

Cortés' Account of Tenochtitlan

- Date** ■ Written October 30, 1520, published in 1522
- Place** ■ Written in the Aztec Empire, published in Seville, Spain
- Type of Source** ■ Letter (original in Spanish)
- Author** ■ Hernán Cortés
- Historical Context** ■ In 1519 Cortés was sent from Cuba to Mexico to explore, trade, and rescue Spanish soldiers lost in an earlier expedition. Amazed by the gold objects and beautiful cities he saw there, Cortés decided instead to conquer the region. The Aztec emperor, Montezuma, at first welcomed Cortés. By 1521 Cortés had conquered the powerful Aztec Empire.
- Internal Context** ■ This excerpt is from the second of five letters that Cortés wrote to King Charles I of Spain (also known as Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire). In this letter, Cortés went on to describe Montezuma and life in the royal court. Cortés hoped to impress the king with his discoveries and gain an appointment as governor of the region. He succeeded.

IN ORDER, most **potent** Sire, to convey to your Majesty a just **conception** of the great extent of this noble city of **Temixtitlan**, and of the many rare and wonderful objects it contains; of the government and dominions of **Moctezuma**, the sovereign: of the religious rights and customs that prevail, and the order that exists in this as well as the other cities appertaining to his realm: it would require the labor of many accomplished writers, and much time for the completion of the task. I shall not be able to relate an hundredth part of what could be told respecting these matters; but I will endeavor to describe, in the best manner in my power, what I have myself seen; and imperfectly as I may succeed in the attempt, I am fully aware that the account will appear so wonderful as to be deemed scarcely worthy of credit; since even we who have seen these things with our own eyes, are yet so amazed as to be unable to comprehend their reality. But your Majesty may be assured that if there is any fault in my relation, either in regard to the present subject, or to any other matters of which I shall give your Majesty an account, it will arise from too great brevity rather than extravagance or **prolixity** in the details; and it seems to me but just to my **Prince** and Sovereign to declare the truth in the clearest manner, without saying anything that would detract from it, or add to it.

Before I begin to describe this great city and the others already mentioned, it may be well for the better understanding of the subject to say something of the configuration of Mexico, in which they are situated, it being the principal seat of Moctezuma's power. This Province is in the form of a circle, surrounded on all sides by lofty and rugged mountains; its level surface comprises an area of about seventy **leagues** in circumference, including two lakes, that overspread nearly the whole valley, being navigated by boats more than fifty leagues round. One of these lakes contains fresh and the other, which is the larger of the two, salt water. On one side of the lakes, in the middle of the valley, a range of highlands divides them from one another,

potent
powerful

conception
a mental image

Temixtitlan
name Cortés calls Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital on the site of present-day Mexico City. (See the Atlas of World History, page 80, for a drawing of the city.)

Moctezuma
also called Montezuma. He was emperor of the Aztec from 1502 to 1520.

prolixity
overly long, wordy

Prince
"Prince" was used for any ruler at this time.

leagues
unit of distance equal to 3 miles. Seventy leagues would be about 210 miles.

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with the exception of a narrow strait which lies between the highlands and the lofty sierras. This strait is a **bow-shot wide**, and connects the two lakes; and by this means a trade is carried on between the cities and other settlements on the lakes in canoes without the necessity of traveling by land. As the salt lake rises and falls with its tides like the sea, during the time of high water it pours into the other lake with the rapidity of a powerful stream; and on the other hand, when the tide has ebbed, the water runs from the fresh into the salt lake.

This great city of Temixtitlan [Mexico] is situated in this salt lake, and from the main land to the denser parts of it, by whichever route one chooses to enter, the distance is two leagues. There are four avenues or entrances to the city, all of which are formed by artificial causeways, **two spears' length** in width. The city is as large as **Seville** or **Cordova**; its streets, I speak of the principal ones, are very wide and straight; some of these, and all the **inferior** ones, are half land and half water, and are navigated by canoes. All the streets at intervals have openings, through which the water flows, crossing from one street to another; and at these openings, some of which are very wide, there are also very wide bridges, composed of large pieces of timber, of great strength and well put together; on many of these bridges ten horses can go abreast. Foreseeing that if the inhabitants of the city should prove treacherous, they would possess great advantages from the manner in which the city is constructed, since by removing the bridges at the entrances, and abandoning the place, they could leave us to perish by famine without our being able to reach the main land, as soon as I had entered it, I made great haste to build four **brigatines**, which were soon finished, and were large enough to take ashore three hundred men and the horses, whenever it should become necessary.

This city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of **Salamanca**, surrounded by **porticoes**, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged in buying and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise that the world affords, embracing the necessaries of life, as for instance articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails, and feathers. There are also exposed for sale **wrought and unwrought** stone, bricks **burnt** and unburnt, timber hewn and unhewn, of different sorts. There is a street for game, where every variety of birds in the country are sold, as fowls, partridges, quails, wild ducks, **fly-catchers**, **widgeons**, turtledoves, pigeons, reed-birds, parrots, sparrows, eagles, hawks, owls, and **kestrels**; they sell likewise the skins of some birds of prey, with their feathers, head, beak, and claws. There are also sold rabbits, hares, deer, and little dogs [i.e., the chihuahua], which are raised for eating. There is also an herb street, where may be obtained all sorts of roots and medicinal herbs that the country affords. There are apothecaries' shops, where prepared medicines, liquids, ointments, and **plasters** are sold; barbers' shops, where they wash and shave the head; and restaurateurs,

bow-shot wide
the distance an arrow could fly

two spears' length
spears at this time were roughly 6 to 8 feet long, making the causeways about 12 to 16 feet wide.

Seville, Cordova
Both are large cities in Spain. Cordova is also spelled Cordoba. (See the Atlas of World History, page 74.) In 1500 Tenochtitlan was larger than any city in Spain with a population of 80,000.

inferior
auxilliary or side streets

brigatines
sailing ships with two masts

Salamanca
city in western Spain. Salamanca is still known for its large, beautiful square, La Plaza Mayor, one the finest in Spain.

porticoes
porches with roofs supported by columns

wrought and unwrought
carved with tools and rough

burnt
fired

fly-catchers
birds that feed on insects

widgeons
type of wild duck

kestrels
small falcons

plasters
bandages

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that furnish food and drink at a certain price. There is also a class of men like those called in **Castile** porters, for carrying burdens. Wood and coal are seen in abundance, and braziers of earthenware for burning coals; mats of various kinds for beds, others of a lighter sort for seats, and for halls and bedrooms.

There are all kinds of green vegetables, especially onions, leeks, garlic, watercresses, nasturtium, **borage**, sorrel, artichokes, and golden thistle; fruits also of numerous descriptions, amongst which are cherries and plums, similar to those in Spain; honey and wax from bees, and from the stalks of maize, which are as sweet as the sugar-cane; honey is also extracted from the plant called **maguery**, which is superior to sweet or new wine; from the same plant they extract sugar and wine, which they also sell. Different kinds of cotton thread of all colors in skeins are exposed for sale in one quarter of the market, which has the appearance of the silk-market at Granada, although the former is supplied more abundantly. Painters' colors, as numerous as can be found in Spain, and as fine shades; deerskins dressed and undressed, dyed different colors; earthen-ware of a large size and excellent quality; large and small jars, jugs, pots, bricks, and endless variety of vessels, all made of fine clay, and all or most of them glazed and painted; maize or Indian corn, in the grain and in the form of bread, preferred in the grain for its flavor to that of the other islands and **terra-firma**; patés of birds and fish; great quantities of fish—fresh, salt, cooked and uncooked; the eggs of hens, geese, and of all the other birds I have mentioned, in great abundance, and cakes made of eggs; finally, everything that can be found throughout the whole country is sold in the markets, comprising articles so numerous that to avoid prolixity, and because their names are not retained in my memory, or are unknown to me, I shall not attempt to enumerate them.

Every kind of merchandise is sold in a particular street or quarter assigned to it exclusively, and thus the best order is preserved. They sell everything by number or measure; at least so far we have not observed them to sell anything by weight. There is a building in the great square that is used as an audience house, where ten or twelve persons, who are magistrates, sit and decide all controversies that arise in the market, and order delinquents to be punished. In the same square there are other persons who go constantly about among the people observing what is sold, and the measures used in selling; and they have been seen to break measures that were not **true**.

This great city contains a large number of temples, or houses, for their idols, very handsome edifices, which are situated in the different districts and the suburbs; in the principal ones religious persons of each particular sect are constantly residing, for whose use, besides the houses containing the idols, there are other convenient habitations...

Among these temples there is one which far surpasses all the rest, whose grandeur of architectural details no human tongue is able to describe; for

Castile
Spain

borage
a type of herb

maguery
also known as the century plant, agave, or aloe

terra-firma
solid ground. Cortés may be referring to Europe here.

true
standard, accurate

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within its precincts, surrounded by a lofty wall, there is room enough for a town of five hundred families. Around the interior of the enclosure there are handsome edifices, containing large halls and corridors, in which the religious persons attached to the temple reside. There are fully forty towers, which are lofty and well built, the largest of which has fifty steps leading to its main body, and is higher than the tower of the principal tower of the church at Seville. The stone and wood of which they are constructed are so well wrought in every part, that nothing could be better done, for the interior of the chapels containing the idols consists of curious **imagery**, wrought in stone, with plaster ceilings, and wood-work carved in relief, and painted with figures of monsters and other objects. All these towers are the burial places of the nobles, and every chapel in them is dedicated to a particular idol, to which they pay their devotions.

Three halls are in this grand temple, which contain the principal idols; these are of wonderful extent and height, and admirable workmanship, adorned with figures sculptured in stone and wood; leading from the halls are chapels with very small doors, to which the light is not admitted, nor are any persons except the priests, and not all of them. In these chapels are the images of idols, although, as I have before said, many of them are also found on the outside; the principal ones, in which the people have greatest faith and confidence, I **precipitated** from their pedestals, and cast them down the steps of the temple, purifying the chapels in which they had stood, as they were all polluted with human blood, shed ill the sacrifices. In the place of these I put images of Our Lady and the Saints, which excited not a little feeling in Moctezuma and the inhabitants, who at first remonstrated, declaring that if my proceedings were known throughout the country, the people would rise against me; for they believed that their idols bestowed on them all temporal good, and if they permitted them to be ill-treated, they would be angry and without their gifts, and by this means the people would be deprived of the fruits of the earth and perish with famine. I answered, through the interpreters, that they were deceived in expecting any favors from idols, the work of their own hands, formed of unclean things; and that they must learn there was but one God, the universal Lord of all, who had created the heavens and earth, and all things else, and had made them and us; that He was without beginning and immortal, and they were bound to adore and believe Him, and no other creature or thing...

This noble city contains many fine and magnificent houses; which may be accounted for from the fact, that all the nobility of the country, who are the vassals of Moctezuma, have houses in the city, in which they reside a certain part of the year; and besides, there are numerous wealthy citizens who also possess fine houses. All these persons, in addition to the large and spacious apartments for ordinary purposes, have others, both upper and lower, that contain **conservatories** of flowers...

Source: Hernan Cortés, Second Letter to Charles V, *Modern History Sourcebook*, 1998, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1520cortes/html>> (June 6, 2011).

imagery

expressive images

precipitated

threw, hurled

conservatories

greenhouses