

Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico

CAMILLA TOWNSEND From *The American Historical Review* Vol. 108, Issue 3.

Excerpts, paragraphs 1 - 25 | edited for classroom use by Littlejohn

INTRODUCTION

1
In 1552, Francisco López de Gómara, who had been chaplain and secretary to Hernando Cortés while he lived out his old age in Spain, published an account of the conquest of Mexico. López de Gómara himself had never been to the New World, but he could envision it nonetheless. "Many [Indians] came to gape at the strange men, now so famous, and at their attire, arms and horses, and they said, 'These men are gods!'"¹ The chaplain was one of the first to claim in print that the Mexicans had believed the conquistadors to be divine. Among the welter of statements made in the Old World about inhabitants of the New, this one found particular resonance. It was repeated with enthusiasm, and soon a specific version gained credence: the Mexicans had apparently believed in a god named Quetzalcoatl, who long ago had disappeared in the east, promising to return from that direction on a certain date. In an extraordinary coincidence, Cortés appeared off the coast in that very year and was mistaken for Quetzalcoatl by the devout Indians. Today, most educated persons in the United States, Europe, and Latin America are fully versed in this account, as readers of this piece can undoubtedly affirm. In fact, however, there is little evidence that the indigenous people ever seriously believed the newcomers were gods, and there is no meaningful evidence that any story about Quetzalcoatl's returning from the east ever existed before the conquest. A number of scholars of early Mexico are aware of this, but few others are. The cherished narrative is alive and well, and in urgent need of critical attention.²

2
In order to dismantle a construct with such a long history, it will be necessary first to explain the origins and durability of the myth and then to offer an alternate explanation of what happened in the period of conquest and what the indigenous were actually thinking. In proposing an alternative, I will make three primary assertions: first, that we must put technology in all its forms—beyond mere weaponry—front and center in our story of conquest; second, that we can safely do this because new evidence from scientists offers us explanations for divergent technological levels that have nothing to do with differences in intelligence; and third, that the Mexicans themselves immediately became aware of the technology gap and responded to it with intelligence and savvy rather than wide-eyed talk of gods. They knew before we did, it seems, that technology was the crux.

3
In the last twenty years, scholars have made room for alternative narratives in many arenas, demonstrating that power imbalances explain the way we tell our stories. Yet despite our consciousness of narrative as political intervention, the story of the white gods in the conquest of Mexico has remained largely untouched. . . .

4
Perhaps this relatively dehumanizing narrative has survived among us—in an era when few such have—because we have lacked a satisfactory alternative explanation for the conquest. Without such a misunderstanding, how could a handful of Spaniards permanently defeat the great Aztec state?³ It is a potentially frightening question—at least to those who do not want the answer to be that one group was more intelligent or more deserving than another. The notion that the Indians were too devout for their own good, and hence the victims of a calendric coincidence of tragic consequences, is highly appealing. We can argue that it was no one's fault if the Indians thought the Spanish were gods and responded to them as such. The belief was part and parcel of their cosmology and does not by any means indicate that they were lacking in intelligence or that their culture was "less developed."

5
The obvious explanation for conquest, many would argue, is technology. The Spanish had a technological advantage large enough to ensure their victory, especially if we acknowledge that their technology included not only blunderbusses and powder but also printing presses, steel blades and armor, crossbows, horses and riding equipment, ships, navigation tools—and indirectly, as a result of the latter three, an array of diseases.⁵ But even here we are in dangerous waters, as some would thereby infer a difference in intelligence. Felipe Fernández-Armesto writes: "I hope to contribute to the explosion of what I call the *conquistador-myth*: the notion that Spaniards displaced incumbent elites in the early modern New World because they were in some sense better, or better-equipped, technically, morally or intellectually."⁶ But why need we conflate the latter three? One group can be better equipped technically without being better equipped morally or intellectually. A people's technology is *not* necessarily a function of their intelligence. Even a superficial observer of the Aztecs must notice their accurate calendar, their extraordinary goldwork and poetry, their pictoglyph books: such an observer calls them intellectually deficient at his or her peril.

6
Science can now offer historians clear explanations for the greater advancement of technology among certain peoples without presupposing unequal intelligence. Biologist Jared Diamond presents this new knowledge coherently and powerfully in *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. . . . He sets out to provide a non-racist explanation for "Why the Inca Emperor Atahualpa Did Not Capture King Charles I of Spain." After marshalling well-known evidence that turning from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to sedentary farming leads to increasing population and the proliferation of technological advances—including guns, steel, and (indirectly) germs—

he says that we must then ask ourselves why farming developed earlier and/or spread more rapidly in certain parts of the world. The answer lies in the constellation of suitable—that is, protein-rich—wild plants available in a particular environment at a particular time—which scientists can now reconstruct. It is a highly risky endeavor to turn from hunting and gathering to farming. It makes no sense to do so, except on a part-time basis, for sugar cane, bananas, or squash, for instance; it makes a great deal of sense to do it for the wheat and peas of the Fertile Crescent (and certain other species that spread easily on the wide and relatively ecologically constant east-west axis of Eurasia). In the case of the Americas, one rushes to ask, "What about corn?" Indeed, it turns out that after the millennia of part-time cultivation that it took to turn the nearly useless wild *teosinte* with its tiny bunches of seeds into something approaching today's ears of corn, Mesoamericans became very serious full-time agriculturalists. But by then, they had lost valuable time—or so we say if they were in a race with Eurasia. In 1519, it would turn out that, unbeknownst to either side, they *had* been in a something akin to a race. Establishing that the Mexicans had not had protein-rich crops available to them for as long as their conquerors, and thus had not been sedentary as long, allows us to understand the technical disparities that existed without resorting to comparisons of intelligence or human worth. Diamond's work relieves us of an old burden. We may proceed more freely with our business as historians.

HOW DID THE "CONQUISTADOR-AS-GOD" MYTH BECOME SO WELL-KNOWN?

Our first task must be to ask ourselves whence came the myths associated with the conquest. The simple truth is that, by the 1550s, some Indians were themselves saying that they (or rather, their parents) had presumed the white men to be gods. Their words became widely available to an international audience in 1962, when Miguel León-Portilla published *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, translated from his 1959 *Visión de los vencidos*. The work was perfectly timed to meet with the political sympathies of a generation growing suspicious of the conquistadors' version of events. The volume was printed in at least eleven other languages and has remained a common reference for a variety of scholars. It is an invaluable book, communicating the fear, pain, and anger experienced by the Mexica when their great city of Tenochtitlan crumbled.⁸ Yet, ironically, the same text that lets sixteenth-century Nahuas speak "within hearing distance of the rest of the world"⁹ also traps them in stereotype, quoting certain statements made at least a generation after the conquest as if they were transparent realities. "When Motecuhzoma heard that [the Spanish] were inquiring about his person, and when he learned that the 'gods' wished to see him face to face, his heart shrank within him and he was filled with anguish. He wanted to run away and hide."¹⁰

Numerous scholars have analyzed these words while ignoring their context. . . . Hugh Thomas's recent monumental 800-page volume is a case in point. Thomas uses apocryphal accounts as if they had been tape-recorded conversations in his portrayal of the inner workings of Moctezuma's¹² court. "The Emperor considered flight. He thought of hiding . . . He decided on . . . a cave on the side of Chapultepec." Thomas does this, I believe, not out of naïveté but out of a genuine desire to incorporate the Indian perspective. He does not want to describe the intricate politics of the Spanish while leaving the Indian side vague, rendering it less real to his readers.¹³

WHAT SOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO CHALLENGE THE MYTH?

Writings of the Conquistadors

With such friends, though, perhaps the indigenous and their cultural heirs do not need enemies. A different approach is definitely needed, or the white gods will continue to inhabit our narratives. In beginning anew, let us first ask what sources we have available. We in fact have only one set of documents that were undoubtedly written at the time of conquest by someone who was certainly there—the letters of Cortés. The *Cartas* are masterful constructions, loaded with political agendas, but we are at least certain of their origin, and Cortés never wrote that he was taken for a god. Andrés de Tapia, a Spanish noble who was a captain under Cortés, wrote an account predating López de Gómara's, and, in the 1560s, two aging conquistadors wrote their memoirs: Francisco de Aguilar, who by then had renounced worldly wealth and was living in a Dominican monastery, dictated a short narration, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, then a landholder in Guatemala, wrote a long and spicy manuscript that has come to be beloved by many.¹⁴

Writings of the Priests

Besides the testimony of the conquistadors, we have the writings of priests who were on the scene early, and who were bent on making a careful study of indigenous beliefs, the better to convert the natives. In 1524, twelve Franciscan "Apostles" arrived in Mexico City and were warmly greeted by Cortés. One of them, Fray Toribio de Benavente (known to posterity by his Nahuatl name, "Motolinia" or "Poor One"), wrote extensively.¹⁵ The efforts of the Franciscans led to the founding in 1536 of a formal school for Indian noblemen in Tlatelolco in Mexico City and

culminated during the 1550s in the work of Bernardo de Sahagún, who spent years orchestrating a grand project in which students did extensive interviews with surviving notables of the *ancien régime*. The most complete extant version is the Florentine Codex.¹⁶ The Dominican Fray Diego Durán, though not born until the 1530s, is also particularly valuable to us because he moved with his family from Seville to Mexico "before he lost his 'milk teeth,'" was raised by Nahuatl-speaking servants, and became fluent in the language.¹⁷

11

Indigenous Sources

The last group of sources were produced by the indigenous themselves, but here is the heart of the problem: we have none that date from the years of conquest or even from the 1520s or 1530s. There are sixteen surviving pre-conquest codices (none from Mexico City itself, where the conquerors' book burning was most intense), and then, dating from the 1540s, statements written in Nahuatl using the Roman alphabet, which was then rapidly becoming accessible to educated indigenous through the school of Tlatelolco.¹⁸ The most famous such document about the conquest is the lengthy Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex. Although it was organized by Sahagún, and the Spanish glosses were written by him, the Nahuatl is the work of his Indian aides.¹⁹ At the end of the century, a few indigenous men wrote histories. Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a descendant of the last king of Texcoco, near Tenochtitlan, was prolific.²⁰ Though removed in time, he is worth reading, having access to secretly preserved codices; he railed against Spaniards who had confused matters by making false assertions that were taken as truth.²¹

These, then, are the rather limited documents we have to work with.

12

REINTERPRETING THE SOURCES

[What they are we to make of the] understanding that the Aztecs were convinced that their own omens had for years been predicting the coming of the cataclysm, and that Cortés was recognized as Quetzalcoatl and the Europeans as gods. The most important source for all of these legends is Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex. James Lockhart, a scholar studying the sources, notes that [Book Twelve] reads very much as if it were two separate documents: the first part, covering the period from the sighting of the European sails to the Spaniards' violent attack on warrior-dancers participating in a religious festival, reads like an apocryphal fable (complete with comets as portents), while the second part, covering the period from the Aztec warriors' uprising against the Spaniards after the festival to their ultimate defeat over a year later, reads like a military archivist's record of events.²³ Indeed, this phenomenon makes sense: the old men being interviewed in the 1550s would likely have participated as young warriors in the battles against the Spanish, or at least have been well aware of what was transpiring. On the other hand, they would most certainly not have been privy to the debates within Moctezuma's inner circle when the Spaniards' arrival first became known: the king's closest advisers were killed in the conquest, and at any rate would have been older men even in 1520.

13

Still, the fact that the informants for the Florentine were not acquainted with the inner workings of Moctezuma's court only proves that they were unlikely to have the first part of the story straight; it tells us nothing about why they chose to say what they did. It seems likely that they retroactively sought to find particular auguries associated with the conquest. The Florentine's omens do not appear to have been commonly accepted, as they do not appear in other Nahuatl sources.²⁴ Interestingly, Fernández-Armesto notes that the listed omens fall almost exactly in line with certain Greek and Latin texts that are known to have been available to Sahagún's students.²⁵

14

Why would Sahagún's assistants have been so eager to come up with a compelling narrative about omens? We must bear in mind that they were the sons and grandsons of Tenochtitlan's most elite citizens—descendants of priests and nobles. It was their own class, even their own family members, who might have been thought to be at fault if it were true that they had had no idea that the Spaniards existed prior to their arrival. . . .

15

The idea that Cortés was understood to be the god Quetzalcoatl returning from the east is also presented as fact in Book Twelve. Moctezuma sends gifts for different gods, to see which are most welcome to the newcomers, and then decides it is Quetzalcoatl who has come. There are numerous obvious problems with the story. First, Quetzalcoatl was not a particularly prominent god in the pantheon worshiped in Mexico's great city. The one city in the empire where Quetzalcoatl was prominent, Cholula, was the only one to mount a concerted attack against Cortés as he made his way to the Aztec capital. Many aspects of the usual post-conquest description of Quetzalcoatl—that he was a peace-loving god who abhorred human sacrifice, for example—are obviously European mythological constructs, thus rendering the whole story somewhat suspect. Furthermore, in the Codex itself, when the earlier explorer Juan de Grijalva lands on the coast in 1518, he is taken to be Quetzalcoatl. So much for the explanation that Cortés happened to land in the right year, causing all the pieces to fall into place in the indigenous imagination.

17

Susan Gillespie has made a careful study of every sixteenth-century text (pre-and post-conquest) where

18

Quetzalcoatl appears, and has proven that the story as we know it did not exist until Sahagún edited the Florentine Codex in the 1560s. Quetzalcoatl certainly was a deity in the Nahuatl tradition. If we take as our only sources the pre-conquest codices, archaeological remains of temples, and recitations of pre-conquest religious ceremonies recorded elsewhere, we are left with certain definite elements. Quetzalcoatl was, as his name indicates, a feathered serpent, a flying reptile (much like a dragon), who was a boundary maker (and transgressor) between earth and sky. Like most gods, he could take various forms and was envisioned differently in various villages and epochs: he could be the wind, for example. His name became a priestly title, an honorific for those liminal humans whose role it was to connect those on earth to those beyond. In myth, he was associated with the city of the Toltecs, an ancient state-building people who had preceded the Aztecs in the Central Valley of Mexico. As the invading Mexica often claimed legitimacy by insisting that they were the heirs of the Toltecs, the symbol of Quetzalcoatl often appeared as an iconographic legitimator of a kingly line. In the Aztec ritual calendar, different deities were associated with each cyclically repeating date: Quetzalcoatl was tied to the year Ce Acatl (One Reed), which is correlated to the year 1519 (among others) in the Western calendar.²⁸

There is no evidence of any ancient myths recounting the departure or return of such a god, but, in the early years after conquest, discrete elements of the story that has become so familiar to us do appear separately in various documents, with the main character being mortal rather than divine. The wandering hero is called Huemac or Topiltzin ("Our Lord" as in "Our Nobleman"); he is not given the name "Quetzalcoatl" until the 1540s, and then not in Nahuatl language texts. He is sometimes said to have ruled Tollan; the city is sometimes said to have fallen in connection with his exile; the prophecy of his return is occasionally made.²⁹ Motolinía rendered the story relevant to Cortés: Quetzalcoatl (in his version, a mortal apotheosized into a god, in good European tradition) was sent away to build up other lands, but people in Mexico awaited his return, and when they saw the sails of Cortés they said, "Their god was coming, and because of the white sails, they said he was bringing by sea his own temples." Then, remembering that all the Spaniards were supposed to have been gods, Motolinía quickly added, "When they disembarked, they said that it was not their god, but rather many gods."³⁰

The elements did not all appear in the same narration until Sahagún's Codex drew them together in the 1560s— although references to the more traditional god Quetzalcoatl and a separate mortal hero named Huemac are also peppered throughout the Codex. By that time, Spanish priests had been interacting with the locals for years, and new European elements had been incorporated almost seamlessly: as they were wont to do elsewhere, the priests had theorized that a Christian saint had previously visited the New World, and such a man makes his appearance in these stories as the hero Quetzalcoatl, now a peace-loving man who is driven into exile because of the people's belief in the devil (the god Huitzilopochtli), and who foretells his own return.³¹ In about 1570, the author of the "Anales de Cuauhtitlan" became the first Nahuatl to put all these elements together. To the generation of the 1570s, it seemed logical that their forebears had believed thus, for it provided a needed explanation why they had made such an ineffective defense.³²

Even if it is untrue that anyone in 1519 thought Cortés was Quetzalcoatl, there remains the question of whether or not Cortés and his men were in general perceived to be gods. Cortés did not claim that he was accorded godly status. It is, however, apparently true that the Nahuatl frequently referred to the Spanish as *teotl* or *teutl* (plural *teted* or *teteu*), which the Spanish rendered in their own texts as *teul* (plural *teules*); they translated this word as "god." Sahagún's students in the 1550s clearly believed their parents had used *teotl* as a form of address in their dealings with the Spanish, and this was a matter less open to reinterpretation than some others.³³ Several conquistadors insisted on it. Perhaps the best question is not whether the Indians used the word *teotl* in their groping efforts to categorize the Spaniards before they had any political relation to them but rather why they did so, what it meant to them.

To turn an obvious point into a less obvious one, the indigenous had to call the Spaniards something, and it was not at all clear what that something should be. It is noteworthy that in Durán's history the issue first surfaces in the initial communication efforts of the Indian translator Malinche. "She responded, 'The leader of these men says he has come to greet your master Motecuhzoma, that his only intention is to go to the city of Mexico.'" But in the next interchange: "The Indian woman answered in the following way: 'These gods say that they kiss your hands and that they will eat.'"³⁴ In the Nahuatl universe as it had existed up until this point, a person was always labeled as being from a particular village or city-state, or, more specifically, as one who filled a given social role (a tribute collector, prince, servant). These new people fit nowhere; undoubtedly, they had a village or city-state somewhere, but it was not in the known world, and their relationship to it was not clear. Later, they were called "Caxtilteca" (people of Castile), but that came after closer acquaintance. There was no word for "Indian," of course, and the indigenous struggled in certain situations. How to describe the woman translator, for example, who came with the newcomers but was not one of them? She became "a woman, one of us people here."³⁵ If there were no "Indians," there were no "Spanish" in opposition to them. So what to call the new arrivals? One of them might be a *tecuhtli*, a dynastic lord ruling over his own people, but he was not so in relation to "us people here." The Nahuatl word for king was *tlatoani*, meaning "he who speaks." Tellingly, in Nahuatl texts where the Spaniards have previously been referred to as *teotl*, first Cortés and then the viceroy become *tlatoani* after the Europeans vanquish the Indians and are in a position of authority over them.³⁶

In the Florentine Codex, the moment of political surrender is described by the warriors: "There goes the lord Cuauhtemoc going to give himself to the gods" (*teteu*). Yet, in the preceding pages, the enemy has been described as execrable rather than divine: in fact, when the Spaniards are temporarily expelled, the warriors perform ceremonies "in gratitude to their gods (*teotl*) for having freed them from their enemies." Tellingly, in the negotiations *after* the surrender, when the Spaniards are demanding full restitution of all the gold and jewels they were ever given, they are termed "our lords" as in "our earthly overlords" (*totecuiovan*, from *tecuhtli*), but in a moment of rage, a leading priest whose tone indicates he does not yet feel he owes allegiance cries out, "Let the god (*teotl*), the Captain [Cortés] pay heed!" He then refuses to pay, until the defeated Cuauhtemoc calms him and uses the word *tecuhtli* again.³⁷ 23

Sixteenth-century dictionaries say that *teotl* meant simply *dios*, but they, we must remember, were written years later, after semantic shifts had occurred in the process of Indians and priests working together.³⁸ Bernal Díaz first says that *teotl* meant "god" (*dios*) or "demon" (*demonio*). We might assume he meant "demon" only in the sense that the Christians called the entire Nahua pantheon "devils," but an anecdote that he relates indicates otherwise. The Spaniards seem to have been given to understand—quite accurately—that the word could mean "devil" in the sense of a capricious immortal over whom mortals had no control, or a ceremonial human impersonator of such a character. After the Spanish had gleaned the word's meaning, they thought to reinforce the notion as follows: 24

[Cortés said], "I think we'll send Heredia against them." Heredia was an old Basque musketeer with a very ugly face covered with scars, a huge beard, and one blind eye. He was also lame in one leg ... So old Heredia shouldered his musket and went off with [the Indians] firing shots in the air as he went through the forest, so that the Indians should both hear and see him. And the *caciques* sent the news to the other towns that they were bringing along a *Teule* to kill the Mexicans [Aztecs] who were at Cingapacinga. I tell this story here merely as a joke and to show Cortés' guile.³⁹

This story is barely comprehensible unless one accepts that the Spanish had been told the word *teotl* encompassed notions of "powerful one" and "deity impersonator." For the impression one is left with here is not that the locals thought the Spaniards were glorious and divine beings but rather that they envisioned them as bizarre sorcerers who owed allegiance to no one and whose powers could potentially be turned against the Aztec overlords and tax collectors. It is even conceivable that the indigenous were referring to "deity impersonators" as potential sacrifice victims for the Aztecs; certainly, *teotl* is used in that sense in descriptions of religious ceremonies elsewhere in the Florentine. . . . 25