

SOURCING EXCERPTS: SPANISH CONQUEST OF THE AZTEC EMPIRE

Process

As you read these documents, focus on completing the Historical Context and Purpose sections of the Sourcing Tool. Additionally, as you read, keep these questions in mind: *What were the motivations of the Spanish conquerors? What were the responses of the Indigenous peoples to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire?*

Source 1: “Flowers and Songs of Sorrow”

Introduction: Aztec/Mexica poets wrote this “song of sorrow” after the conquest of Tenochtitlan by the Spanish. The collection, *Cantares Mexicanos*, housed in the National Library of Mexico, was written c. 1523.

Flowers and Songs of Sorrow

*Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow are left in
Mexico and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw warriors and wise men. We know it is true
that we must perish [die], for we
are mortal men.
You, the Giver of Life,
you have ordained [ordered] it. ...*

*We are crushed to the ground, we lie in
ruins.*

*There is nothing but grief and suffering in Mexico
and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw beauty and valor.*

*Have you grown weary [tired] of your servants? Are
you angry
with your servants,
O Giver of Life?*

Source: Leon-Portilla, Miguel, ed. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. Translated by Angel Maria Garibay K. and Lysander Kemp. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1962 (p. 149).

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Source 2: Third Letter of Cortes

Introduction: Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), one of the most famous conquistadors of the sixteenth century, wrote an account of his travels and conquests in the Americas to inform the Spanish monarch, Charles V, of his victories in the New World. The letters, published in 1522 and 1523, became a popular read for the European upper classes.

Before leaving the camp, I had ordered that Gonzalo de Sandoval should proceed with the brigantines [ships] to the place where the Indians had fortified themselves in houses, thus holding them surrounded, but not attacking them until he should observe that we began to fight; in such manner that, holding them thus surrounded, they had no place to go except amongst the dead, and on the roofs which were left them. For this cause, they neither had, nor procured [obtained], arrows, nor darts, nor stones, with which to hurt us. Our friends accompanied us, armed with swords and shields, and such was the slaughter done that day on water and on land, that with prisoners taken they numbered in all more than forty thousand men; and such were the shrieks and the weeping of the women and children that there was none whose heart did not break; and we had more trouble in preventing our allies from killing and inflicting tortures than we had in fighting with the Indians, for no such inhuman cruelty as the natives of these parts practice was ever seen amongst any people. Our allies obtained very great plunder, which we could not prevent, because we were about nine hundred Spaniards, and they more than one hundred and fifty thousand men, and no attention or diligence [carefulness] was sufficient to prevent them from robbing, although we did everything possible to stop it. One of the reasons why I refused to go to extremes in those previous days was that, by taking them by assault [force], they would probably throw what they had into the lake, and if they did not do so our allies would steal everything they found; and, for this reason, I feared that but a small part of the great wealth existing in the city, as shown by what I had before obtained for Your Highness, would be secured for Your Majesty. As it was already late, and we could no longer endure [stand] the stench of the dead which had lain for many days in those streets (the most pestilential [plague-like] thing in the world), we returned to our camps.

Source: Cortés, Hernán. “Third Letter of Cortés.” In *The Conquistadors: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, edited and translated by Patricia de Fuentes. New York: The Orion Press, Inc., 1963 (pp. 119–122).