

The Cholula Massacre: Factional Histories and Archaeology of the Spanish Conquest

Geoffrey G. McCafferty
Dept. of Archaeology
University of Calgary

In October of 1519, Hernán Cortés ordered his conquistadores to attack assembled Cholulteca indians in the main plaza of their city, resulting in one of the key events (and greatest tragedies) of the Spanish conquest of New Spain. The Cholula massacre was described by a variety of Spanish eyewitnesses (including Cortés himself), indigenous authors, and other Colonial chroniclers. All agreed on the fundamental action, but a wide range of often contradictory information exists, reflecting selective "histories" related to agency and factionalism. Archaeological excavation of a mass burial from the plaza offers an additional perspective on the massacre, including insights on the demographics of the indigenous victims. This paper analyzes the historical accounts as they relate to motive, intensity, and effect, and contrasts these factors with the archaeological evidence. The goal is not simply the discovery of "Truth" about the Cholula massacre, but rather to better understand the factional competition of early Colonial Mexico as different groups sought to manipulate history to promote their own self-interest. Emerging as a major actor in this drama is Malintzin, interpreter/consort of Cortés, who may have orchestrated the massacre for her own political agenda.

The Spanish conquest of Mexico represents one of the most dramatic--and violent--examples of culture contact in human history. Complex societies, totally ignorant of one another's existence, clashed on an unprecedented scale and in the process thoroughly disrupted the foundations of each others' world-views. Within a very few years indigenous mesoamericans became subject to foreign domination and were forcibly converted to a new religion, political system, and economy. For the European victors the discovery of a "new" branch of the human race shattered the ideological monopoly of the Church and precipitated the "Scientific Revolution," radically changing Western civilization in the process. Ripples of the Conquest continue in the struggle of indigenous groups such as the Maya Zapatistas against colonialist Ladino oppression, as well as widespread re-inventions of ethnic identity among indian groups.

One of the key events in the Conquest was the Cholula massacre when, according to a variety of historical accounts, Spanish *conquistadores* under the command of Hernán Cortés allegedly assembled indigenous nobles in the ceremonial plaza of Cholula and then attacked, killing thousands. This atrocity was reported by *conquistadores*, Spanish priests, and indigenous chroniclers, making it one of the most widely described episodes in the Conquest (Aguilar 1993 [1560s]; Cortés 1986 [1519-21]; Las Casas [1552/1656]; Díaz del Castillo 1963

[1580]; Ixtlilxochitl 1975-77 [1615]; López de Gómara 1964 [1552]; Muñoz Camargo 1966 [1550s]; Sahagún 1989 [1585], 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 12; A. de Tapia 1993 [1550s]; V. de Tapia [1530s; in Warren 1944]; Torquemada 1975-82 [1625]; discussed in Dudek 1993; Peterson and Green 1987). A critical review of the varying accounts provides numerous details surrounding the attack, as well as insight into factional motivations behind these "histories." Additionally, archaeological excavations conducted in the early 1970s have recovered over 650 skeletons, including massacre victims, and therefore provide another perspective on the attack and an opportunity for evaluating the textual accounts (Castro Morales and García Moll 1972). This chapter identifies a number of contested themes relating to varying perspectives on the massacre, including questions of provocation, intensity, and consequences. The objective is not simply to seek the Truth behind the massacre, but also to deconstruct the purposes and prejudices that led to the various accounts. A theme that emerges from these accounts is the possible role of Malintzin, the Indian interpreter and consort of Cortés, who may have manipulated events leading up to the Massacre in order to further her own political interests.

The Conquest of Mexico

The Spanish conquest of Mexico occurred between 1519-1521, when a small band

of mercenaries under the command of Cortés sailed from Cuba, around the coast of the Yucatan peninsula, to land near the modern city of Veracruz. They then trekked inland to the Valley of Mexico where they met and ultimately defeated the Aztec empire. Along the way the Spanish encountered a complex mosaic of ethnic and political factions, the result in part of the very recent creation of the Aztec empire. One consequence of this expansion was that diverse city-states chafed under their newly imposed tributary status. The Spanish themselves were hardly a united entity either, since Europe was just emerging from medieval feudalism. The frontier atmosphere of the recently established colony in Cuba further fomented rivalries and intrigue. For example, Cortés' expedition represented an act of open defiance toward the Cuban governor, and in partial retribution Cortés was eventually tried in Spanish court for offenses against the indigenous population, notably the Cholula massacre itself.

The divided nature of indigenous culture was one of the keys to Cortés' success--this was never a simple case of "cowboys vs. indians." Instead, many of the groups that the Spanish encountered joined with the *conquistadores* in an effort to throw off the yoke of Aztec oppression. If they had only known that their fate was about to become so much worse...

Another important key to the "success" of the Conquest was Cortés' association with a disinherited indian princess named Malintzin, more commonly referred to as *La Malinche* (Díaz del Castillo 1963 [1580]:85-87; López de Gómara 1964 [1552]:56-57; also Cypess 1991; Karttunen 1994:1-23; 1997; McCafferty 1997a). Malintzin was raised in the southern Gulf Coast region, land of the multi-ethnic Olmeca-Xicallanca (Jiménez Moreno 1942; McCafferty 1997b). She was trained to inherit her mother's throne, suggesting an education in all the wiles of statecraft, including languages, etiquette, and negotiation. But when her mother remarried and bore a son, Malintzin was sent away (by one account she was sold into slavery) to clear the line of succession for her half-brother. She ended up at the important trading community of Potonchan, perhaps as a temple priestess (*ahuiani*)¹. Malintzin and 20 other women were

presented to the Spanish among other tribute as an incentive to get the barbarians to move along. Cortés quickly recognized Malintzin's worth as a translator, since she was able to speak both Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs) and Maya (a language spoken by a Spanish castaway named Gerónimo de Aguilar who had been rescued by Cortés along the Yucatan coast). What was less obvious, but probably of equal or greater ultimate value, was Malintzin's ability to negotiate successfully with the greatest lords of the land and persuade them to do the unthinkable, to join with a small band of barbarians against the most formidable nation in the Mesoamerican universe. One facet of the conquest that will be suggested is the degree of agency displayed by Malintzin in this campaign; indigenous accounts hint that she may have actively orchestrated key events in the conquest, particularly in relation to the Cholula massacre.

The Spanish *conquistadores* marched inland from their coastal base camp, and acquired valuable indigenous allies along the way, notably the Cempoalans and Tlaxcaltecs. The Cempoalans were tributaries of the Aztec empire, though this was a relatively recent development, and Cortés/Malintzin quickly blackmailed the Cempoalans into breaking that allegiance. The Tlaxcaltecs, on the other hand, were traditional enemies of the Aztecs, and major participants (in alliance with Cholula and Huexotzinco) in the ritualized Flowery Wars in which armies met for the purpose of capturing enemy warriors who would then be sacrificed. The Tlaxcaltecs themselves battled and nearly defeated the Spanish before finally reaching a cautious alliance.

Driven by their lust for gold and glory, Cortés and his army drove into the highlands of the Mexican *altiplano*. They were met repeatedly by envoys from the Aztec capital who entreated the foreigners not to continue to the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan. The Aztec king Motecuhzoma was afraid of the Spanish because, according to oracles and miraculous visions, he believed that they were destined to overthrow his kingdom. Furthermore, Cortés himself may have intentionally exacerbated the situation by taking on costume elements of the Feathered Serpent god Quetzalcoatl who, according to legend, was destined to return from the east to regain his rightful kingdom.

¹ The suggestion that Malintzin was an *ahuiani*, or temple woman, is based on the speculation that she and the other women presented to Cortés were not part

of established households, and were therefore "liquid" capital that could be transferred to the Spanish.

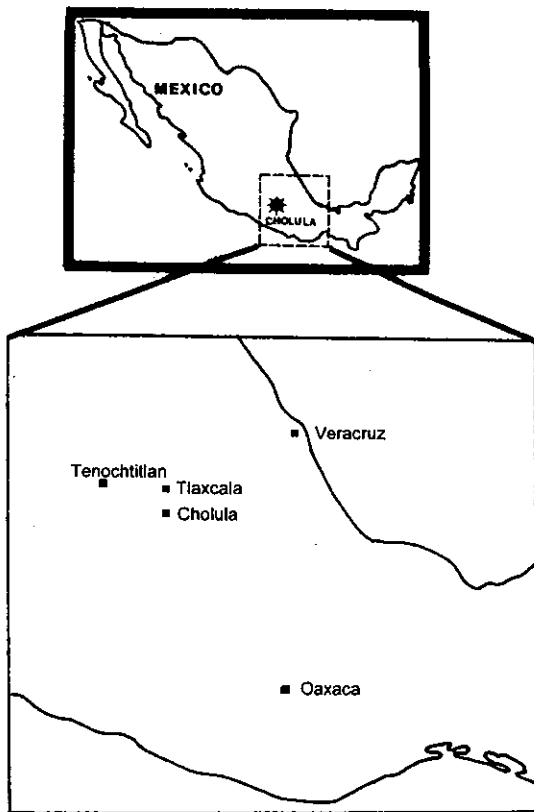


Fig. 1. Map of central Mexico.

Having formed an alliance with the Tlaxcaltecs, the Spanish were encouraged to continue their march to the Valley of Mexico by way of the city of Cholula (Fig. 1). Cholula, they were told, was a powerful ally of the Aztecs. It was also an enemy of the Tlaxcaltecs, apparently because they had recently betrayed Tlaxcala during one of the Flowery Wars by attacking from the rear while the Tlaxcaltecan forces were engaged against the Aztecs (Muñoz Camargo 1966[1550s]). The detour through Cholula may therefore have been a form of retribution for the Tlaxcaltecs and payment in advance for Cortés' new allies, as well as a means of eliminating an enemy force from the Spaniards' line of retreat (Peterson and Green 1987). For Malintzin it may have had a more personal significance.

Cholula was one of the largest cities in Mexico at the time of the Conquest, with a population of 30-50,000 within the city limits and an equal number in the surrounding hinterland (McCafferty 1996a; Peterson 1987). It was one of the principle religious centers of central Mexico, with its major temple dedicated

to the god Quetzalcoatl (Durán 1971 [1576-79]; Olivera 1970). Nobles from throughout central Mexico went to Cholula for legitimation of their authority as rulers (Rojas 1927), including the important nose-piercing ceremony through which they were recognized as *tecuhtlis* (lords). Cholula was also a mercantile center for the long-distance *pochteca* who traveled throughout Mesoamerica bringing exotic commodities to the bustling market for exchange. Cholula was a multi-ethnic community, with Nahuatl-speaking Tolteca-Chichimeca affiliated with the Valley of Mexico as well as Olmeca-Xicallanca who were linked with groups from the Gulf Coast (McCafferty 1996a, 1997b; Olivera and Reyes 1969). Political struggles between these competing factions may have resulted in the aforementioned betrayal of the Tlaxcaltecs, since Aztec historical accounts consistently list Cholula as an ally of Tlaxcala in the Flowery Wars (Durán 1994 [1581]). In fact, other than the massacre accounts, there is no evidence that Cholula was ever affiliated with the Aztecs.

The Spanish contingent that marched to Cholula included large armies from both Tlaxcala and Cempoala. They were met on the outskirts of the city, where the native allies camped while the Spaniards entered the city with a procession of Cholulteca nobles. Accounts vary as to the level of hospitality shown by the people of Cholula, but by most accounts their welcome dissolved within a few days as increased levels of hostility were displayed. In some accounts there were overt danger signs, including battle preparations such as stockpiles of stones ready to be hurled from buildings and pits dug into the city streets to foil cavalry charges. A key event occurred when Malintzin allegedly learned of a plot to attack the Spanish and informed Cortés, who summoned Cholulteca nobles into the ceremonial square of the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl. Upon his command, the *conquistadores* attacked, and the Indian allies on the outskirts of the city joined in the slaughter. Casualties were in the thousands, and pillaging may have continued for several days, including the destruction of the temples dedicated to Quetzalcoatl.

Following the Cholula massacre, Cortés and his force proceeded into the Valley of Mexico, where they met with the Aztec ruler Motecuhzoma. It is likely that the massacre played an important role in the Aztec king's political decision to meet the Spanish, since the act communicated both the military as well as supernatural power of the invaders. Instead of

sending his superior army out to crush the Spaniards, Motecuhzoma chose to invite them into his court where he and his priests could inspect the aliens firsthand. The strategy backfired, as Malintzin convinced Motecuhzoma to place himself under Spanish guard, where he was eventually killed, and consequently the Aztec political system collapsed. Within a year the Aztec capital lay in ruins, the population decimated by conquest and disease.

Accounts of the Cholula Massacre

The Cholula massacre was one of the most widely reported events of the Spanish conquest, with at least eleven Colonial descriptions as well as three depictions of the attack in indigenous pictorial style. Contextual analysis of these sources reveals a range of biases that influenced the focus and emphasis of the accounts.

In his second letter to the king of Spain, Hernán Cortés described events leading up to his arrival in Cholula, the attack itself, and the subsequent pacification of the city (1986 [1519-21]:70-75). Since Cortés was using his letters to justify his illegal invasion of Mexico he was concerned with demonstrating that the provocation necessitated his response. Thus Cortés emphasized the size and might of Cholula, as well as the danger faced by his army. Cortés wanted to go to Cholula because it shared an open boundary with the Aztec empire. Upon arriving in the city the Spaniards were housed in comfortable quarters and provided with supplies. Ominous signs were present, however, including battlements in the streets and the abandonment of the city by its women and children. Interrogation of some of the townspeople revealed a plot involving 50,000 Aztec warriors waiting in ambush on the outskirts of the city. Cortés initiated a preemptive attack in which at least 3000 armed warriors were killed, and "some towers and fortified houses" were burned. Following the attack, however, order was quickly restored and the marketplace was soon filled with people and goods.

A related account was written by Francisco López de Gómara (1964 [1552]:123-131), secretary to Cortés, who published an account of the Conquest based on Cortés' personal recollections and other primary accounts. In this version, the decision to go to Cholula was strongly encouraged by the Aztecs, who were anxious to sever the alliance between the Spanish and Tlaxcala. Other details are virtually identical, however, though the casualty

estimates are double those of Cortés. López de Gómara described the final attack on the main pyramid, including the complaints of the defenders who berated their gods for not coming to the defense of the city.

Andrés de Tapia (1993[1540s]:33-37), was one of Cortés' senior officers, and his account closely parallels that of his commander; from identical passages it is clear that his account was also used by López de Gómara. Tapia recounts the arrival in Cholula, warnings about an Aztec-inspired plot, and Cortés' decision to attack. He notes that instead of servants to carry the supplies of the Spanish, armed warriors came to the plaza. These were killed, along with most of the principle nobles, and the ensuing massacre continued for two days. No estimate of total casualties was given, though it was noted that women and children were spared. Tapia also described the destruction of the principal temple in the town, which was burned along with the priests who took refuge there.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo was a soldier among the *conquistadores*, who wrote his "True History of the Conquest" (1963 [1580]) more than 50 years later in an attempt to gain a greater share of the rewards, and particularly in response to published accounts by Cortés and López de Gómara who presented a very "Cortés-centric" perspective on the campaign. In contrast, Díaz del Castillo described a conquest by committee, in which Cortés met regularly with his captains and lieutenants to survey their opinions, and then proceeded democratically. Notably, most of the information on the role of Malintzin in the Conquest comes from this account; Cortés never mentions his translator/ advisor/mistress by name (though she is described by López de Gómara).

Díaz del Castillo provides the most detailed account of the Cholula massacre (1963 [1580]:189-208). He also described a warm initial reception in the city but it was followed by a deterioration in hospitality, battlements in the streets, and finally Malintzin's discovery of the "plot." He was especially impressed with the preparations for sacrifice and cannibalistic consumption of the Spaniards; among many other interesting bits of information Díaz del Castillo provides the only known recipe for *conquistador* stew (1963 [1580]:199).

Another Spanish eyewitness, however, presents a contrasting account (Aguilar 1993[1560s]:143-144). Fray Francisco de Aguilar, a soldier in Cortés' army who later

joined the Dominican order, recorded his memories of the Conquest in the 1560s. The account is fairly brief, but Aguilar describes the grandeur of the city and mentions an ominous warning from the Tlaxcalteca allies concerning the greeting given by the Cholultecas. He does not mention battle preparations though he does relate a growing sense of hostility in the city. After several days in which the locals did not bring firewood or water to the Spanish compound, a decision was made (at the request of the captains and *against* Cortés' arguments) to kill those indians that brought supplies "and there were about two thousand of them" (ibid:144). The Spanish then left the city.

During Cortés' Inquisition trial yet another eyewitness account was recorded—that of Vázquez de Tapia (in Wagner 1944:173, also Peterson and Green 1987:209-210). He states that the Spanish were well-treated, that there was no evidence of a plot, and that even though he was a captain he had no warning when Cortés



Fig. 2. The Cholula Massacre depicted in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*.

ordered the attack on the 4-5000 assembled Cholultecas. This is the most divergent of the Spanish accounts in that it suggests that the attack was unprovoked and was entirely instigated by Cortés himself.

In addition to the varied accounts of the *conquistadores*, several indigenous versions are also recorded. The most detailed is that of Diego Muñoz Camargo, in his *Historia de Tlaxcala*

(1966 [1550s]; also León Portilla 1992). This included a written text as well as indigenous-style illustrations of the conquest; a parallel account is presented in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (1979 [1550/1892]) which presents indigenous style depictions of scenes from the Conquest, including the Cholula massacre. The Tlaxcaltecan account emphasized the events leading up to the trip to Cholula, especially the cruel treatment of a Tlaxcalteca emissary who was tortured by the Cholultecas before being sent back to Tlaxcala with a message of foreboding. The Tlaxcaltecas allegedly warned the Spanish not to go to Cholula, but Cortés was adamant. Once there, the Tlaxcaltecas recognized the signs of an impending ambush and warned Cortés, who then instigated the attack in which the Tlaxcaltecas participated. The Tlaxcalteca account of the battle emphasizes the religious aspect of Cholula, relating a native belief that any assault on the temple of Quetzalcoatl would result in devastating floods that would wash away the attackers; it was only after that prediction failed to occur that the Tlaxcaltecas joined in.

The indigenous depiction of the massacre also focuses on the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl (Fig. 2), identified by the feather ("quetzal") and serpent ("coatl") emerging from the top of the temple (*Lienzo de Tlaxcala* 1979[1550/1892])². Spanish and indigenous warriors attack defenders amid a field of dismembered victims. Notably, it is Malintzin who directs the attack in one of the only scenes in which Cortés is not present at her side. Three natives are represented in a structure located in the upper right corner of the scene; although their affiliation is unclear these may be the Cholulteca informants that Cortés/Malintzin interrogated and then sequestered before the attack. A final image is of a person leaping off the top of the pyramid, an act that is described in the written account as an ultimate act of defiance whereby the Cholultecas leaped to their deaths rather than surrender.

² The depictions of the Cholula massacre in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (1979 [1550s/1892]) and the *Historia de Tlaxcala* (Muñoz Camargo 1966 [1550s]) are clearly related, yet details of the battle differ between the two sources, particularly in the role of Malintzin. A detailed comparison of these representations and the battle scene from the *Codice de Cholula* will be published separately.

An interesting clue from Muñoz Camargo's account adds support to the idea that Malintzin directed the attack on Cholula. He writes that in order for the Spanish to distinguish Tlaxcalteca warriors from the Cholultecans (since presumably the Europeans had difficulty distinguishing indigenous insignia), the Tlaxcaltecs shed their traditional war headdresses and instead wore plaited grass (1966 [1550s]; in Leon-Portilla 1992:48). While this would certainly reduce "friendly fire" casualties, it also may have had a symbolic significance. "Grass" in Nahuatl is "*malinalli*." Malintzin means "Lady Grass." Thus by wearing woven "*malinalli*" as their insignia the Tlaxcaltecs may have been identifying themselves as warriors of Malintzin.

Indigenous accounts from the Aztec perspective were recorded by the Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1950-82 [1547-1585], Book 12:29-30; 1989[1585]:58). According to these informants there was no provocation. The unarmed victims were summoned to the temple courtyard and attacked "treacherously." No mention is made of any plot to ambush the Spanish, but rather it is emphasized that the Spanish were incited by the Tlaxcaltecs who sought revenge against their enemies. Here the Aztec informants were deflecting blame from the Spanish (they were, after all, being interviewed by a Spaniard) to their traditional enemies from Tlaxcala.

complete Colonial period descriptions of the massacre. Torquemada reveals that Cholula was divided into six barrios, with three allied with the Aztecs, while the other three were probably affiliated with Tlaxcala. Through Aztec instigation the allied barrios were to unite with 30,000 Aztec warriors waiting on the outskirts of the city to ambush the Spanish. Cortés discovered the plot with the help of Malintzin and decided to punish the city. In the ensuing massacre 6000 were killed, though women and children were spared. Torquemada also relates the myth of the water from the pyramid that would wash away attackers, and how the defenders were slow to take up arms because of their misplaced confidence in the temple.

Another version, originating from the Aztec subject community of Texcoco, was written by the indigenous nobleman Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl nearly 100 years after the Conquest (1975-77[1625], Book 2:215-216). In this account the Spanish were richly welcomed into Cholula, but Cortés became annoyed by ambassadors from Tenochtitlan who tried to dissuade him from continuing to the Aztec capital. To make an example of Cholula and thereby send a message to the Aztec king, Cortés summoned the nobles of Cholula and accused them of plotting against him. The nobles were slaughtered, and the city was attacked; within two hours more than 5000 were killed, the principle houses were looted, and the temples burned.

One of the most influential--and critical--accounts of the conquest was written in 1552 by Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican priest and staunch advocate for the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Because his accounts were highly critical of the Spanish Conquest, they were translated into several languages (e.g., Las Casas [1552/1656]) and used as propaganda against the Spanish by other European nations (Conley 1992). Las

Casas argues that the attack was concocted by the Spanish as a means of instilling fear in the indigenous population. They attacked the

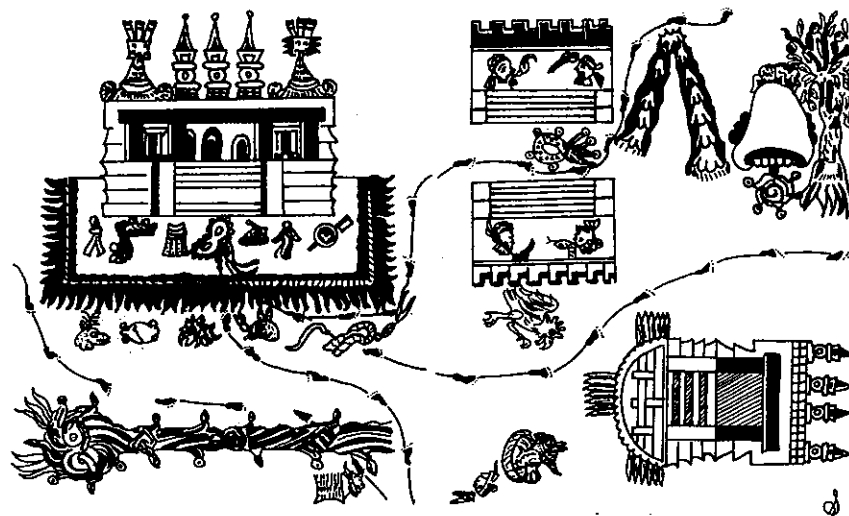


Fig. 3. Ceremonial center of Late Postclassic Cholula as depicted in the *Historia Tolteca Chichimeca*.

Fray Juan de Torquemada (1975-83 [1615], Book 2:134-141) synthesized several accounts into one of the longest and most

Cholultecans who had gathered to carry their luggage, and in the ensuing three or four days killed 6000, including the nobility and priests who were burned where they took refuge in the temple.

Archaeological Evidence of the Massacre

Cholula has been the object of archaeological investigations for over 100 years, though the focus of most of the attention has been the Classic/Early Postclassic period Great Pyramid and its associated ceremonial precinct (McCafferty 1996b). Because of the continuous occupation of the city up to the present, many archaeological resources have been obliterated by more recent construction. This is particularly true of the Late Postclassic center around the former site of the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl (Fig. 3), now located (probably) under the Cathedral of San Gabriel and the Capilla Real (Marquina 1970). Few remains of the Contact-period city have been unearthed, however, due to the predominant research focus on the Classic/Early Postclassic ceremonial center.

One of the notable features of Cholula's archaeological record is the large number of burials that have been found. Over 600 individuals have been excavated from around the Great Pyramid (López Alonso, Lagunas Rodríguez, and Serrano Sanchez 1976; Romero 1937), most dating to the Postclassic period (900-1520 CE). A mass burial in San Andrés Cholula dated from the Late Postclassic (1300-1520 CE) and included 52 individuals (Suárez Cruz 1989). Another mass burial was excavated on the grounds of the Cathedral of San Gabriel, where 671 individuals were excavated (Castro Morales and García Moll 1972). These have been interpreted as remains of massacre victims, though other Colonial period burials may also be included in the assemblage.

Many of the historical accounts of the massacre place the initial attack in the plaza associated with the main temple of the city, and several also describe the final desperate defense of that temple. Soon after the Conquest the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl was dismantled, and in its place the Cathedral of San Gabriel was built (Rojas 1927). The burials found in the courtyard do not represent victims left *in situ*, however. In accord with the accounts of the city being reoccupied within a few days of the attack, the victims seem to have been gathered together for mass burial, as they were "stacked like cordwood" (Peterson and Green 1987:210). In contrast to prehispanic burial patterns (flexed,

seated position facing north) these individuals were buried on their backs in an extended position with the head toward the east, corresponding to Christian practice. On the other hand, the majority of the individuals exhibited cranial deformation, a practice abandoned after the Conquest. Few grave goods were found (n=22) in contrast to the prehispanic custom, and most were objects of personal adornment such as a lip plug, jadeite beads, and copper "buttons." Two Spanish coins were also found, including one dating from 1512 (Peterson and Green 1987:211).

Based on the datable indices for this grave assemblage, many if not all of the skeletons relate to the Contact period, since an essentially prehispanic population was buried using Catholic mortuary practices. Evidence that this may have been the result of the massacre itself comes from the high incidence (n=43) of decapitated and/or dismembered skeletons (Castro Morales and García Moll 1972:382). Also noted were cut marks on the bones indicative of sharp instruments such as swords (Peterson and Green 1987:211). The dated coins are consistent with this being a massacre-related deposit since they could have been obtained before arrival in Mexico.

A demographic profile of the burial population indicates that approximately 50% (n=342) were adults, while juveniles (n=47) and infants (n=256) were also present. Sexing of the skeletons has not yet been completed³, but some at least were of pregnant women (Peterson and Green 1987:211). While 671 skeletons were excavated this was from only a small portion of the total burial ground, and the excavators estimate that the total burial population could have been as high as 27,000 (Castro Morales and García Moll 1972:383). This total would be far too high to be exclusively from the massacre, and may therefore include victims of Colonial period epidemics.

Archaeological evidence provides another perspective on the Cholula massacre. On the one hand the sheer number of victims, including details of their violent deaths, provides a grisly confirmation of the event reminiscent of the scene from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Alternatively, the demographic profile contrasts with historical accounts of the *conquistadores* that women and children were either sent away

³ The analysis of the skeletons is continuing under the direction of Berta Ocaña, Centro Regional de Puebla, INAH.

from the town prior to the battle or else were spared by the merciful Spanish.

Discussion

At least twelve different authors wrote or painted accounts of the Cholula massacre in the first century after the event. These "histories" emphasize different actions and motivations, and in some cases these are contradictory. A critical analysis of the various accounts provides clues as to the agenda of the particular authors, and also about the process of history making. These accounts sometimes tell as much about the intentions of the history maker as they do about the events they describe.

Cortés' visit to Cholula has several distinct facets that are represented by different "historians" in different ways:

- 1) the decision to go to Cholula;
- 2) the reception and accommodations in the city;
- 3) evidence of a plot to ambush the Spanish;
- 4) details of the massacre itself; and
- 5) events following the attack

Several authors discuss the decision to leave Tlaxcala to travel the short distance to Cholula, which is not on the most direct route to Tenochtitlan and requires a much more difficult ascent through the mountains. The indigenous Tlaxcaltecan perspective of Muñoz Camargo emphasized the defiant attitude of the Cholulteca as they mutilated the first Tlaxcalteca emissary and then sent messengers of low status in return. The Tlaxcaltecan allegedly tried to discourage the Spaniards from going to Cholula, but were also quick to emphasize protocol reasons why the subsequent attack was justified. The Spanish, on the other hand, imply that despite warnings from their indian allies about the hostile nature of the Cholultecan they wished to visit the rich and marvelous city. They may have been encouraged in this by the Aztec emissaries, who were anxious to disrupt the growing alliance between the Spanish and the Tlaxcaltecan. Peterson and Green (1987) suggest that Cortés was anxious to eliminate a powerful enemy on his line of retreat and send a political message to Tenochtitlan in the process.

Another possibility is that the Spanish were skillfully manipulated into visiting the political enemies of the Tlaxcaltecan (and Malintzin?) with tales of the city's wealth. Many of the accounts describe the Tlaxcalteca army, estimated as between 30-100,000 strong, that accompanied the Spanish to the gates of the city,

and who joined in the massacre and looting a few days later. Factional competition within pre-Conquest Cholula is suggested by Torquemada and Díaz del Castillo (also Olivera and Reyes 1969), whereby the city may have been divided between pro-Tlaxcala and pro-Aztec parties; following the massacre the Spanish note that Cholula and Tlaxcala became close allies, implying that the factional issue may have been resolved at the point of a Spanish sword.

Many of the accounts comment on the welcome given by the people of Cholula, including offerings of food and incense. The Spaniards were housed in palaces in the heart of the city. What is disputed among the sources is the extent to which this hospitality continued: the Spanish accounts claim that supplies were cut off after a few days, which, according to Aguilar provoked the Spanish attack.

Closely linked to the issue of hospitality, and the most directly controversial topic, is the question of a plot instigated by the Aztecs to ambush the Spaniards. Portents of danger were reported before even leaving Tlaxcala, and evidence in Cholula included battlements in the city, ritual sacrifices characteristic of battle preparation, rumors of an Aztec army on the outskirts of the city, and the "fact" that women and children were sent away from the city. Andrés de Tapia described armed warriors trying to impersonate baggage carriers in order to escort the Spanish out of town, presumably to the ambush site. The crucial evidence of a plot was discovered by Malintzin, who was warned by a woman of the city. This was later confirmed when Cortés (through Malintzin) interrogated priests and nobles, though it was denied by the Aztec emissaries who were confronted with the plot. Other accounts, however, indicate that there was no plot or other provocation.

The consensus among Cortés, Andrés de Tapia, López de Gómara, and Díaz del Castillo that there was a plot makes the contrasting denial of such a plot by Vasquez de Tapia stand out. As noted, the invasion of Mexico was in defiance of orders from Cuba, and some of Cortés' officers remained loyal to the Cuban governor, thus creating dissension within the army. It is possible that the testimony of Vasquez de Tapia represents the voice of one of these dissenters who was attempting to discredit Cortés by placing the blame squarely on him. But other sources also leave out evidence of a plot, including the account of

Aguilar and the indigenous Aztec account recorded by Sahagún.

The *concept* of a plot would have heightened tensions between the Spanish and Cholultecans, making an attack all the more likely. If the Tlaxcaltecs were anxious to use the Spanish as an instrument of revenge on the ruling faction of Cholula, then planting suspicions would have advanced this cause. The key episode in many of the "plot" scenarios, however, involves Malintzin, both in giving the initial warning as well as translating the interrogation of the Cholula priests and nobles.

Could Malintzin herself have orchestrated the Cholula massacre? Here it should be recalled that she was a member of Olmeca-Xicallanca nobility, albeit exiled and perhaps even sold into slavery by her people. Cholula was once the highland capital of the Olmeca-Xicallanca (Jiménez Moreno 1942; McCafferty 1997b; Olivera and Reyes 1969), though by the Late Postclassic they were probably a minority group who were allied to Tlaxcalteca interests in opposition to the Aztec-allied faction. It is likely that Malintzin recognized the sociopolitical dynamics of Cholula. She may have even been met by kinfolk; the warning from a noblewoman, accompanied by an offer of marriage to her son, supports the idea that Malintzin was warmly welcomed. By revealing a "plot" and, through subsequent interrogations, placing the blame on the ruling faction, Malintzin may have focused suspicion on the political rivals of the Olmeca-Xicallanca. Malintzin's role in orchestrating the attack on Cholula is further suggested by the Tlaxcalteca accounts where: 1) Tlaxcalteca warriors wear twisted grass (*malinalli*) on their heads for identification with Malintzin; and 2) the image in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* in which Malintzin directs the battle. The strategy seems to have been successful since both Díaz del Castillo and Torquemada comment on a meeting between Cortés and nobles from other Cholulteca factions after the massacre, followed by friendly relations between Cholula and Tlaxcala. Cholulteca warriors then joined with Cortés' army for the final assault on Tenochtitlan.

One of the clues to the hostile intentions of the townspeople, cited by several of the Spanish chroniclers, was the abandonment of the city by its women and children. Others, such as Sahagún, wrote that the citizens were caught unprepared, implying that women and children were also present. Here the archaeological

evidence that nearly half of the burial population was made up of children, and that women were also well represented, supports the allegation that women and children were present and were not spared. Peterson and Green (1987:213-215) suggest that if Cortés and his army had announced that they were preparing to depart the city many children would have turned out to see the barbarians leave, and thus would have been present when the order was given to begin the attack.

Details of the massacre itself vary based on the intensity of the attack, and also on the religious connotations. The duration of the battle varies between a few hours to 4-5 days. Casualty estimates range from 2000 to 6000; if the Late Postclassic city had a population of 30-50,000 this would represent between 5-20% of the total population. The estimate of 27,000 based on the excavated burial population (Castro Morales and García Moll 1972) seems too high to have been exclusively massacre related based on the ethnohistoric accounts, and so supports the idea that at least some of the skeletons relate to victims of the ensuing epidemics.

The final defense of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl was reported by several chroniclers. The Spanish *conquistadores* placed less emphasis on the religious significance. The Tlaxcalteca account (Muñoz Camargo 1966 [1550s]; also León Portilla 1992) went into the greatest detail about the assault on the Cholula temple, suggesting that it was only after the Tlaxcalteca warriors saw that the pyramid did not burst forth to wash away the Spanish attackers that they too joined in the assault.

If Cortés was masquerading as the returned god Quetzalcoatl, why would he destroy his principal temple and massacre the people of his capital city? There is considerable controversy as to how much Cortés knew or cared about native mythology. There is some doubt as to whether the "deception" was a later Colonial period fabrication. In support of this is the statement by Díaz del Castillo (1963[1580]:202) that he did not recall the name of the deity to which the Cholula pyramid was dedicated, and Cortés himself ignores the episode. Regardless of whether or not there was an intentional effort to impersonate Quetzalcoatl, the Spanish attack on Cholula and its ceremonial center can be perceived as an overt move to shatter the indigenous belief system by demonstrating the superiority of the European god.

Conclusion

This analysis has presented a variety of different "histories" relating to a single event: the Cholula massacre. All of these accounts were recorded within the Colonial period, and all were either firsthand accounts or else drew upon several such accounts. As such all are considered "authoritative." But when these accounts are considered together the varying range of perception becomes obvious, prompting the search for prejudicial agendas that acted both consciously and unconsciously to structure these "histories."

The potential bias of primary sources is well-established in critical approaches to history, and another cautionary tale is hardly necessary. What this chapter seeks to add, then, is a focus not simply on what the different accounts can tell about the events discussed, but also on what the emphases and omissions in the accounts reveal about the political nature of the history making process. In this regard it is not surprising to find Cortés and López de Gómara writing about provocation leading to the attack; Díaz del Castillo highlighting the danger from sacrifice and cannibalism faced by the common soldiers; and Muñoz Camargo emphasizing Tlaxcala's role. Other accounts are even more revealing: Sahagún's Aztec informants were still shocked at the treachery of the Tlaxcaltecs who deceived the Spanish into attacking an unsuspecting community; and Vazquez de Tapia's account before the Inquisition that Cortés was personally responsible for an unprovoked massacre of thousands, perhaps as part of an ongoing maneuver by Cortés' political rivals.

These contradictory accounts challenge the veracity of primary documentary sources, but at the same time they reveal new insights into factionalism during the early Colonial period, particularly in regard to the process of history making by history making agents.

Archaeological evidence is also available for further critical appraisal of the sources. The demographic profile of the burial population contrasts with the documentary reports that women and children had either abandoned the city or else were spared during the attack. Does archaeology present a more objective view of the past? Until more detailed information about the excavation and subsequent analysis of the skeletal remains are published it is difficult to adequately evaluate the potential biases manifested in these data. The suggestion that at least some of the burials may relate to other causes, such as the post-Conquest

epidemics, means that the initial demographic data may be the result of multiple causes. As Castro Morales and García Moll (1972) correctly observe, however, this is one of the most important burial assemblages ever excavated in Mexico and it deserves to be carefully studied and amply published.

Finally, the biases associated with history making are ongoing. In 1980, the mayor of San Pedro Cholula described the Cholula massacre as a myth: it was simply an exaggerated account of a minor disease that some of the indians caught as the benevolent Spaniards passed through town. A few years later, however, a large mural of Cholula's history was painted in the courtyard of the municipal offices, depicting a particularly violent scene of mounted Spaniards attacking the assembled citizenry. In contrast to the dark colors used to portray the Spanish, Malintzin is represented in a resplendent white *huipil* as she observes from the sidelines.

This leads into the most recent example of history making, i.e., the one that I am presenting here. Of the many accounts that have been written of the Cholula massacre, Malintzin's role has often been identified as central from the point of view of exposing the plot. She is represented as fulfilling her duty as Cortés' servant; indeed this is the only instance in which he refers directly to her, even if only as "my interpreter, an Indian woman from Putunchan" (Cortés 1986 [1519-21]:73). Romanticized accounts of the Conquest, especially those generated during the Republican period in which the newly independent Mexico attempted to create a national identity by vilifying its Colonial heritage, represent this as a crucial moment in history when Malintzin as "La Malinche" traded her Indian identity for her emotional subordination to "her captain" (Cypess 1991). From this act arose the concept of *malinchismo*, a derogatory term for Mexicans who sell their bodies and souls for foreign ideals. On another level, this androcentric concept emphasizes the subordination of women through their dependence on emotional reasoning and sexual urges (e.g., Paz 1961:85-86).

I have constructed a different history of the massacre, in which Malintzin may have been a more important actor. By emphasizing her heritage as a member of the nobility, I suggest that she was trained in the skills needed for political manipulation, including multilingual and multicultural negotiation as well as military strategy and the ability to incite factional

competition. Malintzin was a member of the Olmeca-Xicallanca ethnic group, noted as merchants associated with the *pochteca* (who had a reputation for trading exotic goods as well as strategic information) and who had their highland base at the religious and mercantile center of Cholula. When Malintzin arrived at Cholula as interpreter/ advisor/consort of Cortés she was met by members of her own ethnic group as well as by representatives of the locally dominant factions affiliated with the Aztecs. When a noblewoman of the city allegedly warned her of an impending attack and offered her sanction, Malintzin took that information to Cortés.

Was there such a plot? Any direct information about it would have been translated through Malintzin, so she would have similarly controlled that information. Indirect evidence such as the abandonment of the city by women and children is contradicted by the archaeological evidence, suggesting that Cortés and his followers may have been fabricating a provocation for the attack. Accounts of battlements on rooftops and pits in the streets may have been similar inventions--on the other hand these may have been reasonable defensive measures considering that Cortés arrived at the city gates with an army of up to 100,000 Tlaxcalteca warriors. No evidence was ever revealed of an army of Aztec warriors hiding in the bushes outside the city aside from the rumors spread in relation to the alleged plot, and it is notable that no such army joined in the battle when the massacre began.

Regardless of whether or not there was ever a conspiracy to ambush the Spaniards, Cortés and (most of) his men seem to have been convinced that such a threat existed. When the decision was made to assemble the Cholultecas and then attack, it was Malintzin that was depicted directing the attack. The Tlaxcalteca forces that joined in the battle wore insignia identifying them as warriors of Malintzin. This view of a militant Malintzin is not unique since in other scenes from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* she is shown with shield and sword, and she was depicted prominently in military action during the battles in Tenochtitlan.

The result of the Cholula massacre probably shifted the balance of factional power in the city in favor of the Olmeca-Xicallanca barrios. It was reported that Cholula was able to restore friendly relations with Tlaxcala, indicating that the pro-Aztec faction had lost control of the city council. From this point of

view, Malintzin gained an important political victory for her people.

Malintzin also benefited on a more personal level. By "uncovering" a hostile plot she demonstrated her loyalty to Cortés and his men. She went on to assist in the conquest of the Aztecs, again playing a central role in the negotiations, to the extent that native nobility referred to Cortés as "Malinche."⁴ Eventually she bore a son, Martín, by Cortés, who was recognized as the legitimate heir to Cortés' empire. Within the gender ideology of prehispanic Mesoamerica, producing a royal heir was one of the highest levels of prestige that a woman could attain, since it insured that her matriline would continue to rule. Ultimately, Malintzin married a Spanish nobleman and was granted a large estate on the road connecting Mexico City with Veracruz; it is likely that this was in part a politically motivated move by Cortés to remove her from the capital, perhaps because of her prestige among both indigenous nobles and Spaniards alike. Notably, it was her son Martín who led an attempt to overthrow the Spanish government in Mexico (Jara and Spadaccini 1992:79).

This "new" history of the Cholula massacre is informed by feminist theory which seeks to recognize the role of women as actors in historical events. Androcentric constructs have minimized or completely ignored the importance of Malintzin in the Conquest. In some accounts she became the culprit who, because of the biological weaknesses of her sex, betrayed her indian heritage and allowed the Conquest to succeed. Yet at the same time the ethnohistorical evidence is readily available to write Malintzin into a "herstory" in which she controlled critical events of the Conquest and may have even instigated and directed the Cholula massacre.

Many authors have created a diversity of histories of the Cholula massacre. A broadly defined archaeology reveals multiple accounts reflecting multiple historical voices, including my own. While archaeological methods have produced data that probably relate to the events of the Conquest, only preliminary presentation of the results have been published, and thus they

⁴ The concept of Cortés and Malintzin collectively referred to by the title "Malinche" may relate to the prehispanic religious tradition of an oracle or deity impersonator who communicated through an interpreter, with both figures perceived as aspects of the same entity.

await more detailed interpretation. The contradictory nature of the accounts and the burial data, however, should not discourage further analysis, but rather caution against the search for historical truths, and, more importantly, open new avenues in the search for clues to the agency and factional concerns of the history makers.

References Cited

- AGUILAR, FRANCISCO DE. 1993 [1560s]. The chronicle of Fray Francisco de Aguilar. In *The Conquistadores*. Edited and translated by Patricia de Fuentes, pp. 134-164. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- CASTRO MORALES, EFRAIN and ROBERTO GARCIA MOLL. 1972. Un Entierro Colectivo en la Ciudad de Cholula, Puebla. In *Religion en Mesoamerica*. Edited by Jaime Litvak King and Noemi Castillo Tejero, pp. 381-384. Mexico, D.F., Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología.
- CONLEY, T. 1992. De Bry's Las Casas. In *Amerindian images and the legacy of Columbus*. Edited by René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini, pp. 103-131. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- CORTÉS, HERNÁN. 1986 [1519-1521]. *Letters from Mexico*. Translated and edited by Anthony Pagden. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- CYPESS, S. M. 1991. *La Malinche in Mexican literature: from history to myth*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO, B. 1963 [1580]. *The conquest of New Spain*. Translated by J.M. Cohen. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics..
- DUDEK, M. 1993. The Cholulan massacre accounts: processes and influences in the formation of history. Paper presented at the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnographic Sciences, Mexico City, Mexico.
- DURÁN, D. 1971 [1576-79]. *The book of the gods and rites and the ancient calendar*. Translated by Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- 1994 [1581]. *The history of the Indies of New Spain*. Translated, annotated, and with introduction by Doris Heyden. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- HISTORIA TOLTECA-CHICHIMECA. 1976 [1547-60]. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*. Edited and translated by Paul Kirchhoff, Lina Odena Güemes, and Luis Reyes García. Mexico, D.F., Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- IXTLILXOCHITL, FERNANDO DE ALVA. 1975-77 [1625]. *Obras históricas*. Mexico, D.F., Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- JARA, R., and N. SPADACCINI. 1992. The construction of a colonial imaginary: Columbus' signature. In *Amerindian images and the legacy of Columbus*. Edited by René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini, pp. 1-95. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- JIMÉNEZ MORENO, W. 1942. El enigma de los olmecas. *Cuadernos Americanas* 1(5):113-145.
- KARTTUNEN, F. 1994. *Between worlds: interpreters, guides, and survivors*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- 1997. Rethinking Malinche. In *Indian women of early Mexico*. Edited by Schroeder, S., Wood, S., and R. Haskell. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- LAS CASAS, BARTOLOME DE. [1552/1656]. *The tears of the Indians: being an historical and true account of the cruel massacres and slaughters*. Translated by John Philips. Stanford: Academic Reprints.
- LEÓN PORTILLA, M. Editor. 1992. *The broken spears: the Aztec account of the conquest of Mexico*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- LIENZO DE TLAXCALA. 1979 [1550/1892]. *El lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Commentary by Alfredo Chavero, 1892. Mexico, D.F., Mexico: Editorial Innovación.
- LÓPEZ ALONSO, S., Z. LAGUNAS RODRÍGUEZ, and C. SERRANO SÁNCHEZ. 1976. *Enterramientos humanos de la zona arqueologica de Cholula, Puebla*. Colección Científica 44, Mexico, D.F., Mexico.
- LÓPEZ DE GÓMARA, F. 1964 [1552]. *Cortés: the life of the conqueror by his secretary*. Translated and edited by Lesley Byrd Simpson. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- MARQUINA, I. 1970. Pirámide de Cholula. In *Proyecto Cholula*. Edited by Ignacio Marquina, pp. 31-46. Serie Investigaciones 19. Mexico, D.F., Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- MCCAFFERTY, G. G. 1996a. The ceramics and chronology of Cholula, Mexico. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 7:299-323.
- 1996b. Reinterpreting the Great Pyramid of Cholula, Mexico. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 7:1-

- 18.
- 1997a. Engendering the conquest: Malintzin in the light of ethnohistorical archaeology. Paper presented at Birkbeck College, University of London, London, UK.
- 1997b. Giants, tyrants, and Toltecs: ethnic change in Classic/Postclassic Cholula. Paper presented at the Maya Meetings at the University of Texas, Austin.
- MUÑOZ CAMARGO, D. 1966[1550s/1892]. *Historia de Tlaxcala*. Edited by A. Chavero. Mexico City: Tipografía de Secretaría de Fomento.
- OLIVERA, M. 1970. La importancia religiosa de Cholula. In *Proyecto Cholula*. Edited by Ignacio Marquina, pp. 211-242. Serie Investigaciones 19. Mexico, D.F., Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- OLIVERA DE V., M., and C. REYES. 1969. Los choloques y los cholultecas: apuntes sobre las relaciones étnicas en Cholula hasta el siglo XVI. *Anales del INAH época 7, I* (1967-1968): 247-274.
- PAZ, O. 1961. *The labyrinth of solitude: life and thought in Mexico*. Translated by Lysander Kemp. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- PETERSON, D. A. and Z. D. GREEN. 1987. The Spanish arrival and the massacre at Cholula. *Notas Mesoamericanas* 10: 203-222.
- ROJAS, GABRIEL DE. 1927 [1581]. Descripción de Cholula. *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Históricos* I(6): 158-170.
- ROMERO, J. 1937. Estudio de los enterramientos de la Pirámide de Cholula. *Anales del Museo Nacional de México*, Epoch 5a, 2: 5-36. Mexico.
- SAHAGÚN, BERNARDINO DE. 1550-82 [1547-85]. *Florentine Codex: general history of the things of New Spain. Book 12 - the conquest of Mexico*. Translated by Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Santa Fe: The School of American Research and the University of Utah.
- 1989 [1585]. *Conquest of New Spain (1585 revision): reproductions of the Boston Public Library manuscript and the Carlos María de Bustamente 1840 edition*. Translated by Howard F. Cline, edited with and introduction and notes by S.L. Cline. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press.
- SUÁREZ CRUZ, SERGIO. 1989. *Ultimos descubrimientos de entierros postclásicos en Cholula, Puebla*. Cuaderno de Trabajo No. 7. Centro Regional de Puebla. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Puebla, Mexico.
- TAPIA, ANDRES DE. 1540s. The chronicle of Andrés de Tapia. In *The Conquistadors: first-person accounts of the conquest of Mexico*. Edited and translated by Patricia de Fuentes, pp. 17-49. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- TORQUEMADA, JUAN DE. 1575-83 [1615]. *Monarquía indiana*, 7 vols. Coordinated by Miguel León Portilla. Mexico, D.F., Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- WAGNER, H. R. 1944. *The rise of Fernando Cortés*. Los Angeles: The Cortés Society, Fox Printing.