priests who were better taught than the commoners in matters relating to warfare, history, and religion.
Calpulli (pl. calpullin): Essentially like a kinship group with its own internal stratifications ranging from commoners to elected leaders.
Chalachiuitl: Nahuatl for Emerald.
Chia: A type of sage.
Chichimecs: Supra-ethnic group of Northwestern Mexico, they were considered uncivilized.
Chiconauitiitzcuintli: One of the four gods of the lapidaries.
Chimalpopoca: The tlatoani of Tenochtitlan and ruled from 1417-26.
Chinampa: Known as floating islands; they are actually artificial islands made in shallow lakes used for agriculture.
Cholula: A major and old city-state just outside the Valley of Mexico.
Chontal Mayan: A dialect of Mayan common in the Yucatán Peninsula.
Cinteotl: Was one of the gods who created the lapidary crafts; he is also the god of Maize (Aguilar-Moreno 148).
Cronica X: Is a lost history of the Mexica. It is believed to have been written by a native in Nahuatl and with pictographs. It was used by Durán and other chroniclers (Thomas 781).
Codex Aubin: Is codex dated to 1576 and is in the style of an indigenous history. It is a “screenfold” and is a “collection of Mexican testimonies” dealing with the departure of Aztlan to the Conquest (Thomas 776).
Codex Mendoza: Is an indigenous primary source; it is pictographic history with Spanish notes that contains a history of the Mexica, a list of tribute of what each tributary owed, and some glimpses of what life was like in the Valley of Mexico (Thomas 778-9).
Cuitatl: Nahuatl for excrement.
Cuztic teocuitlatl: Nahuatl for gold.
Florentine Codex: Is a twelve volume “ethnography” written by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. It was written in Nahuatl and used natives who were alive during the Conquest of Mexico as its sources. He began the work in 1547 (Thomas 777). It is arguably the most important primary source on the Mexica.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: Was a Franciscan monk stationed in Mexico City who compiled and wrote the Florentine Codex. He was born in Spain in 1499 and sent to Mexico in 1529 (Aguilar-Moreno 24).

Fray Diego Durán: Was a Dominican monk who entered into order in 1556. Although he grew up in Texcoco, he was born in Seville in 1537. He is the author of various important primary sources on the Mexica: The Book of the Gods and Rites, The Ancient Calendar, and The History of the Indies of New Spain. (Aguilar-Moreno 25, Thomas 781).

Gerónimo de Aguilar: A Spaniard who was captured by Chontal Mayans and subsequently became fluent in the language. He would be used to translate with Malintzin.

Governor Velázquez: was the governor of Cuba at the time of the Conquest and funded Cortés’ expedition.

Harquebus: A musket common during the time of the Conquest.

History of the Indies of New Spain: Is an invaluable primary source on the written by Dominican Fray Diego Durán. Durán used the “Crónica X,” native accounts from all ages and ethnic groups. The Historia is one of three works by Durán and was published in 1581 (Aguilar-Moreno 25, Thomas 781). See also Fray Diego Durán.

Huexotzinca: An ethnic group from outside of the Valley of Mexico.

Huitzilopochtli: The main god of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan. He was their warrior sun god who required daily human sacrifice to sustain him. He is a mix of the gods Tonatiuh and Tezcatlipoca.

Iztac teocuitatl: Nahuatl for silver.

Itzcoatl: The tlatoani of Tenochtitlan and ruled from 1427-40.

Itzló: Nahuatl for obsidian.

Ixtlilxochitl: The tlatoani of Texcoco

Lake Chalco: The southernmost lake in the Valley of Mexico.

Lake Texcoco: The largest lake in the lake system of the Valley of Mexico. The island that Tenochtitlan was founded on is on the western side of the lake.

Lake Xaltocan: The lake between Lakes Zumpango and Texcoco.

Lake Xochimilco: The lake between Lakes Texcoco and Chalco; it had highly productive chinampas.

Lake Zumpango: The northernmost lake in the Valley of Mexico.

Letters From Mexico: Is a compilation of letters written by Cortés during the conquest as means to justify his actions in disobeying Governor Velázquez and found La Villa Rica de Vera Cruz. (Translated and edited by Anthony Pagden xix-xx).
Macuilcalli: One of the four gods who created the lapidary crafts.

Malintzin: Cortés Nahuatl translator. Also known commonly as La Malinche.

Maquahuittl: A Mesoamerican weapon in the shape of cricket paddle lined with obsidian blades.

Mayeque: Non-Mexica serfs.

Maxtla: Tlatoani of Azcapotzalco ruled from 1427-9 (Aguilar-Moreno xii).

The Memoirs of the Conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo: See Bernal Diaz del Castillo.

Metzcuitlatl: Nahuatl for mica.

Meztli: Nahuatl for moon.

Mexica: The name of ethnic group inhabiting Tenochtitlan, commonly known today as the Aztecs.

Milpa: A style of intercropping, or a term for a maize field.

Mirror Stone: Was a mirror created from either obsidian or pyrite which divination like powers and was associated with the god Tezcatlipoca.

Montezuma I (Montezuma Ilhuicamina): The tlatoani of Tenochtitlan from 1440-69.

Nahua: A term used to describe speakers of Nahuatl and is used similarly to an ethnic group.

Nahuatl: The language of the Nahuas including the Mexica.

Naualpilli: One of the four gods who created lapidary crafts.

Neçoliztli: A Nahuatl term for a form of bloodletting by cutting one’s lips or earlobes.

Obsidian: A volcanic glass.

Olmec: Is considered to be the “mother” culture for all of Mesoamerica. The civilization existed from around 1200-800 BCE near modern Veracruz (Aguilar-Moreno 7-8).

Ometeotl: A Mesoamerican hermaphroditic god who birthed the four Tezcatlipocas.

Otumba: A small city-state located near the a gray source of obsidian but better known for its specialized craft production.

Pachuca: A town located near a important source of high-quality green obsidian.

Pánfilo Narváez: A Spaniard sent to Mexico to arrest Hernán Cortés.

Pipiltin: Essentially a Nahua term for the noble class.

Quetzalcoatl: One of the oldest gods in Mesoamerican mythology. His name translates to “feathered serpent.” He is responsible for creating and destroying various worlds. He is also the god of wind and of knowledge (Aguilar-Moreno 149-50). A post conquest myth asserts that Montezuma thought that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl returning to take power.

Tecpatl: Nahuatl for flint or sacrificial knife. Also a minor deity.

Tarascan Empire: An empire neighboring the northwestern portion of the Triple Alliance’s Empire.

Telpochcalli: A Mexica school for commoners to learn basic military skills, history, and religion.
**Telpochtli:** A cult for young warriors who worshiped Tezcatlipoca.

**Tenitztania:** Nahuatl verb that means to sacrifice and cut ones lips for the idols.

**Tenitztic:** Nahuatl, translates to “something sharp or which has a cutting edge.”

**Tenitzticayotl:** Nahuatl word that translates to “edge, or sharpness of a knife, etc.”

**Tenochtitlan:** The capital city of the Mexica.

**Teosinte:** The wild ancestor of modern maize.

**Teotihuaca:** Remnant people in the Valley of Mexico from the collapse of the

Teotihuacan Empire around 750 CE.

**Teotihuacan:** The capital city of the Mexica.

**Tezcatlipoca:** One of the four sons of Ometeotl, the creator god. Tezcatlipoca holds a complicated place in the Mesoamerican Pantheon. He has created and destroyed various worlds.

**Tezozomoc:** The tlatoani of Azcapotzalco, succeeded by Maxtla in 1417 (Aguilar-Moreno xii).

**Tlacaelec:** The nephew of Itzcoatl, and the half-brother of Montezuma I. He was an important advisor to both Itzcoatl and Montezuma I.

**Tlacopan:** A Tepanec city-state that was part of the Triple Alliance. Also known as Tacuba.

**Tlahuahuanaliztli:** Is the form of sacrifice that translates to “gladiatorial sacrifice.”

**Tlatoani:** The ruler of a city-state elected by the nobility (pipiltin) or a previous tlatoani’s council and can be equated to a king.

**Tlaxcalan:** A native of Tlaxcala.

**Tlaxcala:** A city-state outside the Valley of Mexico.

**Toltecs:** The previous civilization in habiting the Valley of Mexico centered in the city-state of Tula. The Toltecs lasted from circa 900-1150CE. (Aguilar-Moreno 16-7).

**Tonatiuh:** A sun god dating back to the Toltecs, circa 950 CE.

**Totonacs:** A Mesoamerican ethnic group that lived along the Gulf Coast.

**Triple Alliance:** Triunvirate alliance between the three city-states that formed it: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. The empire they created is often referred to the Aztec Empire.

**Tzintzuntzan:** The capital city of the Tarascan Empire. See also Tarascan Empire.

**Xipe Totec:** Mesoamerican god of agriculture and goldsmiths (Aguilar-Moreno 151).

**Xiuhcoatl:** Huitzilopochtli’s serpent atlatl.

**Xiuitl:** Nahuatl for Turquoise.

* I have listed sources only for any information not previously cited within the body of the work.

Figure 1: Chronology and Genealogy of the *Tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan. Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 38.
Figure 2: Human Sacrifice depicted in the Codex Magliabechiano. Source: Susan Toby Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America: Archaeology and Culture History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 504.
Figure 3: A page from the Codex Mendoza depicting tribute owed to the Triple Alliance. Source: Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1997), Folio 31r, pp. 67.
Figure 4.1, 4.2: Chinampa structure (above) and planting from the Florentine Codex (below). Source: Susan Toby Evans, Ancient Mexico & Central America: Archaeology and Culture History (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 444, 464.
Figure 5: Precious stones and obsidian mirror. Source: Sahagún, Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, XI: illustrations, 772-786.

Figure 7: Warriors with tepoztotilli. Source: Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1997), Folio 67r, pp. 139.

Figure 8: Obsidian tool and jewelry production. Source: Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 110.
Figure 9: A drawing of the *maquahuitl* and *tepoztopilli* that were destroyed in the fire of the Royal Spanish Armory in 1884. Source: Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1995), 82.
Figure 10.1, 10.2, and 10.3: Tecpatl effigy knives (top), obsidian ear spools (middle), obsidian lip plug (bottom). Source: Eduardos Matos Moctezuma and Felipe Solís Olguín, Aztecs (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2002), 255, 313.
Figure 11.1, 11.2: The Eagle Warrior effigy sacrificial knife (above) and the Tonatiuh sacrificial knife with Huitzilopochtli’s xiuhtoatl at the end of the handle (below). Source: Eduardos Matos Moctezuma and Felipe Solis Olguin, Aztecs (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2002), 232, 328.
65. Preparation of the image of Uitzilopochtli (Chapter 19). 66-70. Massacre of participants in the Feast of Uitzilopochtli (Chapter 20). 71. The massacre is announced to the Mexicans (Chapter 20). 72. War breaks out between the Spaniards and the Mexicans (Chapter 21).

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