

Discussion: Writing a Good History Paper (Friday, November 14, 2025)

For this assignment, you are the professor and are charged with grading the attached papers: (1) a historiographical essay on the origins of slavery in the Caribbean, (2) a research paper on Cortés and the legend of Quetzalcoatl, and (3) a creative piece on the aftermath of the conquest of Mexico as seen through the eyes of a child. After reading each paper, assign a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or E), and then type up a short paragraph, providing the author with feedback on what worked, what didn't, and how the piece can more generally be improved. (In doing so, you might consider such things as theses, use of evidence, structure, style, employment of source material, or any other factors that you feel are important in good writing.) **PLEASE BRING YOUR TYPED FEEDBACK—THREE PARAGRAPHS TOTAL—TO CLASS ON FRIDAY WHERE IT WILL BE TURNED IN IN LIEU OF A QUIZ.**

[No Title]

The formation of the New World and the Caribbean was a long, drawn out process, that involved many steps, some forward, and some arguably backwards from the time of Columbus to the colonization. In the case of the Caribbean islands, everything happened so fast; from the first discovery to the exploitation of everything the lands had to offer, to finally the exploitation of races to sow the seeds of the imperialist gains. The question at hand being why slavery, based on the mass importation and enslavement of Africans developed in the Caribbean has many different answers. Because the expedition to colonialism all happened so fast, one can only wonder if this was all in the makings before the lands were even discovered with their rich resources and meager populations. It is that which began to characterize the Caribbean islands; a land with rich resources, a small population, and a utility that was unknown at the time. As colonists and imperial powers began imposing, it became clear what road the Caribbean would take; that of the plantation system and forced labor, because there really was no other choice.

The slave trade actually seemed to be in the makings before the first slave was even transported to the islands. With Columbus's voyage already being funded, the expeditionary colonists would be sure to find land, and this in turn would lead to some sort of agriculture and plantation system, based on the resources and terrain of the islands, as well as the climate. There was a process, just as any process in the exploration of a new land, where the explorers discovered things that they could work with, things that the crown could become rich with, and they began to think in ways that it could be used to their advantage. The New world was a new realm so when Columbus arrived, although doing so peacefully, he saw many things such as resources, forests, indigenous

peoples and other factors that intrigued him. After thinking he found China and the East and his goal of Christianizing the Great Kahn still being in tact, there was an immediate greed factor that played into this. He wanted what he saw and he knew that he could have it if he wanted to. “There was very much cotton there, very fine and long, and there are many mastic trees, and it seemed to him that the bows were made of yew and that there is gold and copper. There is also much chili, which is there pepper, of a sort worth more than pepper, and nobody eats without it because they find it very healthy.” (CP 71) Thus were some of the accounts made by Columbus about the new lands he was encountering. He knew that the islands contained much potential wealth and he knew that the islands could bring much more wealth to the imperial powers. With the imperialist countries now informed about the resources, gold, and terrain in the New World; they were intrigued. Columbus’s journal only affirmed this as he spoke about many islands with metals and islands with such dense forest that had fruits, waterfalls, gold, and other priceless resources that weren’t available in Europe. Additionally, Dr. Chanca, who was the doctor of the royal family, added “On this island the trees were so dense that it was marvelous, and there were such varieties of trees, unknown to anyone, as was astonishing, some with fruit, some with flowers, so that everything was green.” (CP 72) “The land was very high and most of it bare, which was not the case with any other, either those we had seen before or those which we have seen since. The land seemed of the sort that would have metals in it.” Dr. Chanca serves as a secondary account for what was being discovered and it shows that the stories of Columbus weren’t exaggerations, there really was a lot to be had in this new place; especially metals.

When news got back to Europe about all that was being discovered in the New World and after finding out about the resources that the New World had to offer, in order to exploit the resources that were there, there had to be some supply of labor; this seemed to be a must; to do the things that the imperialists wanted to do with the land they had found. The Indians weren't going to work, as they were very susceptible to the diseases of the colonists and died off quickly as well as fought the colonists at every chance they could. When the conquest of the Caribbean began, Indians were eventually wiped out from 3 million to 11, so this too became a problem, because who was going to work? The first genocide brought many ideas about race as it was forming and it had a lot to do with the Jews in Spain, which was eventually transmitted into the Caribbean. "By custom and often by law, any persons of European birth or ancestry of economic circumstance, intellectual ability or educational achievement, enjoyed a social status superior to that of every non-white person....the color of ones skin immediately and effectively fixed both social position and occupation, with blackness indicating low status and arduous manual labor and whiteness superiority and leisure," Franklin Knight stated. This ridiculous statement of ranking human beings seems almost normal at the time, when class ranking by race was done on a regular basis. Originally, the Indians were below the rank of the Africans, but this may have been because they were the primary source of forced labor to the Europeans. Less than a century later, the Africans found themselves on the bottom of the class system ranking. They too had now become the subjects of the forced labor and with it came the peasantry. This type of class ranking seemed to be characteristic of the New World colonists entire thought process as later in Haiti, they begin to develop scales of race. The under-exploitation of Africa played a key

role too, as soon the Imperialist powers were then beginning to travel down the coast of Africa and there they saw settlements that had huge amounts of big, strong black Africans, and a spark was ignited. Because of the Spanish war tradition, resistors of Spain could be enslaved and this was carried out; in Africa and in the Caribbean with the Indians. The slave raid industry began and any resistance was justification for enslavement. This was the beginning of a something big; something that would shape our world to this day. The conditions were bad but laws were made for the indigenous people to lead better enslaved lives; and thus it all began.

Initially, slaves didn't have to be Africans, but for many reasons, the Black Africans were seen as better and more adapt to what the colonies wanted to achieve as there was plantation agriculture in the islands modeled after Brazil and their sugar trade. Sugar became to be like gold to the colonists and whatever they had to do to get it they did. It was a commodity that every wanted but not a lot of people knew how to develop it. The imperialist powers used the islands and transformed it how they wanted it to be: like Europe. White men soon encouraged white laborers to come and serve and many came. Soon after, the Dutch pushed out the inhabitants of Brazil and they go to Barbados, fleeing the Dutch. These refugees knew about sugar and how to manufacture it, and thus the Dutch West India Company is formed. Black slaves are immediately viewed as better workers because of their ease in controlling, they were traumatized through their passage, they were branded, they were property and they were non-English. As Sidney Mintz states, "Although slaves were used for many purposes in the Hemisphere- their primary function was to serve as manual laborers, engaged in production, in production in excess of consumption, that is, in the production of market

commodities, in production for the gain of the master and the metropolis. Slaves were not primarily a source of prestige, of sexual gratification, of the satisfaction of sadistic impulses, or of anything else but profit- and of profit within a frankly capitalistic system, even though the curious view that slavery and capitalism are mutually exclusive still persists. The slaves of the Caribbean like those of the American South and Brazil, were used for the creation of wealth in enterprises intimately related to world trade.” This excerpt sheds light on the simple purpose Africans were used for. Their lives were ruined for someone else’s wealth and their families were destroyed. It is a sad story as the history is laid out for all to see, and the feelings one must foster when reading such accounts makes one ask simply “why?” At the same time, if not for the Africans, who knows where the world, and especially the Caribbean would be today. If not for the Africans, it would have been another peoples being enslaved. Black slaves were so much more favored over any other types of laborers. They were slaves for life, they were chattel, and weren’t expected to have families. Additionally, they were sold regardless of anything. The British and French were responsible for the original importation as a production for another commodity. Sugar came with slavery, and so it went.

Summing up, the imperialization and exploration of the New World essentially is the underlying factor behind the development of the slave trade and the enslavement of Africans. These black Africans were better suited for the type of labor that was necessary, on these huge sugar plantations and coffee plantations. A huge development in the eyes of the imperial powers was formed, as they had their sugar, and their labor, although they didn’t know what kinds of problems this would cause in the future. This

was the most suitable answer to the colonists labor problem and they ran with it; there really was no other choice.

The Conquest, Cortés and Quetzalcoatl: A Question of Historicity

The conquest of the Aztec nation by Hernán Cortés and a handful of Spanish soldiers has been explained by historians in a number of different ways. A traditional explanation is that the Aztecs considered Cortés to be the returning Quetzalcoatl and that this Spanish conqueror subsequently used this knowledge to his advantage. This interpretation is generally corroborated by existing primary sources. According to these, the legend of Quetzalcoatl played a major role in the conquest. Recent historical works, however, have disputed this claim. According to their interpretation, the legend of Quetzalcoatl is nothing more than a post-conquest fabrication—used by the Aztecs to explain their *inevitable* defeat and by the Spaniards to justify their apparent success. Did the legend of Quetzalcoatl play a central role in Cortés' conquest of the Aztec empire? Although this question may never be satisfactorily answered, we can begin to address it by examining the complex interplay between Europeans and *Nahuas* on the eve of the conquest.

The legend of Quetzalcoatl exists in various forms. In essence, it can be divided into two parts: the mythical Quetzalcoatl that created the world and his priest of the same name that ruled over the Toltecs in legendary Tollan.¹ The latter aspect of Quetzalcoatl is the one that is pertinent to the conquest. According to legend, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl (translated "Our Lord-feathered-serpent") was born in the year *Ce-Acatl* ("One Reed") in the sacred 52 year cyclical calendar.² He was born of Chimalman whose virgin conception was announced by heavenly messenger.³ He was a human priest of the mythical Quetzalcoatl, ruled the legendary Toltecs of

¹David Johnson, "The Messiah of Mesoamerica," *Arizona Quarterly* 38 (Autumn 1982): 241-242. Eloise Q. Keber, "Central Mexican Pictorial Manuscripts," *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 3 (Spring 1987): 77. David R. Carrasco, "Quetzalcoatl's Revenge: Primordium and Application in Aztec Religion," *History of Religions* 19 (May 1990): 307.

²Stephen A. Colston, "'No Longer Will There Be a Mexico': Omens, Prophecies, and the Conquest of the Aztec Empire," *American Indian Quarterly* 9 (Summer 1985): 247; Keber, 92.

³Keber, 82-83. Braden, 31. Note the similarities between this story and that of the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary as announced by the angel Gabriel. This and other similarities were attributed by early Spanish friars to be the work

Tollan, and substituted human sacrifice for that of butterflies.⁴ In order to appease the Gods for the sins of his people he "built temples and performed penances, including the shedding of his blood."⁵ Native sources indicate that he the inspired the arts and culture of Tollan and was the source of all that was good.⁶ As with his mythical counterpart, Quetzalcoatl the creator, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl, the priest and king, was constantly at odds with his nemesis Tetzcatlipoca.⁷ Legend states that after a series of duals Tetzcatlipoca tricked Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl into becoming drunk and committing incest with his sister. Ashamed and disgraced, this priest and king left Tollan and journeyed to the sea. There "he ordered a boat to be made of serpents, and entering into it, as into a canoe, he sailed away over the sea and it is not known how he arrived."⁸ At this point (as in others) there are variations in the legend. In some accounts Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl dies while in others he is "resurrected" as the morning star venus.⁹ In yet another account it is said that before sailing away he promised that one day he would return to rule again. Moreover, it was predicted that his second coming would be (as in the first instance) in the year *Ce-Acatl* of the sacred, cyclical calendar.¹⁰

Cortés came to the shores of the New World interestingly enough in the year 1519, *Ce-Acatl*, and, according to traditional history, was mistaken by the Aztecs to be the returning Quetzalcoatl.¹¹ Thus, native accounts indicate that upon receiving news of Cortés' landing Motecuzhoma thought "that this is Topiltzin Quetzalcoat who had come to land."¹² Similarly,

of the devil while today scholars often attribute such similarities to the work of the Spanish friars or to that of their native proselytes.

⁴Johnson, 242.

⁵Keber, 83.

⁶Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and the University of Utah Press, 1975), III 13-14.

Hereafter cited as the *Florentine Codex*.

⁷Braden, 34.

⁸*Florentine Codex* III, 31-36.

⁹Keber, 94.

¹⁰Braden, 35.

¹¹Keber, 79, 85.

¹²*Florentine Codex*, III, 9.

Cortés corroborates this interpretation in his second letter to Charles V. According to Cortés' account, Motecuzhoma addresses the *conquistadores* in the following manner:

Long time have we been informed by the writings of our ancestors that neither myself nor any of those who inhabit this land are natives of it, but rather strangers who have come to it from foreign parts. We likewise know that from those parts our nation was led by a certain lord (to whom all were subject), and who then sent back to his native land . . . And we have always believed that among his descendants one would surely come to subject this land and us as rightful vassals. Now seeing the regions from which you say you come, which is from where the sun rises, and the news you tell of this great king and ruler who sent you hither, we believe and hold it certain that he is our natural lord.¹³

According to both accounts, Motecuzhoma mistook Cortés for the returning Quetzalcoatl.

This traditional interpretation of the conquest of Mexico—in which the legend of the returning Quetzalcoatl plays an important role—has recently come under fire by revisionist scholars. These assert that the legend was, in fact, a post-conquest fabrication. While non-traditional interpretations have recently become vogue, they are not necessarily new.¹⁴ As early as 1930, Alfredo Chaverro asserted (in something of a blanket statement) that "all these prophecies and songs and legends which appear to have been confirmed by the arrival of the Spaniards . . . are works subsequent to the conquest."¹⁵ More recently, Stephen A. Colston specifically asserts that for the Spaniards "the Quetzalcoatl prophecy was manipulated so as to transform the Conquest from a tale of moral uncertainty to an epic of righteousness." He further surmises that "dignity" of the defeated "could be maintained by viewing the causes of this cataclysm through a filter devised from other prophetic accounts."¹⁶ Susan D. Gillespie argues along similar lines in her recent work *The Aztec Kings* by citing the studies of those who have "scrutinized Cortés' letters [and] concluded that these speeches [of Motecuzhoma] are totally

¹³Hernando Cortes, *Five Letters: 1519-1526*, trans. F. Bayard Morris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), 70-71.

¹⁴A prime example in this shift from traditional to non-traditional interpretation can be found in Michael Coe's *Mexico*. The first three editions of the book indicate that Motecuzhoma believed that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl while the fourth edition holds such a belief in "suspicion." Compare Michael D. Coe, *Mexico* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 176-178 and Michael D. Coe, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 197.

¹⁵Braden, 40.

¹⁶Colston, 254.

apocryphal." She dismisses Motecuzhoma's reference to a "returning Lord" as "an attempt [by Cortés] to ingratiate himself with the Spanish king, who had never given Cortés any authority to speak for him." Gillespie concludes that "the supposition that Cortés discovered, and used to his own advantage, a belief in the return of Quetzalcoatl, who could unseat the powerful Motecuhzoma, is unfounded."¹⁷

As shown in the previous examples these critics generally call into question the validity, historicity, and reliability of the primary sources. Along these lines, they highlight the "desperate political situation" of Cortés in writing his letters to Charles V,¹⁸ the partisan Christian background of the Spanish Friars in recording and interpreting native traditions,¹⁹ and the supernatural inevitability of the conquest as detailed in native accounts.²⁰ Indeed, that the legend of Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl (as understood today) was influenced by both post-conquest society and sources is inevitable. However, the inevitability of this colonial influence does not rule out the existence of the legend at the time of the Conquest nor Cortés' exploitation of Quetzalcoatl's "prophesied" return.

As previously noted, nearly all of the primary sources from the period corroborate the traditional interpretation that Cortés had knowledge of the legend of Quetzalcoatl and used this knowledge for personal gain. These sources include Bernal Diaz del Castillo's *Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*. While recent interpretations of the Conquest question the historicity of these primary sources, the sources themselves boldly assert their own validity. Thus, Sahagún explains in his introduction that

all writers seek to authenticate their writings as fully as possible, some by trustworthy witnesses, others by reference to previous writers who have secured sure testimony as to the facts, still others by reference to the Holy Scriptures. But these means are wholly lacking in my case for the twelve books I have written, and I see no other way of

¹⁷Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 180-181,183.

¹⁸Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs an Interpretation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 277. Braden, 317.

¹⁹Gillespie, 183-185. Braden, 309-314.

²⁰Colston, 254.

authenticating what I have written than by stating here the extreme care which I exercised in securing the data.

Sahagún then relates how the compilation of his twelve volume encyclopedia was, indeed, accomplished with meticulous care.²¹ Similarly, while it must be conceded that Bernal Diaz completed his memoirs more than fifty years after the conquest he asserts that his record is true. Wrote Diaz to the detractors of his own day and time, "That which I have myself seen and the fighting I have gone through . . . I will describe quite simply, as a fair eye witness without twisting events one way or another."²²

While recent scholars question the historicity of the speech made by Motecuhzoma (and recorded by Cortés) about a returning Lord or Lords from the East, Bernal Diaz confirms Cortés' account. In this primary source Motecuzhoma again addresses Cortés and says: "We take it for certain that you are those whom our ancestors predicted would come from the direction of the sunrise." The consistency between these two accounts is of special consequence since Bernal Diaz wrote his version to "correct what he alleges to have been given incorrectly by other writers," including "challenging statements attributed to Cortés."²³ In this instance, however, Diaz does not contradict Cortés; rather, he corroborates him.

The historicity of the legend of Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl is further substantiated by similar legends throughout the New World. Jacques Lafaye indicates that

the prophecy of Quetzalcoatl was a specific Mexican instance of a belief common to the majority of the Indian peoples, the belief that men from the East would come to dominate them. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca heard of it during his trek across the Southwest; Gómara cites it for Española; the Chibchas, the Tupi of Brazil, the Guarani of Paraguay, had similar beliefs.²⁴

²¹Braden, 312.

²²Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, trans. A.P. Maudslay, (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), Preface by the author.

²³Braden, 41.

²⁴Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness 1531-1813*, trans. Benjamin Keen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 151.

David Carrasco makes a similar argument in his work on the conquest, asserting that "parts of a tradition about Quetzalcoatl of Tollan appear in over fifty documents . . . during the sixteenth century." While Carrasco admits that this documentation was realized "under Spanish influence and patronage," the sheer number of corroborating accounts argues for the legend's historicity.²⁵ In summary, the primary sources indicate that the legend of Quetzalcoatl was not only a pre-conquest reality but also a post-conquest preoccupation for both the Spaniards as well as the Mexica.

The primary sources indicate that Cortés had a knowledge of the legend of Quetzalcoatl. The *Florentine Codex* indicates that upon receiving news of the arrival of the Spaniards on his coasts, Motecuzhoma sent an "array of Quetzalcoatl" to the coming *conquistadores* and that their captain Cortés graciously put it on.²⁶ Sahagun's later account of the conquest sheds light upon the knowledge and actions of Cortés in this particular instance. In this account the Aztecs come to the Spanish flagship and indicate "that they came from Mexico in search of their lord and king, Quetzalcoatl, and that they knew he was there."

The Spaniards were astonished . . . and made no response, They began to whisper among themselves, saying, "What can this mean when they say that they know their king and god is here and that they wish to see him?" Don Hernando Cortés heard this reply, with all the others, and they began to confer among themselves about the matter; and after a good deal of discussion, they agreed that don Hernando Cortés should dress himself in the best apparel that he had. They prepared for him a throne on the quarterdeck where he was to sit and look like a king. And so disguised, those Mexican Indians who had come in search of Quetzalcoatl were to enter to see him and to speak to him.²⁷

This account purports to explain how Cortés learned of the legend of Quetzalcoatl and subsequently implies that he exploited it for personal gain.

²⁵Carrasco, 297.

²⁶*Florentine Codex* XII, 12. This is something of a controversial reference since it is not mentioned in any of Cortes' letters to Charles V or in Bernal Diaz's account. Some scholars believe that Sahagun has confounded the giving of this present to a group of Spaniards that had arrived on the coast in the previous year.

²⁷Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *Conquest of New Spain*, trans. Howard F. Cline (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 41.

While Bernal Diaz does not corroborate this particular account, he does recall similar instances in which Cortés exploited indigenous perceptions in order to deceive the indigenous populations. Diaz indicates that during the visit of one of Motecuzhoma's governors, Cortés gave the orders to "load the lombards with a great charge of powder so that they should make a great noise when they were fired off." Cortés then "made as though he wished . . . to speak to them [Motecuzhoma's ambassadors]" at which moment he ordered his men to fire the cannons. On this same occasion, Diaz recalls that Cortés instructed one of his lieutenants to attach "bells to the horses' breastplates" in order to impress the Motecuzhoma's ambassadors with the horsemanship of the Spanish. Said Cortés, "It would be well if we could gallop on these sand dunes but they will observe that even when on foot we get stuck in the sand—let us go out to the beach when the tide is low and gallop two and two." After describing the entire incident, Diaz concludes that the natives "were frightened by things so new to them."²⁸ In another instance, Diaz recalls a time when Cortés' indigenous allies sought aid from the Spanish against the Mexica. Diaz's account of Cortés' subsequent comments to his fellow *conquistadores* is telling: "Do you know, gentlemen, that it seems to me that we have already gained a great reputation for valour throughout this country . . . the people here take us for gods or beings like their idols." In order to promulgate this deception, Cortés feigns to send only one Spanish soldier to take on an entire army of Aztec warriors. This leads the native chiefs to send word that "they [are] bringing a Teule [god] to kill all the Mexicans who were in Cingapacinga [the village being plundered]." Bernal Diaz's final comment is of worth: "I tell this story here merely as a laughable incident, and to show the wiles of Cortés."²⁹

²⁸Diaz, 72.

²⁹Diaz, 97-98. Other translations of Diaz's account are also of interest. "All this is done in order that the Indians may suppose us to be deities" and "I have mentioned this laughable circumstance that the reader may see what artifices Cortes employed to throw dust into the eyes of the Indians." For both translations see Braden, 92.

Since Bernal Diaz is Spanish none of these examples necessarily proves that the natives took the *conquistadores* to be gods or that they believed Cortés to be the returning Quetzalcoatl. It does, however, make it very clear that the Spaniards believed this to be the case. This is further substantiated by Bernal Díaz who constantly refers to the fact that the natives referred to the Spaniards as "Teules".³⁰ The meaning of "Teules", of course, is gods or idols. Francisco López de Gómara, Cortés' personal secretary and official biographer, corroborates the Spanish belief that the Aztecs believed that the *conquistadores* were part of the legend of the returning god Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl. Wrote Francisco López,

The Indians stared at the dress, fierce countenances, and beards of the Spaniards; they were astonished to see the horses eat and run; they were frightened by the flashing of the swords; and they fell to the ground at the roar of the cannon . . . They said that the god Quetzalcoatl had come, bearing his temples on his shoulders, for he was the god of the air who had gone away and whose return they were expecting.³¹

These various accounts indicate that the Spanish believed that the natives perceived them to be returning gods or lords. In turn, this is consistent with the natives' own interpretation of the conquest, i.e., the return of Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl, Lord of Tollan. And yet, the alleged role that the Quetzalcoatl legend played in the Conquest still remains somewhat ambiguous. In order to understand this relationship one must return again to the Machiavellian nature of Hernán Cortés.

Cortés' motives in bringing about the Fall of Mexico are probably very complex, but two reasons are readily apparent: religion and money. Cortés was an ardent believer in Catholicism. Diaz recalls that Cortés asked his men the following question: "How can we ever accomplish anything worth doing if for the honour of God we do not first abolish these sacrifices made to idols?"³² Similarly, in his second letter to Charles V he speaks of it being "plainly manifest that

³⁰Ibid., 75, 92, 97, 118, 136, 142, 143, 144, 163, 176, 188, 194, 231, 245. Note that the actual nahuatl version of this work is "teotl."

³¹Francisco Lopez de Gomara, *Cortes: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), 57-58.

³²Diaz, 103.

God was fighting on our side."³³ This deep religious conviction was seen not only in his life but also in his death. "[F]ifty poor men shall be provided out of my means . . . [and] each shall receive one real," wrote Cortés in his Last Will and Testament. "[And] the hospital of our Lady of the Conception, which I ordered to be founded in the city of Mexico in New Spain, shall be finished at my cost."³⁴ These examples also involve Cortés' second motive for conquest: money. Diaz clearly indicates that Cortés intended to receive a fifth of the conquest's spoils (after, of course, the royal fifth had been removed).³⁵

Cortés used whatever means were at his disposal in order to accomplish his ends. In his second letter to Charles V, he boasts of not only using treachery in dealing with both the Aztecs and the Tlaxcalans but also of ordering that the hands of fifty natives (who were alleged spies) be cut off after which he sent them back to their lord.³⁶ Similarly, upon arriving on the shores of Vera Cruz, Cortés ordered that his ships be scuttled so that his men had no choice but to follow him.³⁷ Based upon these events alone, it becomes clear that Cortés used whatever means at his disposal to subjugate the natives to the Spanish throne, to convert them from their gods to Catholicism, and to rob them of their material wealth.

In conclusion, although it is impossible today to know how the *Nahuas* of central Mexico initially perceived of the Spanish conquistadores, it is plain that the Spanish themselves believed that they were conceived of as gods. This has been the traditional interpretation.³⁸ Indeed, the primary sources are unanimous on this point. In this regard, it seems not only reasonable but also quite probable that Cortés used the Quetzalcoatl legend to his advantage. Thus, whether by grim chance or Spanish design, the legend of Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl was fulfilled.

³³Cortes, *Five Letters*, 43.

³⁴Hernando Cortes, *The Last Will and Testament of Hernando Cortes*, trans. G.R.G. Conway, (Mexico City: Privately printed, 1939), 29.

³⁵Diaz, 82-83, 250.

³⁶Cortes, *Five Letters*, 52-53, 45.

³⁷Diaz, 18-110.

³⁸Braden, 105.

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Religious Conquest

*“Escucha mis palabras con cuidado. Tómallo ese rosario en las manos. No tengas miedo. Ahora tu eres un hijo de Dios. Comprendes?”*¹ The boy’s dark, fear-stricken eyes gazed uncomprehendingly up into the intense eyes of the sallow skinned religious man. The priest raised a string of beads before his face, dangling it there temptingly for the little boy to grab. But hot, stagnant air pressed him in on all sides and he remained motionless, cornered. *“Escucha!”* the voice of the priest rang out harshly this time and he pressed the rosary into the boy’s hands, grasping them and giving him a rough shake. *“Ahora, repite.”*²

Hands cradling the heavy, metal cross the boy averted his face from the foreign man standing over him to study the beads spilling between his fingers. They felt smooth and heavy in his palm. He recognized the material as jade. It was highly valued among his people and his own family had possessed several jade figurines.³ Perhaps this was his family’s jade. He did not know what had become of it after he and his mother had been forced to surrender their home and belongings to the Spaniards following the siege of Tenochtitlan. The jade, as with all the Spanish laid claim to was first broken down and then shaped into whatever they desired it should become. Objects resistant to such recreation were discarded and replaced. Despite the language differences limiting their communication, the boy understood both what was wanted of him and what would happen to him should he fail to complete the ritual. Rolling the beads between the pads of his index finger and thumb the boy recalled images of Spanish retribution.

¹ “Listen to my words carefully. Take this rosary in your hands. Don’t be afraid. Now you are a child of God. Do you understand?”

² “Listen!” “Now, repeat.”

³ Jade had to be traded into the city and its sources in Mesoamerica were few and far between and thus possession of this mineral denoted at least some economic status. Although jade would have been repossessed by the Spanish, it is unlikely that it would have been made into a child’s rosary. Nevertheless, it serves here to jumpstart the protagonist’s memory. For a discussion of jade in Mesoamerica see Mark A. Bukholder and Lyman S. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4, 9-10.

Yesterday there had been a formal execution before the royal palace. Cortes ordered the execution of some of the captured warriors. Everyone had turned out to see it as was their custom. Death was nothing new to the boy's society and was often a public event. In order for there to be life there must also be death. Such is the dichotomy of the universe and so the great Montezuma made daily human sacrifices to Huitzilopochtli in order that the sun would rise over Tenochtitlan each morning. But for the Mexicans in attendance the burnings were a gross mockery of their sacred ceremony. The boy watched in horror as the flames and smoke enveloped its victims. Their dishonorable deaths had served no purpose and their lives had been wasted.⁴ Those who died at the hands of priest at least perished in the knowledge that they were performing a kind of duty to the gods and to the people.

Shutting his eyes to the disgusting vision the boy selected a different bead and examining it intently regressed further in his memory to the week before the Spanish had arrived in his city. Rumors of their coming spread from every mouth until it was impossible to tell fact from fiction. Some whispered that they were magicians of some sort, enchanting the beasts they rode and using their powers to defeat those who stood in their way. Some even claimed that they must be gods who had emerged from the vast waters of the eastern coast and that they were both indestructible and inevitable.⁵ If it is the will of the gods that these newcomers rule Tenochtitlan then it would be so regardless of human influence. However, there were still more who doubted the divinity of the strangers. The boy remembered the hushed voices of his parents discussing

⁴ Bernal Díaz describes one occasion on which Cortes has several natives burned for plotting against the Spanish which Montezuma sees as a great indignity, as recounted in Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 246. In this case, I chose to interpret his anger more as a reaction to the insult to his culture, leading one to assume that other Mexicans would find this practice equally baffling in addition to being appalling.

⁵ Díaz admits on several occasions that Cortes did what he could to preserve the natives' notion that the Spaniards had some inhuman qualities—for example, hiding the bodies of soldiers killed in battle so that the natives would not know that the Spanish were mortal, too. It is probable that given Montezuma's extensive use of spies, word of this aspect of the strangers' nature would have been passed around as gossip. For examples of Cortés' actions in this regard, see especially Díaz, 133, 314.

their own theories as he lay pretending to sleep. He hadn't known what to think. They sounded worried but he knew Montezuma to be the most powerful Mexican ruler. Surely Montezuma would know what to think. Montezuma would follow the guidance of ancient Huitzilopochtli and all would be well...

The actual arrival of the Spanish had been something altogether different. The boy and his family attended their entrance into the city and first meeting with Montezuma. With skin pale like that of the dead the Spaniards rode into the city. Apart from the unfamiliar adornments in retrospect the boy understood must have come from their homeland, the Spanish entourage was richly clad in the gifts of the Mexicans themselves. They bore all of the gold and other precious offerings which had been given in the hopes of staving them off in an insolent display of disregard for the petitions of the greatest Mexican of all. Standing in the throng of people, the boy was surrounded by murmurings of disapproval and astonishment at the obvious social blunders made by Cortes. From that moment forward, a feeling of foreboding never left him. Whoever these people were, they came determined to step on the traditional customs of his people.⁶

Tearing his eyes away from his hands the boy looked up at the aging priest this time with bitter anger crowding the fear out of his eyes. He wondered how long he had stood there silently, lost in thought. A second? A minute? An hour? He had been standing still since the Spanish entered Tenochtitlan. Unable to move and unable to speak, he watched. And now he watched the pallid lips of the priest move and for all he understood there might as well have been

⁶ Díaz describes Cortes' misguided attempt to "embrace" Montezuma at which point the guards immediately restrain him. Nowhere does he describe any Spanish attempt to modify their behavior so as not to be offensive. See Díaz, 218.

no sound to the religious man's words.⁷ The priest finished speaking and looked expectantly at the boy who merely stared back unresponsive.

Suddenly, the wooden door to the room was opened allowing bright sunlight to flow in and blind the boy's eyes when he turned to see who it was. A soldier thrust another boy into the room, who fell to his knees looking fearfully at the two figures occupying the room, before slamming the door shut. Observing the new arrival, the boy decided he was much younger than himself. He thought hopefully that this boy had come to take his place with the religious man and he could go back to his family. It had been hours since the religious man had come to collect him and brought him to this place. Instead, the priest went over and retrieved the younger boy from where he had fallen and brought him to stand next to his first pupil. He began, "*Escucha mis palabras con cuidado. Tómallo eso rosario en las manos. No tengas miedo. Ahora tu eres un hijo de Dios. Comprendes?*"⁸ With this said he stepped forward and handed the younger boy a string of beads which he proceeded to clutch in trembling fingers as if his life depended on it. This unconscious action garnered an approving nod from the Spaniard. Tears sprung in the younger boy's eyes and he glanced guiltily at the older boy entreating him silently for some kind of help. The older boy looked back helplessly. His defiance vanished and he wished that he could somehow ease the younger's anxiety. "*Ahora, repite.*"⁹

The priest began in a severe tone "*La oración inicial es 'Ave María Purísima.'*"¹⁰ The two boys followed him through the complicated set of prayers, including "los misterios," although they struggled with the language and kept forgetting to continue counting their beads as

⁷ While many missionaries began learning Nahuatl upon their arrival in the newly conquered Aztec empire, given the timeframe of this story, which is to have occurred very shortly after the final battle for Tenochtitlan, I have chosen to utilize the language barrier to emphasize the alienation the natives would have felt from the culture and especially the religion being forced upon them.

⁸ "Listen to my words carefully. Take this rosary in your hands. Don't be afraid. Now you are a child of God. Do you understand?"

⁹ "Now, repeat."

¹⁰ "The initial prayer is 'Hail, Purest Mary'"

they moved from one homage to the foreign god to the next.¹¹ The boys merely parroted whatever the priest said, numb to the feeling and meaning behind the words.

When the exercise was finally over, the older boy indicated that he was ready to hand the rosary back to the religious man but the man roughly refused it and motioning for the boys to follow, led them out of the small, dim room they had been standing in and into the adjacent room. Both boys stopped upon entrance to the long narrow room and caught their breath. The walls were lined with beds filled with children much like themselves: kinless casualties of the conquest. A cross stood out prominently on the far wall and several children were being tended by Mexican women. Having completed his duty towards them, the priest left them once he had motioned them to empty beds near the door. Each took his place, not knowing what else was to be done. Utterly alone, except for the sporadic lonely cough, curled with his head to his knees in the darkened room the older boy seized on the rosary and began feverishly counting the beads. “One: Huitzilopochtli, lead my people from this place . . .”¹²

¹¹ The set of rituals associated with rosary beads has not changed much in the time since the conquest of Mexico. It was right about that time (the 1520’s to be exact) that the prayers came into their modern forms with the exception of “the mysteries” which today contain all of the elements from the 1500’s with the addition of one new section. For a history of the rituals associated with the rosary beads see Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997), 13-30.

¹² Complete artistic liberty was taken with regard to my interpretation of what the Spanish might have done with the orphaned children of the people they killed during the conquest. For a more complete historical discussion of this subject see Connie Horstman and Donald V. Kurtz, “Compadrazgo and Adaptation in Sixteenth Century Central Mexico,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35 (Autumn 1979): 361-372.

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