

The Second Letter of Hernán Cortes

The great city of Temixtitlan is built on the salt lake, and from the mainland to the city is a distance of two leagues, from any side from which you enter. It has four approaches by means of artificial causeways, two cavalry lances in width. The city is as large as Seville or Cordoba. Its streets (I speak of the principal ones) are very broad and straight, some of these, and all the others, are one half land, and the other half water on which they go about in canoes. All the streets have openings at regular intervals to let water flow from one to the other, and at all of these openings, some of which are very broad, there are bridges, very large, strong, and well constructed, so that, over many, ten horsemen can ride abreast. Perceiving that, if the inhabitants wished to practice any treachery against us, they had plenty of opportunity, because the said city being built as I have described, they might, by raising the bridges at the exits and entrances, starve us without our being able to reach land, as soon as I entered the city, I made great haste to build four brigantines, which I had completed in a short time, capable whenever we might wish, of taking three hundred men and the horses to land.

The city has many squares where markets are held, and trading is carried on. There is one square, twice as large as that of Salamanca, all surrounded by arcades, where there are daily more than sixty thousand souls, buying and selling, and where are found all the kinds of merchandise produced in these countries, including food products, jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, zinc, stone, bones, shells, and feathers. Stones are sold, hewn, and unhewn, adobe bricks, wood, both in the rough and manufactured in various ways. There is a street for game, where they sell every sort of bird, such as chickens, partridges, quails, wild ducks, fly-catchers, widgeons, turtle-doves, pigeons, reed-birds, parrots, owls, eaglets, falcons, sparrow-hawks, and kestrels, and they sell the skins of some of these birds of prey with their feathers, heads, beaks, and claws. They sell rabbits, hares, and small dogs which they castrate, and raise for the purpose of eating.

There is a street set apart for the sale of herbs, where can be found every sort of root and medical herb which grows in the country. There are houses like apothecary shops, where prepared medicines are sold, as well as liquids, ointments, and plasters. There are places like our barber's shops, where they wash and shave their heads. There are houses where they supply food and drink for payment. There are men, such as in Castile are called porters, who carry burdens. There is much wood, charcoal, braziers made of earthenware, and mats of divers kinds for beds, and others, very thin, used as cushions, and for carpeting halls, and bed-rooms. There are all sorts of vegetables, and especially onions, leeks, garlic, borage, nasturtium, watercresses, sorrel, thistles, and artichokes. There are many kinds of fruits, amongst others, cherries, and prunes, like the Spanish ones. They sell bees-honey and wax, and honey made of corn-stalks, which is as sweet and syrup-like as that of sugar, also honey of a plant called maguey, which is better than most; from these same plants they make sugar and wine, which they also sell.

They also sell skeins of different kinds of spun cotton, in all colours, so that it seems quite like one of the silk markets in Granada, although it is on a greater scale; also as many different colours for painters as can be found in Spain and of as excellent hues. They sell deer skins with all the hair tanned on them, and of different colours; much earthenware, exceedingly good, many sorts of pots, large and small, pitchers, large tiles, and infinite variety of vases, all of very singular clay, and most of them glazed and painted. They sell maize, both in grain and made into bread, which is very superior in its quality to that of the other islands and mainland; pies of birds, and fish, also much fish, fresh, salted, cooked, and raw; eggs of hens, and geese, and other birds in great quantity, and cakes made of eggs.

Finally, besides those things I have mentioned, they sell in the city markets everything else which is found in the whole country and which, on account of the profusion and number, do not occur to my memory and which also I do not tell of, because I do not know their names.

Each kind of merchandise is sold in its respective street, and they do not mix their kinds of merchandise of any species; thus they preserve perfect order. Everything is sold by a kind of measure, and, until now, we have not seen anything sold by weight.

There is in this square a very large building, like a Court of Justice, where there are always ten or twelve persons, sitting as judges, and delivering their decisions upon all cases which arise in the markets. There are other persons in the same square who go about continually among the people, observing what is sold, and the measures being used in selling, and they have been seen to break some which were false.

This great city contains many mosques, or houses for idols, very beautiful edifices situated in the different precincts of it; in the principal ones of which are the religious orders of their sect, for whom, besides the houses in which they keep their idols, there are very good habitations provided. All these priests dress in black, and never cut or comb their hair from the time they enter the religious order until they leave it; and the sons of all the principal families, both of chiefs as well as noble citizens, are in these religious orders and habits from the age of seven or eight years till they are taken away for the purpose of marriage. This happens more frequently for the first-born, who inherit the property, than with the others. They have no access to women, nor are any allowed to enter the religious houses; they abstain from eating certain dishes, and more so at certain times of the year than at others.

Amongst these mosques, there is one principal one, and no human tongue is able to describe its greatness and details, because it is so large that within its circuit, which is surrounded by a high wall, a village of five hundred houses could easily be built. Within, and all around it, are very handsome buildings, in which there are large rooms and galleries, where the religious who live there are lodged. There are as many as forty very high and well-built towers, the largest having fifty steps to reach the top; the principal one is higher than the tower of the chief church in Seville. They are so well-built, both in their masonry, and their wood-work, that they could not be better made nor well constructed anywhere; for all the masonry inside the chapels, where they keep their idols, is carved with figures, and the wood work is all wrought

with designs of monsters, and other shapes. All these towers are places of burial for the chiefs, and each one of their chapels is dedicated to the idol to which they have a particular devotion. Within this great mosque, there are three halls wherein stand the principal idols of marvelous grandeur in size, and much decorated with carved figures, both of stone and wood; and within these halls there are other chapels, entered in by very small doors, and which have no light, and nobody but the religious are admitted to them. Within these are the images and figures of the idols, although, as I have said, there are many outside.

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 Along one of the causeways that lead to the city, there are two conduits of masonry each two paces broad, and five feet deep, through one of which a volume of very good fresh water, the bulk of a man's body, flows into the heart of the city, from which all supply themselves, and drink. The other which brings the water, when they wish to clean the first conduit, for, while one is being cleaned, the water flows through the other. Conduits as large [around] as an ox's body bring the fresh water across the bridges, thus avoiding the channels by which the salt-water flows, and in this manner the whole city is supplied, and everybody has water to drink. Canoes peddle the water through all the streets, and the way they take it from the conduits is this; the canoes stop under the bridges where the conduits cross, where men are stationed on the top who are paid to fill them. At the different entrances to the city, there are guards, in huts to collect a *certum quid* of everything that comes in. I do not know where this goes to the sovereign, or to the city, because up till now I have not been able to ascertain, but I believe it is for the sovereign, for, in other markets in other provinces, that contribution has been seen to be paid to the ruler. There are to be found daily in the markets and public places of the city many workmen, and masters of all trades, waiting to be hired.

The people of this city had better manners, and more luxury in their dressing and service, than those of other provinces and cities, for the reason that the sovereign, Montezuma, always resided there, and all the nobles, his vassals, frequented the city, so better manners, and more ceremony prevailed. But to avoid being prolix in describing the things of the city (though I would fain continue), I will not say more than that, in the service and manners of its people, their fashion of living was almost the same as in Spain, with just as much harmony and order; and considering that these people were barbarous, so cut off from the knowledge of God, and other civilized people, it is admirable to see what they attained in every respect. As far as the service surrounding Montezuma is concerned, and the admirable attributes of his greatness and state, there is so much to write that I assure your Highness I do not know where to begin, so as to finish what I would say of any part respecting it. For, as I have already said, what greater grandeur can there be, than that a barbarian monarch, like him, should have imitations in gold, silver, stones, and feather-work, of all the things existing under heaven in his dominion?—not a silversmith in the world who could do it better, and respecting the stones, there is no imagination which can divine the instruments with which they were so perfectly executed; and respecting the feather-work, neither in wax, nor in embroidery, could nature be so marvelously imitated.