

# Imperial city of the Aztecs: Mexico-Tenochtitlan



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“Tenochtitlan,” as the Aztecs called the metropolis at the heart of their tribute empire, has always had the capacity to astonish outsiders. The first

Europeans to see it were the small band of Spanish adventurers led by Hernan Cortès who were to become its conquerors. As they crossed a snowy pass into the shallow cup of a wide valley in central Mexico late in November 1519, they saw a sight they could not easily believe. A great white city, lightly moored to the shores by three long causeways, floated on a shimmering lake. The last city they had seen was Seville, the largest in Spain, sheltering more than sixty thousand souls. This lake-borne city was almost four times as large, with thousands more people clustered in the "suburbs" fringing the mainland. And this city, unlike the cramped muddle of houses, streets, and byways that made up medieval Spanish towns, had been planned. Its habitations were neatly packed within a ruler-straight grid of canals and footpaths, so Cortès and his men could see four processional ways converging on a central precinct where temples and pyramids rose in the morning air like man-made mountains. No encrustations of smoke or dirt sullied these fairytale structures: they were brilliant with colored stuccos, and even the humblest dwellings, some of them crested with roof-gardens, shone with whitewash. In old age, Bernal Diaz, a Spanish foot soldier in that long-ago campaign and still our best and most engaging witness, remembered the impact of the "enchanted vision" of the magical city, with its "pyramids and buildings rising from the water . . . Indeed, some of our soldiers," he reported, "asked whether it was not all a dream."

Astonishingly, the Spaniards were welcomed as the ambassadors they claimed to be. As they were ushered into the city they noticed, in the midst of the planning and pageantry, another unfamiliar detail that rather unnerved them. The city and its people were immaculately clean, the paths and squares swept, and the humblest canoemen clean in his rags. There was none of the filth and squalor they regarded as inseparable from city life. While their dreams were of an ordered urbanity (a dream later partially realized in conquered Tenochtitlan), their experience was of public streets and spaces foul with rubbish ejected from houses and shops, and mired in the ordure of horses and, in the darker alleys, of men. Bernal Diaz, dazzled from the first by the glories of Tenochtitlan, was perhaps most impressed by its system of public latrines. Canoes, moored at intervals along the canals, with little huts built over them for privacy, received human wastes, which were then poled away, probably to fertilize the "floating gardens" that supplied the city's luxury trade in corn, fruit, and flowers. All offensive trades—leather tanning and the like—were banished to the far lakeshores. And in this city, the Spaniards realized with a jolt, the sole draft animals were men.

In time the interlopers came to understand that the city was clean, orderly, and magnificent because it was a sacred place: a material testament to the glory of the Aztecs' tribal god Huitizopochtli, "Hummingbird on the South," the god of war and the sun. In Tenochtitlan cleanliness was a demonstration of respect for the gods, not for men, and constant sweeping a sign of devotion.

As the band of Spaniards wandered about, wide-eyed tourists, they were struck by the contrast between the airy palaces of the lords, splendid as Moorish palaces with their pools and courtyards and halls hung with delicate draperies,

and the modest dwellings of artisans and workers. The differences between classes (or were they castes?) were even more tellingly marked by the conscientiously simple dress and meek demeanor of the commoners, and the superb hauteur of the lords. Acclaimed warriors were especially magnificent in regalia and demeanor, while Cortès judged that the glory enveloping Emperor Moctezoma surpassed that of the court of Spain. Women (at least the respectable ones) were properly demure, passing through the streets as swiftly and modestly as Moorish women, and if the huge market was rowdy, as such places usually are, with prostitutes strolling about clacking their chewing gum "like castanets," the trading was controlled and the taxes regularly collected. And law was properly enforced; the public space of the market was the favorite location for the bloody punishment of offences as commonplace as drunkenness.

As they got to know this supremely elegant place better (they were to live there under an increasingly unstable truce for almost eight months), the Spaniards began to realize the people of this astonishing city were less amenable than they seemed; that the great warriors, for instance, who spoke with such soft courtesy, were fired by an arrogance even greater than their own. The dream city increasingly took on aspects of nightmare as apparent similarities dissolved into sinister parodies of their own practices, most dramatically in the business of worship.

The Aztecs were an admirably pious people. Their service to the gods was unwearying, a demanding ritual calendar fervently celebrated. Priests were everywhere. Like Spanish priests, most abstained from women, and their bodies, thinned like those of Spanish ascetics by rigorous fasting and scarred by the disciplines of self-mortification, were decently concealed by long dark robes. But those robes were stained with human blood, and their long hair was clotted with it, and while some of the blood was their own, drawn from the lacerations they inflicted on their ears, tongues, and penises, most came from the human victims they slew daily. An essential part of the rituals conducted before those flowery shrines crowning the shining pyramids was the killing of tribute slaves, or captured warriors. As the months passed the Spaniards saw women, children, and infants die under the knives of the priests, and learnt that even their gentle hostage-host Moctezoma could not be dissuaded from the regular sacrifice of living beings—and, as they were convinced, from eating the flesh of his victims.

The very order of the city, once understood, became its own threat. Despite their medieval walls, Spanish towns were porous. Anyone entering Tenochtitlan did so by permission, and under scrutiny. The Spaniards held Moctezoma prisoner, but they were prisoners too. So they retreated to their narrow quarters, and even there knew themselves to be watched. And when the truce collapsed at last into violence, they learnt in the course of one terrible night, as they fled and died along the causeways, that this beautiful city could transform on an instant into a death-trap, and its courteous citizens into murderous hunters of men.

Over the next two years the Spaniards and a host of Indian allies (like other imperial powers, the Aztecs were well hated) discovered that the only way to break Tenochtitlan's resistance was to destroy it stone by stone, which they slowly, methodically, bitterly did. Now we know the city only from a few excavations, and the words of men who were present at its dying. The shadowy Tenochtitlan we reconstruct from those remains and re-activate through the disciplined historical imagination affronts our expectations of urban life almost as much as the living city did its Spanish destroyers.



Map of Tenochtitlan, possibly made for Cortes. Woodcut from *Praeclara Ferdinandi Cortesii de Nova Maris Oceani Hispania Narratio*, Nürnberg, 1524 (first publication of Cortes's letters.) Courtesy of the New York Public Library.

First, consider again its peculiar location: on a lake, which was once noisome swampland. The city had been founded, as the Aztecs (or "Mexica," as they called themselves) told it, only in the year Two House, which is 1325 in the Christian reckoning. Its site was fixed by the god Huitzilopochtli, who sent a sign to the priests of his wandering tribe of his sacred will. It came in the form of a great eagle. A later Indian scholar recalled the moment as described in the old stories: "and when the eagle saw the Mexicans, he bowed his head low . . . Its nest, its pallet, was of every kind of precious feather . . . and they also saw strewn about the heads of sundry birds, the heads of precious birds strung together, and some birds' feet and bones. And the god called out to them, he said to them, 'O Mexicans, it shall be here!'"

That is an unusual beginning for a city. We expect cities to come into existence by a geographical or political circumstance: a confluence of rivers, a strategic pass, an economic opportunity, an alliance; not by an announcement made by a god reinforced by a sacred bird's symbolic promise of luxuries to come through success in war. But we also notice that perhaps tribal gods choose

shrewdly. It was possible that the local earthly powers might let homeless refugees get away with squatting on swampy, useless land, especially if the tribe's young men could be exploited as mercenaries.

However, while the exigencies of life, environment, and circumstance profoundly influenced the development of Tenochtitlan, their god-imposed destiny was to remain paramount throughout the city's brief, brilliant existence. Tragically, it was its people's knowledge of their sacred destiny that rendered the surrender Cortès expected hourly during those last days of siege psychologically impossible, so guaranteeing their own and the city's destruction.

We also expect cities to be loosely knit: an agglomeration of anonymous individuals enjoying both the freedom and the misery unfettered individualism allows. The old saying "town air makes free" encapsulates folk memories of the escape by European populations from the control of master-ridden feudal countrysides to the promising liberty of "the city." There was no freedom in Tenochtitlan. While the city's life depended on the movement of people (merchants, craftsmen, carriers, peddlers) and goods (food, clothing, raw materials, firewood) brought daily into the city by canoe or causeway, that movement was strictly controlled at a series of checkpoints. The hundreds of other strangers brought into the imperial city as war captives and tribute slaves were closely guarded until they faced the sacrificial knives. Why did Tenochtitlan mistrust outsiders, given its unchallengeable military and economic supremacy?

Its own citizens were equally controlled by an ingenious interlocking system of urban supervision. It began with the smallest domestic unit of the family compound, and then ran through the immediate neighborhood, whose inhabitants were, historically, kin related and often specializing in the same trade, through "wards" ruled by local lords in association with regional councils, to "quarters," and so on up to a sophisticated central administration with some of the characteristics of a professional bureaucracy, but which remained under the jurisdiction of a council of hereditary lords who allocated executive and judicial offices between themselves. Each level owed service to the one above, and each in return gained a share in imperial bounty: a guaranteed "trickle-down" effect. This is the kind of system we might expect to find in post-revolution China, but not in a pre-modern nascent state in central Mexico. What had begun as a simple clan-based organization had transformed in the course of not much more than a hundred years into a highly effective form of urban centralism resting on a strong base of family and local loyalties. Tenochtitlan offered urban opportunities without the loss of the warmth of kin relationships, or the costs—and the liberties—of urban depersonalization.

We are left with a puzzle. Tenochtitlan was economically dynamic. How did its managers stimulate individual ambition and the intensification of economic inequality while sustaining the stability of the clan? For example: if the guild of long-distance merchants looks very like a monopolistic corporation to

us, some merchants became much wealthier than others, while within clans traditional lords could sink into poverty, and carry their kinsfolk and dependants down with them. I think the key is that, despite visible inequities, all males and therefore all families had a ladder to prestige and wealth: warriorhood. Combat was a career open to talent from all ranks, and every boy trained for war in his local warrior house. Most never rose beyond the local level and were called to serve only if there was need of a mass levy to subdue an unruly province. But some, by courage or luck or skill, rose through a clear and honest hierarchy to become stars in the warrior firmament, bringing glory and material rewards both to their kin and their locality. Nowadays the best comparison is with a local lad winning national prestige and wealth as, say, a ballplayer or a boxer, so bathing his family, friends, and neighborhood in the refracted light of his glamour. I think of the warrior hierarchy as a set of external stairs, rather like a fire escape, running up the side of an otherwise rigid social structure. Gross failure was punished, but it was punished outside the system and remote from the kin, by death on the sacrificial stone of another city.

Tenochtitlan's precarious, dynamic order was held together by a passionate devotion to religion and the discharging of the Aztecs' special and ever-expanding obligation to the gods. The Aztecs knew themselves to be a chosen people. It was their task to sustain the movement of the natural order—the sequence of seasons above all—by nourishing the earth with the “sacred water” of human blood, and sustaining the heat and energy of the sun by feeding him (he was unequivocally male) with hot pulsing human hearts. This faith entailed not withdrawal but passionate engagement with the world, and lacked any concern for the individual soul. Instead it committed its believers to labor and to urgent military and sacrificial action. This city was no engine for secularization.

As for more intimate politics: warrior societies are typically uncomfortable places for women, who are regarded as breeders and feeders of fighting men or their off-duty toys. It is true that the Aztec city maintained official brothels, the “Houses of Joy,” staffed by tribute girls whose sexual services were doled out to successful warriors as rewards. Their own women were treated very differently. In metaphysical terms Aztecs dreaded what we would call “the female principle,” which they saw as embodied in the dreadful image of the voracious “Earth Mother,” who “ate the Sun” nightly, and who endlessly devoured her own children in an inescapable cycle of destruction and regeneration. Women who died in the throes of childbirth and in thrall to her sacred powers were believed to become her agents. Transformed into witches, they regularly returned to earth to afflict and destroy children. But women in the social world were free from the taint of the dangerous sacred, and enjoyed substantial *protections*, along with a high degree of freedom. It is true that public politics was an exclusively male domain, but women could pursue a craft, run a business, and control their own property independently, and won social repute by doing so. Wives enjoyed legal protection from marital abuse, and took unchallengeable custody of the younger children in cases of marital breakdown.

Even more surprisingly, they were understood to have a right to sexual fulfillment. The old Aztec nobles who are our chief informants of how life was lived in pre-conquest Tenochtitlan also acknowledged women's lively participation in informal social occasions, and the cruel wit they used to puncture male pretensions. It seems that only the priests and the greatest warriors were safe from their tongues.

This account can no more than skim the surface of a remarkable experiment in urban living, an experiment that falls quite outside our assumptions and our experience. Cities are as complex and various as the humans who inhabit them, and every close study rebukes our parochialism. Confronted by the complicated actuality of Tenochtitlan, we are reminded of how implausible it is to dream of imposed conformity.

**Further Reading:** If you would like to know more of the texture of life in Tenochtitlan on the eve of the Spanish conquest, you could begin with the paperback edition of my *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (New York, Cambridge, Melbourne, 1991) especially part one, "The City." For pure pleasure and the excitement of an eyewitness account, I recommend Bernal Diaz del Castillo's *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain (Mexico)*, various editions.

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