

# TACTICAL FACTORS IN THE SPANISH CONQUEST OF THE AZTECS

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*A perspective largely unexamined in past works on the Spanish Conquest of Mexico has been the details of the tactical systems of the respective sides, and how these systems worked on the battlefield to produce the Spanish victory. This article examines the Conquest in terms of tactics, applying a military-historical perspective to ethnohistorical texts and data gleaned from modern works. It is shown that Spanish infantry tactics and horse cavalry were critical factors in the Spanish victory. [Aztecs, ethnohistory, Mexico, Spanish Conquest, war]*

## Introduction

Most interpretations of the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs attribute the Spanish victory to psychosocial factors—the Aztecs had a different conception of warfare, or they were paralyzed by the Quetzalcoatl myth—or to technological factors, such as the supposed superiority of firearms and steel swords, or to combinations of the two. As Soustelle put it,

The Spaniards and the Mexicans were not really fighting the same kind of war. On the material plane, they fought with different weapons: on the social and moral, they had totally different concepts of war (1970: 215).

Davies (1973: 251) cites, among other factors, the Aztec conception of war as “half a process governed by ritual and magic” as a reason for the Aztec’s defeat. Another purported reason for Spanish battle superiority has been the supposed Aztec “obsession” with taking live prisoners for later sacrifice (Davies 1973: 251; Soustelle 1970: 210), which handicapped the Aztec soldier before the Spanish conquistador, who had no such compunction.

An issue unexamined in detail in most Conquest literature is that of the tactical concepts and practices of both the Aztecs and the Spanish. This article examines the Spanish Conquest in terms of its tactical background, applying a military-historical perspective to ethnohistorical sources. These sources, including Bernal Diaz’ *The discovery and conquest of Mexico* (1956) and de Sahagun’s *General history of the things of New Spain* (1975, 1979), are largely from the colonial period and the Spanish point of view, but are reasonably well-attested and trustworthy. In addition, information is also drawn from modern studies, especially Havig’s *Aztec warfare* (1988). Significant reasons for

the Spanish victory in the Conquest can be found in the tactics of the two sides. In this interpretation the Spanish were able to win on the battlefield largely because of two facts: 1) the way in which the Spanish used their infantry formations (close order formation with tightly drilled bodies of men) gave them a decisive advantage over Aztec infantry formations, and 2) Spanish cavalry was capable of disrupting and routing large bodies of Aztec troops, at least on the open battlefield. The analysis emphasizes the essential value of discipline and integration of effort in combat among the Spanish forces.

## Synopsis of the Conquest Events

The expedition of Cortes arrived at San Juan de Ulua, near present-day Veracruz, in April 1519, after skirting the coast of Yucatan. The expedition consisted of 508 soldiers, 100 sailors, and sixteen horses (Diaz 1956: 42). At San Juan de Ulua the Spanish made contact with both representatives of Moctezuma and the local Totonac people. Cortes induced the Totonacs to ally themselves to him, thus establishing a secure base on the coast. Leaving a portion of his force as a colony, Cortes left for Mexico on August 16, 1519.

On August 20th the Spanish crossed the frontier of Tlaxcala, a realm independent of the Aztecs. Cortes intended to make them allies, as he had the Totonacs. The Tlaxcalans, however, were initially hostile, and a series of pitched battles were fought before they made peace and entered into an alliance with the Spanish.

Having established a forward base in Tlaxcala, the Spanish continued toward Mexico, accompanied by several thousand Tlaxcalan troops. In Cholula the Spanish massacred a large force which

they supposed was about to ambush them. Moving on, the Spanish arrived in Tenochtitlan on November 8. During this march the Spanish managed to avoid direct conflict with the Aztecs, playing (by accident or design) on the uncertainty of Moctezuma. Moctezuma's policy was, in fact, marked by vacillation and confusion, despite the fact, as evidenced by later opposition, that many of Moctezuma's commanders urged immediate action against the Spanish (Davies 1973: 242-243; Diaz 1956: 240).<sup>1</sup>

Very soon after their arrival in Tenochtitlan the Spanish staged a *coup d'etat*, seizing Moctezuma and punishing Aztec commanders who had opposed them. However, subsequent Spanish actions further antagonized the nobility and the priests, and the Spanish position remained precarious. At this moment a second Spanish expedition, sent by the Governor of Cuba, an enemy of Cortes, arrived on the coast. Cortes took the majority of his troops to the coast to deal with this expedition, leaving a small garrison in Mexico. The garrison commander, Pedro de Alvarado, massacred the celebrants of a religious festival, sparking a rebellion. Cortes returned to Mexico and rejoined the besieged Spanish. After some days of indecisive combat the Spanish decided to withdraw. In the retreat the Spanish suffered heavy casualties, losing the major portion of their force. However, they defeated the Aztecs in open battle at Otumba on July 14, 1520, and escaped to Tlaxcala.

Having received reinforcements and supplies, the Spanish again advanced on Mexico. Receiving the allegiance of a breakaway faction of the city of Texcoco, the Spanish subjugated the cities bordering the lakes of the Valley of Mexico and besieged the Aztecs in Tenochtitlan. After a 90-day siege the city fell on August 13, 1521.

### *Tactical Organization of the Spanish*

The immediate question is how the two sides in this conflict used their forces and how that use led to victory for the Spanish and defeat for the Aztecs.

Spanish tactics of this period were an outgrowth of their experiences in both the Reconquista and the Italian campaigns, and the whole trend of the late Middle Ages in reasserting the superiority of infantry formations over cavalry. By the late fifteenth century the heavy knight had been displaced on the European battlefield by the common foot-soldier. The pike was the preeminent weapon, sup-

ported by swordsmen, muskets, and artillery. An important result of these developments was the reintroduction of precision movement of units to the European battlefield.

For the Spanish, the proving ground for their new tactics was Italy, where they fought a series of protracted wars with the French at the turn of the sixteenth century. The essential evolution of Spanish tactics in this theater was the development of the general Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordoba, who integrated the elements of European arms into a functional, mutually-dependent system.

The secret of Don Gonzalo's success was his evolution of new infantry tactics and his organization of the infantry into manageable, self-sufficient units: pikemen to resist the initial cavalry charge of a battle; arquebusiers to guard the flanks and enfilade the attackers; and infantry armed with javelins and the Roman-Spanish short sword, and protected by round shields, to move through the pikemen to the attack. The Great Captain died in 1515, but his tactics and his principle of the independent, self-sufficient infantry unit survived (Hills 1970: 53).

This tactical system revolved around a unit known as a *tercio*, roughly corresponding to a regiment in modern parlance (Hills 1970: 53). When standardized in 1534 the *tercio* consisted of twelve companies of 250 men each, six of pike, four of swordsmen, and two of arquebusiers (p. 53). "In column of route they marched; pikemen-swordsmen-pikemen, with the arquebusiers guarding the flanks and the vanguard" (pp. 53-54).

The key to this system was mutual support among the different companies. If one unit/weapon-type failed, all might be lost. To insure against this, a well-drilled and disciplined order had to be maintained (Ropp 1959: 16; Jones 1987: 190-191). Individual units were relentlessly trained to work together. This discipline enabled a commander to move and use his units efficiently, as well as keep them together in the face of an enemy attack.

The formal organization of the *tercio*, however, was not set until after Conquest. In the first years of the sixteenth century the organization of Spanish armies was flexible.

There [was] no such thing as a typical 16th Century battle formation. Each battle was a separate tactical problem. It was a game in which not only the numbers but the values of the pieces varied with each situation (Ropp 1959: 19).

The variability of unit and unit size was adaptive

in the sense that a commander could adjust the organization of his command to the needs of the moment.

This flexibility served the Spanish well in the Conquest. The Spanish organized and reorganized their force according to their needs—at Tabasco, against the expedition of Narvaez, in the flight from Mexico, and elsewhere (Diaz 1956: 47-50, 285-286, 313). Gomara (1965: 239) indicates that in Tlaxcala Cortes organized his troops into nine companies of sixty men each before beginning their return to Mexico. Diaz (1956: 395-396) records that during the siege of Tenochtitlan the force was reformed into nine companies of about fifty men each, grouped in turn into three “divisions,” each of three companies. This handling of troops was in keeping with Spanish practice of the period.

On the other hand, the role of Spanish cavalry in the Conquest varied from contemporary European usage. As noted above, the ascendancy of heavy cavalry in Europe had ended in the late Middle Ages with the re-invention of effective infantry formations. In fact, cavalry had faded to a largely supporting role (Ropp 1959: 17). Nicolo Machiavelli, in his *Art of war*, published in 1521, gives an ideal for the makeup of an army of the period. Cavalry totalled no more than 300 in a regiment of 6000 (Machiavelli 1965: 61, 82), and had more to do with the pursuit of a routed enemy than involvement in the main battle.

In Mexico the absence of infantry units organizationally and technologically capable of standing against cavalry allowed mounted troops a brief renaissance. The comparatively small force of cavalry available to Cortes was a key ingredient in the Spanish force, which often achieved startling success against native forces. At Cintla in Tabasco, early in the expedition, thirteen horsemen routed a huge enemy force engaged with the infantry (Diaz 1956: 58-59). At Otumba the wounded and exhausted cavalry repeatedly broke through the overwhelming numbers of Aztecs troops until they retreated (pp. 319-320). During the campaign Cortes continually reorganized his cavalry, as he did his infantry, to meet the needs of the moment. At Otumba he divided his cavalry into squads of five (Diaz 1956: 319); while preparing to return to Mexico from Tlaxcala he organized his cavalry into four “squadrons” of ten horses each (Gomara 1965: 239). Cavalry was the “arm of decision” in the Conquest.<sup>2</sup>

The various indigenous allies of the Spanish,

particularly those of Tlaxcala and Texcoco (in the last phases of the campaign), rounded out the Spanish force. These troops were essential to the Spanish effort in that they helped redress the imbalance in numbers between the Spanish and the Aztecs. Even so, in many battles the Aztecs greatly outnumbered the Spanish and their allies (Diaz 1956: 318-320). However, without the extra numbers afforded by indigenous troops, the Spanish in several actions in the early campaigns in Tabasco and Tlaxcala seem to have been more easily enveloped, restricting their mobility and sometimes putting them in precarious positions (pp. 58-59, 126-127).

These three parts of the Spanish force—infantry, cavalry, and allies—can be said to form a whole tactical entity, performing different tasks and supporting one another. The integration between strictly Spanish units and their allies would necessarily have been more tenuous than that between infantry and cavalry, since the internal order and discipline of each was maintained in different ways. But the operational “fit” was, by the evidence of the ethnohistories, sufficient for the coordination of action.

#### *Tactical Organization of the Aztecs*

The tactical formations customarily used by the Aztecs were based on a different means of recruitment than that of the Spanish. The Spanish were all volunteers, “gentleman-adventurers,” who had signed on for a share in the Conquest. The Aztecs, on the other hand, employed what would be called a “levy,” essentially conscription. Every able-bodied man was liable for military service. Education for young men of commoner status was largely that of the soldier (Soustelle 1970: 42). Each *calpulli* (ward) had at least one *tepochcalli*, staffed by experienced warriors who served as instructors (p. 169). In this way the Aztecs possessed a highly centralized and universal system of conscription to fill their manpower needs.

The military forces of the Aztecs and their allies were organized into a series of units. All troops in Tenochtitlan were levied on the basis of their membership in their *calpulli* and fought as a *calpulli* unit (Hassig 1988: 56-57). In turn, the various *calpulli* units were grouped into four “corps,” corresponding to the four quarters of the city, each of which was commanded by one of the four councilors of the emperor (Soustelle 1970: 44).

Troops from other cities would fight in their own units.

Each town marched under its own banner with its own leader, and if it was large enough to have more than one *calpolli*, it would have one over-all leader, or *tlahtoani*, and subordinate leaders for each of the several *calpolli* units. These *calpolli* units were often dispersed among and incorporated into the larger armies of a major campaign, but they apparently were not divided. They were the basic command, logistical, and tactical units, and violating their integrity would have caused too many supply and control problems (Hassig 1988: 55-56).

In other words, tributary troops were not used in piecemeal replacements for Aztec units.

The mass of troops in the Aztec units were commoners. Davies (1988: 163-164) suggests that the highest positions were generally reserved for the nobility. However, lower "officer" ranks were typically held by commoners promoted for merit.

The *calpulli* forces were organized into units of 400 men, sub-divided into "squads," although the exact size of these sub-units is unclear (Hassig 1988: 56). The "companies" of 400 were, in turn, organized into "divisions" of 8000, called *xiquipeles* (Diaz 1956: 440; Hassig 1988: 56), although Hassig suggests that this division was more an ideal than a unit regularly used, and often towns and wards contributed less than a full *xiquipelli* to the levy.

In addition to these troops, the Aztecs had various elite units at their command. Grouped into soldier fraternities such as the Eagle and Jaguar Knights, these troops fought as separate corps and supplied leaders to the regular units (Davis 1973: 190; Hassig 1988: 45). These elite soldiers supplied the Aztec forces with the skill and daring to be emulated by the levies (Sahagun 1975: 91-93) and also acted as shock troops (Hassig 1988: 100).

How Aztec units were ordered for battle is largely a matter of conjecture. Sahagun (1979: 52) does record that the Aztecs were careful in ordering their "ranks" for battle, and stiff punishment was handed out to those who broke or confused the lines. However, this ordering appears to have little resembled the European system of close-order drill. The typical employment of these units on the battlefield is clear. When battle was joined, there was an initial release of missile weapons, followed by combat between *macquauitl*-armed troops (Soustelle 1970: 210; Hassig 1988: 98-99). Davies suggests that Aztec tactics were little more than various kinds of ambush, but Hassig indicates that

they also used flank attacks and encirclement (Davies 1973: 188; Hassig 1988: 101). Hassig also suggests that the Aztecs employed a comparatively open battle formation, in order to give individual soldiers room to employ their *macquauitl* with maximum efficiency.

This open formation is typically employed when fighting infantry of a similar nature to one's own, whereas a more densely packed closed formation is employed when withstanding a cavalry charge. Since there were no horses [in pre-Hispanic battles], the way Aztecs weapons were used fostered an open formation (Hassig 1988: 102).

Hassig proposes that the wide spacings (approximately six feet) between soldiers in these formations were perhaps filled by spearmen (p. 102). An Aztec army engaging an enemy probably extended into a line

only deep enough to prevent the breakthrough of enemy elements. Once the army had closed with the enemy and formed a broad front, skirmishing occurred by units as wholes, but given the weapons employed, actual combat was inevitably an individual affair. If the unit's front broke, a rout was likely (p. 101).

Hassig also points out that the Aztecs usually attempted to surround a foe and attack from all directions at once.

### Discussion

It seems apparent from the ethnohistorical records that the use of open formations by Aztec units, along with their inability to cope tactically with Spanish cavalry, were the two critical battlefield factors of Aztec tactical practice which contributed to the Spanish victory. In essence the Spanish infantry, with their close-order formations and sword and shield-armed troops, were able to survive the initial contact and penetrate Aztec units, or at least to stand their ground. Meanwhile, the Spanish cavalry was typically engaged in breaking up the Aztecs' formations and causing them to retreat. This superior combat system was the reason the Spanish were able to win in tactical terms.

These two factors can be seen in most of the battles of the Conquest. The battle of Otumba on July 14, 1520, is one example. Having just escaped from Mexico, the Spanish, along with surviving allies, were met near the village of Otumba by a large Mexican force. Cortes, in a letter to Charles V, indicates that the Spanish were disposed in "squadrons," deployed in a square, during their

retreat:

I concentrated my people there, and from those who were still capable of action made squadrons, placing them in front and behind and on the sides with the wounded in the middle; and I distributed the horsemen likewise (Cortes 1971: 140).

A passage in Sahagun seems to indicate that the cavalry flanked the main formation, with the remaining baggage and non-combatants in the center (Sahagun 1975: 77). It is probable that the Spanish "closed ranks" at the approach of the Aztec forces (p. 79).

Diaz describes the battle vividly, mentioning that when the Aztecs tried to surround the Spanish forces, the Spanish cavalry "keeping in parties of five, broke through [Aztec] ranks. . ." (Diaz 1956: 319). The Spanish infantry "moved all mixed up with them foot to foot" (p. 319). Meanwhile, the cavalry "speared them as they chose, charging and returning. . ." (p. 319). During the fighting Cortes gave instructions to the infantry to direct their attacks against the Aztec leaders. Finally, their formations broken and their chief commanders dead, the Aztecs fled, with the Spanish cavalry and infantry in pursuit (p. 320).

Sahagun's informants recorded their view of the battle as follows:

Also at this very time the Mexicans came arriving that they might intercept [the Spanish]. . . . And when the Spaniards looked toward them, they awaited their foes; therefore they checked themselves so that they might contend against them. They indeed pondered how they would be able to succeed against them. And when this happened, [the Mexicans] fell upon them, they threw themselves upon them so that all speedily would be enclosed within them. Then there was repeated spearing, striking down of the men. There indeed died Mexicans [and] Tlatilulcans. . . . There were only a few who escaped their hands, who did not die. And those who remained at a distance . . . did not die. And when the Spaniards had slain them, when their ire abated, thereupon they went. All who bore burdens upon their backs went to be the last (Sahagun 1975: 79-80).

Several points in these narratives are worth noting. First is the suggestion in Sahagun (p. 79) that the Aztecs were of such numbers that they completely surrounded the Spanish. Also notable is the way in which the Spanish used their cavalry—in "parties of five"—to disrupt the Aztec ranks (Diaz 1956: 319). In addition, Diaz seems to indicate a close coordination between the cavalry and the infantry. Finally, it seems clear that the Spanish infantry at Otumba were in close forma-

tion in the middle of the enemy throughout the battle and were hard-pressed (p. 319). As noted above, Sahagun (1975: 79) seems to indicate that the Spanish closed ranks before contact was made, which agrees with Diaz' statement (1956: 319) that the Spanish paused to receive instructions and orders.

From this evidence the battle can be said to have had four phases. First, the Spanish and the Aztecs moved into contact. Second, the Aztec formations were engaged and "fixed," or forced to present vulnerable flanks and rear, by the Spanish infantry and allies. Third, the Spanish cavalry repeatedly charged through the Aztec formations, disrupting their ranks. Fourth, the Aztecs broke and were pursued by the Spanish and their allies. According to Diaz, the infantry kept moving forward, engaging the Aztecs at close quarters, while the cavalry charged again and again, particularly targeting Aztec leaders (1956: 319-320).<sup>3</sup>

This pattern of infantry formations coordinating their actions with the enemy-unit—"busting" cavalry was repeated, with variations, in most of the battles of the Conquest. In the brief war with Tlaxcala the Spanish appear to have been very hard pressed at times, to the point that the infantry could not move because of the mass of Tlaxcalan troops all around them, and they had to rely on the cavalry to break the enemy (Diaz 1956: 130-131). At the battle of Cintla in Tabasco, the cavalry and infantry caught the Tabascan forces in what was essentially a pincer movement (p. 76). In the fighting that attended the siege of Tenochtitlan, the Spanish and their allies spent much time and energy leveling houses and filling gaps in the causeways to gain access to the city and give the cavalry room to maneuver (Diaz 1956: 417, 422-423).

During the campaign the integration of the indigenous allies of the Spanish with the Spanish units appears to have been sometimes problematic. As noted above, the Tlaxcalans and other allies helped redress the numerical odds facing the Spanish. A major aspect of this function may have been to absorb the bulk of attritional losses. The Spanish employed their allies in a number of positions and roles, both as advance and rear guard (Diaz 1956: 353, 396), as guides and baggage-carriers (pp. 317, 347), and laborers (pp. 337, 340), as well as combatants. However, Diaz (pp. 396, 400, 424, 431) also indicates that the allies sometimes obstructed operations, particularly during the siege of Tenochtitlan, and special precautions had to be taken to

avoid this. The difficulty appears to have been the sheer numbers of the allies and a tendency on their part to jam narrow or restricted spaces (pp. 400, 431).

Concern for the integrity of their formations is voiced by the Spanish in their narratives of the Conquest, particularly by Diaz.

When we reached the level ground with our horsemen and artillery . . . we did not dare break our formation, for any soldier who left the ranks to follow some of the Indian captains and swordsmen was at once wounded and ran great danger. . . . We dared not to charge them . . . lest they should break up our formation. . . .

. . . [T]hey came on so fearlessly that they surrounded us on two sides, and had even half defeated us and cut us off, when it pleased our Lord Jesus Christ to give us strength to turn and close our ranks . . . and advancing shoulder to shoulder, we drove them off (Diaz 1956: 126, 423-424).

The Aztecs, for their part, although disciplined and ordered in their own units, had neither the effective close-order formations of the Spanish nor any consistent method of preventing the Spanish cavalry from operating at will, at least on the open battlefield. This was less true in rough terrain or within cities, where horses were less useful and more vulnerable. Hassig (1988: 241) points out that the Aztecs developed a number of defensive ploys, such as pits, which they used against the Spanish cavalry. But these were often of limited utility: "Most of the innovative tactics were static. . . . [T]he Spaniards had to be drawn into an appropriate position or maneuver" (p. 241). The Aztecs never evolved tactics to enable them to stand up to the Spanish cavalry in open battle.<sup>4</sup>

Because of this failure cavalry must be considered the "arm of decision" in the Conquest. However, because of their small numbers during the campaigns, and the varied terrain in which the fighting took place, cavalry alone would not have been sufficient to defeat the Aztecs. Spanish infantry and allies, by their ability to engage Aztec forces at close quarters, to pin their units down for the cavalry to charge and disrupt, and to operate in areas where cavalry were ineffective, were essential ingredients in Spanish force.

While engaging the Tlaxcalans, the Spanish found them to be brave but poorly led and badly deployed (Diaz 1956: 131). Cortes (1971: 142) made much the same observation about the Aztecs in one battle in one of his letters to Charles V: "[T]hey were so many that they got in each other's way, and could neither fight nor run." The greatest

Aztec successes against the Spanish appear to have been during engagements within constricted areas, such as the fighting which preceded the Spanish flight from Tenochtitlan and the retreat itself along the causeway on Noche Triste. Limited space obviously prevented the Spanish from deploying in their customary formations and kept the cavalry from operating with impunity. During Noche Triste this particularly appears to have been the case. The Spanish quite literally had run for their lives:

what could we do beyond what we accomplished? which was to charge and give some sword-thrusts to those who tried to lay hands on us, and to march and get on ahead so as to get off the causeway (Diaz 1956: 315).

But it was on the open battlefield that the fate of the Aztec nation was decided, both at Otumba, where the Spanish survived the Aztec's greatest attempt to crush them, and later in the battles that sealed off Tenochtitlan and allowed the Spanish to lay siege to the capital and strangle it into submission. The Conquest can be viewed as a classic case of a war won through superior tactics. The Spanish infantry formation was a more effective way of employing foot-soldiers than the Aztec system, and their cavalry was a tactical challenge largely unanswered. While the Aztecs and the Spanish were fighting the same kind of war, a fundamental difference between them was the manner in which they organized and used their respective forces, and that difference was critical.

### *Conclusion*

At the beginning of this article it was noted that most interpretations of the Spanish Conquest have attributed the Spanish victory to conceptual or technological factors. A difficulty with these interpretations may be that they tend to obviate examination of important functional reasons—actions on the battlefield—and produce the false impression that the Spanish Conquest was inevitable and could not have been stopped by the Aztecs. In this article a tactical/military historical perspective has been applied to ethnohistorical records of the Conquest in an attempt to understand these "on-the-ground" factors. The application of such a perspective to ethnohistorical works has potentially great utility in explicating actions and events which may otherwise be obscure and difficult.

Battle is a special sort of sociopolitical interac-

tion. Warfare is not random violence but a calculated political act employing definable techniques. Success in battle is mediated through the tactical/organizational concepts and usages of either side. When the combatants come from two widely different cultures, the need for a close examination of those concepts and usages is acute. Moreover, any war is won or lost because of a complex of reasons—psychological, organizational, and technical. Therefore, the inclusion of detailed discussion of tactical organization and practice is a necessary compliment to other explanations of the Conquest.<sup>8</sup>

A more thorough-going examination of the ethnohistorical records would reveal more about the tactics of the Conquest. In addition, many pertinent issues, such as logistics, the effects of disease

on the Aztecs, and political control and strategy, must be included in an explanation. As an example of the last, Hassig has outlined another critical reason for the Spanish victory—their ability on a strategic level to take “advantage of existing cleavages within the [Aztec] system to split the empire, turn its members on the Aztecs, and rend it asunder” (1988: 267). Such a perspective complements the analysis here. Strategy and tactics are linked but functionally distinct aspects of any military campaign. For victory combatants must have success in both spheres. The Spanish had to strip the Aztecs of their subject groups, but without tactical success their diplomatic victories would have been meaningless.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>The attitude of the Aztecs toward the Spanish, as recorded in the ethnohistoric texts, particularly Sahagun, is one of initial confusion and fear, then growing familiarity, closely followed by opposition. In Sahagun the Spanish are presented as greedy and perfidious, for example, attacking without warning the participants in the Feast of Uitzilopochtli, whereupon the Aztecs are depicted as rising in righteous indignation against them (Sahagun 1975: 55-57). The Sahagun narrative of the Conquest ends with the Spanish trying to extort more gold from the surviving Aztec leadership (p. 126). Terror of the Spanish seems to have faded very quickly for the Aztecs and seems to have played little or no role in subsequent battles.

<sup>2</sup>Much has been made by some (for example, Prescott 1964: 152, 237, 306) of the terror the appearance of the horse, an animal unknown in Pre-Columbian Mexico, engendered in the Aztecs. This belief has some basis in fact. Diaz (1956: 59) records that the Tabascans “thought that the horse and its rider was all one animal, for they had never seen horses up to this time” and that the Tlaxcalans after their first battles with the Spanish were afraid of their animals (p. 131). However, it is apparent that this feeling did not last long after they discovered that horses were mortal creatures that could die and were vulnerable in certain types of terrain. Certainly by Noche Triste the Aztecs were capable of killing large numbers of horses (and their riders) given the right set of circumstances. The utility and success of horse cavalry for the Spanish lay not in psychological or supernatural terror, but in their heavy “shock”—value, or ability to break and disrupt enemy units, on the open battlefield.

<sup>3</sup>Brian Fagan (1984: 274) believes that the targeting of the Aztec leaders by the Spanish was the fundamental reason for the Spanish victory at Otumba, in that the death of the leaders caused the common soldiers to lose heart. This is true only in the sense, as Hassig (1988: 96) points out, that the

leaders were standard bearers on whom their men guided their formations, and that, with their loss, the unit would be in danger of losing its direction and cohesion. Such a danger would obviously be mitigated by the assumption of command by subordinate leaders. More important was the ability of the Spanish to maintain the integrity of their formations and to disrupt the Aztec units while killing large numbers of enemy troops.

<sup>4</sup>This inability was not for lack of understanding of the tactical necessities, but stemmed from the fact that for the Aztecs to change the organization of their armies would have entailed

considerable time, since it would involve retraining professional warriors. Closed formations were not adopted, apparently because while they may have cured the problems of a massed cavalry attack, they would also have created a better target for Spanish gunners. . . . Instead, the responses were largely technological (Hassig 1988: 238).

However, it is apparent from the records that, either through circumstances or inspired leadership, the Aztecs on occasion were able to stop the Spanish cavalry charge. For example, Diaz (1956: 379-380) writes that at Xochimilco a combination of massed Aztec troops armed with improvised pikes standing on restricted ground (at a bridge and perhaps with their backs to the lake), managed to halt the cavalry attack and actually drag Cortes from his horse. In this case Cortes and the cavalry were rescued by Spanish infantry and Indian allies. However, Hassig’s point holds true—the Aztecs on the whole failed to respond with appropriate organizational adaptations to cope with cavalry (1988: 238).

At the same time the final stratagem which defeated the Aztecs was the siege, rather than open battle. The siege as a military operation was well known in Pre-Conquest Mexico (Hassig 1988: 108) and necessarily involved different tactics than combat on the battlefield. However, the ninety-day siege which ended in the fall of Tenochtitlan would have been impossible for the Spanish without their open-battle victories and a continued coordination of all their arms in closing the circle tight about Tenochtitlan. Once the siege began, the Spanish adapted their units and their movements to an unrelenting advance up the causeways into the city, supported by a naval

presence on the lakes in the form of armed brigantines. This new order of Spanish forces was merely a variation of their usual tactical functions.

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the sufficiency of these "orthodox" interpretations. However, certain assumptions about the Aztecs and their way of war, and the ways in which they responded to the Spanish invasion, have been criticized or are susceptible to criticism. For example, the supposition that the Aztec conception of warfare was fundamentally different from the European is no longer defensible. Barry Isaacs (1983a) has demonstrated from the ethnohistorical record that Mexican warfare on the eve of the Spanish Conquest was similar or identical to "state-level warfare else-

where. . .," with the same heavy casualties, destruction of property and lands, and political objectives. The capture of enemy warriors for sacrifice, in Isaacs' view, fades to a secondary pursuit of peasant soldiers eager to advance in rank; the overall aims and methods of warfare were set by the elite, who had a different agenda (1983a). Even the special case of the "Flowery War" (*xochiyaoyotl*), which has usually been interpreted as wholly religious in motivation and content (Soustelle 1970: 101), in fact had very real strategic and attritional purposes (Isaacs 1983b). Similar criticism can be leveled against the assumption of the superiority of Spanish weapons, or the effects of the Quetzalcoatl myth on the Aztecs (see, for example, Hassig 1988: 237-238, 242).

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