

because they were in some sense better, or better equipped, technically, morally or intellectually" (Fernández-Armesto 1992:288). But in the case of Mexico, there is another side to the story: Cortés cannot truly monopolize the credit for victory because Motecuzoma is equally awarded the blame for the Aztec defeat. This is a curious phenomenon, well-known to Conquest historians, but it has not received proper attention (Fernández-Armesto 1992:288).

On the European side—the side best represented in subsequent historiography—the Spanish victory was attributed to Hernando Cortés's political skill, courage, and luck and, no less important, the hand of God (Elliott 1967:55; see also Díaz Balseira, Chapter 3, this volume). Such characterizations appear in the hagiographic accounts, such as those by Francisco López de Gómara (1964), Cortés's secretary, and the Franciscan writers, including Friars Sahagún, Motolinia, and Mendieta (Cline 1988:99). They also concurred with the dominant approach in nineteenth-century European political history that emphasized the actions of major political figures as driving historical change (e.g., von Ranke 1981:17). The legacy of these earlier attitudes continues to shape understandings of the Conquest today, despite contemporary concerns for a more balanced view of past events. Thus, we now also take into consideration the impact of non-personal factors in explaining the outcome, such as the superior technology of the Spaniards, the political instability and weaknesses of the Aztec Empire, and, especially, the devastation and disruption wrought by European diseases (Fernández-Armesto 1992:303).

Nevertheless, even as Cortés's role in the Spanish victory is now somewhat downplayed, the blame for the Aztec loss still falls heavily on Motecuzoma. Much has been written about Motecuzoma's personal failings, as though the protracted struggle for European hegemony in the Americas was solely his to lose. Indeed, it has been suggested that if someone less superstitious and conceited than Motecuzoma had been in charge—an aggressive warrior like the Tlaxcaltec general Xicotencatl or Motecuzoma's young successor, Cuauhtémoc—the Conquest would not have been possible (Martínez 1986:398).

Because of the long-standing focus on these two men in the battle for control of Mexico, specific actions that impacted their changing relationship were frequently chosen to illustrate the course of the Conquest, and they continue to resonate with audiences today. These events constitute only a small sample of the actual occurrences, and they were not necessarily critical to the eventual outcome. However, they were transformed into icons of the victory of Christendom over the Aztecs and, by extension, of America itself. They form a mini-narrative that encapsulates the lengthy multifaceted processes of encounter, intrigue, battle, defeat, and subjugation.

The seventeenth-century Kislak paintings are prime examples of what one

BLAMING MOTEUCUZOMA

ANTHROPOMORPHIZING THE AZTEC CONQUEST

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The Aztec Conquest has long been depicted as a struggle between two towering historical figures—Cortés and Motecuzoma. The "noble, valiant Cortés" was contrasted with a "timorous, cowardly" Motecuzoma in the earliest Hispanic narratives of the Conquest written only a few decades after the 1521 fall of the Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan (Clendinnen 1991:65; e.g., see López de Gómara 1964:179). William Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) further personalized the clash between the Old and New Worlds in terms of the contrast of these two leaders, the European and the Indian, such that the former, by dint of cultural superiority, was bound to emerge victorious. This attitude not only continues to permeate current perspectives on the Conquest (Clendinnen 1991:65; Lockhart 1993:17; see, e.g., Collis 1954; Thomas 1993), but it has been generalized to all of Latin America in the form of the "conquistador-myth: the notion that Spaniards displaced incumbent elites in the early modern New World

might call the "Hispanic corpus" (Spanish- and Creole-produced) of iconic depictions that entwine the actions of Cortés and Moteuczoma. These include the reception of Moteuczoma's delegates in Veracruz (plate 2), followed by the fateful meeting of Cortés and Moteuczoma on the edge of the city of Tenochtitlan (plate 3). Cortés moved into the city and soon afterward imprisoned Moteuczoma, bringing the two in close juxtaposition. A series of events that is *not* depicted then led to their separation, artistically represented by the death of Moteuczoma while in Spanish custody (plate 4), followed immediately by the flight of Cortés from the city (plate 5). A final iconic event that connotes their relationship is the presentation to Cortés of Cuauhtémoc, Moteuczoma's successor and surrogate, the final painting in the series (plate 8). Through this abbreviated sequence of events, their relationship of opposition has been reversed: Cortés, the intrepid invader, has defeated the supreme emperor within his own capital. The Spanish outsider, who came into the Aztec realm by sea, became the insider, while Cuauhtémoc attempted to flee that realm by water but was captured. He was executed several years later by Cortés in the region that is now Campeche, during the latter's journey to Honduras (Scholes and Roys 1968:112).

Another perspective of the Conquest has also survived in the form of pictorial and written accounts produced by indigenous elites or representing their views, dating from the mid- to late sixteenth century into the early seventeenth century. As one might expect, this "indigenized corpus" highlights certain events not found or prominently depicted in the Hispanized corpus. Perhaps most significant is the massacre carried out by Pedro de Alvarado during the Toxcatl ceremony in Tenochtitlan's main ceremonial precinct (*Codex Aubin* 1963:81; *Codex Ríos* 1996:fol. 89r; Durán 1994a:pl. 59; Histoire Mexicaine 1998:21; *El Lienzo de Tlaxcala* 1979:pl. 14; Sahagún 1950–1982 [(*Florentine Codex*)] [hereafter FC]: Bk. 12, figs. 66–70). This occurred in May 1520 and was a critical turning point for the Aztecs in their relationship with the Spanish intruders (Cline 1989:7; Lockhart 1993:16–17). The massacre precipitated the hatred and war that led to the Spaniards' ouster from the city on the *Noche triste*, June 30 (according to Fr. Sahagún 1989a:98). Its counterpart in the Hispanized corpus may be the Battle of Otumba, a heroic turning point for the Spaniards still greatly suffering from their humiliating retreat from the city, which is not part of the indigenized corpus. Another important event illustrated in some indigenous-authored documents but not in the Hispanized portrayals is the execution of Cuauhtémoc (e.g., *Codex Ríos* 1996:fol. 90r; Tira de Tepechpan 1978:pl. 15).

Despite these discrepancies, some of the same iconic events in the Kislak paintings were depicted in the sixteenth century by native artists of New Spain. These include the first meeting of Moteuczoma and Cortés (Durán 1994a:pl. 58; FC Bk. 12:fig. 44; *El Lienzo de Tlaxcala* 1979:pl. 11), the stoning death of

Moteuczoma (*El Lienzo de Tlaxcala* 1979:pl. 15), the flight of the *Noche triste* (FC Bk. 12:figs. 89–93; *El Lienzo de Tlaxcala* 1979:pls. 18–19), and the presentation of the captured Cuauhtémoc to Cortés (*El Lienzo de Tlaxcala* 1979:pl. 48); it is an exaggeration to state that Cuauhtémoc formally surrendered (Cortés 1986:264–265).

More significant, it is in the post-Conquest indigenous written historical traditions that we see the blame for their defeat fall most heavily on Moteuczoma. On the one hand, the weaknesses attributed to Moteuczoma in the Conquest accounts were partly a by-product of Spanish representations, derived especially from Cortés's political strategy to save his own neck (Clendinnen 1991:75). His Second Letter (Cortés 1986) has Moteuczoma virtually giving away his kingdom to Cortés, who illegitimately represented himself as ambassador of the Spanish monarch, at their first meeting. Cortés soon made Moteuczoma his prisoner, impeding the emperor's capacity to oust the Spanish intruders. Moteuczoma's apparent willingness to kowtow to the Europeans seemed inexplicable other than by reference to failings of his character, and he was disparaged by his own people. In his Third Letter, Cortés (1986:188) reported that as the Spaniards were preparing to attack Tenochtitlan, the enemy warriors taunted him, saying, "Do you think there is not another Murezuma to do whatever you wish?" Cortés's actions and his reasons for them, as laid out in his letters to the king of Spain, became embedded within the Hispanic rationale for the events of the Conquest. They greatly contributed to the notion that the most powerful man on the North American continent was rendered virtually impotent upon his first encounter with the Spanish conquistador.

On the other hand, the native accounts are far more critical in their assessments of Moteuczoma's reaction to the Spanish *entrada*. More important, they provide detailed reasons why a widely feared military leader had been reduced to an indecisive coward long before the Europeans even set foot on Mexican soil. In these narratives Moteuczoma, the *huey tlatoani* ("great speaker") of the Mexico city of Tenochtitlan, looms large as the locus for the conjunction of human and cosmic factors that made defeat inevitable, just as Cortés was magnified and almost venerated in some sixteenth-century Hispanic accounts of victory (e.g., Aguilar 1993; Díaz del Castillo 1994; López de Gómara 1964). It was the indigenous characterization of a "quaking, indecisive, quiescent, effete" Moteuczoma (Lockhart 1993:17) that was brought to scholarly attention by William Prescott in the nineteenth century.¹ We thus need to examine the reasons for representing Moteuczoma as a fearful, fawning failure of a ruler.

BLAMING MOTEUCZOMA

God was given ultimate credit for the Spanish victory, with Cortés acting as His agent on earth (Cline 1989:6, 9). By the same token, Motecuzoma's fate was also attributed to divine intervention, but as a punishment for his shortcomings. Both indigenous authors and Spaniards relying on native informants depicted Motecuzoma as uncertain, passive, paralyzed with fear, and ultimately hopeless. He simply stood back and let the alien invaders do what they would because he believed his fate was in the hands of his gods, who had turned against him. Their divine intervention in Aztec destiny was relayed by cosmic omens or portents said to have begun approximately ten years before Cortés arrived on the scene and interpreted as foretelling the impending destruction of Motecuzoma's reign. In some accounts Motecuzoma is said to have been singled out by these ominous signs sent directly by the gods because of his tyranny and oppression. Adding further to his distress, according to some accounts, was his belief that the Spaniards might be gods.

The most elaborate descriptions of the fear and paralysis that gripped Motecuzoma because of these strange auguries appear in the *General History* written by Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún in its last edition, the version known as the *Florentine Codex* (FC; Sahagún 1950–1982). Written in parallel Nahuatl and Spanish texts, this twelve-book encyclopedia was completed in the years 1578–1580. The twelfth book is dedicated entirely to the Conquest (see Lockhart 1993). Sahagún continued to edit Book 12, and a final revision was finished in 1585, which survives as a Spanish copy (Sahagún 1989b). The 1585 revision of Book 12 varies considerably from the earlier *Florentine Codex*, and it represents Sahagún's view of the Conquest more so than that of his indigenous (mostly Tlaxelolcan) informants (Cline 1988, 1989:3–4). A second major source of information on Motecuzoma's state of mind is the Tenochtitlan-biased *Historia* of Friar Diego Durán (1967, 1994b) completed in ca. 1581, along with closely related accounts (Acosta 2002; Alvarado Tezozomoc 1980; *Códex Ramirez* 1980). Some of the information found in Sahagún's and Durán's histories is repeated in other late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century records, but these two document groupings provide the greatest detail and have garnered the most attention from historians.

For example, Sahagún's Book 12 was the major source used in the popular rendering of native accounts of the Conquest—Miguel León-Portilla's (1962) *The Broken Spears*, especially in the chapter he entitled "Motecuzoma's Terror and Apathy." An excerpt from FC Book 12 succinctly encapsulates Motecuzoma's supposed state of mind as the Spaniards moved ever closer to Tenochtitlan:

Moteczuma loudly expressed his distress. He felt distress, he was terrified, he was astounded. . . . He would flee; he wished to flee; he needed to flee; he would take himself hence. He would hide himself. . . . But this he

could not do. He could not hide. He could not take refuge. No longer had he the strength; no longer was there any use; no longer had he energy. . . . [Motecuzoma] only awaited [the Spaniards]; he made himself resolute; . . . he submitted himself entirely to whatsoever he was to see, at which he was to marvel. (FC Bk. 12:ch. 9, 25–26)

The elaborate repetitive and poetic language of Sahagún's elite Nahuatl informants dramatically highlights Motecuzoma's sheer terror and his ultimate inability even to run away from his enemies.

However, he was not completely passive or indecisive, at least early on. Motecuzoma is said to have reacted to the onset of the omens by demanding explanations and responses to them from his soothsayers and magicians, whose job it was to regularly negotiate with the supernatural realm. He also sent his magicians to try to stop the Spaniards, but, of course, they failed. Only when Motecuzoma realized that he was dealing with divine forces against which he had insufficient power to deter them is he said to have given up these ineffective efforts (especially in the FC; see Colston 1985:254). To the Euro-American mind he epitomizes the irrational superstitions of the native peoples of the Americas, forming a sharp contrast with modern Western rationality and practicality that today we mistakenly credit to late medieval Spaniards and in that sense seem to provide some justification for the conquest of civilized rationality over primitive superstition (Clendinnen 1991:66).

In the various historical accounts, however, this superstitious and irrational attitude is *not* extended to all the Aztecs—although the nameless masses were also said to have exhibited dread, weeping, and despair—but was most strongly attributed to Motecuzoma among native leaders. In contrast, Motecuzoma's cousin Cuauhtémoc is credited with rallying his people to fight the Spaniards until the bitter end, when—his city in ruins, his people starving or dead—he was quickly captured while leaving the city. Cuauhtémoc's name—"Descending Eagle"—came to signify his fate, symbolizing the setting sun (Caso 1958:33). Nevertheless, for his valor, Cuauhtémoc remains a hero to the Mexican people and "an emblematic figure of Mexican nationalism," honored with statues, schools, towns, and streets in his name (León-Portilla 2001:289). No such honor has been given to Motecuzoma, the solitary personified repository of blame for the Aztec defeat.

Significantly, the record of Motecuzoma's actions and reactions in these accounts produced generations afterward contrasts greatly with the conquistadors' retellings of their interactions with high-ranking ambassadors and noble officials sent by Motecuzoma—not magicians and soothsayers. The latter documents paint a picture of a powerful man very actively engaged, cunning, and ruthless in trying to stop the Spaniards' advance. In his Second Letter, Cortés

(1986) cited multiple examples of Motecuzoma's power and dominion, the fear and obedience shown him by even the highest lords, as well as Motecuzoma's numerous attempts to deceive the Spaniards, to ambush them (the official reason given for the Cholula and Toxcatl massacres), to block their way, bribe them, cajole them, and in every way possible prevent them from coming to Tenochtitlan (1986:58, 69, 73, 77, 81). Even after being taken into their custody, Motecuzoma was accused of sending men to kill Spaniards and of plotting with Pánfilo de Narváez when he arrived on the Gulf Coast in 1520 to arrest Cortés (1986:91, 123).

Moreover, no confirming evidence exists for Motecuzoma's "terror and apathy" contemporary to the events of the *entrada* and Conquest. Durán's and Sahagún's descriptions of Motecuzoma's state of mind do not describe public behaviors that could have formed the basis of an accurate recounting of events decades later. The lengthy speeches attributed to Motecuzoma and his closest advisers cannot be taken at face value given that there was no one writing them down and no indication that those who heard his words lived to repeat them verbatim to later chroniclers (Clendinnen 1991:69; Todorov 1985:56). Sahagún's propensity to insert moralizing speeches into his narrative to fulfill his own agenda has also been recognized (this was not an atypical occurrence during that era). In Sahagún's case, his insertions were designed to absolve the Spaniards of culpability for the more heinous acts of cruelty—the Toxcatl massacre and the subsequent death of Motecuzoma—instead blaming the Aztecs (Cline 1988:100, 1989:7–8).

Historian James Lockhart (1993:17–18) further observed that the elaborate descriptions in the first part of the FC of an agonized Motecuzoma, the supernatural events said to have caused his distress, and his magicians' failed attempts to stop the invaders (constituting the "first phase" of the Conquest) are very much at odds with the remaining chapters in Sahagún's account. They are also strikingly unlike other early accounts based on native oral traditions that relate events in a straightforward and rational manner, especially the battles and intrigues following the expulsion of the invaders on the *Noche triste* (which began the "second phase" of the Conquest; Clendinnen 1991:67). Nevertheless, these descriptions of Motecuzoma's responses to the Spanish *entrada* have typically been taken as literal happenings that preordained the result of the ensuing conflict rather than as "the mythic constructs they largely are," in the opinion of historian Inga Clendinnen (1991:67).

Thus, despite all their evidentiary shortcomings, every popular and almost every scholarly account of the Conquest accepts that these narratives have a degree of historical veracity—that Motecuzoma did indeed exhibit certain personal failings and thus contributed to the rapidity of the Spanish takeover of his

empire. Two major reasons have been given by various historians for believing Motecuzoma was reduced to if not terror, at least profound anxiety. First, a large number of written sources—both native- and Spanish-authored—mention the specific events that caused his panic. Although the information they contain is highly contradictory, their number is taken to indicate that they must contain some grain of truth (e.g., Colston 1985; León-Porrilla 1974; Nicholson 2001). Second, the Aztecs are known to have been superstitious and to have interpreted various happenings as ominous auguries (e.g., López Austin 1969). These beliefs are considered to account for a certain level of foreboding, which seems necessary to explain Motecuzoma's otherwise irrational actions and thereby account for his easy capture (e.g., Martínez 1986:397–398; Padden 1967; Thomas 1993; Todorov 1985).

What we see in the present-day explanations of the Conquest is the persistence of the "positivist" (Fogelson 1989) and "literal-minded" (Burke 1990) approach in Western history, despite the fact that this mind-set has been under attack within the discipline of history since the 1930s. The positivist school assumes that historical events exist preformed within documents and merely have to be extracted through historians' methods of critical analysis, determining which events are more likely to be correctly represented, for example, by seeing their repetition across many historical records (Fogelson 1989:135; see, e.g., López Austin 1973:10–11). Raymond Fogelson (1989:135) recently accused fellow ethnohistorians especially of continuing to adhere to a positivist history, even as most others in the history profession have been abandoning it.

Two salient questions therefore arise from a serious consideration of the role of Motecuzoma's "terror and apathy" in the events of the *entrada* and Conquest. First, why does blame continue to fall on Motecuzoma today, given the very non-credible evidence for his personal failings? Second, why did the indigenous peoples assign such blame during the first century after the Conquest?

Given the lack of evidence for the many "events" said to have contributed to or represented Motecuzoma's weakness, we must consider the possibility that they fall into the category of "nonevents." Fogelson (1989) discussed the importance of "nonevents" in both Western and non-Western historiography, including a type of nonevent he calls the "imagined event." In some cases imagined events also become "epitomizing events," which are "narratives that condense, encapsulate and dramatize longer-term historical processes. Such events are inventions but have such compelling qualities and explanatory power that they spread rapidly through the group and soon take on an ethnohistorical reality of their own" (Fogelson 1989:143). Hence they will appear in the guise of historical fact in many different accounts.

From this perspective, the post-Conquest documents that fault Motecuzoma

for the Aztec defeat can be seen as a subsequent re-envisioning of the Conquest, in part by the indigenous peoples themselves as part of their resistance and accommodation following the imposition of Spanish colonialism. This was an important aspect of the "transformation" that resulted from the invasion, but understanding this process requires us to consider central Mexican theories of history, not just our own—that is, an Aztec "ethno-ethnohistory" (following Fogelson 1989; Turner 1988). When we examine these accounts in terms of ethno-ethnohistory, we discover that the epitomizing nonevents salient to an indigenous comprehension of and explanation for the complex, long-term processes of invasion, disruption, defeat, subjugation, and iconoclasm focused on a singular image—the body and person of Moteuczoma. And the foremost mechanism employed to link these occurrences that were beyond Aztec control directly to Moteuczoma, as the embodiment of the Aztec state, was the later invention of cosmic portents—nonevents said to have heralded, if not caused, these events.

THE OMENS

It is commonly held today (Colson 1985:247; León-Portilla 1962:13; see also, e.g., Carrasco 1982; Collis 1954; Graulich 1994:232; León-Portilla 1974; Nicholson 2001; Padden 1967; Thomas 1993; Todorov 1985; this is not an exhaustive list) that Moteuczoma was *most* distressed because of his mistaken belief that Cortés was a god, in particular an ancient god who had left and predicted his return to retake the throne that originally belonged to him, the one Moteuczoma currently occupied. Although the Aztecs may have initially believed the Spaniards as a people, or Cortés as their leader, had divine qualities—just as Moteuczoma was a divine king—the notion that Cortés fulfilled some ancient prophecy, and in particular his identification with the Aztec deity *Quetzalcoatl*, was part of a millenarian movement that developed within the first two generations after the Conquest (Gillespie 1989; Stenzel 1980; see also Clendinnen 1991:69, 88; Cortés 1986:467–468).

More significant, in the accounts of the Conquest believed to be based on native perceptions and preserved in the writings of Sahagún, Durán, and others, the identification of Cortés as *Quetzalcoatl* is typically given relatively little importance as a cause for the fear and uncertainty that are said to have gripped Moteuczoma. Instead, much greater prominence is given to events interpreted as omens or portents of impending doom. Although these omens and the impact they had on the Aztecs in general and Moteuczoma in particular are found in many different documents authored by Spaniards, mestizos, and indigenous peoples, there are many discrepancies among them. At least three major series of omens that foretold the coming of the Spaniards can be discerned, and they are

differentially distributed in the accounts, especially where later authors drew on a variety of earlier documents.

One of the earliest known detailed accounts of omens appears in the *Memoriales* of Friar Toribio Motolinia (1970:ch. 55), dating to the early 1540s (Fernández-Armesto 1992:288–289). Motolinia presented a list of several omens, all of which were said to have occurred before the Spaniards arrived in 1519, briefly described as follows: (1) there were visions in the air of people fighting with one another; (2) a man from Tlatelolco (the city adjacent to Tenochtitlan on the north), while waiting to be sacrificed, was visited by a bird from heaven wearing a crown, who told him that soon there would be no more sacrifices; and (3) for many days, two hours before dawn a light rose in the East over the sea and then disappeared. Toward the East some saw flames of fire, while others saw a great smoke that rose from the sea to the sky. The list of omens is followed by a description of their principal impact on Moteuczoma, who had experienced prognostications that white, bearded men would come from the East to rule his land and thus terminate the reign of the rulers of Mexico. Cortés's secretary, Francisco López de Gómara (1964:ch. 145, 294–295), writing the first history of the Conquest (1552), repeated Motolinia's list of omens—embellishing them somewhat—but in his story Moteuczoma ends up placating the fears expressed by others:¹

Despite the early date and later repetitions of some of Motolinia's portents in other accounts, most scholars have given greater attention to a numbered series of eight omens provided in Friar Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, each with its own illustration (Figures 2.1–2.4). Sahagún claimed to have solicited information from surviving witnesses perhaps as early as 1547 and not later than 1555 and to have begun this part of his encyclopedic work while those participants (most of whom were likely Tlatelolcan) were still alive (Cline 1988:97), although the *Florentine Codex* appeared in final form decades later and some scholars consider it a "late work" (e.g., Clendinnen 1991:69; Fernández-Armesto 1992:289). The list of omens forms the opening chapter of Book 12, "The Conquest" (see also his 1585 revision; Sahagún 1989). The entire list of eight, with much of their detail intact, is duplicated in a number of other sources, including the historical accounts of Diego Muñoz Camargo (1978:Bk. 2, ch. 1) and Friar Juan de Tovar (*Codex Ramirez* 1980:79–80), as well as in the works of two authors known to have copied from Tovar, Friar José de Acosta (2002:Bk. 7, ch. 23) and Friar Juan de Torquemada (1975:Bk. 2, ch. 110).

In briefest outline, these eight omens, said to have begun ten years before the Spanish arrival, are as follows: (1) a pyramid-shaped column of flames appeared before dawn in the East; (2) the temple of the god *Huitzilopochtli* mysteriously caught fire; (3) the thatch-roofed temple of the god *Xiuhtecuhtli* mysteri-



Figure 2.1. Omens 1 and 2, in Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, the Florentine Codex. Left: the first omen (top: Book 12, fol. 1r; bottom: Book 8, fol. 3v). Right: the second omen (top: Book 12, fol. 2r; bottom, Book 8, fol. 11v). Drawings by S. Gillespie.

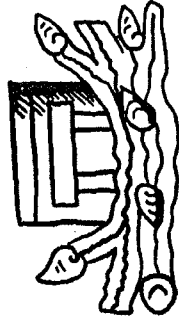


Figure 2.3. Omens 5 and 6, in Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, the Florentine Codex. Left: the fifth omen (Book 8, fol. 12r; not illustrated in Book 12). Right: the sixth omen (top: Book 12, fol. 2v; bottom: Book 8, fol. 12r). Drawings by S. Gillespie.



Figure 2.2. Omens 3 and 4, in Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, the Florentine Codex. Left: the third omen (Book 12, fol. 2r; not illustrated in Book 8). Right: the fourth omen (top: Book 12, fol. 2r; bottom: Book 8, fol. 12r). Drawings by S. Gillespie.

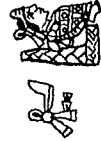
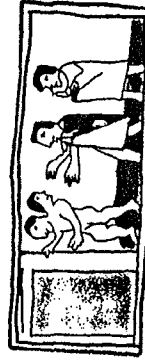
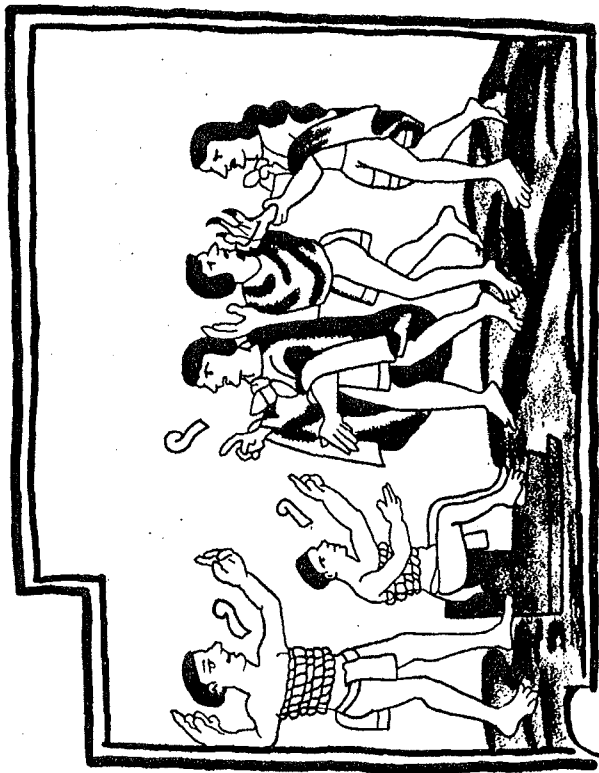


Figure 2.4. Omens 7 and 8, in Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, the Florentine Codex. Left: the seventh omen (top: Book 12, fol. 3r; bottom: Book 8, fol. 12v). Right: the eighth omen (top: Book 12, fol. 3r; bottom: Book 8, fol. 12v). Drawings by S. Gillespie.



Capítulo 13. de como Motecuzoma en

Figure 2.5. The Omen of the Drunken Man of Chalco Bound with Rope, in *Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, the Florentine Codex* (Book 8, fol. 18v). Drawing by S. Gillespie.

ously caught fire; (4) a three-headed comet appeared in the daytime; (5) the lake waters boiled and foamed, flooding some buildings; (6) at night a woman's voice was heard wailing about the impending destruction; (7) lake fisherman caught a crane with a mirror in its head, into which mirror Motecuzoma saw stars and then an approaching army, after which the bird mysteriously disappeared; and (8) a two-headed man was taken to Motecuzoma but then vanished.

Sahagún also related another strange sign that appeared after Cortés was already on the eastern outskirts of the Basin of Mexico, so it is not numbered with the others. A drunken man from Chalco province (in the southeast area of the basin) appeared before the magicians and soothsayers sent by Motecuzoma to try to bewitch the Spaniards. The man, who was bound with rope around his chest, told the magicians they were all doomed and presented them with a vision of their city in flames (Figure 2.5). They recognized him as the god Tezcatlipoca and went back to Tenochtitlan. This story is also told in the *Codex Ramírez* (1980:86) of

Tovar and Acosta's history (2002:Bk. 7, ch. 25). A final omen is mentioned in the *Florentine Codex* (Book 12, ch. 39), just prior to Cuauhtémoc's departure from his dying city. Deep in the night a fire, as if a blazing coal, came spinning out of the sky like a whirlwind and dropped into the water. But at this sign, unlike the others, the Aztecs remained silent.

It is less well-known that the list of eight omens is repeated and illustrated in Sahagún's Book 8, "Kings and Lords," and that there are discrepancies in the two chapters in which they appear (Figures 2.1–2.4). In Book 8 the omens are listed in a matter-of-fact style, with only a brief mention of how they caused Motecuzoma and his people to be afraid (ch. 7), whereas Book 12 describes in excruciating detail the extreme fright and paralysis they caused Motecuzoma. All eight appear in the same order in Book 8, chapter 6 as in Book 12, chapter 1, and six of them are illustrated in full color accompanying chapter 6 (FC:Bk.8, figs. 56–61), unlike the cruder black-and-white illustrations of Book 12. However, in Book 8, chapter 1 there are only four omens, and they are somewhat different. Three are shown together in a single illustration: (1) a beam in the "song house" (*cuicacalli*), a religious building, began to speak; (2) the goddess Cihuacoatl wept at night (she is the woman who wailed at night in the other lists because in the illustration for chapter 6 she is shown as Cihuacoatl, identical to this illustration for chapter 1); and (3) a woman who died and was buried came back to life to tell Motecuzoma that his reign was about to end. The last omen is illustrated separately (Bk. 8:fig. 11): (4) flames forming a pyramidal shape regularly appeared at night in the East for four years. Thus, only two of the four omens are repeated in the other series of eight. The story of the woman who came back to life received much more detail in Torquemada's *Monarquía indiana* (1975:Bk. 2, ch. 91), there identified as Motecuzoma's sister Papan (or Papanztzin).

A third major series of omens is found in the related histories of Durán (1994a: ch. 41–43, 46–48), Alvarado Tezozomoc (1980:ch. 100–106), Tovar (*Codex Ramírez* 1980:77–78), Torquemada (1975:Bk. 2, ch. 77–79, 91), and Acosta (2002:Bk. 7, ch. 23; the latter three also repeat the aforementioned Sahaguntine series). Besides being fewer and quite different than the earlier-described series, they are interspersed with other events in the narrative, especially in Durán's and Torquemada's accounts, rather than listed together as a series of the same kind of phenomenon. However, these accounts are no less elaborate in their descriptive detail or of the devastating impact the signs had on Motecuzoma's state of mind, especially in Durán's *Historia*, the only one of these documents that also provides illustrations.

The omens begin with the foretelling by the Tetzcoacan ruler Nezahualpilli of the impending defeat of the Mexica Aztecs (in Durán and Torquemada; the *Codex Ramírez* and Acosta's account assign this role to Quetzalcoatl, the patron

god of Cholula, as well as to Nezahualpilli). Nezahualpilli, *buey tlatoani* of the second-most-powerful city in the Basin of Mexico, predicted to Moteuczoma that he would be unable to win wars with Huexotzinco, Tlaxcala, and Cholula (enemy polities just east of the basin) and that he would see signs in the sky as an omen of what would come. Moteuczoma subsequently waged fruitless wars with Tlaxcala to determine whether Nezahualpilli was correct. As a later consequence, the Huexotzincoans, allies of Tlaxcala at that time, burned the temple to the Aztec goddess Toci at Tocihtitlan (near the southern edge of Tenochtitlan), which Moteuczoma considered an ill omen (Durán 1994a:ch. 62). In a Tetzcoacan-biased account, *Historia de la nación chichimeca* (Ixtililochitl 1977: II, ch. 72), Moteuczoma and Nezahualpilli played a ball game as a form of divination to determine whether Nezahualpilli's prophecy was correct; not surprisingly, Moteuczoma lost the game.

While these particular omens caused Moteuczoma some anxiety, he was greatly frightened by what happened next. A comet appeared in the East (Durán 1994a:pl. 48), which Nezahualpilli explained as a sign that indigenous rulership would soon be over, as decreed by the gods (see Figure 7.7). Time passed, but then another curious thing transpired that renewed Moteuczoma's fear. Moteuczoma desired a new stone to be used in rites of sacrificing war captives and ordered that a fine stone be brought from Chalco province to Tenochtitlan. However, the stone at first could not be budged. It then spoke to the masons and sculptors who had wrapped it in ropes to move it, telling them that their labors were useless for their destruction was at hand. When it finally agreed to be moved, the stone was dragged up the main causeway into the city from the south (in Durán's illustration [1994a:pl. 51] one should take into account the anachronism of the wheeled cart) (Figure 2.6). Just as it reached the edge of the city, the stone broke through a bridge, dropping into the lake below. It was later discovered back where it had first been found in Chalco province, still bound with the ropes the sculptors had used to move it.

Several of the documents in this omen grouping follow the talking stone episode with a complicated story about a farmer from the Tetzcoaco area, who was picked up by an eagle and carried to a cave. There he was directed to observe a vision of Moteuczoma sleeping. He was told to burn the emperor on the thigh with a smoldering tube of tobacco incense. This was to be a sign of the emperor's impending defeat, a punishment for his tyranny and oppression. The farmer did so, and after the eagle returned him to his field, he went to tell Moteuczoma what had happened. Only then did the *buey tlatoani* observe his burned thigh and realize his sorry future. Following these terrifying portents, Moteuczoma decided to flee and sought a cave at Cincalco near Chapultepec (a hill west of Tenochtitlan) where he could forever hide. This last act of cowardice is also related by Sahagún

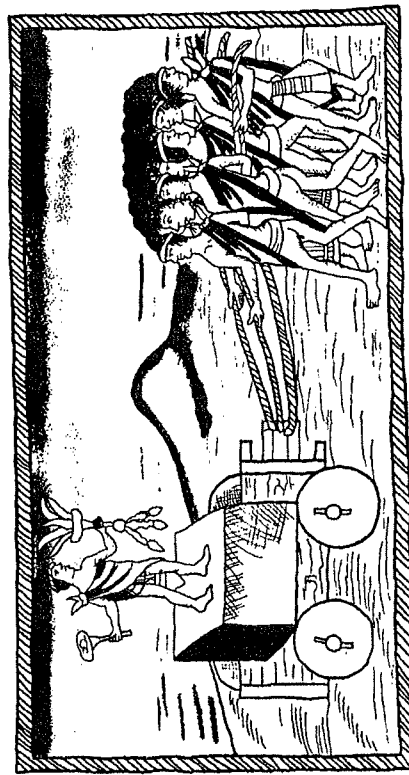


Figure 2.6. Dragging the Talking Stone from Chalco to Tenochtitlan, in Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de la Nueva España* (1994:plate 51). Drawing by S. Gillespie.

(FC:Bk. 12, ch. 9, fig. 23). In Sahagún's version Moteuczoma lacked the resolve to actually leave (see earlier excerpted quotation), but in Durán's account a sleeping priest was awakened by a divine voice, telling him that Moteuczoma was indeed fleeing in a canoe across the lake to the west (illustrated in Durán 1994a:pl. 52). The priest went after him to shame him into returning to accept his fate. In both episodes a humble and anonymous person brought down the great Moteuczoma.

THE ROLE OF THE OMENS IN THE AZTEC DEFEAT

Using a critical approach, most modern historians have tried by various means to determine the historical accuracy of these signs (e.g., Colston 1985; López Austin 1969) and thereby to understand how they might have affected Moteuczoma and the other native peoples. However, the issue of whether these omens actually occurred had been raised much earlier by the chroniclers themselves, some of whom suggested that the signs were real and were sent by God to signal the coming of Christendom (e.g., Acosta 2002:Bk. VII, ch. 23, 432; Muñoz Camargo 1978:Bk. II, ch. 1, 167). While this opinion is no longer popular in our secular society, it is still commonly held that most or even all of these omens did occur, were interpreted in a negative way, and hence were remembered for generations, in part because the Aztecs were already predisposed to anxious forebodings even before Cortés arrived.

Prescott (1873:1, ch. 6, 220), whose first edition appeared in 1843, was perhaps the first to suggest that rumors of white men in the Caribbean since Columbus's first voyage would have reached the Aztecs. He hypothesized that "[i]n the excited state of their imaginations, prodigies became a familiar occurrence. Or rather, events not very uncommon in themselves, seen through the discolored medium of fear, were easily magnified into prodigies; and the accidental swell of the lake, the appearance of a comet and the conflagration of a building were all interpreted as the special annunciations of Heaven." Subsequent scholars have repeated this notion that native elites were already on edge because of strange peoples in their vicinity (e.g., Graulich 1994:233; Padden 1967:108; Thomas 1993:40ff), adding the detail that Motecuzoma was particularly dreading the upcoming year 1519 as symbolically associated with the god *Quetzalcoatl* (Collis 1954:56).

Other historians have suggested that only certain of these events are plausible—namely, those that conform to our understandings of the natural world, such as seeing the comet, the burning of the temples, the flooding of the lake, hearing voices in the night, the dragging of a large stone that fell into the lake, and so forth—and that because they are plausible, they probably did happen. Reasonable explanations have been proposed for some of the other signs as well. The light seen in the night could have been an aurora borealis, the two-headed man could have been Siamese twins (Thomas 1993:43), the woman who died and came back to life in her grave was actually only in a coma (Collis 1954:57). The few remaining non-plausible omens, such as the mirror-bird, have been attributed to "figments of the imagination of someone who had eaten sacred mushrooms" (Thomas 1993:43). Taking a different tack, Serge Gruzinski (1989:27–28) hypothesized that the omens were metaphoric renderings of the dissenting voices of both aristocrats and peasants against the growing domination of Tenochtitlan; hence they include the participation of Nezahualpilli, the Tezcocoan ruler, as well as an anonymous farmer from the Tetzcoaco area.

Whatever their origin—actual or fabricated—it is widely accepted that something(s) untoward happened that distressed Motecuzoma and developed into a major contributing factor in the subsequent events of the Spanish *entrada*. In this common opinion, a very strong negative judgment of Aztec society is sometimes exposed: "Such unexplained, awesome events would have struck intense fear into the hearts of a people as ruled by fate as the Mexica" (Berdan 1982:141). R. C. Padden (1967:108) especially emphasized the psychological impact, considering all these portents—real or not—as the "product of mass hysteria" that infected the native population several years before Cortés showed up on the Veracruz coast. He further suggested that "the climate of hysteria that made possible such morbid hallucinating was the symptom of a sick and tortured

society that eagerly awaited its own demise" (1967:108). This persistent negative stereotype of native American people is one answer to the first question asked earlier—why Motecuzoma still gets blamed for the Aztec defeat.

Moreover, while much contemporary historiography emphasizes the impact of these omens and portents on the Aztec state of mind, little has been said about the parallel information included in the writings of the Spanish conquistadors and missionary clerics. The Spaniards also claimed to have witnessed miraculous sightings and other happenings interpreted as signs from God that they were destined to be victorious. On the 1518 Juan de Grijalva voyage to explore the Mexican coast, Juan Díaz (1993:14) reported a comet that appeared and settled over a town. He described it as a "miracle" and one of the signs "by which we knew it was God's wish that we settle in that land." Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1994:ch. 34, 56) cited López de Gómar's account (1964:ch. 20, 46–47; see Cortés 1986:455) that St. James and St. Peter miraculously appeared to save the Spaniards in an early battle in Tabasco (on the Gulf Coast) but that as a sinner he was not able to see them. The conquistador Francisco de Aguilar (1993:141) recalled that once when Cortés's horse stumbled during a battle and his men interpreted this as a bad sign, Cortés, "with invincible courage and without a moment's confusion, kept right on going on foot"; that is, he ignored the inauspicious quality of the happening and refused to retreat, the very opposite of the picture of Motecuzoma.³

The existence of signs sent by God was integral to medieval Christianity. The Franciscan friars, such as Morolonia, Sahagún, and Mendieta—who avidly collected these omens from their informants—were much given to interpreting God's intentions through these means. As noted earlier, they and others believed Cortés was fulfilling the will of God in bringing Christendom to the New World and would have expected such omens and portents to be sent, even unto the Aztecs (Elliott 1967:55; Lafaye 1976:30–31; Phelan 1970). In addition, the missionary friars are credited with contributing not only an interest in portents but their specific content to their informants. Felipe Fernández-Armesto (1992:292ff) has suggested that the eight omens in Sahagún's Book 12 were likely copied from three Greek and Latin books available to his chief informants, students in the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlaltelolco. In Europe of that era there was a similar recourse to Classical descriptions of omens and portents provided by such writers as Josephus, Plutarch, and Lucan (Fernández-Armesto 1992:293; see also Thomas 1993:42–43), including comets and visions of warring armies in the clouds. Torquemada (1975:Bk. 2, ch. 110) made the connection to the Classical authors in his recounting of Sahagún's eight omens. Fernández-Armesto (1992:295) noted that Sahagún's near-contemporary, William Shakespeare, drew on these same Classical sources to create the auguries of *Julius Caesar*.

Blaming Motecuzoma

Fernández-Armesto thus sides with a minority viewpoint that rejects the a priori notion that Motecuzoma was quaking in fear of the Spaniards as strange beings sent by gods, if not gods themselves. His opinion is shared by Inga Clendinnen (1991) and James Lockhart (1993). The latter two historians observed that in attempting to understand the Conquest, emphasis has always been given to its first phase, up to the Toxcatl massacre and the subsequent *Noche trisizt*. It is within this period of time that the narratives dwell on omens, the return of Quetzalcoatl, the terror of Motecuzoma, and the magicians and soothsayers—all of which seem to be late constructions (Clendinnen 1991:69, 88–89; Lockhart 1993:18). The reasons for such “unabashed mythic history, a telling of what ‘ought’ to have happened” (Clendinnen 1991:69), are quite straightforward in their perspective—the need “to explain the outcome of defeat . . . a concern for the construction of a viable and satisfying public history for the conquered” (1991:88–89). Fernández-Armesto (1992:295) arrived at the similar conclusion that the omens were the creation of a people “anxious to understand the conquest in terms of an alien heritage and to re-express the Aztec experience in the discourse of Renaissance humanism.”

In short, the standard portrayal of Motecuzoma decades after his death as fearful, indecisive, and cowardly can be attributed to “the classic reactions of a people after defeat, to blame their leader as a scapegoat” (Lockhart 1993:17), “a post-Conquest scapegoating of a leader who had indeed admitted the Spaniards into his city in life and so was made to bear the weight of the unforeseeable consequences in death” (Clendinnen 1991:69). The descriptions of a tortured Motecuzoma likely reflected “the attitude of a whole cohort of Mexico smarting under their loss of preeminence and looking for someone to blame. Later generations, in need of symbols, gave both Cortés and Motecuzoma a meaning they hardly had at the time” (Lockhart 1993:18). Here is an explanation for the second question asked previously—the sixteenth-century indigenous blaming of Motecuzoma, although the issue of whether Cortés and Motecuzoma had such symbolic meanings “at the time” is less straightforward.

In this perspective, the omens represent an active response by subjugated peoples to their current circumstances—the typical attempt of a vanquished group to explain, after the fact, what has happened” (Lockhart 1993:17). Tzvetan Todorov (1985) further explained the post-Conquest invention of these portents as an aspect of the Mesoamerican worldview, which was organized according to cyclical concepts of time such that the present and future must repeat the past. In his opinion, the dominance of cyclical time could ill accommodate the “radically new, entirely unprecedented situation” posed by the Spanish presence (Todorov 1985:87). Fabricating the omens that predicted what would occur was a reasonable recourse because “the present becomes intelligible and at the same time less

inadmissible, the moment one can see it already announced in the past” (Todorov 1985:74).

Divination and prophecy form a major category of “imagined nonevents” in Fogelson’s (1989) classification, as events that “never happened but could have occurred, or, according to the ethnologic involved, should have happened” (1989:142). Given that the Aztecs had experienced an event so horrific it was unthinkable—the rapid destruction of their most powerful city, Tenochtitlan, under the protection of the god Huitzilopochtli—this could only be the result of supernatural intervention, a major cosmic shake-up (Uchmany 1980:10). The ethnologic required divinely sent signs and portents of what was to come, an ethnologic shared in some ways by both the Aztecs and the Spanish invaders.

Nevertheless, once the portents have been categorized as an “emollient myth” designed for “the construction of a viable and satisfying public history of the conquered” (Clendinnen 1991:89), the Aztecs, and Motecuzoma more particularly, remain in our view as powerless—condemned by the inevitability of what was to come—as if the omens had really happened or their gods had actually turned against them (e.g., Colston 1985:240, 244). Motecuzoma and his people are portrayed as trapped in a worldview that could not accommodate the unexpected—hence the omens were needed later, if only to provide that expectation. In contrast (yet again), Cortés is said to have made adaptation and improvisation to changing circumstances “the very principle of his conduct” (Todorov 1985:87).

In sum, contemporary scholarship provides two stark alternatives to explain the omens and other events that conveyed a sense of supernatural intervention, superstition, and fatalism on the part of the Aztecs. Either there is a great deal of truth to these accounts, on the assumption that the impact they made on Motecuzoma was critical to the subsequent events of the Conquest, or they are the typical rationalizations of a defeated people thereby seen as less equipped to deal with events as they unfolded than their European counterparts. Neither alternative casts the Aztecs in a positive light against their opponents. Moreover, neither opinion gives much consideration to the substantive content and symbolic import of the omens themselves, despite the detail—in some cases quite extraordinary—that envelops them.

AN ETHNO-ETHNOHISTORY OF THE OMENS

A third alternative to account for these omens is to take an ethno-ethnohistorical approach. The happenings, actions, and emotions ascribed to the Aztecs in the latter documents represent responses to the colonial situation—complex and emerging processes that came to be represented in narrative form as an iconic sequence of events and nonevents. To cite Terence Turner (1988:242), “To

understand the terms in which other cultures have formulated their historical interaction with [European] society is to understand their ethnohistories of us—to do ethno-ethnohistory.” And it is precisely the cultural terms with which the Aztecs incorporated the Spanish into their own theory of history—and the role the omens and portents played in this capacity—that remain understudied.

Few historiographers—or mythographers, for that matter—have looked closely at the detailed descriptions of these omens to ask why they were given their specific form in the various traditions because such a question was irrelevant to their critical agendas. Among those who have, however, the symbolic qualities of these signs become readily apparent. Lockhart (1993:17), for example, called attention to the fact that Sahagún carefully listed eight omens in order; eight was “the canonical number of any set of things in the Nahua world.” Stephen Colson (1985:240) observed that they incorporate the four elements of the universe (earth, air, fire, water). Michel Graulich (1994:227–228) took this quality farther, seeing in the omens’ serial order the duality of oppositions characteristic of Aztec thought, one that contrasts celestial with terrestrial phenomena (although he also suggested that these were real happenings singled out precisely for their symbolic dualism; this aspect is further developed by Magaloni Kerpel, Chapter 7, this volume). Even portents and signs that seem to be merely copied from European Classical sources by well-educated natives must nevertheless have had meaning for the Aztecs to have been incorporated into their native historical traditions.

Scott O’Mack (1990) has taken this type of analysis a step farther, observing that the omens should be interpreted as one means by which the Aztecs incorporated the Conquest into their own theories of history. In other words, what the Spaniards did or were believed to have done during the *entrada* and the Conquest subsequently became integrated into the signs and portents that seemingly predicted what they would do.⁴ As Todorov (discussed earlier) and others have observed, time in the Mesoamerican worldview is ultimately more cyclical than linear, and present circumstances are considered less a consequence than a repetition of past events. Nevertheless, the world of the Aztecs was far from being “overdetermined” and dependent on cyclical time to the point of being completely “foreseeable,” hence incapable of adaptation and improvisation (contra Todorov 1985:66) when it clashed with unanticipated Spanish invasions. Rather than narrowly insist that the present must duplicate the past, another way to express this temporal aspect of Aztec cosmology is to say that precedence and antiquity are the basis for authority and legitimacy in the present. It was the chief function of the divine rulers, in their preeminent role as lawgivers, to *create* a link between past and present—that is, to establish precedence—through the medium of history. The indigenes’ agency and inventiveness in comprehending and reacting to

the present by drawing upon the past as a symbolic resource is revealed by careful examination of the “pre-Conquest” omens against the backdrop of analogous events, both earlier in time in Aztec historical traditions as well as during the *entrada* and the battle for Tenochtitlan.

To this end, O’Mack examined the place names associated with the “talking stone” episode, the specific places where it stopped on the journey. He observed that the route along which the stone was moved—from Chalco province in the southeastern corner of the Basin of Mexico up the southern causeway to the entrance to Tenochtitlan, where it fell through a bridge into the water—is exactly the path taken by Cortés when he first traveled to Tenochtitlan, as if the stone had predicted that route. More specifically, the place where the bridge collapsed and the stone fell is Xoloco (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1980:ch. 102, 665; Torquemada 1975:Bk. 2, ch. 79), precisely where Motecuzoma had his first meeting with Cortés (Caso 1956:14; FC Bk. 12, ch. 16). Durán (1994a:ch. 66, 74) added further details to link the stone to Cortés through Motecuzoma’s actions: when the stone was first dragged to Tenochtitlan, Motecuzoma ordered that all the people of the city should venerate it when it reached Tocititlan, the shrine of the goddess Toci, where the Huexotzincans had earlier burned the temple, taken as a bad omen. Later, when Motecuzoma set out to meet Cortés, he waited for him briefly at Tocititlan before going on to Xoloco. In addition, the same places to which the stone was moved were involved in a much earlier battle between Tenochtitlan and Chalco province during the time of a prior *huey tlatoani* also named Motecuzoma (Durán 1994a:ch. 16), indicating that linking even earlier history to the “prophecies” of future events was at work in devising these omens.⁵

Although it is not my purpose here to delve into the complex symbolic significance of all these ominous signs, I call special attention to the links between the omens and Huitzilopochtli, the patron deity of Tenochtitlan. Described as a war god, Huitzilopochtli was also associated with the annual north-south movements of the sun (Gillespie 1999). In terms of the omens, the only direct link to Huitzilopochtli might seem to be the sudden bursting into flames of his temple, Sahagún’s second omen. Nevertheless, this association is apparent in some of the details of this event and the other signs as well. The fire at his temple burned the location named Irepeyoc, where the image of Huitzilopochtli was placed during the fifteenth month of the Aztec year, Panquetzaliztli. The state ceremony of that month celebrated the annual rebirth of Huitzilopochtli (FC Bk. 2, ch. 34, app. 192, Bk. 3, ch. 1) in November. It occurred just prior to the winter solstice and marked the rebirth of the sun in the south, which would soon start to move north again, growing stronger each day to herald the coming summer and the main agricultural season (Gillespie 1999).

The bird with the mirror on its head—Sahagún’s seventh omen—was also

linked to Huizilopochtli. This water bird, found in the lake, was taken directly to Motecuzoma, who looked into its mirror and first saw stars and then an approaching army before the bird mysteriously disappeared.⁶ While most commentators emphasize the forebodings associated with an approaching army of men riding on the backs of what appeared to the Aztecs to be deer, the stars are more important. They were the stars of the "Fire Drill" constellation, called *mamalhuaztli* in Nahuatl (FC Bk. 12, ch. 1, 3, Bk. 8, ch. 6, 18) and *astillejos* (or *mastelejos*) in Spanish. They are usually identified with Caspar and Pollux of the Gemini constellation, stars that move near the Pleiades in the sign of Taurus (FC Bk. 7, app. ch. 3, 60; Sahagún 1989b:33; Milbrath 1999:267). Among later colonial writers who copied this information, only Friar Torquemada (1975:Bk. 2, ch. 110, 235) also identified the stars in the mirror, again as the *astillejos* constellation. He stated that this vision frightened Motecuzoma very much, while Sahagún (FC Bk. 12, ch. 1, 3) wrote that Motecuzoma "took it as an omen of great evil when he saw the stars and the Fire Drill." The *mamalhuaztli* drill is associated explicitly with Huizilopochtli (FC Bk. 1, app. 67). As for Castor and Pollux, these two bright stars mark the northern extreme of the sun at summer solstice and were in conjunction with the sun on that solstice for over 1,000 years (Milbrath 1999:266). Thus, they too are linked with the annual movements of the sun and can be related to the complex celestial symbolism encapsulated by Huizilopochtli.

Furthermore, Motecuzoma is said to have received the bird with the mirror (and the two-headed man, the eighth omen) while he was in the building named *Tiltlan calmecatl*, roughly translated as "black palace" or "black chamber" (FC, Bk. 8, ch. 6, Bk. 12, ch. 1; Sahagún 1989b:Bk. 12, ch. 1; see also Acosta 2002:Bk. 7, ch. 23; *Codex Ramirez* 1980:79; Muñoz Camargo 1978:Bk. 2, ch. 1; Torquemada 1975:Bk. 2, ch. 110). A number of these late sources attempted to explain why this architectural location was mentioned. Sahagún (1989b) presumed that Motecuzoma was in his "black palace" because he used it as a retreat in times of adversity and sadness. Others picked up on this theme, and both Tovar and Acosta went so far as to say that Motecuzoma was sequestered in his black palace because his sorrow by then was so great, having interpreted the many omens as divine warnings.

However, the *Tiltlan calmecatl* is described in both Sahagún's (FC Bk. 2, app. 182) and Durán's writings as a temple dedicated to the goddess Cihuacoatl. It was so-called because the inner chamber was always kept completely dark (Durán 1971:217), not because it was painted black (as Sahagún and others presumed). This was the place where the kings of Tenochtitlan were inaugurated, becoming the human incarnation of Huizilopochtli (Durán 1994a:297, 313). Durán (1971:217) stated that this temple was located adjacent to that of Huizilopochtli

because Cihuacoatl was Huizilopochtli's sister. And Cihuacoatl was the wailing woman whose voice was heard in the night—Sahagún's sixth omen (explicitly identified as the source of the voice in Bk. 8, ch. 1, but not in Bk. 12). Such behavior was typical of this deity; elsewhere, Sahagún (FC Bk. 1, ch. 6, 11) stated that "[b]y night she walked weeping, wailing; also she was an omen of war."⁷ Note that sisters of both Huizilopochtli and Motecuzoma are among the personified omens.

As for the talking stone that would not budge, this omen was also linked to Huizilopochtli. Durán (1994a:477) stated that Motecuzoma ordered a new stone to be made for the "Playing of Men" sacrifice, which would be a *temalacatl*, a large flat disk ornamented with the sun design upon which a captured warrior would stand to battle an Aztec adversary. However, Alvarado Tezozomoc (1980: ch. 102, 662) stated that it was destined to be a great sacrificial stone for the temple of Huizilopochtli. Torquemada (1975:Bk. 2, ch. 79) and Tovar (*Codex Ramirez* 1980:77-78) intimated the same, that it was to be the principal stone of sacrifice. Durán, who provided the greatest detail concerning this event, elaborated how the stone's miraculous return to its place of origin terrified Motecuzoma, who went to Chalco to see it and make sacrifices. Afterward, Motecuzoma ordered his stonemasons to complete a different task instead—to carve his likeness in bas-relief on the face of the hill at Chapultepec, on the western side of the lake (Durán 1994a:481). Chapultepec is also the location associated with the cave where Motecuzoma later attempted to hide to escape the doom that awaited him (Durán 1994a:487; Sahagún 1981:Bk. 12, 35). Significantly, another document (a copy of the text of the *Codex Tudela*; Gomez de Orozco 1945:63) conflates these two episodes. It includes the story of the talking stone that broke through the bridge at the southern end of the city but states that this stone was being moved to Chapultepec to serve as the basis for Motecuzoma's portrait.

My point in bringing up these details is to demonstrate how the omens were directed very personally toward Motecuzoma. The ominous objects were taken first to Motecuzoma, after which they vanished. Motecuzoma personally played a ball game against Nezahualpilli to determine whether Nezahualpilli's prophecies would come to pass. It was Motecuzoma's sister who rose from the dead to tell him his reign was about to end. Motecuzoma was burned on his thigh in a vision. Motecuzoma ordered the stone to be moved, which at first would not budge and then refused to move further than Xoloco, where Motecuzoma would later meet Cortés. Motecuzoma attempted to flee, agonized over where he could hide, set out by canoe, and was brought back to face his destiny. These very personalized happenings are unlike the comets, lights in the sky, and visions in the clouds that characterize omens in European Classical tradition.

Furthermore, while nameless others are said to have been frightened by these

portents, Motecuzoma's sheer terror is described in unrelenting fashion (especially in FC Book 12; see also Durán 1994a; Motolinia 1970; Tovar's *Codex Ramirez* 1980). There is more to these descriptions than just a man in fear of losing his throne or even his life. The close connections of a number of omens to Huitzilopochtli (and to gods related to Huitzilopochtli) further indicate the seriousness of what was at stake. Motecuzoma was a divine king, the incarnation of Huitzilopochtli (Cortés 1986:467; Durán 1994a:ch. 53, 398, ch. 54, 406). These retrodictive (rather than predictive) signs demonstrate that the threat to Motecuzoma extended to Huitzilopochtli, and thus they impacted not just one man or the Aztec peoples but the maintenance of cosmic order itself.⁸

ANTHROPOMORPHIZING THE CONQUEST

The omens are therefore much more than imagined nonevents, occurrences that should have happened to provide a convenient scapegoat for the defeated Aztecs, divine justification for Spanish subjugation, and, more generally, a satisfactory historical explanation for the fall of Tenochtitlan. These signs were employed as a *mechanism* to very directly and personally involve Motecuzoma in what was actually a long sequence of complex happenings over a vast landscape involving thousands of players, beyond anyone's control. They reference an impending cosmic disaster while simultaneously centering it on one very important individual, even to the degree of laying all the fault for what occurred on his character. Motecuzoma's portrayals represent an oxymoronic mixture of arrogance, tyranny, and decisive, terrible punishments in dealing with his own people alongside cowardice, meekness, and indecision when dealing with the Spaniards. All of these details point to a significant aspect insufficiently addressed by historians, despite the emphasis in subsequent historiography on the contrast between Cortés and Motecuzoma—namely, the anthropomorphization of the Conquest. From the Aztec point of view, Motecuzoma literally embodied the state and hence its destiny.

I use the term "embodiment" very specifically because it is Motecuzoma's body that became a focus of attention in descriptions of the omens and their effects. He was burned on his thigh. He ordered his likeness sculpted at Chapultepec hill. And he attempted to flee his city, but only after he discovered that the Spaniards were enquiring about him in the most personal way—asking questions about his body, his appearance, his age (FC Bk. 12, ch. 9, 25–26; *Codex Ramirez* 1980:83). Completely terrified by this news, he tried to escape but found he no longer had the strength to act; he was immobilized. Like the talking stone that foretold his doom—and would go no further than Xoloco at the edge of the city—Motecuzoma could not move. And it was at that point that

he was said to finally give up, to decide he could do no more than simply submit himself to what would happen.

Significantly, Motecuzoma's body was the subject of certain prohibitions, which were remarked by several of the conquistadors who wrote accounts of the Conquest, including Cortés. At their first meeting at Xoloco, Cortés moved to embrace Motecuzoma but was prevented from doing so by two lords who held the emperor's arms on either side (Cortés 1986:84; Díaz del Castillo 1994:ch. 88, 161); one of the lords was his brother Cuicahuac, ruler of Iztapalapa, and the other was also a kinsman, Cacama, ruler of Tetzcoco. A further restriction was for anyone other than the highest lords to look at Motecuzoma in the face (e.g., Aguilar 1993:146–147; Díaz del Castillo 1994:ch. 88, 161; López de Gómara 1964:ch. 65, 139). Durán (1994a:ch. 53, 398) recounted once asking an old man about Motecuzoma's facial characteristics, height, and appearance; the man replied that he could not honestly answer, never having seen his face, for it would have been death to have done so. But the Spaniards were not obliged to obey these rules, something that threatened Motecuzoma's ritual, and hence political, status. As Clendinnen (1991:75) astutely observed, their acts of gazing at, even eventually touching Motecuzoma contributed to his "desacralization," a process that accelerated when Cortés took physical custody of him. Such actions were emphasized by the native informants of Sahagún (FC Bk. 12, ch. 16, 45), who reported that at the first meeting at Xoloco, the Spaniards "grasped [Motecuzoma] by the hand. Already they went leading him by it. They caressed him with their hands to make their love known to him. And the Spaniards looked at him; they each looked at him thoroughly. They were continually active on their feet; they continually mounted, they continually dismounted in order to look at him."⁹

With the diminishment of his sacred status came a loss of political power, the power to command obedience from the other lords. In fact, a few Spanish sources state that a successor, his brother Cuicahuac, was designated ruler in his stead while Motecuzoma was still alive (Aguilar 1993:152; Díaz del Castillo 1994:ch. 126, 252). In another account it was his ultimate successor, Cuauhtémoc, who is said to have called Motecuzoma the "woman of the Spaniards" and to have proclaimed to a gathered crowd, "we do not want to obey him because he is not our king," just before a volley of arrows and stones killed the *buey tlatoani*. Although Cuauhtémoc was only eighteen, according to Tovar the people already wanted to make him their ruler instead of Motecuzoma (*Codex Ramirez* 1980:89). And, of course, it was Motecuzoma's belief that he was about to be replaced—not by a younger successor but by the original inventor of kingship, Quetzalcoatl—that is said in later post-Conquest accounts to have contributed greatly to his "terror and apathy." It is hard to imagine a more dire situation—which is what is represented in these various documents—than for the cosmos to have been so threat-

ferent major gods or groups of their particularizations according to a precise ritual calendar . . . and also according to the vicissitudes of his reign" (Valeri [1985:142] for Hawaii). In the Aztec case, the changing relationship of the brother deities most closely associated with rulership—Tezcatlipoca (patron of Tezcoco) and Huitzilopochtli (patron of Tenochtitlan)—as manifest in the annual calendar was preeminent to Motecuzoma's ritual status (Gillespie 1999).

It is also conceivable that, as with other divine kings, if Motecuzoma were seen as weak, his weakness would threaten the entire society, if not the totality of the cosmos itself. The ethnologic required that he be put to death and replaced so that kingship itself would not be further threatened. Indeed, it ultimately matters little whether the Spaniards or the Aztecs killed Motecuzoma; however, regicide for this purpose was more typically the act of the king's people.⁹ Sir James Frazer discussed this topic at length in his chapter of *The Golden Bough* entitled "The Killing of the Divine King": "[I]f the course of nature is dependent on the gradual god's [divine king's] life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death? There is only one way of averting these dangers. The man-god must be killed, as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by the threatened decay" (Frazer 1940:265). Thus, in some Aztec histories we read of Cuiclahuac replacing Motecuzoma while he is most vulnerable but has not yet died or of Cuauhtémoc playing a direct role in denying Motecuzoma his status as a powerful figure to be unquestionably obeyed.

Finally, Motecuzoma's body continued to be an object of attention even after his death, as seen in the conflicting accounts of its disposal. Durán (1994a:ch. 76, 545) reported two different versions—one that Motecuzoma received a rich funeral that lasted for days and was attended by many lords and the other that his body was unceremoniously cremated and his children and wives executed. The conquistadors' accounts typically state that his body was carried or even thrown out of their palace (e.g., Aguilar 1993:154; Cortés 1986:132; Díaz del Castillo 1994:ch. 127, 253). Sahagún (FC Bk. 12, ch. 23, 65), whose informants provided the most details, related that the Spaniards cast his body out from their palace at a place called Teoyoc, and people took it to Copulco, where it was cremated. As his body burned, it smelled foul, and the people castigated him and cried out their anguish and disapproval. The *Codex Aubin* (1963:59), however, relates a curious story that a man named Apanecatl took up Motecuzoma's body on his back and carried it to three different towns before the corpse was accepted and finally hidden; a man of that same name is said to have carried the image of Huitzilopochtli on his back in early Mexica history (Gillespie 1989:157).

All of these details suggest that the integrity, sanctity, and representations

ened by the weakness and tyranny of a single king that kingship itself (and with it the cosmos) would have to be started anew, which is exactly what happened when the Spanish Crown took control of New Spain.

Motecuzoma's body also comes into play concerning his death in late June 1520 while in Spanish custody. There is a striking difference of opinion as to who killed him, with most native sources (including native informants of Spanish authors) insisting the Spaniards stabbed or strangled him, while most Hispanic sources state that he was killed by his own people, usually by stoning while attempting to speak to them on the Spaniards' behalf (see summary of these contradictions in FC Book 12, ch. 23, 65n). Díaz del Castillo (1994:ch. 126, 253) precisely locates where on Motecuzoma's body three stones struck and did mortal damage: on the head, arm, and leg; other sources mention the stone that hit his head. It is logical that Motecuzoma and the other lords in Spanish captivity would be killed at the point where Cortés determined he must escape Tenochtitlan as quickly and quietly as possible, while angry crowds cut off their supplies and daily threatened the Spaniards. Their anger is also a logical outcome of the massacre ordered by Pedro de Alvarado that prevented the main ceremony of the fifth month, Toxcatl, from being carried out in May of that year. As Sahagún explicitly recorded, the Toxcatl massacre was a turning point in events for the Aztecs (see earlier discussion). As a result, the invaders were forced to abandon the city, with disastrous results, on the night of June 30.

But in addition to such a logical cause-and-effect relationship among these events, we need to examine the further implications of Spanish interference with Aztec religious practices at this specific point in their calendar. The Toxcatl ceremony, which coincided with the first solar zenith passage, celebrated the annual ascension to power of Huitzilopochtli following his birth in the month of Panquetzaliztli, and FC Book 12 has multiple illustrations of the elaborate making and veneration of his image to be used in the rite. The failure to culminate this ceremony obviously would have called into question the fates of the cosmos more generally and of Tenochtitlan more specifically as the most important city under Huitzilopochtli's protection. Furthermore, Motecuzoma was supposed to have appeared at a precise moment in the ritual to renew his metaphysical link to his tutelary god (FC Bk. 2, ch. 24, 73), an annual reaffirmation of his sovereignty. However, he was prevented from doing so, which more immediately threatened his legitimacy as ruler of Tenochtitlan and its domain.

As with other divine kings symbolically linked to the sun—for example, in pharaonic Egypt, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Hawaii (Beidelman 1966; Evans-Pritchard 1948; Fealey-Hamik 1985; Frazer 1940; Richards 1969; Sahlin 1985)—Motecuzoma's sacred status likely changed with the pulsing of the seasons. The Aztec emperor, like his counterparts elsewhere, "instantiate[d] dif-

NOTES

1. Prescott (1873:1, ch. 6, 219) refers to the prophecy of the return of Quetzalcoatl and suggests that it was at hand, as indicated by "various preternatural occurrences, reported with more or less detail by all the most ancient historians." He goes on to list some of the reported omens, drawing them from Sahagún, Muñoz Camargo, and Acosta, among others. He also cites Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas's sixteenth-century *Apologética historia de las Indias* (Bk. 3, ch. 120): "según sus profetas agoreros le avian certificado, que su estado é triquezas y prosperidad avia de perzer dentro de pocos años por çiertas gentes que avian de venir en sus dias, que de su felicidad lo derrocasse, y por esto vivia siempre con temor y en tristeza y sobresalado." Here Prescott also refers to Classical European sources, especially Lucan on Roman omens (1873:1, ch. 6, 220). He admits in a footnote that he omitted from this category of probable events interpreted as omens the resurrection of Motecuzoma's sister, Papantzin, as given in eighteenth-century historian Francisco Javier Clavigero's account (whose source was the early-seventeenth-century *Monarquía indiana* of Friar Torquemada, discussed later in text).
2. Motolinia's description of the vision of armed men in the sky is repeated by Torquemada (1975:Bk. 2, ch. 110), who placed it in the year 1511. The latter two celestial omens (the rising fire and the smoke in the East) appear in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (1995:fol. 42r, 1509, fol. 42v, 1512) and the parallel *Codex Ríos* (1996:fol. 87r, 87v). Similar information is depicted in two other parallel late-sixteenth-century pictorial documents, *Codex Aubin* (1963:78, for 1509) and *Histoire Mexicaine* (1998:fol. 14v) for the years 1509–1510. They are also mentioned in Chimalpahin's (1965:231–232) *Séptima Relación* (also for the years 1509–1510; more briefly in his *Tercera Relación* for 1510 [1965:120]) and Muñoz Camargo's (1978:Bk. 2, ch. 1) *Historia de Tlaxcala*, in the form of a bright cloud and a windstorm (although the last two authors reverse the order of these omens). Ixtlilxochitl's *Historia de la nación chichimeca* (1977:II, ch. 72, 181–182) speaks of the great light or fire that rose in a pyramidal shape in 1510 but only mentions, and does not further list, the numerous other signs and portents that announced the ruin and total destruction of all the land. The text of the *Codex Tudela* (Gomez de Orozco 1945:63) describes the smoke that rose in the mornings but says that it occurred in the year 1519, and this document also includes the talking stone omen (discussed later).
3. It has also been suggested that during the prolonged *entrada*, if any people were likely to have been "jittery and psychologically insecure," it would have been the Spaniards, trapped far from home in an alien and menacing environment with no clear way out (Fernández-Armesto 1992:301).
4. The same process happened in another world area two and a half centuries later, following British Captain James Cook's voyage to the Hawaiian Islands. Cook, like Cortés, was taken to be a god by the native peoples, possibly the one known as Lono. As Marshall Sahlins (1982:85, 1985:31) has shown, the Hawaiian rituals that could be interpreted as evidence for this mistaken identity were elaborated only after Cook's visit (and his death at the hands of the Hawaiians), becoming an "iconic representation of Cook's voyage" purposely forged to cement that identification rather than a mere coincidence.
5. Colston (1985:247) noted that the talking stone from Chalco was bound with seven ropes, while the drunken man from Chalco was bound with eight ropes, indicating

of Motecuzoma's body were essential not just to his own well-being but also to that of the kingdom he ruled and, ultimately, to that of the cosmos itself. In other ways, sixteenth-century documents indicate that, for all intents and purposes, the divine person of Motecuzoma literally did represent Tenochtitlan and the entirety of its domain. The name "Motecuzoma" was commonly used to refer to what we only much later called the Aztec Empire (Gillespie 1998:245), while a non-personal designation—the kingdom of Culhua—is rarely mentioned (e.g., Cortés 1986:173). Again, this is in keeping with the precepts of divine kingship elsewhere. As Valerio Valeri (1985:146) explained for the similar ideology underpinning Hawaiian divine kingship: "Since the king is identified with the cosmos, a fortiori he is identified with his kingdom, that is, with the land and its inhabitants. In fact, he personifies them; his kingdom is assimilated with his body or, what amounts to the same thing, is considered his child. . . . By appropriating the king's body, it is thus possible to appropriate his realm."

CONCLUSION

The blame assigned to Motecuzoma in the later recasting of the events of the *entrada* and the Conquest is not simply the result of a European historiography in which "great men" drive history, exemplified by Prescott's popular nineteenth-century history of the Conquest. Although weakness is a part of Motecuzoma's enigmatic character in the Spanish accounts, the native historical traditions provide the greatest criticism of his actions and inaction, as well as the most detailed descriptions of his dread and the reasons for it. These "remembrances" and reconstructions of history took shape as part of the post-Conquest processes of accommodation to invasion and subjugation. They incorporate various imagined epitomizing nonevents, things that ought to have happened, which have a certain logic in both Aztec and Spanish cosmologies and theories of history.

In particular, the omens and the prophecy of a returning god who would replace him served to focus the unfolding events in a very immediate and utterly personal way upon the body and sanctity of the Aztec emperor. They formed a means to directly fault him for this disaster, but then, as a divine king, the maintenance of cosmic and social order *was* his personal responsibility. Motecuzoma embodied the Aztec state in ways our secular society finds difficult to comprehend. If the empire and its capital city fell, it must have been because of his failings, but a strong successor should have set things right again. Cuauhtémoc did indeed attempt to fulfill that role, never yielding until absolutely everything was lost—to the great perplexity of Cortés (Clendinnen 1991)—and he remains a hero to the Mexican people today.

some symbolic connection between these two omens, even though they typically appear in different sources. The profound importance of Chalco as elaborated in these omens in terms of its historical links to Tenochtitlan and to the Conquest events cannot be further pursued here.

6. Furst (1995:32) identified the bird as the purple gallinule (*Porphyrylla martinica* L.), called *cuatzezal*, or "mirror-head," in Nahuatl. Sahagún's FC (Bk. 11, ch. 2, 32) describes it as a dove-sized migratory water bird, light blue in body color, with a round patch (of different color) on the crown of its head that was considered to be like a mirror. This bird was a sign of war, and it was said that one who captured it gazed into its "mirror." If he were to be unlucky in war, he would see himself taken captive, but if he were to have good fortune, he would see himself dragging his foe instead. While this folklore certainly may have played a role in the bird of omen brought before Moteczoma—and the bird pictured in FC Book 8 is light blue—that bird is never identified to species. It is consistently described as the size of a crane, brown or ashen-colored (FC Bk. 12, ch. 1, Bk. 8, ch. 6; Muñoz Camargo 1978:Bk. 2, ch. 1; Torquemada 1975:Bk. 2, ch. 110). Acosta (2002:Bk. 7, ch. 23, 431) stated it was "the size and color of a crane but of a shape that was odd and outlandish." However, the Spanish version of Sahagún's FC (1981:Bk. 8, ch. 6, 292) describes the bird as the size and color of an eagle, one of the bird avatars of Huitzilopochtli.

7. Three other gods closely associated with Huitzilopochtli—Tezcatlipoca, Xiuhtecuhtli, and Toci—were also the subjects of omens, most explicitly the mysterious burning of Xiuhtecuhtli's temple, the "drunken Chalcan" identified as Tezcatlipoca, and the burning of the shrine of Toci at Tociatlan. Further explanation of the close symbolic linkages of Huitzilopochtli to these deities is beyond the bounds of this chapter (but see Gillespie 1999).

8. With Scott O'Mack, I have elsewhere (Gillespie and O'Mack 1991) developed the evidence that Cortés was likened to Huitzilopochtli, at least up to the time of the Toxcatl massacre. See also Cortés (1986:468).

9. In several accounts of Aztec historical traditions, earlier rulers of Tenochtitlan—Chimalpopoca and Tizoc, who are depicted as weak kings—were poisoned by their own people and replaced by more vigorous and successful kings (Gillespie 1989:16).