1

Omens

Omens and signs were an important aspect of Nahuatl history, employed to explain events and to foretell the future. The first source in this section, from the *Tovar Codex*, illustrates this cultural inclination. It represents the legendary founding of the Mexica capital at the place where their ancestors first saw an eagle perched on a cactus and recognized it as a sign for them to settle in Tenochtitlan. Nahua accounts of the fall of the Mexica Empire also emphasized signs and omens that preceded the Spaniards' arrival as a way of deciphering the unfolding events.

Although the omens described in the following selections appear to predate Spanish contact and to be native in origin, a closer look raises serious questions. There is much evidence suggesting that the Nahua peoples were not alarmed by the arrival of the Spaniards, and rather saw them as simply another group of dangerous outsiders who needed to be controlled or accommodated. After the conquest, on the other hand, some people from Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, where the impact of the war was most profound, considered otherworldly explanations. Nahua emphasis on eight miraculous omens—the usual number when the Nahua considered sets of anything—was probably a postcontact interpretation. Informants may have wished to placate the Spaniards who wrote down these accounts, and they may also have resented Moctezuma's failure to provide leadership. In the accounts of the omens, the story of the return of Quetzalcoatl begins to play a role in explaining Moctezuma's behavior from the outset of events, but that too was a subsequent gloss.

Omens announcing a cataclysmic change were not limited to the Nahua version of events, as we see from the third selection, drawn from the *Chronicles of Michoacán*, a text based on information gathered from Purépecha peoples, traditional enemies of the Mexica. They too discussed with Spanish friars that miraculous events had preceded the fall

of the Mexica Empire. Finally, Spanish accounts, like the fourth selection, also tended to incorporate a version of the omens, perhaps as a way of justifying colonialism by underlining the preordained nature of the conquest from a Christian perspective.

1

JUAN DE TOVAR

Mexican Eagle and Cactus

From *History of the Arrival of Indians to Populate Mexico*

This selection from a manuscript by Juan de Tovar illustrates the use of symbolism in Mexica history. Tovar was a Jesuit, son of a conquistador, who traveled widely in central Mexico to record its history. Fluent in Nahuatl and Otomí, Tovar sought to preserve Indigenous traditions in his principal work, Historia de la venida de los indios *(c.1580s), a copy of which is housed at the John Carter Brown Library. The manuscript, commonly called the* Tovar Codex, *employed drawings in the Mesoamerican tradition alongside Spanish commentary.*

This image depicts the legendary founding of Tenochtitlan, which occurred after migrants led by Tenoch (on right) witnessed an awaited sign: an eagle with a prey in its beak atop a flowering cactus located in the middle of a lake. In most depictions the eagle holds a snake instead of a bird. The historical importance of this omen is borne out in the modern-day flag of Mexico, which bears the eagle-on-a-cactus motif in memory of this event.

Juan de Tovar. "Historia de la benida de los yndios a poblar a Mexico . . ." (Mexico City, 1585), f.91v. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

From the *Codex Tovar* (Mexico, c.1585). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

2

FRAY BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN

From the *Florentine Codex*

The following selection from the Nahuatl text provided by Sahagún's research assistants reveals that some informants described wondrous signs at the inception of the story as indications of the events to come. Sahagún's assistants interviewed mainly people from Tlatelolco, but similar stories were also included in accounts that came from other Nahua communities. The illustration of the sixth omen should be read alongside the written description for a full rendering of the event.

Twelfth book, which speaks of how war was waged here in the altepetl of Mexico.

First chapter, where it is said that before the Spaniards came here to this land, and before the people who live here were known, there appeared and were seen signs and omens.

Ten years before the arrival of the Spaniards an omen first appeared in the sky, like a flame or tongue of fire, like the light of dawn. It appeared to be throwing off [sparks] and seemed to pierce the sky. It was wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. It looked as though it reached the very middle of the sky, its very heart and center. It showed itself off to the east. When it came out at midnight it appeared like the dawn. When dawn came, then the sun on coming out effaced it. For a full year it showed itself (it was in [the year] Twelve House that it began). And when it appeared there would be an outcry, and people would hit their hands against their mouths as they yelled. People were taken aback, they lamented.

The second omen that happened here in Mexico was that of its own accord the house of the devil Huitzilopochtli, what they call his mountain, named Tlacatecçan, burned and flared up; no one set fire to it; it just took fire itself. When the fire was seen, the wooden pillars were already burning. Tongues and tassels of flame were coming from inside; very quickly they consumed all the building's beams. Then there was an outcry. They

James Lockhart, ed., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 50–56.

said, "O Mexica, let everyone come running; it must be put out, [bring] your water jars!" But when they threw water on it, trying to extinguish it, it blew up all the more. It could not be put out; it burned entirely.

The third omen was that a temple was struck by lightning, hit by a thunderbolt. It was just a building of straw at the temple complex of Xiuhteuctli, called Tzonmolco. The reason it was taken for an omen was that it was not raining hard, just drizzling. It was said that it was struck when the sun was shining, nor was thunder heard.

The fourth omen was that while the sun was still out a comet fell, in three parts. It began off to the west and headed in the direction of the east, looking as if it were sprinkling glowing coals. It had a long tail, which reached a great distance. When it was seen, there was a great outcry, like the sound of rattles.

The fifth omen was that the water [of the lake] boiled up; it was not the wind that caused it. It bubbled and made exploding sounds, rising high in the air. It reached the foundations of the houses; it flooded them, and they collapsed. This is the great lake that extends around us here in Mexico.

Figure 1. *"O my children, where am I to take you?"*

This section of the *Florentine Codex* shows the combined use of Spanish, Nahuatl, and pictorial renderings that makes this work truly unique.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España,* Libro 12, f.2v, 1577.

The sixth omen was that many times a woman would be heard going along weeping and shouting. She cried out loudly at night, saying, "O my children, we are about to go forever." Sometimes she said, "O my children, where am I to take you?"

The seventh omen was that once the water folk were hunting or snaring and caught an ash-colored bird, like a crane. Then they went to the Tlillan calmecac to show it to Moteuccçoma; the sun was inclining, it was still full day. On top of its head was something like a mirror, round, circular, seeming to be perforated, where the sky, the stars, and the Fire Drill [constellation] could be seen. And Moteuccçoma took it for a very bad omen when he saw the stars and the Fire Drill. The second time he looked at the bird's head he saw something like a multitude of people coming along, coming bunched, outfitted for war, carried on the backs of deer. Then he called the soothsayers, the sages, and said to them, "Do you not know what I've seen, something like a multitude of people coming along?" But when they were going to answer him, what they saw disappeared, and they said nothing more.

The eighth omen was that many times people appeared, thistlepeople with two heads but one body; they took them to the Tlillan calmecac and showed them to Moteuccçoma. When he had seen them, they disappeared.

3

FRAY MARTÍN DE JESÚS DE LA CORUÑA

From the *Chronicles of Michoacán*

The Purépecha peoples who dwelled to the northwest of Tenochtitlan lived in a relationship of respectful hostility with the Mexica. They too spoke about strange events previewing the arrival of the Spaniards. Their leaders (called cazonci*) had successfully resisted Mexica expansion into their area, the present-day Mexican state of Michoacán. Franciscan*

Chronicles of Michoacán, trans. and ed. Eugene R. Craine and Reginald C. Reindorp (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 53–54.

3

Encounters

The Spaniards and the Mexica tried to make sense of each other based on their unique historical and cultural contexts. The Mexica mainly regarded the Spaniards as strange but understandable, simply a new kind of foreigner who needed to be expelled from their empire. The Spaniards viewed the Mexica through the lens of earlier encounters with Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, and also based on their own traditions of diplomacy and contact with non-Europeans in the Mediterranean world.

The first selection in this chapter is from Cortés's earliest surviving letter to Charles V, in which he described the land and peoples he encountered. In order to provide the king with a common reference, he compared native customs to Islamic ("Moorish" or *Moro*) traditions, and also drew on biblical references. He focused on the religious practice of human sacrifice as a singularly reprehensible custom that justified the need to spread Catholicism, and by extension, the king's control over this land. This union of observation with self-serving emphases was typical of many European descriptions of the peoples of the Americas.

The second selection from Bernal Díaz provides insight into the importance of exchanging gifts for both the Spaniards and Nahuas. His report is also sensitive to the value of information, elaborating on Cortés's strategies to learn about the politics and wealth of the region, as well as how Nahua leaders similarly collected intelligence about the newcomers. Especially notable are his remarks on the importance of pictographic representation for the Mexica, and how those images were used to communicate information.

The Nahua selection is from the accounts gathered by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún about thirty years after the conquest. While its attention to certain details—the style of the capes offered as gifts, the costumes of the gods—seems authentic, the emphasis on Moctezuma's weakness and on the possible supernatural qualities of the strangers indicates a "shading" of the account made by those interviewed in order

to criticize the failed Mexica leadership and probably to gratify the Spanish authorities of the time. The tendency to identify the Spaniards with a returning deity come to reclaim his kingdom—in some accounts Quetzalcoatl, the ancient god of the Toltecs—became a standard aspect of postcontact Indigenous accounts, and later those by Spanish chroniclers and mestizo historians. As discussed in the introduction, certain aspects of the story made this identification plausible. In some sense, myth, history, and propaganda were not discrete categories for the Nahua, and none was more "true" than the others. Traditionally, for peoples of Mesoamerica, history's main function was not so much to describe events as they "really" happened but rather to fit them into specific visions of the past and the future. The degree to which this concept of history influenced Sahagún's informants is open to debate.

8

HERNANDO CORTÉS

Letters to Charles V

The letters of Cortés were reports that mixed self-explanations and justifications with more general information of the kind to interest a king. Religion, politics, and ethnography are combined here along with observation and assessment. Cortés's preconceptions and previous experiences surely shaped his observations, and he likely "invented" some facts to fit his purposes.

Letter I

[July 10, 1519]

We send your highnesses this account [*relación*] in order to inform your Majesties of all the things of this land, its customs and wealth, and of the peoples who possess it, and of its laws or sects, and their rites and ceremonies.

Translated by T. Seijas. Fernando Cortés, "Cartas de Relación," in *Historiadores primitivos de Indias*, edited by Enrique de Vedia (Madrid: Impr. de M. Rivadeneyra, 1852), 9–10.

10

FRAY BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN

From the *Florentine Codex*

The Nahua account contained in the Florentine Codex *provides considerable detail of the same meeting described by Díaz: the nobles involved, the exchange of gifts, and the way in which the encounter was reported to Moctezuma. Here the attention to detail is comparable to Díaz's account, but the focus on hostile aspects of the encounter, such as the Spaniards having chained their visitors, offers insight into their diverging goals. The descriptions of the Spaniards, their weapons, and animals have a sense of immediacy, but the commentary that these first meetings filled Moctezuma and others with forebodings of catastrophe must be regarded with considerable skepticism, as these accounts were collected several decades after the events occurred.*

Second chapter, when it is said how the first boat that came arrived . . . When those who came to the seashore were seen, they were going along by boat. Then Pinotl of Cuetlaxtlan, a high steward, went in person, taking other stewards with him: [second], Yaotzin, the steward of Mictlanquauhtla; third, the steward of Teocinyocan, named Teocinyocatl; fourth, Cuitlalpitoc, who was only a dependent, a subordinate leader; and fifth, Tentlil, also a subordinate leader.

These were the only ones who first went to see [the Spaniards]. They went as if to sell them things, so that they could spy on them and contemplate them. They gave them precious cloaks, precious goods, the very cloaks pertaining to Moteucçoma which no one else could don, which were assigned to him alone.

It was by boat that they went to see them. As they were doing it, Pinotzin said, "Let us not lie to the lord Moteucçoma, for you would live no longer. Let's just go, lest we die, so that he can hear the real truth." (Moteucçoma was his personal name, and Tlacateucth was his title as ruler.)

Then they embarked, launched off, and went out on the water; the water folk paddled for them. When they approached the Spaniards, they

James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, Repertorium Columbianum, UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 56–86.

made the earth-eating gesture at the prow of the boat(s). They thought that it was Quetzalcoatl Topiltzin who had arrived.

The Spaniards called to them, saying to them, "Who are you? Where have you come from? Where is your homeland?"

Immediately they said, "It is from Mexico that we have come."

They answered them back, "If you are really Mexica, what is the name of the ruler of Mexico?"

They told them, "O our lords, Moteucçoma is his name."

Then they gave them all the different kinds of precious cloaks they carried, to wit, like those mentioned here: the sun-covered style, the blue-knotted style, the style covered with jars, the one with painted eagles, the style with serpent faces, the style with wind jewels, the style with (turkey blood), or with whirlpools, the style with smoking mirrors.

For all these things that they gave them, [the Spaniards] gave them things in return; they gave them green and yellow strings of beads, which one might imagine to be amber. And when they had taken them and looked at them, greatly did they marvel.

And [the Spaniards] took leave of them, saying to them, "Go off, while we go to Spain; we will not be long in getting to Mexico."

Thereupon they went, and [the local people] also came away, coming back. And when they came out on dry land, they came straight to Mexico, moving along in this direction day and night to come inform Moteucçoma, to tell him and report to him the truth [. . .]. They took the goods they had received.

Then they spoke to him: "O our lord, o master, destroy us [if you will, but] here is what we have seen and done at the place where your subordinates stand guard for you beside the ocean. For we went to see our lords the gods out on the water; we gave them all your cloaks, and here are the fine things belonging to them that they gave us. They said, 'If you have really come from Mexico, here is what you are to give the ruler Moteucçoma, whereby he will recognize us.'" They told him everything [the Spaniards] had told them out on the water.

And Moteucçoma said to them, "You are doubly welcome; take your rest. What I have seen is a secret. No one is to say anything, to let it escape from his lips, to let a word slip out, to open his mouth, to mention it, but it is to stay inside you."

Third chapter, where it is said what Moteucçoma ordered when he heard the statement of those who saw the first boat that came.

Thereupon Moteucçoma gave instructions to the man from Cuetlaxtlan and the rest, telling them, "Give orders that watch be kept everywhere along the coast, at [the places] called Nauhtlan, Toztlan, and

Mictlanquauhtla, wherever they will come to land." Then the stewards left and gave orders for watch to be kept.

And Moteuccçoma assembled his lords, the Cihuacoatl Tlilpotonqui, the Tlacochcalcatl Quappiaztzin, the Ticocyahuacatl Quetzalaztatzin, and the Huitznahuatlailotlac Ecatenpatiltzin. He reported the account to them, and showed them, put before them, the beads they had brought.

He said to them, "We have beheld the fine blue turquoise; it is to be guarded well, the custodians are to take good care of it; if they let one piece get away from them, [their] homes, children, and women with child will be ours."

Then the year changed to the one following, Thirteen Rabbit, and when it was nearly over, at the end of the year Thirteen Rabbit, [the Spaniards] made an appearance and were seen once again. Then the stewards quickly came to tell Moteuccçoma.

When he heard it, he quickly sent out a party. He thought and believed that it was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who had landed. For they were of the opinion that he would return, that he would appear, that he would come back to his seat of authority, because he had gone in that direction [eastward] when he left. And [Moteuccçoma] sent five [people] to go to meet him and give him things. The leader had the official title of Teohua [custodian of the god] and the personal name of Yohualli ichan. The second was Tepoztecatl, the third Tiçahua, the fourth Huehuetecatl, and the fifth Hueicamecatl eca.

Fourth chapter, where it is said what orders Moteuccçoma gave when he found out that the Spaniards had returned. The second time they came it was [with] don Hernando Cortés.

He said to them, "Come, o men of unique valor, do come. It is said that our lord has appeared at last. Do go to meet him; listen well, make good use of your ears, bring back in your ears a good record of what he says. Here is what you will take to our lord."

[First] were the appurtenances of Quetzalcoatl: a serpent mask, made of turquoise; a quetzal-feather head fan; a plaited neckband of green-stone beads, with a golden disk in the middle of it; and a shield with gold [strips] crossing each other, or with gold and seashells crossing, with quetzal feathers spread about the edge and with a quetzal-feather banner; and a mirror with quetzal feathers to be tied on his back; and this mirror for the back seemed to have a turquoise shield, with turquoise glued on it, and there were green-stone neck bands with golden shells on them; then there was the turquoise spear thrower, entirely of turquoise, with a kind of serpent head; and there were obsidian sandals.

The second set of things they went to give him were the appurtenances of Tezcatlipoca: a feather headpiece, covered with golden stars, and his golden bell earplugs; and a seashell necklace; the chest ornament, decorated with many small seashells, with its fringe made of them; and a sleeveless jacket, painted all over, with eyes on its border and teased feathers at the fringe; and a cloak with blue-green knots, called a *tzitzilli*, tied on the back by taking its corners, also with a mirror for the back over it; and another item, golden bells tied to the calves of the legs; and another item, white sandals. [A third and fourth god's costume was also sent.] . . .

These then were the things, called gods' appurtenances, that the messengers carried with them, and they took many other things by way of greeting: a shell-shaped gold headpiece with yellow parrot feathers hanging from it, a golden miter, etc.

Then baskets were filled and carrying frames were adjusted. And then Moteuccoma gave orders to the aforementioned five [emissaries], saying to them, "Now go, don't tarry anywhere, and address yourselves to our lord the god. Tell him, 'Your agent Moteuccoma has sent us; here is what he is giving you. You have arrived in Mexico, your home.'"

And when they reached the coast, they were taken across [a river or inlet] by boat at Xicalanco. There again they left by boat, taken by the water folk. Everything went into the boats; the goods were placed in boats. And when the boats were full, they left. They cast off and reached [the Spaniards'] boat[s], bringing their own boat close.

Then [the Spaniards] said to them, "Who are you? Where have you come from?"

Then [the emissaries] answered them, "Why, we have come from Mexico."

Again [the Spaniards] replied to them, "Perhaps not. Perhaps you are just claiming to be from there, perhaps you are making it up, perhaps you are deceiving us."

But when they were convinced and satisfied, they hooked the prow of the boat with an iron staff and hauled them in; then they also put down a ladder.

Fifth chapter, where it is said what happened when Moteuccoma's messengers went into don Hernando Cortés's boat.

Then they climbed up, carrying in their arms the goods. When they had gotten up into the boat, each of them made the earth-eating gesture before the Captain. Then they addressed him, saying,

"May the god attend: his agent Moteuccoma who is in charge in Mexico for him addresses him and says, 'The god is doubly welcome.'"

Then they dressed up the Captain. They put on him the turquoise serpent mask attached to the quetzal-feather head fan, to which were fixed, from which hung the green-stone serpent earplugs. And they put the sleeveless jacket on him, and around his neck they put the plaited green-stone neckband with the golden disk in the middle. On his lower back they tied the back mirror, and also they tied behind him the cloak called a *tzitzilli*. And on his legs they placed the green-stone bands with the golden bells. And they gave him, placing it on his arm, the shield with gold and shells crossing, on whose edge were spread quetzal feathers, with a quetzal banner. And they laid the obsidian sandals before him.

And the other three outfits, the gods' appurtenances, they only arranged in rows before him.

When this had been done, the Captain said to them, "Is this everything you have by way of greeting and rapprochement?"

They answered, "That is all with which we have come, o our lord."

Then the Captain ordered that they be tied up: they put irons on their feet and necks. When this had been done they shot off the cannon. And at this point the messengers truly fainted and swooned; one after another they swayed and fell, losing consciousness. And the Spaniards lifted them into a sitting position and gave them wine to drink. Then they gave them food, fed them, with which they regained strength and got their breath back.

When this had been done the Captain said to them, "Do listen, I have found out and heard that by what they say these Mexica are very strong, great warriors, able to throw others down. Where there is one of them he can chase, push aside, overcome, and turn back his enemies, even though there should be ten or twenty. Now I wish to be satisfied, I want to see you, I want to try out how strong and manly you are." Then he gave them leather shields, iron swords, and iron lances. [He said,]

"Well now, very early in the morning, as dawn is about to come, we will struggle against each other, we will challenge each other, we will find out by comparison who will fall down first."

They answered the Captain, saying, "May the lord pay heed, this is not at all what his agent Moteuccoma ordered us. All we came to do was to greet and salute you. We were not charged with what the lord wishes. If we should do that, won't Moteuccoma be very angry with us because of it, won't he destroy us for it?"

Then the Captain said, "No indeed; it is simply to be done. I want to see and behold it, for word has gone to Spain that you are very strong, great warriors. Eat while it is still before dawn, and I will eat then too. Outfit yourselves well."

Figure 2. *Moctezuma's Messengers Board Cortés's Boat.*
Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, Libro 12, f.8v, 1577.

Sixth chapter, where it is said how Moteucçoma's messengers came back here to Mexico to tell Moteucçoma what they had seen.

Then [Cortés] let them go. [The Spaniards] lowered them into their boat, and when they had descended into the boat, they paddled hard; each one paddled as hard as he could, and some used their hands to paddle. They fled with all possible speed, saying to one another as they came, "O warriors, exert all your strength, paddle hard! Let's not do something [wrong] here, lest something happen to us!"

By water they quickly reached the place called Xicalanco, where they did nothing but catch their breath, then again came running along as fast as possible. Then they reached Tecpantlayacac, whereupon they again left and came fleeing. They quickly got to Cuetlaxtlan, where they caught their breath and also quickly came away.

And the (ruler or steward) of Cuetlaxtlan said to them, "First take your rest for a day or so, until you recover your strength."

But they said to him, "No, rather we are going hurrying to talk to the lord ruler Moteucçoma, to tell him what we saw, these very terrifying things the like of which have never been seen. Should you be the very first to hear them?"

Then they quickly got on their way and soon reached Mexico. It was night when they got there; they came in by night.

During this time Moteucçoma neither slept nor touched food. Whatever he did, he was abstracted; it seemed as though he was ill at ease, frequently sighing. He tired and felt weak. He no longer found anything tasteful, enjoyable, or amusing.

Therefore he said, "What is to come of us? Who in the world must endure it? Will it not be me [as ruler]? My heart is tormented, as though chile water were poured on it; it greatly burns and smarts. Where in the world [are we to turn], o our lord?"

Then [the messengers] notified those who guarded [Moteucçoma], who kept watch at the head of his bed, saying to them, "Even if he is asleep, tell him. Those whom you sent out on the sea have come back.'"

But when they went to tell him, he replied, "I will not hear it here. I will hear it at the Coacalco; let them go there." And he gave orders, saying, "Let some captives be covered with chalk [for sacrifice]."

Then the messengers went to the Coacalco, and so did Moteucçoma. Thereupon the captives died in their presence; they cut open their chests and sprinkled their blood on the messengers. (The reason they did it was that they had gone to very dangerous places and had seen, gazed on the countenances of, and spoken to the gods.)

Figure 3. *Death of Captives.*
Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, Libro 12, f.10v, 1577.

Seventh chapter, where is told the account that the messengers who went to see the boat gave to Moteuccoma.

When this was done, they talked to Moteuccoma, telling him what they had beheld, and they showed him what [the Spaniards'] food was like.

And when he heard what the messengers reported, he was greatly afraid and taken aback, and he was amazed at their food. It especially made him faint when he heard how the guns went off at [the Spaniards'] command, sounding like thunder, causing people actually to swoon, blocking the ears. And when it went off, something like a ball came out from inside, and fire went showering and spitting out. And the smoke that came from it had a very foul stench, striking one in the face. And if they shot at a hill, it seemed to crumble and come apart. And it turned a tree to dust; it seemed to make it vanish, as though someone had conjured it away. Their war gear was all iron. They clothed their bodies in iron, they put iron on their heads, their swords were iron, their bows were iron, and their shields and lances were iron.

And their deer that carried them were as tall as the roof. And they wrapped their bodies all over; only their faces could be seen, very white. Their faces were the color of limestone and their hair yellow-reddish, though some had black hair. They had long beards, also yellow-reddish. [The hair of some] was tightly curled. And their food was like fasting food, very large, white, not heavy, like chaff, like dried maize stalks, as tasty as maize stalk flour, a bit sweet or honeyed, honeyed and sweet to eat.

And their dogs were huge creatures, with their ears folded over and their jowls dragging. They had burning eyes, eyes like coals, yellow and fiery. They had thin, gaunt flanks with the rib lines showing; they were very tall. They did not keep quiet, they went about panting, with their tongues hanging down. They had spots like a jaguar's, they were varicolored.

When Moteucçoma heard it, he was greatly afraid; he seemed to faint away, he grew concerned and disturbed.

Eighth chapter, where it is said how Moteucçoma sent witches, wizards, and sorcerers to do something to the Spaniards.

Then at that time Moteucçoma sent out emissaries. Those whom he sent were all bad people, soothsayers and witches. He also sent elders, strong warriors, to see to all [the Spaniards] needed as to food: turkey hens, eggs, white tortillas, and whatever they might request, and to look after them well so that they would be satisfied in every way. He sent captives in case [the Spaniards] should drink their blood. And the emissaries did as indicated.

But when [the Spaniards] saw it, they were made sick to their stomachs, spitting, rubbing their eyelids, blinking, shaking their heads. And [the emissaries] sprinkled blood in the food, they bloodied it, which made their stomachs turn and disgusted them, because of the great stench of the blood.

Moteucçoma did this because he took them for gods, considered them gods, worshiped them as gods. They were called and given the name of gods who have come from heaven, and the blacks were called soiled gods. . . .

They say that Moteucçoma sent the witches, the rainmakers, to see what [the Spaniards] were like and perhaps be able to enchant them, cast spells on them, to use conjury or the evil eye on them or hurl something else at them, perhaps addressing some words of wizardry to them so that they would take sick, die, or turn back. But when they performed the assignment they had been given concerning the Spaniards, they could do nothing; they had no power at all. Then they quickly returned to tell Moteucçoma what they were like, how strong they were, [saying,] "We are not their match; we are as nothing."

Then Moteuccçoma gave strict orders; he scolded and charged the stewards and all the lords and elders, under pain of death, that they see to and take care of everything [the Spaniards] might need. And when [the Spaniards] came onto dry land and finally started moving in this direction and coming along the road toward here, they were well cared for and made much of. They were always in the hands of someone as they came progressing; they were very well attended to.

Ninth chapter, where it is said how Moteuccçoma wept, and the Mexica wept, when they found out that the Spaniards were very strong.

And Moteuccçoma lamented his troubles at length; he was afraid and shocked. He told the troubles of the altepetl. And everyone was very afraid. Fear reigned, and shock, laments, and expressions of distress. People talked, assembled, gathered, wept for themselves and for others. Heads hung, there were tearful greetings, words of encouragement, and stroking of hair. Little children's heads were stroked. Fathers would say, "Alas, my children, how is it with you, that what is about to happen has happened to you?" And mothers said, "O my children, how is it with you who are to behold what is about to happen to us?"

And it was told, presented, made known, announced, and reported to Moteuccçoma, and brought to his attention that a woman, one of us people here, came accompanying them as interpreter. Her name was Marina and her homeland was Tepeticpac, on the coast, where they first took her. . . .

pages to accompany them. In some pueblos, they even play at tilting with reeds and have bull fights, and they tilt at the ring, especially on Corpus Christi day or the day of San Juan or Señor Santiago . . . [M]any of them are horsemen, especially in a pueblo named Chiapa of the Indians, and, even those who are not Caciques, nearly all of them own horses, and some own herds of mares and mules, and use them to bring in firewood and maize and lime and other things of the kind which they sell in the Plazas, and many of them are carriers in the same way as we have in our Castile.

Not to waste more words, they carry on all trades very perfectly—and even know how to weave tapestry cloths.

I will stop talking further on this subject and will tell of many other grandeurs which, through us, there have been and still are in New Spain.

31

From the *Proof of the Faithful Service of Doña Marina (Malintzin) during the Conquest of New Spain*

In 1542, Doña Marina's daughter María Jaramillo and her husband Luis de Quesada initiated a judicial inquest in Mexico City regarding Malintzin's role in the fall of Tenochtitlan. This legal effort included gathering testimonies of numerous people who had known Doña Marina and witnessed her considerable political influence. The couple sought to garner validation from the crown of her social stature for their own economic ends, primarily to secure a greater share of Doña Marina's property, which included an encomienda *grant of Indian laborers and tribute from the town of Xilotepec. Doña Marina's husband (and María's father) Juan Jaramillo had disapproved of the marriage to Luis de Quesada and punished the couple by restricting their share of the estate in his will.*

Translation by T. Seijas. "Información de los méritos y servicios de doña Marina [Malintzin], india, mujer de Juan Jaramillo, que auxilió a Hernán Cortés y a su gente en la conquista de México, dándoles noticias fidedignas de lo que observaba dentro de la población, a fin de que les sirviese de gobierno." Archive of the Indies [AGI], Patronato 56 N.3 R.4 f.13, 34v.

The excerpt below is from Marina's "Proof of Merits" (Probanza de meritos) *—a standardized colonial document employed by numerous participants in Spain's conquest campaigns to receive compensation for their good service to the Spanish king. The format included a list of leading questions for witnesses who were called upon to elaborate on the person's contributions. From the* Probanza's *questions and witnesses' answers, it is clear that Doña Marina was widely remembered as a key player in orchestrating the downfall of the Triple Alliance. Doña Marina and her descendants benefited considerably from her efforts, illustrated by the fact that she rose in social position from being an enslaved woman to a highly respected property owner. Like Bernal Díaz's text, this kind of documentation speaks to the importance for future generations—Spanish and Indian—of having participated in the collapse of the Mexica Empire to secure social and economic standing in the new colonial order.*

Excerpt from *Probanza* Questionnaire

If [the witness] knows that because the said Doña Marina was a native [*natural*] of this land at the time when the captain [Cortés] and Spaniards who accompanied him, industriously and with good judgment towards warring Indians, who needed food with which to sustain the army, that she was able to provide provisions, and that she did so many times, and that Indians would give her the food and the she would bring it back [to the camp] in order to share with everyone, and that it was because of [her efforts] that Spaniards did not perish, and that the land was afterwards won. . . .

Excerpt from Witness's Answers (Spanish Captain)

. . . It was almost through divine intervention that in order to conquer New Spain everyone understood one another, which [made it possible] to declare that God and King rule [this land]; and that the said Doña Marina, [who was] very faithful and loyal to don Hernando Cortés and the conquering Spaniards, had a talent for speaking with Indigenous people and ways of making them understand that there was no way to tame the Spaniards.

Figure 12. *Doña Marina/Malintzin as Interlocutor.*
This representation from the *Florentine Codex* portrays Doña Marina as Cortés's translator, political advisor, and cultural mediator. She stands at center, listening to Nahuatl and Spanish speakers and interpreting both languages to enable each side to understand the other. This affirmation of her importance is borne out in the testimonies of dozens of witnesses who described her efforts decades after the war.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, Libro 12, f.47v, 1577.

4

The March Inland: Tlaxcala and Cholula

After the founding of Vera Cruz, Hernando Cortés sought to build alliances with nearby city-states, especially with Cempoala. According to his report, the Cempoalans had only recently been brought under Mexica domination and were restive under their overlords, so Cortés hoped they would ally with the Spaniards against the Mexica. This strategy of garnering support from Indigenous elites served him well throughout the wars that followed. After learning more about the Mexica Empire, Cortés decided to strike inland, leaving a garrison of about 150 men in Vera Cruz. The expedition consisted of several hundred Spaniards, Cempoalan soldiers, and a large number of Indigenous bearers (*tlamemeh*) with supplies. They trekked westward, climbing through the mountains that lay just beyond the coast and passing through a number of towns.

At various points the company received ambassadors, forward observers sent from Tenochtitlan by Moctezuma to gather information about the strangers. Cortés used a combination of diplomacy, bravado, and guile to try to impress these representatives, as well as to obtain local support for the mission, which by this time aimed to reach the Mexica capital and possibly force a confrontation. Informed about regional politics, Cortés chose to lead his force through Tlaxcala, an *altepetl* whose people were linguistically and culturally akin to the Mexica, but who were also their traditional political enemies.

Despite Cortés's diplomatic efforts, the Tlaxcalans understandably received the expedition with suspicion and hostility. The Tlaxcalan state was composed of four major political divisions, and its leadership was not united on the course of action to take against the invaders. Under the leadership of a young captain, Xicotencatl the Younger, certain Tlaxcalans and their Otomí allies carried out a military offensive that led to a number of open battles, which Bernal Díaz recounts in detail.

Eventually, the factions in favor of an alliance with the Spaniards won out, and the strangers were welcomed into the city with the usual presentations of food, supplies, and captive women. Some Tlaxcalans leaders like Mase Escasi and Xicotencatl the Elder, father of the hostile captain, seized the opportunity to join forces against the Mexica. For the Spaniards, cementing this alliance gave them a firm logistical base for further operations.

Cortés's alliance with Tlaxcala impressed Moctezuma's representatives, who realized that the strangers had gained a valuable if, for the Mexica, dangerous partner. Cortés's decision to march from Tlaxcala to the nearby city and religious center of Cholula, their traditional enemy, was likely taken at the urgings of Tlaxcalan military advisors, who hoped to take advantage of the new alliance to gain the upper hand over their regional competitors. Although the Spaniards were welcomed at first, fighting erupted in Cholula and resulted in a bloody massacre of the inhabitants, which was perhaps intended to show the Mexica leadership what Tlaxcalans and Spaniards were capable of doing together.

The story of the alliance with Tlaxcala is central to the course of subsequent events. Without Tlaxcalan support, the trajectory of the conquest of Tenochtitlan would have been very different. After the wars, Tlaxcala became a privileged province under Spanish colonial government, with Tlaxcalans receiving honors, rewards, and exemptions as acknowledgement of their critical role in dismantling the Mexica Empire. Some twentieth-century Mexican nationalists described the Tlaxcalans as traitors to a "native" cause, but such labels make little sense in the context of the ethnic rivalries and the contemporary geopolitics of central Mexico.

The selections on the campaign against Tlaxcala included here are excerpts from Bernal Díaz's account of the events. Another conquistador, Andrés de Tapia, narrates the Tlaxcala–Spanish attack on Cholula in a forthright manner. The Nahua sources for this part of the story include the Mexica views collected by Sahagún, as well the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*—a sixteenth-century Tlaxcalan pictorial account that celebrates the Spanish–Tlaxcalan alliance.

friend, who I have reason to believe is very good, and I will not tolerate that anything be said to the contrary."

Then he ordered that most of the noblemen be killed, leaving a few of them in chains. He also ordered the Spaniards in the other patios to give a signal that everyone be killed, and so it was done. They defended themselves the best they could, and tried to take the offensive, but since they were walled inside the courtyards with the entrances guarded, the majority of them died.

This done, the Spaniards and Indians in our company went out in squadrons to different parts of the city, killing the men and burning the houses. Shortly after, a number of people from Tlaxcala arrived, and they looted the city, destroyed everything possible, making off with a great amount of plunder.

Certain priests of the devil climbed to the top of the tower of the principal idol and refused to give themselves up, but stayed there to be burned, lamenting and telling their idol that it was wrong of him to forsake them. So everything possible was done to destroy this city, but the marqués ordered us to refrain from killing women and children. The work of destroying the city took two days. Many [of the residents] hid in the hills and fields, and others took refuge in the land of their enemies.

At the end of two days the marqués ordered the destruction ceased, and so it stopped. Within another two or three days, it appeared that many of the natives of the city had gathered together, for they sent word to the marqués begging for pardon and for permission to reoccupy the city, offering to be a protectorate of Tlaxcala. The marqués pardoned them.

13

FRAY BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN

From the *Florentine Codex*

The Nahua accounts collected by Sahagún emphasize the Spanish–Tlaxcalan alliance, and the Cholula massacre is described as an unprovoked act of violence.

James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, Repertorium Columbianum, UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 90–98, 104–106.

them great honors; they gave them what they needed and attended to them, and then they gave them their daughters.

Then [the Spaniards] asked them, "Where is Mexico? What kind of a place is it? Is it still far?"

They answered them, "It's not far now. Perhaps one can get there in three days. It is a very favored place, and [the Mexica] are very strong, great warriors, conquerors, who go about conquering everywhere."

Now before this there had been friction between the Tlaxcalans and the Cholulans. They viewed each other with anger, fury, hate, and disgust; they could come together on nothing. Because of this they put [the Spaniards] up to killing them treacherously.

They said to them, "The Cholulans are very evil; they are our enemies. They are as strong as the Mexica, and they are the Mexica's friends."

When the Spaniards heard this, they went to Cholula. The Tlaxcalans and Cempoalans went with them, outfitted for war. When they arrived, there was a general summons and cry that all the noblemen, rulers, subordinate leaders, warriors, and commoners should come, and everyone assembled in the temple courtyard. When they had all come together, [the Spaniards and their friends] blocked the entrances, all of the places where one entered. Thereupon people were stabbed, struck, and killed. No such thing was in the minds of the Cholulans; they did not meet the Spaniards with weapons of war. It just seemed that they were stealthily and treacherously killed, because the Tlaxcalans persuaded [the Spaniards] to do it.

And a report of everything that was happening was given and relayed to Moteuccoma. Some of the messengers would be arriving as others were leaving; they just turned around and ran back. There was no time when they weren't listening, when reports weren't being given. And all the common people went about in a state of excitement; there were frequent disturbances, as if the earth moved and (quaked), as if everything were spinning before one's eyes. People took fright.

And after the dying in Cholula, [the Spaniards] set off on their way to Mexico, coming gathered and bunched, raising dust. Their iron lances and halberds seemed to sparkle, and their iron swords were curved like a stream of water. Their cuirasses and iron helmets seemed to make a clattering sound. Some of them came wearing iron all over, turned into iron beings, gleaming, so that they aroused great fear and were generally seen with fear and dread. Their dogs came in front, coming ahead of them, keeping to the front, panting, with their spittle hanging down.

Twelfth chapter, where it is said how Moteuccoma sent a great nobleman along with many other noblemen to go to meet the Spaniards, and

what their gifts of greeting were when they greeted the Captain between Iztactepetl and Popocatepetl.

Thereupon Moteucçoma named and sent the noblemen and a great many other agents of his, with Tzihuacpopocatzin as their leader, to go meet [Cortés] between Popocatepetl and Iztactepetl, at Quauhtechcac. They gave [the Spaniards] golden banners, banners of precious feathers, and golden necklaces.

And when they had given the things to them, they seemed to smile, to rejoice and be very happy. Like monkeys they grabbed the gold. It was as though their hearts were put to rest, brightened, freshened. For gold was what they greatly thirsted for; they were gluttonous for it, starved for it, piggishly wanting it. They came lifting up the golden banners, waving them from side to side, showing them to each other. They seemed to babble; what they said to each other was in a babbling tongue.

And when they saw Tzihuacpopocatzin, they said, "Is this one then Moteucçoma?" They said it to the Tlaxcalans and Cempoalans, their lookouts, who came among them, questioning them secretly. They said, "It is not that one, o our lords. This is Tzihuacpopocatzin, who is representing Moteucçoma."

[The Spaniards] said to him, "Are you then Moteucçoma?" He said, "I am your agent Moteucçoma."

Then they told him, "Go on with you! Why do you lie to us? What do you take us for? You can't lie to us, you can't fool us, (turn our heads), flatter us, (make faces at us), trick us, confuse our vision, distort things for us, blind us, dazzle us, throw mud in our eyes, put muddy hands on our faces. It is not you. Moteucçoma exists; he will not be able to hide from us, he will not be able to find refuge. Where will he go? Is he a bird, will he fly? Or will he take an underground route, will he go somewhere into a mountain that is hollow inside? We will see him, we will not fail to gaze on his face and hear his words from his lips."

... Fourteenth chapter, where it is said how Moteucçoma gave orders for the roads to be closed so that the Spaniards could not get to Mexico here.

And in vain attempt Moteucçoma ordered that the roads and highways be closed off in various places. They planted magueys in the road coming straight to Mexico here, directing them [instead] onto the road going into Tezcoco.

And where they closed the road with a wall of maguey, [the Spaniards] immediately recognized it, they saw that they had just blocked it, and they disregarded it. They took the magueys, kicked them far away, sent them flying, hurled them far off to the side.

They spent the night at Amaquemecan, then came straight on along the road and reached Cuitlahuac, where they also spent the night. They assembled the rulers from each of the kingdoms among the chinampa people: Xochimilco, Cuitlahuac, Mizquic. They told them what they had told the rulers of Chalco. And the rulers of the chinampa people also submitted to them.

And when the Spaniards were satisfied, they moved on this way and made a halt in Itztapalapan. Then they summoned, had summoned the rulers there as well, called the Four Lords, of Itztapalapan, Mexicatzinco, Colhuacan, and Huitzilopochco. They talked with them in the same way they had spoken to [the chinampa people] (as was said). And they too peacefully submitted to the Spaniards.

Moteucçoma did not give orders for anyone to make war against them or for anyone to meet them in battle. No one was to meet them in battle. He just ordered that they be strictly obeyed and very well attended to.

And at this time there was silence here in Mexico. No one went out any more; mothers no longer let [their children] go out. The roads were as if swept clean, wide open, as if at dawn, with no one crossing. People assembled in the houses and did nothing but grieve. The people said, "Let it be that way; curses on it. What more can you do? For we are about to die and perish, we are awaiting our deaths."

14

Tlaxcalan Noblemen Greet Cortés and *Massacre at Cholula*

From the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*

The content of the Lienzo, *like the history written by the Tlaxcalan author Diego Muñoz Camargo in the sixteenth century, demonstrates how history can be repurposed for different political ends.*[1] *The early battles between the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans described by Bernal Díaz, for instance,*

[1]Diego Muñoz Camargo, *Historia de Tlaxcala* (México: Oficina tip. de la Secretaría de fomento, 1892). http://archive.org/details/historiadetlaxca00muno.

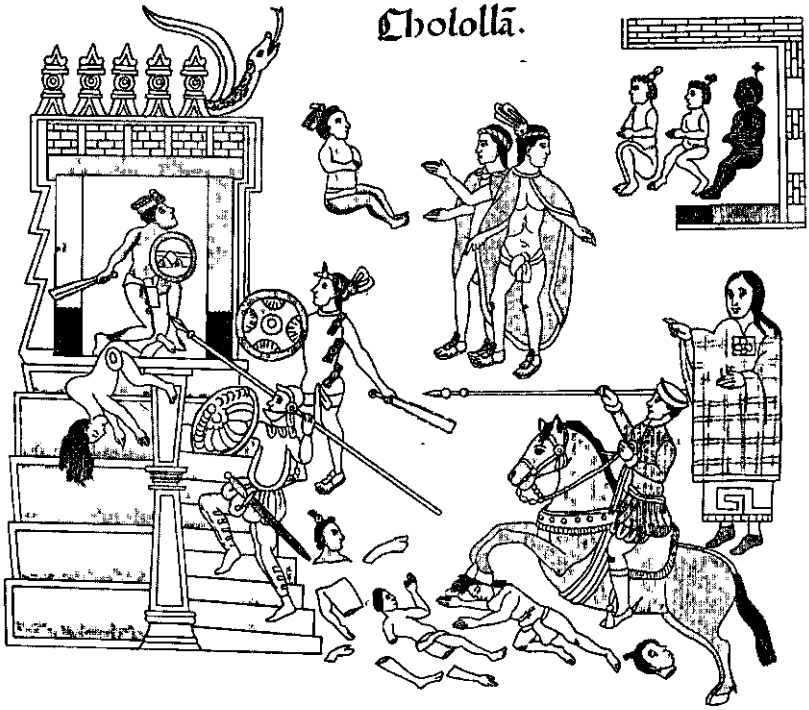
Lienzo de Tlaxcala, reconstruction cells 5 and 9. Liza Bakewell and Byron E. Hamann, "Mesolore: Exploring Mesoamerican Culture." Prolarti Enterprise, LLC and Brown University, http://mesolore.org.

were carefully omitted from Tlaxcalan historical narratives, which concentrated instead on later cooperation and alliance. Doña Marina (Malintzin) plays a central role in the rendering of the fall of the Mexica Empire and *is repeatedly shown as a major figure next to Cortés.*

The first scene has Cortés grabbing the wrist of a Tlaxcalan nobleman before the cross, while two other noblemen holding flowers look on; to the right, Malintzin and a Franciscan friar also bear witness to the encounter. The second scene is the massacre at Cholula. At left, Tlaxcalan and Spanish soldiers attack Cholulan priests at the Temple of Quetzalcoatl; two Tlaxcalan noblemen stand at center, apparently orchestrating the events. Malintzin, at right, is shown directing a Spanish horseman to strike residents of the city-state.

Tlaxcalan Noblemen Greet Cortés at Tlaxcala.

Lienzo de Tlaxcala, reconstruction, cell 5. Liza Bakewell and Byron E. Hamann, "Mesolore: Exploring Mesoamerican Culture." Prolarti Enterprise, LLC and Brown University.



Massacre at Cholula.

Lienzo de Tlaxcala, reconstruction, cell 9. Liza Bakewell and Byron E. Hamann, "Mesolore: Exploring Mesoamerican Culture." Prolarti Enterprise, LLC and Brown University.

death. The Mexicans were made ready in the customary manner, after being informed that they were taking their message to the dead Cazonci, and were sacrificed in the temple of Curicaveri and Xaratanga. . . .

27

FRAY BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN

From the *Florentine Codex*

These excerpts make the agonies of defeat quite apparent, beginning with the report of the smallpox epidemic that was spreading through the city. Particular attention is paid to the places where the battles took place and the specific conditions of the combat. Sometimes the text identifies the military exploits and strategies of individual Mexicas, such as Tzilacatzin. Another excerpt describes the capture and sacrifice of a number of Spaniards in great detail. Sahagún's informants for these accounts were men from Tlatelolco, the quarter of Tenochtitlan that had once been a separate city and was politically subordinate. The excerpts indicate the strength of local pride and perhaps a Tlatelolcan bias against the political and military failure of Tenochtitlan. Just as supernatural signs accompanied the first arrival of the Spaniards in the Nahua accounts, the final defeat is also presaged by an omen, a blood-colored sky. The Nahua texts mention in matter-of-fact directness the Spanish actions after the surrender: the search for gold, and the taking of women and of slaves.

Twenty-ninth chapter, where it is said how, at the time the Spaniards left Mexico, there came an illness of pustules of which many local people died; it was called "the great rash" [smallpox].

Before the Spaniards appeared to us, first an epidemic broke out, a sickness of pustules. It began in Tepeilhuitl. Large bumps spread on people; some were entirely covered. They spread everywhere, on the face, the head, the chest, etc. [The disease] brought great desolation; a great many died of it. They could no longer walk about, but lay in their

James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico.* Repertorium Columbianum, UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 180–84, 192–94, 198–200, 214–18, 242–44, 246–48.

dwellings and sleeping places, no longer able to move or stir. They were unable to change position, to stretch out on their sides or face down, or raise their heads. And when they made a motion, they called out loudly. The pustules that covered people caused great desolation; very many people died of them, and many just starved to death; starvation reigned, and no one took care of others any longer.

On some people, the pustules appeared only far apart, and they did not suffer greatly, nor did many of them die of it. But many people's faces were spoiled by it, their faces and noses were made rough. Some lost an eye or were blinded.

This disease of pustules lasted a full sixty days; after sixty days it abated and ended. When people were convalescing and reviving, the pustules disease began to move in the direction of Chalco. And many were disabled or paralyzed by it, but they were not disabled forever. It broke out in Teotleco, and it abated in Panquetzaliztli. The Mexica warriors were greatly weakened by it.

And when things were in this state, the Spaniards came, moving toward us from Tetzcoco. They appeared from the direction of Quauhtitlan and made a halt at Tlacopan. There they gave one another assignments and divided themselves. Pedro de Alvarado was made responsible for the road coming to Tlatelolco. The Marqués considered the Tenochca great and valiant warriors.

And it was right in Nextlatilco, or in Ilyacac, that war first began. Then [the Spaniards] quickly reached Nonoalco, and the warriors came pursuing them. None of the Mexica died; then the Spaniards retreated. The warriors fought in boats; the war-boat people shot at the Spaniards, and their arrows sprinkled down on them. Then [the main force of the Mexica] entered [Nonoalco]. Thereupon the Marqués sent [his men] toward the Tenochca, following the Acachinanco road. Many times they skirmished, and the Mexica went out to face them.

Thirty-first chapter, where it is said how the Spaniards came with the brigantines, pursuing those who were in boats. When they were done contending with them, they drew close and reached all the houses.

And when they had finished adjusting [the guns], they shot at the wall. The wall then ripped and broke open. The second time it was hit, the wall went to the ground; it was knocked down in places, perforated, holes were blown in it. Then, like the other time, the road stood clear. And the warriors who had been lying at the wall dispersed and came fleeing; everyone escaped in fear. And then all the different people [who were on the side of the Spaniards] quickly went filling in the canals and making them level with stones, adobes, and some logs, with which they closed off the water.

Figure 9. *The Ravages of Disease.*
Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, Libro 12, f.53v, 1577.

And when the canals were stopped up, some horse[men] came, perhaps ten of them; they came going in circles, spinning, turning, twisting. Another group of horse[men] came following behind them. And some Tlatelolca who had quickly entered the palace that had been Moteuccçoma's residence came back out in alarm to contend with the horse[men]. They lanced one of the Tlatclolca, but when they had lanced him, he was able to take hold of [the Spaniard's] iron lance. Then his companions took it from [the Spaniard's] hands, throwing him on his back and unhorsing him. When he fell to the ground, they struck him repeatedly on the back of the neck, and he died there.

Then the Spaniards sent everyone, they all moved together; they reached Quauhquiahuac [Eagle Gate]. As they went they took the cannon and its gear and set it down at Quauhquiahuac. (The reason it is so called is that an eagle stood there, carved of stone, some seven feet tall, and enclosing it were a jaguar standing on one side, and a wolf standing