CHAPTER 1

Fear, Wonder, and Absence

Our Distorted View of Moctezuma's Tenochtitlan

Matthew Restall

> "Its strange setting, the grandiosity of its palaces and temples, the glint of its treasures, and the repellant mystery of the human sacrifices made daily to its terrible gods, all filled the Spaniards with astonishment."
>
> JOSÉ FILGUEIRA VALVERDE, Galician intellectual, 1960[1]

1 The Conquistador Lens

We are all Bernal Díaz; and therein lies the problem.

Díaz' description of Tenochtitlan has been so widely quoted that it has become inescapable. First published in 1632, his *True History of the Conquest of New Spain* grew slowly but steadily in popularity over the centuries, deeply mined by dozens of chroniclers and historians writing in various languages, and achieving canonical status in abridged form in the 20th century. The following passage—whether in this translation or another, paraphrased or plagiarized or properly quoted, in a scholarly article or textbook—has thus been read by millions:

> When we saw so many cities and villages built into the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level causeway going towards Mexico, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and *cues* and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry.

1 From one of scores of renderings of the traditional narrative of the Conquest of Mexico, written, as most have been, as a biography of Cortés; and also, written, likewise as many have been, in the form of a sort of hybrid novel and work of history; Filgueira Valverde (1906–1996), *Hernán Cortés*, p. 100 (*Su extraña situación, la grandeza de sus palacios y de sus templos, el fulgor de sus tesoros y el repelente misterio de los diarios sacrificios humanos ante sus terribles dioses, todo llenaba de asombro a los españoles*).

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> And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream? It is not to be wondered at that I here write it down in this manner, for there is so much to think over that I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, nor even dreamed about.[2]

The popularity of the passage is understandable. It surely captures something of how they must have felt, those first European visitors to the great Aztec metropolis, walking the causeway to meet Moctezuma and his entourage on a clear, sunny 8 November 1519. The scene was perhaps the most stunningly beautiful and impressive combination of the natural and built environments in human history. Placed in their shoes (and who among us has not wished to see that city before its destruction?), we would likely experience a set of emotions similar to the trio recorded by Díaz and other conquistadors: disbelief, wonder, and fear. Indeed, these are the three themes of response to the city that are my focus here (the recasting of "disbelief" as "absence" is explained in due course).

My concern, however, is less with how Spanish invaders saw Tenochtitlan and more with how *we* see it; more specifically, with how conquistador perceptions have shaped and distorted our own. In other words, deployed superficially, Díaz' description serves a useful purpose. But upon deeper reflection, a series of problems emerge—one beneath the other, like the layers of construction uncovered by archaeologists working today in the heart of old Tenochtitlan.

First of all, the Spaniards were not alone; they were accompanied by African and Taíno slaves and servants; the latter, mostly indigenous to Cuba. Many had died in the nine months since the company had left Cuba, or they had remained on the Gulf Coast or sailed to Cuba or Spain (all of which was also true of the Spaniards, almost halved in number). But there must have been 100 or even 200 surviving Taíno and African slaves and servants walking into Tenochtitlan that 8 November, their presence unrecorded by their masters, and their perceptions lost to history.[3]

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2 I have here used the 1910 Maudslay translation in Díaz, *The True History of the Conquest*, vol. II, p. 37, as it is the most commonly reprinted and quoted (rivaled perhaps by the 1963 Cohen translation in the Penguin edition). My sole edit is to italicize *cues*, an awkward English adoption of Díaz' Hispanized version of a Nahuatl term for "temple". The original passage is in Díaz, *Historia verdadera*, Ch. 87 (1632, fol. 64v, 2008, p. 157). Usages of the passage are far too numerous to cite, but I must confess that I too have employed it, as superficially as have so many others, as a familiar hook: see Restall, *Seven Myths*, p. xiii.

3 The presence of Taínos in the war of 1519–21 has been given little attention in the historical literature, but the scattered pieces of evidence add up to a compelling picture; e.g. for a complaint on labor shortages in Cuba as a result, see Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), Santo Domingo 99, ramo 1, no. 17 (I am grateful to Scott Cave for sharing this document

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Second, Díaz' observation is not original. Consider this description by Juan Cano (best known for marrying Moctezuma's daughter, Doña Isabel Moctezuma Tecuichpochtzin), referring to the wonders of the city and the riches that Moctezuma supposedly shared with the conquistadors: "They seemed to us a thing of enchantment, and we could hardly believe it was true or that we were not dreaming of them, these things of Mexico".[4] Cano's own *relación* has never surfaced, but portions of it were copied and summarized by Alonso de Zorita in the 1580s, Cano having died in 1572. It would not be surprising if Díaz had therefore borrowed his famous "enchantment" phrase from Cano; for all his claim to "truth" and "eyewitness" authenticity, Díaz' *True History* is replete with contradictions, inventions, and borrowings from accounts by others—most obviously, Francisco López de Gómara.[5]

In fact, I suspect that Díaz' original manuscript was a *recopilación* or compendium of conquistador testimonies and passages copied from other books, and that the oft-quoted expression of wonder was original neither to Cano nor Díaz (after all, Cano missed the company's 1520 encampment in the heart of Tenochtitlan, not arriving in the city until June, when it was already in a state of war).[6] Francisco de Aguilar later testified that Diego de Ordaz "said he had been amazed by what he had seen", and "in truth it appeared to have caused him fear and astonishment" (both men were veterans of the entire war).[7] Cortés himself told the King of Spain that it was all "so wondrous as not to be believed". The "great city of Temixtitan"—as Spaniards first called it—was so full of "grandeur, of strange and marvelous things" that "we here who saw them with our own eyes could not understand them with our minds".[8]

The conquistador lens, then, was not a sophisticated or varied one. Lacking original imaginations, men like Díaz and Cortés drew upon generic, not

with me). Also see *Documentos Cortesianos* (hereafter DC), vol. I, pp. 170–209; Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, Ch. 8.

4 Cano in Martínez Baracs, *Juan Cano*, pp. 50, 151–52 (*les parecía cosa de encantamiento y que no podían creer que fuese verdad sino que lo soñaban las cosas de México*).

5 For critical appraisals of Díaz, see: Miralles, *Bernal Mintió*; and Duverger, *Crónica de la Eternidad*.

6 Grunberg, *Dictionnaire*, pp. 98–100.

7 Aguilar (writing *c.*1560) in J. Díaz et al., *Conquista de Tenochtitlán*, p. 176 and Fuentes, *Conquistadors*, p. 145 (*otro nuevo mundo de grandes poblaciones y torres, y una mar, y dentro de ella una ciudad muy grande edificada; venia espantado de lo que habia visto; que a la verdad al parecer, ponia temor y espanto*). Note that I have varied my gloss of terms like *grande* and *espanto* to better convey this opening point; but conquistadors like Aguilar used a limited vocabulary, and generally my translations more closely follow the original text.

8 CCR (1522, fol. 12v, 1971 [1519–25], pp. 101–102; 1993 [1519–25], p. 232) (*seran de tanta admiracion que no se podran creer ... la grandeza, estrañas y maravillosas cosas desta grand cibdad de Temixtitan ... los que aca con nuestros proprios ojos las veemos no las podemos con el entendimiento comprehender*).

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unique, descriptors. When it came to specific references, they tended to fall back on two categories: cities in Spain with which they were familiar; and generic or stereotypical "oriental" or Islamic world reference points. For example, Cortés rather weakly and vaguely asserted that the city was "as big as Seville and Cordoba", and his estimate that the "main tower is higher than the tower of the cathedral in Seville" does not come close to conveying the size of the Templo Mayor—the pyramid and twin temples that towered over Tenochtitlan's main plaza. (Seville's Giralda is actually taller than the Templo Mayor was, but the latter was far larger in overall size). Similarly, his statement that the city's other main plaza was "twice as big as the city of Salamanca's plaza" barely hints at the well-kempt order and symmetry of a city that made medieval European towns seem like cramped warrens of squalor.[9] Compared to the symmetry and order of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco, and other *altepeme* (plural of *altepetl*) of the Aztecs and other Nahuas, Spain's towns were amorphous and claustrophobic. As for Mesoamerican temples, conquistadors usually wrote of them as "mosques" (*mezquitas*), just as Granada was a frequent comparative reference and Mesoamerican clothing often seemed "Moorish" (the Orientalizing of Mesoamericans in general, and the Aztecs and Moctezuma in particular, would persist for centuries after the conquest wars).[10]

As a result, early written descriptions of Tenochtitlan offer a kind of hybrid gaze, mixing attempts to observe and describe the city's built environment and natural setting with often-confused or confusing European and Middle Eastern comparisons. That hybridity of perspective is also evidenced in early visual representations of the city.

For example, consider the earliest such illustration, a woodcut that accompanied a pamphlet published in Augsburg in 1521 or 1522, titled *Newe Zeitung, von dem Lande, das die Spanier funden haben ym 1521 Iare genant Jucatan* (Figure 1.1). Drawing upon brief letters about the Spanish discovery of the Aztec Empire circulating in Europe, the woodcut depicts the Aztec capital as

9 CCR (1522, fols. 16v–17r, 1971 [1519–25], pp. 102–103, 105; 1993 [1519–25], pp. 233–234, 238) (*es tan grande la cibdad como Sevilla y Cordoba ... la mas principal es mas alta que la torre de la iglesia mayor de Sevilla ... tan grande como dos veces la plaza de la cibdad de Salamanca*) (note that "la plaza de" is missing from the 1522 and 1523 editions and 1528 MS, but included in the Madrid MS; see 1993, p. 234, n.275). The comparison of Tenochtitlan's plaza to that of Salamanca echoed down through the 16th century; e.g., Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo stated that it was "twice the city of Salamanca" (Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia General*, 33).

10 For example, Cano in Martínez Baracs, *Juan Cano*, p. 50; also see Schreffler, "Threads", pp. 253–257, and (on depictions of Aztecs and Moctezuma) Hajovsky, "Thevet's 'True' Portrait of Moctezuma"; and Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, Ch. 3–4.

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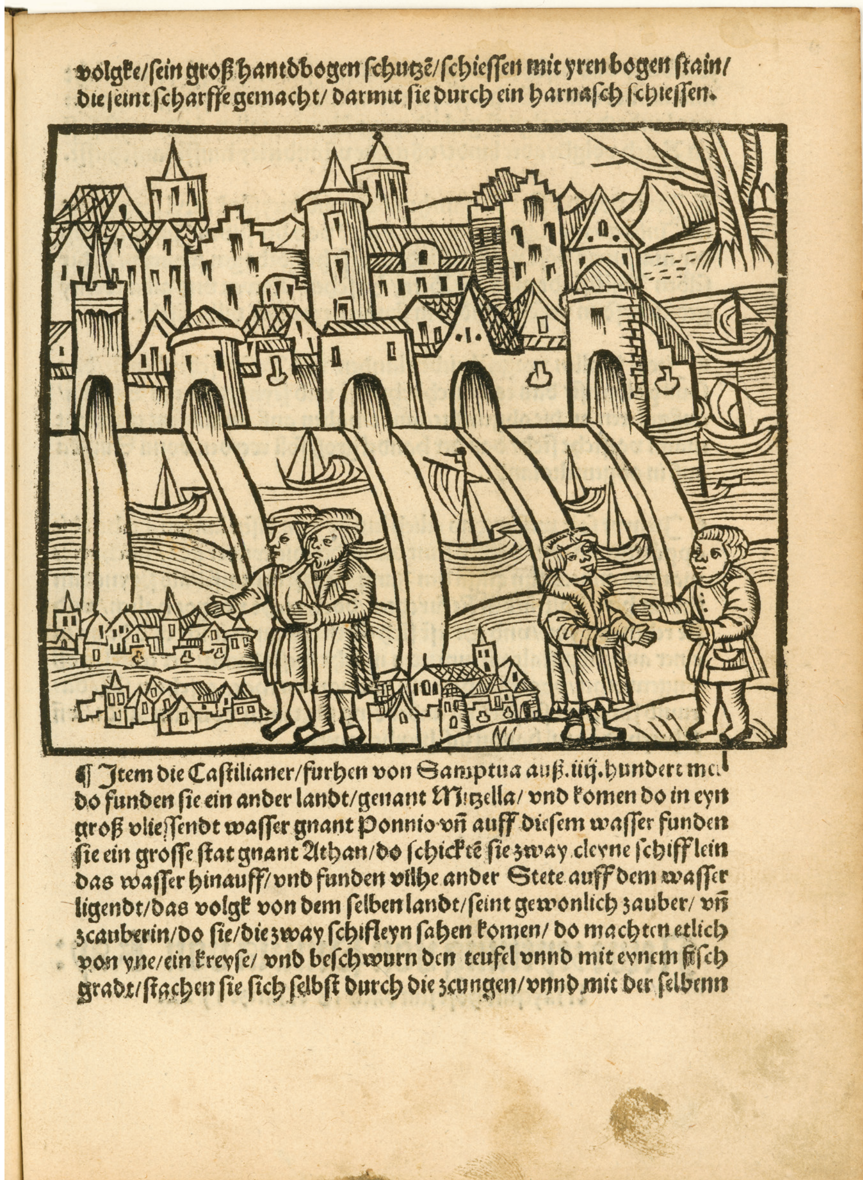

volgke/sein groß handtbogen schutzē/schiessen mit yren bogen stain/
die seint scharffe gemacht/ darmit sie durch ein harnasch schiessen.

¶ Item die Castilianer/furhen von Samptua auß.iiij.hundert ma
do funden sie ein ander landt/genant Mitzella/ vnd komen do in eyn
groß vliessendt wasser gnant Ponnio vñ auff diesem wasser funden
sie ein grosse stat gnant Athan/do schicktē sie zway cleyne schifflein
das wasser hinauff/vnd funden vilhe ander Stete auff dem wasser
ligendt/das volgk von dem selben landt/seint gewonlich zauber/ vñ
zcauberin/do sie/die zway schifleyn sahen komen/ do machten etlich
von yne/ein kreyse/ vnd beschwurn den teufel vnnd mit eynem fisch
gradt/stachen sie sich selbst durch die zcungen/vnnd mit der selbenn

FIGURE 1.1 The first European attempt to visualize Tenochtitlan from the *Newe Zeitung* (1521 or 1522)
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a medieval European island-city whose novel feature is its causeways, here imagined as bridges. The German caption—which even denies the city its own name, giving it the seemingly most relevant European one—reads: "Great Venice has five gates / at each of the gates there is a bridge / which reaches the land / and on these same five bridges / there are many drawbridges with towers on them / so that the city is impregnable".[11]

If the hybridity is minimal in the Augsburg engraving, it is tantalizingly multi-faceted in the *Nuremberg Map*—the cartographic schema of Tenochtitlan included in the 1524 Latin editions of Cortés' *Second Letter* (Figure 1.2). The map was an intriguingly hybrid cultural creation. It combined elements from three sources available to the engraver. One was the medieval European building (structures such as those in the Augsburg engraving). Another was Islamic architecture, as represented in images such as those of the 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle* (not shown here); the mosques and minarets of Constantinople and Jerusalem may have served as models for the "mosques" that Cortés wrote were ubiquitous to Aztec cities. A third element provided the engraver with cartographic conventions and urban features not included in Cortés' *Second Letter* and which could only have come from an Aztec source (probably the lost original Aztec-made map; see Mundy, this volume). For example, the map's schema of a square plaza set within a circular city set within a circular lake reproduced "the idealized geometries" of the Aztec conception of a city.[12]

It is not just the style of the map that is hybridized, but its very details, positioning Tenochtitlan in two moments in time—two universes—all in a single frame. The map thus takes us right to the months between when Moctezuma met the Spaniards and when he died, the period when Tenochtitlan was the Aztec imperial capital but with a Spanish presence—when the "Temple where they sacrifice" (*Templum ubi sacrificant*) still stood but with a small cross raised

11 Anonymous, *Newe Zeitung*; the image appears on the fifth (this one) and the seventh page.

12 Mundy, "Mapping the Aztec Capital", p. 16. This is not to say that representing a city in a circular or fish-eye manner was unique to Aztec culture; it was also a European technique. There have been about a dozen studies of the *Nuremberg Map,* of varying length and depth, published since the 1930s (see the historiographical summary in Boone, "This New World Now Revealed", p. 42, n.1), but three recent articles represent the map's authoritative studies to date: Mundy, "Mapping the Aztec Capital"; Matos Moctezuma, "Reflexiones acerca del plano de Tenochtitlan"; and Boone, "This New World Now Revealed". In Boone's words ("This New World Now Revealed", p. 38), the map "presents Tenochtitlan as belonging to two temporalities"; in Mundy's ("Mapping the Aztec Capital", p. 26), it is "stretched like a taut rope between Cortés' ideological programme and that of its Culhua-Mexica [Aztec] prototype". Schreffler suggests a possible connection to the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, "Threads", pp. 257–62.

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FIGURE 1.2 The Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, from the Latin edition of Cortés' *Second Letter*, published in Nuremberg in 1524. A version with labels in Italian was printed in Venice in 1525. The smaller circular space on the left is the Gulf of Mexico.
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upon it. At the top of the map, on the eastern horizon, an oversized Hapsburg banner flutters. The message to King Charles was clear: here is a city and empire of marvels and riches; its rotten religious core (the central plaza of "sacrifice") justifies all means to conquer and convert its people; that enterprise has begun (the cross on the pyramid) and will soon be completed (the banner will be carried from the edge to the center).

More than a mere promise of victory, the map's very existence was a claim of possession; maps in the Europe of this era were tightly controlled and guarded objects of intelligence. Cortés told the Spanish king that during the months when Moctezuma was under his control, the emperor had given him "a cloth upon which was drawn the whole [Gulf] coast", a map that may have been a source of the coastal sketch included by the Nuremberg printers. Both maps were intended as evidence of the Aztec ruler's submission; the *Nuremberg Map* is thus a cartographic manifestation of the Spanish-invented surrender of Moctezuma.[13] That invention was the central point and purpose of Cortés' *Second Letter*, designed to invert the reality of conquistador failure and defeat in 1520, and convince the king of Spanish triumph. But Moctezuma's death, the capture of Tenochtitlan in 1521, and the persistence of a violent Spanish presence in Mexico effectively sealed the myth of the emperor's surrender. It became a foundation stone of the Spanish ideology of colonial justification, seemingly as ineradicable as the *Nuremberg Map* of Tenochtitlan—which is now reproduced in scores of books and websites, often attributed to Cortés himself, as if it were the eye-witness sketch by a victorious captain of his new acquisition.[14]

The point is not that the *Nuremberg Map*, or the details offered by Cortés or Cano, Díaz or the Anonymous Conquistador, are wrong. Indeed, they all contain unique insights and angles of perspective onto the Tenochtitlan of 1519. But they are heavy distortions, weighed down and twisted with political agendas, cultural interference, and the inadequacy of human memory. Our view of the city—and I mean "our" in the broadest sense, encompassing centuries of Western chroniclers, writers, and scholars—has been not only influenced but determined by those distortions. We see Tenochtitlan not as it was in Moctezuma's day; we see it partially as it was, and partially as it has been imagined and invented since 1519.

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13 CCR (1960, p. 57; 1971, p. 94) (*me trajeron figurada en un paño toda la costa*). My analysis here is heavily indebted to the insights in Mundy, "Mapping the Aztec Capital", pp. 26–28.

14 Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, is effectively a book-length exploration of why Moctezuma's surrender is a myth, and how it persisted for so long.

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2 Fear and Wonder

Let us return to Díaz' "enchantment" description, and a third problem with the famous passage: it is not really describing Tenochtitlan, but Itztapalapa. Certainly the sweep of Díaz' gaze seems to include the capital city, but the location of his scenic overlook is the peninsula leading towards Itztapalapa, the road at sufficient elevation to afford a view of much of Lake Tetzcoco and the many settlements on its islands and shores. The point may seem minor, but it is part of a larger misuse of descriptions of the city by Díaz and other early Spanish sources. For example, some assume that the account of seeing Tenochtitlan for the first time comes from the moment when the advancing invasion force descended the pass between the volcanoes to set their eyes on the Valley of Mexico for the first time (in fact, that November morning was hazy, and neither Díaz nor Cortés nor any other eyewitness source claimed to have such a view).[15] Similarly, descriptions by Díaz, Cortés, and others of the marketplace in Tlatelolco are often used as referents to Tenochtitlan proper, even to its central plaza.

There are many reasons for this confusion and ambiguity, not least of which are the issues to do with genre, audience, and the fact that most conquistador testimonies were recorded years or decades later. But all that aside, one can detect three broad stages through which Spanish descriptions of Tenochtitlan passed. The first was sheer amazement: wonder at the splendor and scale of the city, tinged with fear that the centralization of power that had made it possible might be turned against the invaders.

The second stage was a more focused marveling at the wealth concentrated in the capital, particularly in the marketplaces and in Moctezuma's court—his palaces, storerooms, zoos, and collections. This preoccupation would prove to be a sustained one. It was reflected not only in the attention given to wealth, valuables, gifts, and tribute items in published accounts (most obviously, again, Cortés, Gómara, and Díaz), but also in minor accounts (most not published until the last century) and in the testimony given in Cortés' *residencia*. The latter was the crown investigation into his record in office, a standard procedure that in Cortés' case was unusually protracted, generating some six thousand folios of documentation over 19 years. The overwhelming concern of the investigation was fungible wealth. Put in the terms of our topic here, the crown's interest was this: how much wealth, in the form of precious metals and other portable material goods of value, was there in Tenochtitlan in 1519; where did it

15 Again, I am among those who have made that mistake (Restall, *Seven Myths*, p. xiii; nobody has called me out on it, in print or in person).

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end up, why, and did the crown receive its customary *quinto* (20 per cent tax)? Similar concerns were threaded through *residencias* of other conquistadors and officials, as well as in civil lawsuits (Cortés faced some 50 of these from the 1520s to his death in 1547). As a result, Tenochtitlan became something of a mystical place of lost wealth, of immeasurable riches stolen or squandered or hidden, but always denied the petitioner or plaintiff or witness.[16]

The third stage of the conquistador—then Spanish, and soon European—perception of Tenochtitlan is a vast and highly problematic topic in its own right; but it can be summarized in one freighted phrase: human sacrifice. Consider this scene: in 1554, two Spaniards strolled through Mexico City, chatting in Latin. Their dialogue was fictional, but it tidily reflected the popular perception of the Aztecs that had rapidly taken hold in the colony (as in Europe). Walking through the plaza that had been, since long before the Spanish invasion, the ceremonial center of the city; one Spaniard pointed out where "men and women were offered up and sacrificed as victims to idols ... as if in a butcher shop". This horror, "incredible as it may seem", occurred "almost monthly", taking the lives of "numberless thousands". The other Spaniard responded, "O Indians, most blessed by the arrival of the Spaniards, who were transformed from their former great misery to their present happiness, and from their previous slavery to true liberty!"[17] The more grisly and diabolist the image of Aztec religion, the more profound the redemption of the indigenous Mexican people—and the more justified their conquest and subjugation. Just as accusations of cannibalism had been used to justify enslaving indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, so did the conquest and colonization of mainland "Indians", such as the Aztecs become justified and legalized through accusations of "idolatry", sodomy, and cannibalism.

"Because of the care and devotion the natives of these parts devote to the nurturing and veneration of their idols and of the devil", declared Cortés in the orders read out to the invasion force gathered in Tlaxcala in December of 1520, prior to the assault against Tenochtitlan, "your primary motive and goal is to separate and uproot all the natives of these parts from those idolatries".[18] This

16 Cortés *residencia* in AGI, Justicia, fols. 220–225; excerpted in various compilations since the late-19th century, the best of which is DC, vols. I and II. Other *residencias* and *probanzas* (proofs of merit) in AGI, Justicia 49 (Velázquez *residencia*) and AGI, México 203. Civil suits in numerous areas of the AGI and Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Hospital de Jesús.

17 Cervantes de Salazar, *Life in the Imperial City*, p. 74.

18 DC, vol. I, p. 165; also in AGI, Justicia 220, leg. 4, fols. 342–49, with a copy (not seen by me) in AGN, Hospital de Jesús, cuad. 1, fols. 1–4 (*su principal motive e intencion sea apartar y desarraigar de las dichas idolatrias a todos los naturales destas partes*).

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was not a reflection of Cortés' mythical piety, but a small yet significant link in the manufactured legal chain of conquest justification. The initial wave of letters and reports that reached the court in Spain were filled with the same trio of accusations against the Aztecs (idol-worship, cannibalism, and sodomy), with lurid descriptions of ritual executions as shockingly satanical. The propaganda hit its mark. In the cluster of edicts issued by Charles V in October of 1522, he reasoned that, as he had:

> received reports that many chiefs and lords and others of the land hold many local people as slaves, which they capture and retain through the wars that they wage against each other; and many of those slaves they keep to eat and to kill and to sacrifice before their idols; and that this gives us license to recover [*rescatar*] those Indian slaves; and it will serve us and be to the advantage of the settlers and benefit those Indian slaves if I hereby give license and authority … to the settlers … to recover those Indian slaves and take them as their own slaves.[19]

No matter how much Spanish theologians and other officials debated issues surrounding the nature of "Indians" and how their alleged past justified their present treatment, Tenochtitlan's reputation as a city of "human sacrifice" was set—and remains deeply rooted today. As Gaspar de Villagrá put it in his epic poem about Spanish conquests, first published in 1610: "not more than one hundred years ago / every year in the City of Mexico / were offered up in tribute, in horrific inferno / more than one hundred thousand souls".[20] But in the contrastingly bright present, the poet-conquistador proclaimed, that dark past had been forgotten by the contentedly Christian "Indians", just as "the trees and plants [are] forgetful in the happy spring of the hardships of the winter past".[21]

Over the centuries that followed, readers of Spanish, Italian, Latin, French, English, and Dutch learned "facts" such as these (the example is from Ogilby's *America* of 1670): the "business of the Satanical Religion" of the Aztecs was to sacrifice "to their Devil-god Vitzilopuchtli [*sic*]" thousands of people a year,

19 DC, vol. I, p. 260; original in the archive of the *ayuntamiento* of Mexico City, also reproduced as CC, document 5.

20 Villagrá, *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*, fol. 29v (my translation of *el horrible infierno / Tuvo todos los años de tributo, / De mas de cien mil almas para arriba, / Que en solos sacrificios bomitava, / La gran Ciudad de Mexico perdida*). The poem is primarily about the early history of New Mexico, but seeks to tie that history to the triumph over the Aztecs and to conquistador glories in general.

21 Villagrá, *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*, fol. 30r.

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"whose flesh likewise afterwards they did eat in a solemn Banquet". Rather than sharing in this religion, however, the peoples subject to the Aztecs increasingly grew to "abhor" their "particular Religion", with its "cruel slaughters and butcheries of Men". This, Protestant authors concluded, "was the chief reason why they so easily receiv'd the *Roman* Religion".[22]

The images that accompanied such books offered lurid illustrations of Aztec butchery. Some became well known and influential, copied again and again; a good example is "Human Sacrifices of the Indians of Mexico", used for centuries to accompany numerous accounts and histories in many languages (Figure 1.3).[23] Variations on this visual theme often included an Aztec priest holding aloft a human heart, freshly torn from a sacrificial victim—an image fundamental to popular perceptions of the Aztecs to this day (a cartoon version graces the cover of Terry Deary's *Angry Aztecs*, for example, part of his massively successful Horrible Histories series).[24]

The five-century persistence of a distorted (not to say hypocritical) negative stereotype, generated for political purposes long ago expired, has made Tenochtitlan a place "frozen in time, torn between a prestigious pre-Hispanic past and a colonial history bent on destroying whatever had survived of ancient times". That is how Serge Gruzinski put it recently, crediting Cortés with promoting Tenochtitlan as the "emblematic metropolis" and "the Mexicas at the expense of their neighbours, allies and adversaries, which has persisted in our fixation on the 'Aztecs'; the idea that there was an 'Indian religion', with its places of worship or pyramids, its great festivals, and its human sacrifices".[25]

I would argue that the credit goes less to Cortés, and more to a larger cultural and intellectual phenomenon, whereby the conquistadors converted their fear and wonder into a simple and prejudicial stereotype. That stereotype was perpetuated by the conquistadors, and by the chroniclers and jurists who idolized them, as central to their campaign of legal defense and justification. It soon became enshrined in the conquest story's traditional narrative, so that the modern perception of Tenochtitlan is still frozen in the conquistador gaze.

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22 Quotes from Ogilby, *America*, pp. 239, 275 (also see the 1671 Dutch edition by Montanus).

23 "*Von Menschenopffer de Indianner zu Mexico*", showing executions taking place atop a highly stylized and imaginary Great Temple in Tenochtitlan, was first published in De Bry, *Peregrinationes*, 3rd part, plate VIII (the image here), then again by De Bry in 1602 in his *Americae, Nona et postrema pars*, and then in numerous publications through to the present century. With its bizarre architecture and horned devils, the menacing scene has "a sinister and oppressive tone", as Boone, "Incarnations", p. 73, noted.

24 For example, an engraving in a 1707 Dutch edition of Herrera's *Historia General*, accompanying Herrera's passage detailing the horrors of Aztec sacrifice (Aa, *Naaukeurige versameling*, vol. 10, pp. 185–204); Deary, *Angry Aztecs*.

25 Gruzinski, *The Eagle*, p. 156.

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VIII.
Von Menschenopffer der India-
ner zu Mexico.

DEr Mexicaner Tempel ist laut der Historien oben gestalt / wie hie fürgebildet / auff welchem Tempel sie jhre Menschen Opffer verrichten / solcher gestalt. Sie bringen auff ein gewisses Fest so sie im Jahr haben / alle jhre gefangene so sie im Streit von jhren Feinden gefangen haben zusam̃en / führen sie oben auff den Tempel auff den runden Bergk der Todten Köpffe / vnd setzen sie in der Ordnung neben einander. Baldt kompt von dem obersten viereckheten Berg / ein Priester der hat einen Chorrock an / vnd einen Abgott in der handt / vnd nach etlichen Ceremonien gehet er zu dem veruhrtheilten / vom ersten biß zum letzten / vnd hält jhnen den Götzen für / mit folgenden Worten. Sehet daß ist ewer Gott / wañ dann solches verrichtet / gehet er wider die stegen hinab / nach dem werden die verurtheilten / die mit guter wacht verwahret seyn / einer nach dem andern / die ander stegen hinauff / auff den obersten Berg geführet / alda findet er die Priester / so das Opffer verrichten sollen. Deren sechse sind / die neben einander stehen / vnd auffwarten. Nach dem sie nun für den Götzen jhre Reuerentz gethan / nehmen sie mit grosser Behendigkeit den Armen Sünder / jhrer vier bey den Armen vnd Beinen / vnd der fünfft streicht jhm ein Höltzern Halßbandt vmb den Hals vnnd heben jhn also hinderrücks auff den Stein / daß jhm die Lenden Krachen. Darnach kompt der sechste / welches der Hohe Priester ist / der schneidet jhm behendt den Bauch oder Brust auff / nimbt jhm das Hertz noch Rauchende herauß / vnd wenn ers der Sonnen gezeigt hat / wirfft ers dem Abgott ins Gesicht / den Leichnam aber lassen sie die Stegen hinab rumpeln / da als dann die herzu kommen deren gefangener er war / die nehmen vnnd Kochen jhn vnd sind lustig vnter einander darbey / also daß sie auch wohl einander darauff zu gast laden.

C Noch

FIGURE 1.3 "The Human Sacrifices of the Indians of Mexico [*Von Menschenopffer de Indianner zu Mexico*]", showing executions taking place in Tenochtitlan, from de Bry's *Peregrinationes in Americam*, 1601.
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The emphasis on the ceremonial center, with its grim devotion to "human sacrifice", has eclipsed the crowds, the noise, the smells, neighborhood life, and the complex sense of community. Tenochtitlan was not soulless, horror-bound, and empty; it was vibrant and full of life, a place of festivals and families.

3 Absence

The elements that fed into descriptions of fear and wonder lead quickly to the third category of interest here: disbelief. Early conquistador reactions were pregnant with the concept—wonder expressed as a possible dream or optical illusion. The exaggerations regarding the city's size, its population, and the daily orgies of "human sacrifice" and cannibalism, all strained credulity, even in a Europe hungry for such fantastic tales. More significantly, such exaggerations were compounded by a simple tragic fact: by the time anybody in Europe read accounts or saw woodcuts of Tenochtitlan, the city was an illusion. It had already been destroyed, its buildings razed, its people extinguished. That, at least, was what people in Europe believed. In fact, the city had not been destroyed, nor had the Mexica all perished. But Spanish accounts gave that impression, reinforced by exaggerated claims that the old Aztec Empire had been instantly replaced by a new Christian kingdom: New Spain. In other words, central to how Tenochtitlan was understood by Spaniards—and consequently by the West, us included—was, and is, its disappearance, its loss, its absence.[26]

The point is well illustrated by the question of population. The Franciscan friar Jerónimo de Mendieta imagined later in the century that "the Indian people were so numerous that most of their towns and roads had the appearance of anthills [*hormigueros*], a thing of admiration to those who saw it but which must have instilled a terrible fear [*terrible terror*] in the few Spaniards that Cortés brought with him".[27] Mendieta unwittingly captured the paradox of the Spanish response to the Mexica population: the teeming masses, filling the streets and canoes, were countless and intimidating; but as such, they were faceless, collective not individual, more like ants than real human beings. That attitude made it easier to imagine the city *without* its indigenous population. In his *Second Letter*, Cortés imagined how perfect such a city would be, were it saved just for Spaniards. Its location on a lacustrine island was noteworthy not just for making the place "very beautiful", he told the king, but because

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26 Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan*, is a book-length assault on the "myth [of] the death of Tenochtitlan as an indigenous city", p. 3.

27 Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, p. 175.

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it could allow the conquistadors to create a segregated urban environment—with Spaniards living "separate from the natives, because a stretch of water comes between us".[28]

That paradox of a city both as a teeming anthill and as a prime location emptied and ready for Spanish settlement was consolidated in the traditional narrative of the "Conquest of Mexico", in particular its grossly distorted tale of the early months of 1520. From November of the previous year until June, the 250 or so conquistadors in the city were there as guests of Moctezuma's, more or less at his mercy. Even if they had retained 100 or 200 African, Taíno and Mesoamerican slaves and servants, the visitors were outnumbered some 150 to 1 and easily contained in the palace complex of Axayacatl and adjacent buildings in the ceremonial center. Around them, the urban population, and the thousands who walked or canoed to the capital daily, carried on their lives. The city of families and festivals functioned as always. Such a picture of those months cannot, of course, be found in the traditional narrative, either in its earliest forms (Cortés, Gómara, Díaz) or its modern ones. For in that narrative, Moctezuma surrenders to Cortés and the Spaniards effectively occupy Tenochtitlan, governing the empire through the captive and submissive emperor. Within that lie—engendered by the need to justify the invasion and its violence—the teeming masses become subservient, as if shrunk in size, easily controlled by a tiny occupying force.[29]

After the siege brought the war in the Valley of Mexico to an end in August of 1521, the notion of an empty city was reiterated; and thus began five centuries of an evolving history of Tenochtitlan's population, complete with the paradox of plenty and absence. In fact, the city's population had not all perished in the siege; quasi-indigenous accounts contain folk memories of survivors in a miserable state, but alive nonetheless.[30] The city was never empty, despite the fact that Spaniards enslaved thousands of the survivors (as they did across Mesoamerica throughout this and subsequent conquest wars).[31] But as the mass enslavement of indigenous people drew increasing scrutiny over subsequent decades, Spanish accounts repeated claims by Cortés, Gómara, and others that the Tlaxcalteca

28 CCR (1522: fols. 16v–17r; 1971 [1519–25], pp. 102–3, 105; 1993 [1519–25], pp. 233–34, 238).

29 For challenges to the traditional narrative of the 235-day period between the Spanish arrival and the death of Moctezuma, see: Brooks, "Construction of an Arrest"; Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, Ch. 6.

30 By "quasi-indigenous", I am referring to sources such as the Franciscan-Tlatelolca account in the *Florentine Codex* (e.g., see Lockhart, *We People Here*, pp. 48–255).

31 Cave, "Madalena"; Reséndez, *The Other Slavery*, pp. 13–99; and Stone, "Indian Harvest".

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allies had slaughtered their Aztec enemies.[32] Modern historians added to this a new explanation—smallpox—picking up on scant, late-16th century evidence to argue that an epidemic of the disease decimated a starving, battered population, leaving the Spaniards to occupy a lifeless city of rotting corpses.[33]

In a final twist, in parallel to the perpetuation of the picture of a Tenochtitlan emptied by war and disease, modern scholars seized upon the idea that the city's original population had been vast—hundreds of thousands of people, larger than any other city in the Americas or Europe—thereby exaggerating the contrast between pre-war plenty and post-war absence. Yet while the valley may have held up to a million inhabitants, the Tenochtitlan of 250,000 or more is pure historiographical myth.

The Spanish official Alonso de Zuazo reported from Cuba in 1521 that Tenochtitlan had 60,000 people and Tetzcoco twice that many.[34] The figure of 60,000 was commonly cited in the 16th century, although sometimes as houses (for example, Jeronymo Girava Tarragonez' "*sesenta mil casas*"), setting in motion a long chain of citations used by modern scholars to claim numbers four or five times higher (and sometimes even an absurd 500,000 or more). The Anonymous Conquistador asserted "most people who have seen the great city of Temistitan Mexico judge it to have sixty thousand inhabitants".[35] He was referring to Mexico City around 1550, and although the quote is often mistakenly read as referring to pre-war Tenochtitlan, in fact, he and Zuazo were probably correct: the almost 14 square kilometers of Tenochtitlan likely did contain 60,000 inhabitants, 80,000 at most, in 1519 (and perhaps, too, in 1550). No levels above the ground floor were residential in the Aztec city, so it could not possibly have been more densely populated than modern Manhattan.[36]

Just as the hybrid gaze of the conquistadors can be seen in text and image, so can the paradox of a city both teeming and empty. Note that the *Nuremberg Map* includes people in canoes on the lake, but none in the city. The map

32 Clendinnen analyzed this aspect of the Cortesian narrative in a much-acclaimed article ("Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty").

33 See Brooks, "Revising the Conquest", for a debunking of the myth of the epidemic during the siege.

34 Zuazo in CDHM, vol. I, p. 366.

35 Girava Tarragonez in Apiano, *La Cosmographia*, p. x; Anonymous Conquistador in CDHM, vol. I, p. 391.

36 Modern references are far too numerous to cite, but examples are Soustelle, *Daily Life*, pp. 31–32; Gruzinski, *The Eagle*, p. 147, citing Smith, *Aztec*; also see Rojas, *Tenochtitlan*, pp. 50–54, 88–90. My argument on the impossibility of a Tenochtitlan with a six-figure population is heavily indebted to Susan Toby Evans, personal communication, and *Ancient Mexico*, p. 549.

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spawned scores of copies through the early modern period. In the 16th-century, iterations by Benedetto Bordone and Giovanni Battista Ramusio likewise left the city empty and the lake lively with canoeing figures, but by the

FIGURE 1.4 "The Great Temple of Mexico", from volume 12 of the Abbé Prévost's *Histoire Generales des Voyages*, first published in Paris in 1754
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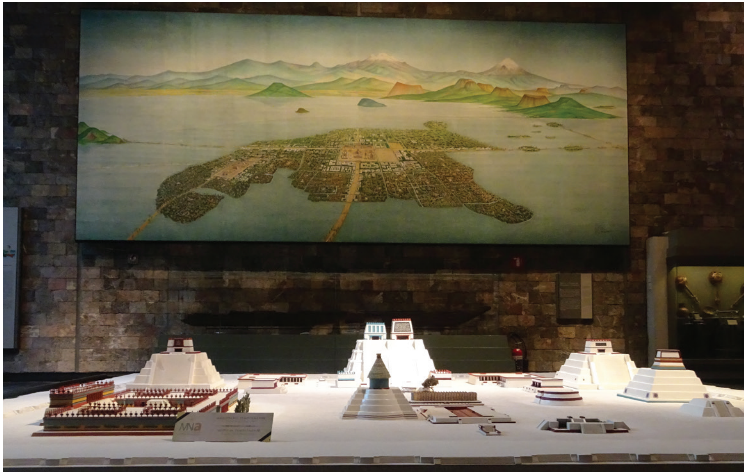

FIGURE 1.5 Tenochtitlan in 1519, as presented to visitors to Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology (painting *c*.1955 by Luis Covarrubias, 1919–1985)
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF AUTHOR

17th, most maps had omitted the people on the lake.[37] The following century reproduced these visual tropes of European depictions from earlier centuries. The rendering of Tenochtitlan in the Abbé Prévost's multi-volume 1754 *Histoire Generales*, for example (Figure 1.4), continued the hybrid imagining, mentioned above, of an Aztec city with impossibly European buildings; but note too, the startling paucity of people.

Modern visions of old Tenochtitlan are likewise more often devoid of Mendieta's ant-like inhabitants. The most obvious example is the best-known modern image of the city, the 1955 bird's-eye painting by Luis Covarrubias in Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology, showing the island-city hovering on the bright blue water ("a jewel in the center of an azure lake"), with snow-capped volcanoes on the horizon (Figure 1.5).[38] The painting is captivating, and thus not surprisingly reproduced and imitated in hundreds of books, magazines, and websites, occasionally with attempts to include people and canoes, but usually showing a city that is empty. Call it the Mary Celeste view of Tenochtitlan—buildings in perfect condition, as if the people were erased in

37 This cartographic history is detailed by Mundy, "Mapping the Aztec Capital", p. 32; and in Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, Ch. 4, drawing upon examples of such maps in the John Carter Brown Library (and reproducing 1556 Ramusio and 1634 De Bry examples).

38 The "jewel" phrase is Mundy's ("Mapping the Aztec Capital", p. 11); on the Covarrubias painting, also see Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan*, pp. 25, 28.

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FIGURE 1.6 From Dan Abnett's *Hernán Cortés and the Fall of the Aztec Empire*, a graphic version for 21st-century young readers

a flash, not unlike the traditional narrative's characterization of "the Conquest" and its miraculously rapid erasure of pre-Christian Mexico. The architectural model of the ceremonial center (Figure 1.5), laid out before Covarrubias' painting, reinforces this impression. Arguably, museum visitors are as consciously aware as the museum's creators and curators that the model is by definition intended to show buildings, not to imply human absence; yet the model and the painting combine to reinscribe the empty city in our subconscious minds, perpetuating a centuries-old tradition.

Because the painting in the National Museum is well known, let me end with an image that is not—but which captures the point well (Figure 1.6). Taken from a graphic history for young readers, titled *Hernán Cortés and the Fall of the Aztec Empire*, the second frame of this sample page shows Tenochtitlan the way we have come to see it in such reconstructions: empty.[39] The book's creators are not to be faulted for failing to include the city's population. On the contrary, they do a fine job of accurately conveying the city's story and its demise as it has been handed down since the 1520s. At the book's end, Tenochtitlan

39 Abnett, *Hernán Cortés*, pp. 6–7.

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is an equally empty, smoking ruin; in the next frame, a Spanish-style city rises phoenix-like in its place. At least the European buildings in early modern representations of the city have been replaced in these modern versions with Aztec structures—whose accuracy archaeologists are increasingly able to demonstrate. But our collective imagination has yet to repopulate the city. Viceregal Mexico City stands in our way, as do the German printers, the Spanish conquistadors, and everyone else who struggled through the early modern centuries to describe and understand Tenochtitlan, along the way making it stranger, emptier, less and less Aztec. We are the heirs of that struggle.

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AGN Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Mexico

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