Aztec Poetry

“How can we save our homes, my people / The Aztecs are deserting the city: / the city is in flames, and all / is darkness and destruction.”

Unknown Aztec poet, “The Fall of Tenochtitlan”

The three poems featured in this entry were created by Aztecs who were in Tenochtitlán (pronounced tay-notch-teet-LAHN) at the time of the Spanish conquest of 1521 and survived to tell about it. Two of the three poems were found in a song collection called Cantares mexicanos (Mexican Songs). This collection was made possible by a Spanish missionary, who worked with a group of tlamatini (pronounced tlah-mah-TEE-nee-may; singular: tlamatini), the poets and philosophers of the Aztec empire, between 1560 and 1580 to write down the songs of the Mesoamericans. Most experts believe the collection is the work of the renowned Spanish missionary Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590) and some of his native assistants, men who were well versed in Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wah-tul) and trained by Sahagún in Spanish and Latin as well. This team collected ninety-one songs over a period of many years. It took many more years before their collection attracted the interest it deserves. The songs, or poems, in the collection provide modern readers with a window into the Mesoamerican experience.
The Broken Spears

When Mexican scholar and writer Miguel León-Portilla (1926–) first published Visión de los vencidos in 1959, his work introduced a new approach in the study of ancient civilizations of the Americas. For his book, León-Portilla gathered sources that had been written by Nahuatl-speaking people around the time of the Spanish conquest. He then had his book translated into English—in 1962 it published as The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico—to reach an even wider audience. Unlike most of the scholars who preceded him, León-Portilla believes the history of the Aztecs should be learned through texts written by the Aztecs themselves.

The last two chapters of León-Portilla’s book provide a native account of the final battle between the Spanish and the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital. In the final chapter, León-Portilla presents three icnocêuicatl (pronounced eek-no-kwee-CAH-tul), or “songs of sorrow,” poems expressing the utter despair of the Aztec people after their city is conquered. León-Portilla notes in his introduction to the poems that “they reveal, with greater eloquence than other texts, the deep emotional wound inflicted on the Indians by defeat.”

The fall of Tenochtitlán

The end of the Aztec empire did not come swiftly or quietly. It was the result of a violent battle that took place in Tenochtitlán between April and August 1521. There were two hundred thousand men, women, and children living in the beautiful and prosperous island city when the Spanish conquistadores (Spanish word for “conquerors”) mounted their last attack. By moderate estimates, about one hundred thousand Aztecs, or half the city’s population, died during the siege. Everything in the city—markets, temples, palaces, and homes—was completely destroyed. An overview of the fall of Tenochtitlán is presented in this entry as a background to the poems that follow.

The Aztec emperor Montezuma II (1466–1520) died in Tenochtitlán during the first battle between the Aztecs and a group of Spanish conquistadores led by Hernán Cortés (1485–1547). In this first battle, the Aztecs soundly defeated the Spaniards, forcing them to retreat from the city. Afterward,
the Aztecs celebrated their victory and elected a new emperor, Montezuma’s brother Cuitláhuac (pronounced kweet-LAH-whahk; d. 1520). They had been so successful in their attack on the Spaniards that they felt sure there would be no more trouble. Nonetheless, they prepared for further war, determined to answer another Spanish assault with full force.

In the midst of these war preparations, an epidemic of smallpox struck. Smallpox and other contagious diseases carried by the Spanish were new to the Americas, and the Aztecs had no resistance to the germs. When the epidemic struck, thousands of people in Tenochtitlán became ill and then died of the disease. The emperor Cuitláhuac ruled for only eighty days before he succumbed to smallpox. He was replaced by the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc (pronounced koo-ow-TAY-mawk; c. 1495–1522).

In the meantime, after their retreat from Tenochtitlán, Cortés and his troops had taken refuge with their allies, the Tlaxcalans, who were bitter enemies of the Aztecs. The Tlaxcalans were not part of the Aztec empire; they had managed to remain independent only because they were fierce and powerful warriors. During his stay with them, Cortés was preparing for another attack on Tenochtitlán. He traveled through the Valley of Mexico, making allies of many other Amerindian groups (indigenous, or native Mesoamericans). Cortés used persuasion, promises of riches, and sometimes force to convince them to join his cause. The fierce Tlaxcalans could be very persuasive, often scaring other groups into joining the Spaniards. One by one, Mesoamerican communities that had
long been subjects of the Aztec empire stopped paying tribute (payments of goods or labor that conquered nations were required to contribute to the empire) to Tenochtitlán. When Cortés was ready to make a renewed attack on Tenochtitlán, his small army of Spaniards had the support of about 150,000 Amerindian warriors.

Tenochtitlán was located on an island in Lake Texcoco, so it had natural protection on all sides. Unfortunately for the Aztecs, Cortés had crafted a new battle strategy that took this into account. First he had his men build thirteen boats, and then he moved his large army to the shores of the lake. On April 28, 1521, Cortés began the seventy-five-day siege of Tenochtitlán. He started by placing his fleet of ships in the waters surrounding the city and his troops at the shore end of each of the causeways (roads built over the water) that led into the city. Tenochtitlán had three causeways: each one was several miles long and 20 to 30 feet (6 to 9 meters) wide. With this strategy, he was able to establish a blockade, ensuring that no food or water could reach the island from the mainland. Then the Spanish attacked, charging into the city from every entry. The Aztecs resisted the invasion fiercely, initially giving up little ground. After a time, though, the blockade and smallpox had ravaged the population of Tenochtitlán. The Aztec people were dying of starvation or dysentery (disease causing severe diarrhea), and the warriors had grown weak. But still the warriors fought on, showing remarkable bravery.

Slowly the Spanish forces worked their way through the city, killing the people and destroying the buildings as they went. The Spanish soldiers used their cannons to break down walls and level the buildings of Tenochtitlán, reducing them to rubble. Then they set the remaining buildings on fire. Meantime, the residents of the city found themselves cornered, forced to retreat but with almost nowhere to go. As the summer progressed, tens of thousands of men, women, and children crowded into the last stronghold against Spanish forces: the market area of Tlatelolco, the northern district of Tenochtitlán.

By August the situation in Tenochtitlán had grown hopeless for the Aztecs, and on August 13, 1521, they surrendered. Cuauhtémoc either gave himself up or was captured by the Spanish. The twenty-five-year-old emperor had proved a
brave leader during the siege, and in present-day Mexico he remains a symbol of the strength of the besieged people. In some accounts of his surrender, he is said to have grabbed Cortés’s dagger and pleaded to be killed since he could no longer defend his city or his people. (Cortés spared him at that time but later had him tortured and killed.) After the surrender, the Tlaxcalans, longtime enemies of the Aztecs, mercilessly slaughtered many defenseless people.

Mural depicting a busy Aztec market in Tlaxcala before the Spanish conquest. The Art Archive/Mireille Vautier.

Primary Source: Aztec Poetry
After the surrender there was nothing left of the once magnificent city. Spanish soldiers reported that there were dead bodies everywhere. In his book *Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España* (The True History of the Conquest of New Spain; also known as *The Conquest of New Spain*) Spanish conquistador Bernal Díaz (1492–c. 1581; see entry) described what the soldiers saw as they walked through the defeated city: “I solemnly swear that all the houses and stockades in the lake were full of heads and corpses. It was the same in the streets and courts … we could not walk without treading on the bodies and heads of dead Indians. Indeed, the stench was so bad that no one could endure it.” The surviving Aztecs were sick, starved, and ragged. They tried to escape the ruins of their city, jumping into canoes or fleeing across the causeways by foot, but the Spaniards blocked the exits. Spanish troops kidnapped many of the women to keep as their concubines (women who are not wives, but live with and have sexual relations with a married man). They branded a good number of Aztec men and then forced them to work under slave-like circumstances. The Spaniards also captured the Aztec rulers, crushing any hope that the Aztecs might reclaim power. For the Aztec people who survived the siege of Tenochtitlán, there was no possibility of recovering the life and the civilization they had known.

**Things to remember while reading “Elegies on the Fall of the City”:**

- The first poem was written soon after the fall of Tenochtitlán, around 1523. Its writers were from Tlatelolco, a district within Tenochtitlán. Tlatelolcans were citizens of Tenochtitlán, but from the founding of Tlatelolco in 1358 until 1473, they had had their own government and royalty. As you can see in this poem, the Tlatelolcans clearly felt distinct from other residents of the city.

- In the first poem, the narrator calls on Motelchiuhtzin the Huiznahuacatl, Tlacotzin the Tlailotlacatl, and Oquitzin the Tlacatecuhtli. These were the princes from the royal families of the Triple Alliance of Aztecs, Texcocans, and Tlacopáns, the confederacy of powers that ruled over the entire empire.
The second poem addresses the capture of Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor. After conquering Tenochtitlán, Cortés took him to his base in a section of Mexico City called Coyoacan. Imprisoned in Coyoacan with Cuauhtémoc were Coanacoch (pronounced coe-AH-nah-coach), the king of Texcoco, and Tetelepanquetzal (tet-lay-pahn-KAYT-sal), the king of Tlacopán. These were the three kings of the Triple Alliance.

The second poem refers to Doña Isabel, a daughter of Montezuma II. After the conquest, Cortés (referred to as the “Captain-General” in the poem) set up a house in Coyoacan and brought his interpreter and mistress, Malinche (c. 1501–c. 1550; see entry), to live with him. Then, as was customary for a victor in battle, he brought the daughters of the fallen Aztec ruler into his own household. Montezuma’s daughters were Doña Isabel, Doña Maria, Doña Ana, and Doña Marina. Doña Isabel would later become pregnant with Cortés’s baby.

The third poem is written in the tradition the Aztecs called xochicuicatl (pronounced show-chee-kwee-CAH-tul), or “flowers and songs.” Poems of this kind were created by elite poet-philosophers called tlamatinime. The poems were highly philosophical, yet often personal, and the poets presented their ideas in beautiful or powerful images. The word “flower” in these poems is used as a metaphor (a word that is used to refer to something that it is being compared to) for art and poetry. Traditionally, the creators of “flowers and songs” found hope and comfort in art, but this poem is also an icnocuicatl, or “song of sorrow.”

“Elegies on the Fall of the City”

“The Fall of Tenochtitlan”

Our cries of grief rise up
and our tears rain down,
for Tlatelolco is lost.
The Aztecs are fleeing across the lake;
they are running away like women.
How can we save our homes, my people?
The Aztecs are deserting the city:
the city is in flames, and all
is darkness and destruction.
Motelchiuhtzin the Huiznahuacatl,
Tlacotzin the Tlailotlacatl,
Oquitzin the Tlacatecuhtli
are greeted with tears.
Weep, my people:
know that with these disasters

**Illustration of the bloody battle for Tenochtitlán between the Spaniards and the Aztecs.** The Art Archive/Antochiw Collection of Mexico/Mireille Vautier.

**Tlacatecuhtli:** “Chief of men,” the top person in the city-state who presided over both religious and military matters.
we have lost the Mexican nation.
The water has turned bitter,
our food is bitter!
These are the acts of the Giver of Life....

“The Imprisonment of Cuauhtemoc”

The Aztecs are besieged in the city;
the Tlatelolcas are besieged in the city! The walls are black,
the air is black with smoke,
the guns flash in the darkness.
They have captured Cuauhtemoc;
they have captured the princes of Mexico.
These are the acts of the Giver of Life...

After nine days, they were taken to Coyoacan:
Cuauhtemoc, Coanacoch, Tetelepanquetzaltzin.
The kings are prisoners now.
Tlacotzin consoled them:
“Oh my nephews, take heart!
The kings are prisoners now;
they are bound with chains.”
The king Cuauhtemoc replied:
“Oh my nephew, you are a prisoner;
they have bound you in irons.
“But who is that at the side of the Captain-General? Ah, it is Dona Isabel, my little niece!
Ah, it is true: the kings are prisoners now!
“You will be a slave and belong to another:
the collar will be fashioned in Coyoacan,
where the quetzal feathers will be woven.
“Who is that at the side of the Captain-General? Ah, it is Dona Isabel, my little niece!
Ah, it is true: the kings are prisoners now!”

“Flowers and Songs of Sorrow”

Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow
are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw warriors and wise men.
We know it is true
that we must perish,
for we are mortal men.

Primary Source: Aztec Poetry
You, the Giver of Life,  
you have ordained it.  
We wander here and there  
in our desolate poverty.  
We are mortal men.  
We have seen bloodshed and pain  
where once we saw beauty and valor.  
We are crushed to the ground;  
we lie in ruins.  
There is nothing but grief and suffering  
in Mexico and Tlatelolco,  
where once we saw beauty and valor.  
Have you grown weary of your servants?  
Are you angry with your servants,  
O Giver of Life?

Desolate: Miserable.

Valor: Bravery.

What happened next …

Cortés promised Cuauhtémoc that the Spanish would treat him with dignity after his surrender. While Cuauhtémoc was in captivity, however, Cortés’s soldiers began to revolt because they felt they had not received enough rewards for their efforts in conquering Tenochtitlán. Cortés allowed his men to torture Cuauhtémoc, hoping he might reveal the location of more gold or treasure. Cuauhtémoc told them nothing. In 1522 (some sources say 1523 or 1525) Cortés made a vague accusation of “conspiracy” against Cuauhtémoc and the two other Triple Alliance kings, Coanacoch and Tetelepanquetzal. As a result, he had all three kings hanged.

The Spanish extended their rule outside the city of Tenochtitlán until most of the people of the vast former empire fell under their power. Over the next century the populations of these native peoples dwindled. The Spanish were ruthless in killing the Aztec priests, whom they considered agents of the devil, especially after hearing reports from Spanish soldiers who had witnessed their comrades being sacrificed. In Tenochtitlán, the Spanish missionaries began their work immediately, converting the people to Christianity.
Soon most of the Nahuatl-speaking people in the empire had adopted the Roman Catholic religion; some accepted it only to avoid death or punishment, but others embraced it sincerely. In their efforts to convert the population, the missionaries burned all the codices (Aztec painted books) they could find and eliminated many other cultural artifacts of the Aztecs in their efforts to convert the population. Some Aztecs clung to their own gods, worshiping in private. These people kept the native religion alive, and some present-day groups continue to worship the traditional Aztec gods.

After the conquistadores had defeated the Aztecs at Tenochtitlán, they felt they deserved rewards. The Spanish government reluctantly agreed to an *encomienda* system, giving the conquistadores land grants that allowed them to use all the Amerindians in a particular region as unpaid laborers. Under this system, the *encomendero*, or grant holder, was supposed to give the Amerindians training in Christianity and the Spanish language and to protect them from invasion. The Amerindians, in turn, were to pay tribute to the conquistador. Conditions for the various Amerindian groups differed: some suffered and even died while working under conditions similar to slavery; others simply began paying tribute to the Spaniards, just as they had previously done with the Aztec rulers.

**Did you know …**

- Miguel León-Portilla took most of the text for his book *The Broken Spears* from the *Florentine Codex* (more properly called the *General History of Things in New Spain*), a twelve-volume book compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún and his talented group of native assistants. Sahagún arrived in Mexico in 1529, just eight years after the conquest, to teach at a missionary school near Tenochtitlán. While he was teaching his young native students religion and the arts in Spanish and Latin, Sahagún took it upon himself to learn about Aztec culture and the Nahuatl language, beginning a lifetime of research.

- In the 1540s he conducted a series of interviews with Aztec elders (older people in a community who understand its history and traditions). Bit by bit, the elders described to him the history and traditions of the Aztec
people. With the help of Nahuatl-speaking assistants, Sahagún recorded the words of the elders in their own language. By about 1580 the manuscript of his book, the Florentine Codex, was complete. The Florentine Codex is organized by subject, with volumes dedicated to such topics as history, the gods, the calendar, Aztec society, and the Aztec perception of the natural world. Its pages present a column of Nahuatl text on the right, comments in Spanish in a column on the left, and illustrations in between. The book is considered the most comprehensive resource about the native people of Mesoamerica.

Consider the following …

- Form a small group with your classmates. Read the poems out loud and then discuss them.

- Compare the poem “Flowers and Songs of Sorrow” with the poem called “Song of Springtime” (see Nezahualcoyotl entry). Note the differences and the similarities between the two poems.

For More Information

Books


Periodicals

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