

The Conquest of Mexico

Until recently, our knowledge of Hernán Cortés's discovery and conquest of Mexico has been based mainly on eyewitness accounts provided by Spaniards who participated in it. One of these is an extensive memoir written by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a soldier who was a member of Cortés's expedition. In 1959, however, Miguel Leon-Portilla, a professor of ancient Mexican history at the National University of

Mexico, published a narrative of the conquest composed of accounts by Aztec eyewitnesses. An English edition of this work, titled *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, was published in 1962. By studying both the Spanish and Aztec accounts, scholars are now able to piece together a detailed chronology of Cortés's expedition and to assess the dramatic impact it had on the Aztec Empire.

"As [the Indian warriors] approached us their squadrons were so numerous that they covered the whole plain, and rushed on us like mad dogs completely surrounding us and they let fly . . . a cloud of arrows, javelins, and stones. . . . With our muskets and crossbows and with good sword play we did not fail . . . and when they came to feel the edge of our swords little by little they fell back. . . . Mesa, our artilleryman, killed many of them with his cannon. . . . I remember that when we fired shots the Indians gave great shouts and whistles and threw dust and **rubbish**¹ into the air so that we should not see the damage done to them. . . . Just at this time we caught sight of our horsemen . . . they came quickly on the enemy and speared them as they chose. . . . We fell on the Indians with such energy that . . . they soon turned tail. . . . The **savannas**² and fields were crowded with Indians running to take refuge in the thick woods near by.

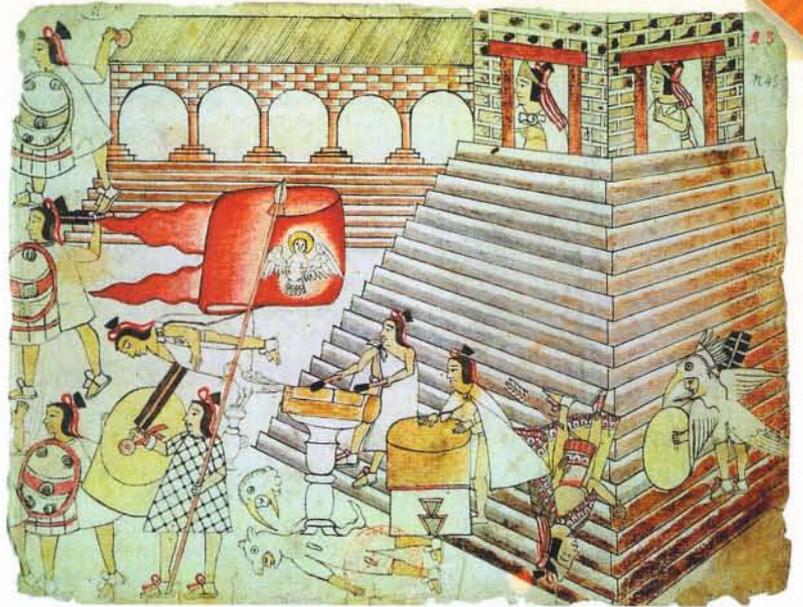
—Bernal Díaz del Castillo, from *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, 1632



▲ This romanticized painting depicts the initial peaceful meeting of the Spanish conquistadors with the Aztec ruler, Montezuma II.

¹ **rubbish:** litter, trash, or unwanted material

² **savanna:** a plain or grassland region with scattered trees, usually found in tropical regions



► This contemporary image depicts the fighting within the city of Tenochtitlán.

. . . the messengers reported to the king. They told him how they had made the journey, and what they had seen. . . . [They described] how the cannon roared, how its noise **resounded**,¹ how it caused one to faint and grow deaf. The messengers told him: “A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its **entrails**:² it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire. . . . If the cannon is aimed against a mountain, the mountain splits and cracks open. If it is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. . . . [The strangers] dress in iron and wear iron casques [helmets] on their heads. Their swords are iron; their bows are iron; their shields are iron; their spears are iron. Their deer carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go. These deer, our lord, are as tall as the roof of a house.” . . . When [Montezuma] heard this report, he was filled with terror.

—Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed., from
*The Broken Spears:
The Aztec Account of the Conquest of
Mexico*, 1962

DBQ Analyzing Historical Documents

- 1 **Analyzing Information** In the battle described in the first selection, which side had an advantage in numbers of men? How do you know?
- 2 **Predicting Consequences** What weapons did the Aztec use? What weapons and other means of defense did the Spanish use?
- 3 **Considering Advantages and Disadvantages** What strategy did the Aztec employ in attacking the Spanish? How did the Spanish counter this strategy?
- 4 **Making Inferences** In their report to the king, the Aztec messengers describe deer as tall as the roof of a house. What animal did they misidentify? Why do you think they made this mistake?
- 5 **Analyzing** Do you think the messengers were intimidated by what they saw? Why or why not?
- 6 **Drawing Conclusions** Based on information from both selections, which side would you predict would ultimately prevail? Why?

3 **resounded**: echoed

4 **entrails**: the internal parts of something