

Mesoamerican Perspectives on Mexican Conquest History: Using Digitized Indigenous Primary Sources in the Undergraduate Classroom

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THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO is perhaps among the most important events in world history. It is a topic that is covered in Mexican and Latin American history courses, of course, but it finds an equally prominent place on (North-) American and world history syllabi. Most significantly, Mexican conquest history is important because it is the only conquest in the entire history of American conquests that offers the opportunity to study not only the writings of the Spanish *conquistadors*, but also the various accounts of indigenous groups who by the early sixteenth century had called central Mexico their home for centuries. It is a history rich in Spanish and indigenous (particularly Nahuatl) alphabetic and pictographic sources.¹

With the (re-)discovery and gradual transcription and translation of native-language primary sources in the twentieth century, a new branch of Mexican ethnohistory developed around Mesoamerican native-language research.² This scholarship has profoundly reshaped our understanding of a history that for centuries had followed a Eurocentric paradigm. The arrival of the Internet age has further

revolutionized this trend. With the recent push both to preserve rare or fragile sources and to make them more widely accessible through digitization, educators and students alike are no longer limited to excerpts from indigenous texts that experts in the field chose to include in their publications of primary source readers. More and more students have home access to the Internet, and colleges and universities are investing in free access to online resources for their constituents. Mexican conquest history has been a prime beneficiary of these developments. This essay will focus on two such publications in particular: (1) Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*, which is available from the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Laurentian Library) via the World Digital Library, and (2) the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, which a team of scholars from the Mesolore Project associated with Brown University made available in its entirety for the first time since the nineteenth century.³

This paper explores the opportunities that using digitized indigenous primary sources in the classroom bring to the teaching of Mexican conquest history.⁴ A core concern of mine is to highlight the heterogeneity of indigenous responses to Spanish military advances and thus move away from the notion that there were strictly two sides to this history: Spanish winners and indigenous losers. The primary sources that I am looking at here are messy—they do not always agree. They, therefore, force students to think beyond historical facts and engage in questions of the human experience instead. How did the various authors experience the events they are writing about? How are their experiences similar to, or different from each other, and why? What hopes and fears are expressed that the student may not have thought about before? And what does this tell us about the history of the Mexican conquests and how this history has been remembered? The goal is to lead students to the understanding that historical research and analysis is not about “what really happened,”⁵ and to allow historical perspectives to guide them to a more comprehensive, if conflicting understanding of the past.

At a secondary and more practical level, the paper also discusses particular ways in which students can develop their analysis and interpretation of primary sources. The visual element in particular of the indigenous sources requires the development of visual literacy skills. In the age of smartphones and social media, our students are perhaps more visually oriented than ever before, but few are visually

literate. It is important to include visual literacy among history student learning outcomes and to think actively about best practices to address the difficulties students may experience in aligning visual readings with contextual knowledge.⁶ The last part of this paper illustrates in-class writing exercises and discussions based on the visual elements of Mesoamerican texts through the example of the representation of Malintzin, the Nahuatl noblewoman whom Mayan lords gifted to the Spaniards as a peace offering of sorts, and whose multilingualism and skillful translations undoubtedly shaped the many alliances and conquests during those fateful years between 1519 and 1521.

The Dominant Narrative: Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo

The writings of the Spanish conquistadors are among the best-known and still most widely read primary sources of any of the American conquests. Among all of the conquistador accounts, the letters of Hernán Cortés to the king of Spain reign supreme. Cortés wrote these letters as he was conquering in the typical style of sixteenth-century *probanzas de mérito*, texts that were meant to persuade one's superior—in this case, the king—of one's noteworthy and merit-worthy deeds. Cortés, of course, was in dire need of convincing the king of the impressiveness of his conquests. Had he not succeeded, he most likely would have returned to Spain in chains or worse. Cortés had disobeyed his immediate superior, the governor of Cuba, who had withdrawn his approval of Cortés' mainland expedition, thinking—as it turned out, rightfully so—that if Cortés were to have a successful conquest, he would not be laying his success at the governor's feet. And now that Cortés was, in fact, on conquest expeditions across central Mexico, the former law student tried to use his successes not only to set up rich material and political rewards from the king, but also to make sure that his earlier disobedience would no longer be held against him. In other words, Cortés had to win over the king; he had to impress. And he did.

Cortés' letters were so well written, so full of detail of these new Mexican lands, its tremendous resources, and its amazing people, that all of Europe started reading his letters voraciously. Future conquistadors read his letters, people who themselves never set foot

in the Americas read them, and, of course, future European settlers in Mexico or other parts of the Americas did as well. The first printed editions in Spanish were published within a year of Cortés' final defeat of the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan in 1521. Translations in Latin, Dutch, German, Italian, French, and English followed, and they all saw multiple reprints and new editions. When I last checked in spring of 2016, the most recent academic Spanish edition was from 2005; the most recent English edition was a 2001 edition of Anthony Pagden's translation from 1971.⁷ Of course, one also can find Cortés' letters online in various formats, in their entirety (as an e-book) or in excerpts selected according to specific topics or themes. His second letter is included in its original form, and in translation, at the World Digital Library Collection.⁸ In other words, Cortés' letters have significantly shaped the memory and narrative of his early sixteenth-century explorations in central Mexico for almost 500 years now, and it is with this narrative in mind that many of our students show up in our classes.

In addition to Cortés, there is at least one other sixteenth-century Spanish eyewitness account that rivals, perhaps even surpasses Cortés' letters in terms of its reception at the time as well as across the centuries. Bernal Díaz del Castillo was one of Cortés' men. He had followed Cortés from Cuba to the mainland and was among the many Spaniards who contributed greatly to the realization of Cortés' dream. When he later saw that Cortés completely disregarded the services of his men in order to claim all credit—and material benefits—for himself, Díaz grew bitter and started writing his own account of what he thought had happened in central Mexico between 1519 and 1521.⁹ Calling his account *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (*The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, also published as *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico*), Díaz re-inserted himself and all humble Spaniards who had been part of Cortés' expedition back into the story. He wrote about the numbers of Spaniards who fought in battle, if any were wounded, and who they were. Díaz even gave credit to the many, many indigenous allies that the Spaniards were able to gain en route to their final destination, the capital of the most powerful indigenous empire in the region, México Tenochtitlan. Yet his emphasis clearly was on ordinary Spaniards, men like himself who had understood at the time that their choices were clear: conquer or die.

Like Cortés, we have been reading Díaz for centuries now. Although circulated among an elite few during his lifetime, Díaz' account was not published until 1632 (significantly later than Cortés' letters). Furthermore, it was not until the nineteenth century that the Díaz chronicle was published in other languages, including a first English translation by Maurice Keatinge in 1800.¹⁰ Since the work in its entirety is more than a thousand pages long, many abridged versions have appeared since then, the most recent English edition in 2012.¹¹ The most recent Spanish edition I located is from 2015.¹² Of course, online versions of various lengths in Spanish and English abound as well, and of all the Mexican conquest sources, it is the most likely to show up on university and college syllabi. Díaz is assigned reading in history courses on colonial Mexico, Latin America, world history, and Western civilization, and also shows up on Spanish literature reading lists. Díaz has been studied by historians and literary scholars, and his work is an integral part of our understanding of the collision of two worlds in early sixteenth-century central Mexico even today.

For centuries now, the works of the conquistadors have shaped the popular understanding of Mexican conquest history. It is a message of European superiority, the inevitability of Spanish success, and the triumph of Christendom. Despite the Spaniards' recognition of the sophistication of Mesoamerican civilizations, the indigenous polytheistic, human-sacrificing religions still made them "savages" in the eyes of their conquerors. It was unthinkable from the Spaniards' perspective, and it remained unthinkable for generations of European civilizations, that the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas would have been able to stem the tide of European expansion and conquest. In *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquests* (2003), Matthew Restall debunks the centuries-old myths surrounding the Mexican conquests.¹³ In particular, he takes aim at the phrase "European superiority" and seeks more convincing explanations for the military and political successes of the Spanish. In his final argument, he proposes disease, Spanish steel, and indigenous allies as the most important factors that kept tipping the odds in the Spaniards' favor, and he does so in a way that is very accessible to an undergraduate audience. The book is definitely a favorite among my students. But how did Restall and the many contemporary historians he cites in his work arrive at this conclusion? What made scholars today

overcome long-entrenched arguments and explanations? It is at this point that we must shift our attention to the Mesoamerican writers of the sixteenth century, who wrote down their perspectives of what was happening all around them, and whose words have been rediscovered and received much attention in the more recent past.

Mesoamerican Perspectives: Shifting the Conquest Paradigm

Florentine Codex

Undoubtedly, the most famous of all indigenous Mexican conquest sources is the *Florentine Codex*.¹⁴ The source was the idea of a sixteenth-century Spanish friar, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, and its primary authors and Sahagún's close collaborators were the descendants of those who had faced Cortés and his men in their final battle for victory. However, the *Florentine Codex* is perhaps best described as a hybrid source that straddles two cultures—Spanish and Nahua. Much of the writing happened at the Franciscan school for Nahua nobles in Tlatelolco, which in the post-conquest years became part of the capital of colonial New Spain. The students were instructed in alphabetic writing, but also in Spanish, Latin, and, of course, Christianity. They worked and lived in close community with the Franciscan friars and no doubt had daily contact with other Spaniards as well. Spanish influence on their writing can only be expected. And yet, after completing a first version of the *Codex* in 1579, Sahagún felt so strongly that he had allowed Nahua perspectives to dominate the narrative too much, that he produced a revised version six years later.¹⁵

The *Florentine Codex* consists of twelve books recording extensive details pertaining to Nahua society and culture. Book XII was written last and is the only of the twelve books that narrates a story—the story of the Spanish conquest of the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan. Its production stretched across three to four decades and included the writing of the original Nahuatl text, the simultaneous painting of images that accompanied the Nahuatl text, and the translation of the Nahuatl into Spanish. The result, as Kevin Terraciano argues so convincingly, therefore, is “three texts in one”¹⁶—with several Nahua hands involved in the writing and painting of the Nahuatl, and Sahagún's hand involved in the Spanish translations.

Unlike many of the Spanish sources, the *Florentine Codex* was not published right away. In fact, the political atmosphere around such ethnographic works had shifted dramatically during the decades of its production, and Sahagún feared that his life work might even be destroyed if it fell into the wrong hands. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the work was published in Spanish, and not until the mid-twentieth century that it became available in English.¹⁷ It was popularized in the 1960s by Miguel León-Portilla's *Visión de los Vencidos* (1959), a paperback version of excerpts from this codex and a few other conquest-era Nahuatl sources on the Spanish conquests, which was soon translated into English and published under the title, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (1962).¹⁸ Since then, indigenous perspectives on this topic have found their way onto syllabi at both Mexican and U.S. research universities. James Lockhart, the most influential of the pioneers of Nahuatl-driven historical research in the United States, published the most recent English translation of Book XII in 1993.¹⁹ For the first time, a scholarly publication included both the Nahuatl and Spanish texts, and translations of both. Lockhart's edition also includes the images that accompany the Nahuatl text, though they are out of their original place in the manuscript, and grouped together. Including both languages and translating them separately was a crucial step because in the past, the Nahuatl and Spanish originals tended not to be included. Lockhart wanted to offer the increasing numbers of researchers who read Nahuatl the opportunity to grapple with the text themselves. And he also wanted to engage in a conversation that pointed out important differences between the Nahuatl and the Spanish—differences that were not necessarily understood before.

The *Florentine Codex* is not just any indigenous Mexican conquest account, it is the particular account of the people of Tlatelolco. Considering that probably more than a dozen Tlatelolcan hands were involved in the painting and writing of the *Codex*, it is in itself a text that conveys multiple messages.²⁰ The Tlatelolca are a people who shared a common history and geographic space with the Mexica, the most powerful indigenous group in all of central and southern Mexico, and the very people whom Cortés knew he had to defeat. Though they shared the same island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, they each built their own *altepetl*, or city—Tlatelolco and México Tenochtitlan. They built impressive causeways that connected the

island cities to the mainland, and perhaps an even more impressive system of canals that was supposed to save the city from severe floods. But the Tlatelolca, like so many other groups across the region, had themselves been conquered by the Mexica about 100 years prior to the Spaniards' arrival, and their resentment of that conquest and of the Mexica was still very much alive. Without a clear understanding of Tlatelolca authorship and the rivalry and hurtful history between them and the Mexica, one is bound to misinterpret what the authors of the *Florentine Codex* were recording.

One particularly striking example of this is the portrayal of Moteuczoma, the Mexica ruler at the time of the Spaniards' arrival. By Spaniard accounts, Moteuczoma was feared across the land, perhaps more feared than any of his powerful predecessors, since the expansion of the Mexica Empire was greatest under his reign. Moteuczoma's army conquered and subjected conquered territories to massive tribute payments, without which the grandeur of Tenochtitlan and of Moteuczoma's court would not have been possible. The wars of conquest also produced slaves for the capital, many of whom soon found themselves atop the great pyramid of Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica war-god, to be sacrificed and have their hearts cut out in order to please and appease him.

The historical record suggests that Moteuczoma was a tyrant, and most likely a quite ruthless one. In stark contrast to all this, the Moteuczoma of the *Florentine Codex* is an indecisive, weak, almost fearful leader who first tried to convince the Spaniards to stay away. When this tactic failed, he finally invited Cortés and his men into the great city of México Tenochtitlan and wined and dined them at the expense of the city's inhabitants. His power slipping away, Moteuczoma ultimately was taken captive by the Spaniards in his own palace, which greatly contributed to the inability of Moteuczoma to continue to control his people. In the end, he was killed, at the hands of whom we are not told. Moteuczoma's dead body was unceremoniously burned, his "body lay sizzling, and it let off a stench as it burned."²¹ On the other hand, the Tlatelolca lord Itzquauhtzin, who was killed along with Moteuczoma, was taken to Tlatelolco:

They grieved greatly, their hearts were desolate; the tears flowed down... Then they outfitted him, equipping him with the lordly banner and other items of paper, and they gave him provisions. Then they took him and burned him in the temple courtyard at the place called Quauhxicalco. It was with great splendor that his body was burned.²²

The portrayal of the two lords' post-mortem treatment could not be more opposite. If read without an understanding of the violent and hostile history between the Tlatelolca and Mexica, one could quickly write off Moteuczoma as weak and unimportant. The Moteuczoma of the *Florentine Codex* is so utterly different from everything that we know about this powerful Mexica lord, that in order to make sense of the differences, students have to consider questions of authorship and the relationships between the authors, the subject matter, and the audience.

In 2012, the World Digital Library added the *Florentine Codex* to its online collection (**Figure 1**), making it possible to show students what this codex, created in the sixteenth century and housed at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, Italy, actually looks like.²³ Unlike many scholarly publications, the digital rendering makes available to the public the many images that were painted next to and often literally into the written text by Tlatelolca artists. The two complement one another in constructing a more complete interpretation of the past as the Tlatelolca understood it, and this gives the students an additional medium to view Mexican conquest history through Tlatelolca eyes. More so than the written text, images make history come alive. Often, the author's potential biases, or motivations for writing/painting are more visible as well.

Diana Magaloni Kerpel, perhaps the most important contemporary art historian whose work focuses on the *Florentine Codex*, studied the more than two thousand watercolor images, as well as those that were left uncolored, and identified about a dozen indigenous artists who she believes were involved in the production.²⁴ By Book XII, many of the images were left unfinished, lacking the beautiful coloring of the earlier books. Magaloni Kerpel points to another horrific epidemic that swept Mexico City in the 1570s that likely contributed to the unfinished images towards the end. But even in black and white, these images are a valuable teaching tool in contemporary classrooms, as they help students break into the indigenous world of early sixteenth-century central Mexico.

The *Florentine Codex* offers explanations for the Spaniards' final victory that are different from what Spanish sources emphasize. As Restall argues so convincingly in *Seven Myths*, instead of Spanish superiority (and apart from Moteuczoma's weakness and incompetence, which the *Codex* to some degree extends to the



Figure 2: The Toxcatl Massacre. Folio 1 in Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*. Digital image provided by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.

Mexica in general), the Tlatelolca authors emphasize Spanish steel (**Figure 2**), disease (**Figure 3**), and indigenous allies (**Figure 4**) as the key reasons for their defeat.

The Toxcatl Massacre, or Alvarado Massacre, shown in **Figure 2**, is one of many scenes painted by the Tlatelolca authors that shows indigenous warriors' body parts laying scattered in all directions, as Spanish steel swords cut right through them. Though this particular image depicts a religious ceremony that the Spaniards brutally interrupted, and that therefore left the indigenous warriors without weapons to defend themselves, it is still very clear that the indigenous authors felt that indigenous weapons stood little chance at effectively hurting, let alone killing the Spaniards who are covered in steel armor from head to toe. Indigenous armor, on the other hand, was made of jaguar and other animal skins, offering little protection against the blows of Spanish swords or the stabbing of the rapier.



Figure 3: Smallpox. Folio 53v in Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*. Digital image provided by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.

Though Spanish sources did talk about the thousands and tens of thousands of indigenous warriors who died on the battlefield in a single day while the losses among the Spanish were minimal, the graphic depiction of the power of Spanish steel in the *Florentine Codex* powerfully and visibly underlines this argument. It also reorients our minds away from finding an explanation for the conquest in overall Spanish military superiority, and helps us zoom in instead on the particular advantage in terms of the specific material of the weapons that the Spaniards possessed.

When it comes to disease, the second of Restall's three core factors explaining the Spanish conquests from an indigenous perspective, the *Florentine Codex* again speaks loudly and clearly. The disease depicted in **Figure 3** clearly indicates that this was an important factor that struck down indigenous populations in the most brutal and horrible ways. In the case of the Mexica, smallpox erupted after they had successfully run the Spaniards out of their city in what Spanish



Figure 4: The Spaniards and their indigenous allies force their way back into México Tenochtitlan during their final assault on the city. Folio 55v in Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*. Digital image provided by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.

sources remembered as *la noche triste*—"the sad night." While the Spaniards were regrouping and preparing for their final assault, the Mexica capital was attacked by the germs the Spaniards left behind. In addition to painting their horror, the Tlatelolca wrote:

Before the Spaniards appeared to us, first an epidemic broke out, a sickness of pustules. It began in Tepeilhuitl. Large bumps spread on people; some were entirely covered. They spread everywhere, on the face, the head, the chest, etc. [The disease] brought great desolation; a great many died of it. They could no longer walk about, but lay in their dwellings and sleeping places, no longer able to move or stir. They were unable to change position, to stretch out on their sides or face down, or raise their heads. And when they made a motion, they called out loudly. The pustules that covered people caused great desolation; very many people died of them, and many just starved to death; starvation reigned, and no one took care of others any longer...The Mexica warriors were greatly weakened by it. And when things were in this state, the Spaniards came, moving toward us from Tetzco.²⁵

Emphasizing and spending time on this argument allows students to move away from relying on the dominant narrative (of Spanish superiority), making alternative explanations not only possible, but real.

Equally, perhaps even most importantly, the *Florentine Codex* points to the Spaniards' indigenous allies as a key factor explaining the Spaniards' ultimate conquest of México Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco in 1521 (**Figure 4**). The *altepetl*, or city of Tlaxcala stands out among them, but other central Mexican communities are also reported to have chosen an alliance with these powerful foreigners against the supreme lord of the land, Moteuczoma. Tlaxcala was a powerful Mesoamerican city to the east of Tenochtitlan at the time of the Spaniards' arrival. It had never been conquered by the Mexica, and represented an independent entity in the middle of the heartland of the Mexica Empire. Of course, that independence came at a price, as the Tlaxcalans had been fighting to prevent a Mexica conquest for generations, and in the process had seen many of their bravest warriors captured in battle and taken away to be sacrificed atop the great pyramid in Tenochtitlan. When the Spaniards advanced towards Tlaxcala early in their expedition against Tenochtitlan, the Tlaxcalan leaders had to make a decision. They decided to fight, but after two weeks of heavy losses, they had a change of heart and negotiated a peace that, they hoped, would not only end the war against the Spanish, but perhaps even against the Mexica. With the Spanish on their side, perhaps a victory against their arch-enemy would be possible?

Indeed, as the Spaniards' most important (though by no means only) indigenous ally, the Tlaxcalans were instrumental in bringing about a Spanish victory. The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, a visual Tlaxcalan conquest account painted probably in the 1550s, argues in no uncertain terms that the fall of the Mexica Empire was as much a Tlaxcalan feat as anyone else's. The Tlaxcalans present themselves as conquistadors²⁶ in their own right and completely ignore that two-week stretch during which they battled the Spaniards fiercely despite suffering enormous losses. According to their account, they were allies from the very beginning, and they used this position, though historically inaccurate, to negotiate preferential terms for themselves in the post-conquest years.

Charles Gibson, one of the first scholars who started to use Nahuatl sources in his 1950s research of sixteenth-century Tlaxcala, located

an extensive set of Tlaxcalan *cabildo* minutes from 1545-1627, which in 1986 was published under the title *The Tlaxcalan Actas*.²⁷ An entry from June 17, 1552 reads:

1. The *cabildo* discusses sending a delegation to Spain to lay Tlaxcala's troubles before the emperor; contributions from all Tlaxcalans are to pay expenses of travel and solicitors' and counsel's fees, etc., since the city assets are insufficient. The viceroy's approval is to be asked by a committee of an *alcalde* and two *regidores* sent to Mexico City...

4. A painting of Cortés' arrival in Tlaxcala and the war and conquest is to be prepared for presentation to the emperor; two *regidores* are to oversee the project and arrange for artists' supplies through the city *mayordomo* and to choose the artists. At this point it is not decided whether the painting should be on cloth (*tilmatly*) or paper (*amatl*).²⁸

In other words, the second post-conquest generation of Tlaxcalan leaders felt that it was time to plead their case with the Spanish king and remind him about the Tlaxcalans' crucial role during the conquest years. In fact, in 1562 and in the middle of a severe fiscal crisis, the Tlaxcalan municipal council again articulated a detailed list of arguments intended to prove their merit:

2. The *cabildo* agrees that it is necessary to go beyond a narrow accounting of certain official acts during a short period of time; rather they decide to tell anew Tlaxcala's merits starting from the first arrival of the Spaniards under Cortés: (1) that their forefathers greeted the Spaniards peacefully and freely granted them supplies; (2) that in the fighting in Mexico City and elsewhere in New Spain, many Tlaxcalan noblemen and commoners lost their lives and property helping the Spanish cause; (3) that starting at that time they were greatly afflicted with tribute in gold, skirts, women's shirts, and maize, as well as with labor duties of the commoners building houses in Mexico City and Puebla; (4) that many Tlaxcalans died when they went to Veracruz, transporting war gear and other supplies for the Spaniards; and (5) that for all this service and affliction the Tlaxcalans have been paid nothing.²⁹

Again, the period of fighting is omitted from their historical memory. Admitting to it would threaten Tlaxcala's agenda, which was to secure resources from the king. In the end, they seem to have agreed on painting their story on cloth. Though the original is lost today,

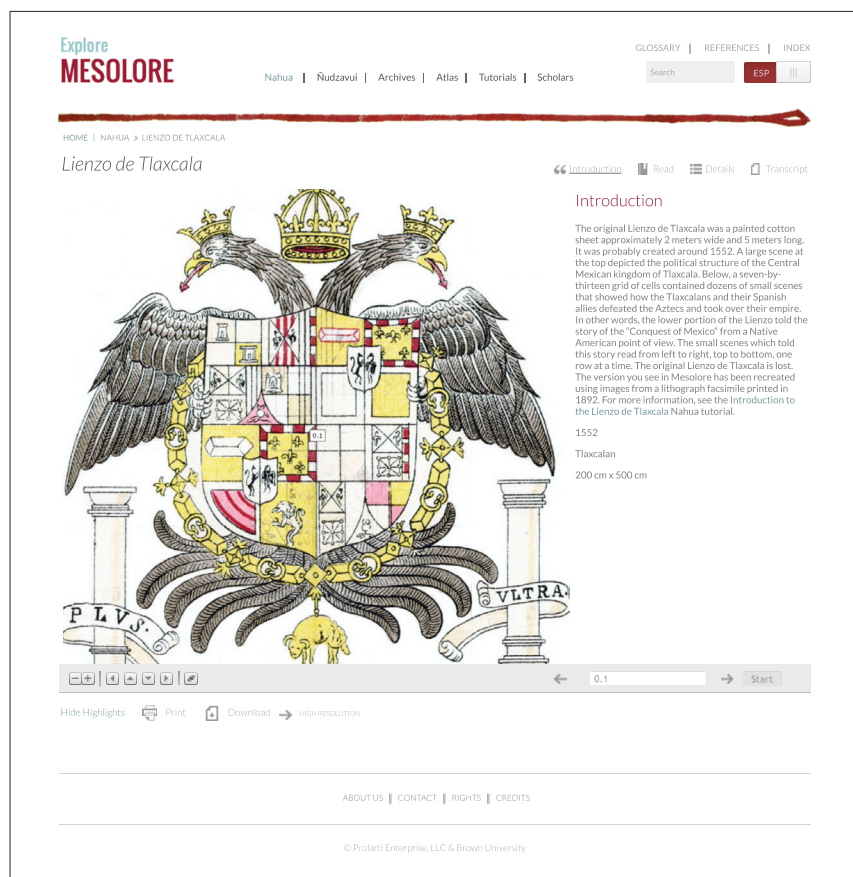


Figure 5: Screenshot of the Mesolore Project Website. Online access to the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, digitized by the Mesolore Project, available at <<http://mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>>.

fragments and copies from later time periods survived. It is these fragments and copies that Brown University's Mesolore Project used as its basis for the digital reproduction.³⁰

Lienzo de Tlaxcala

Much like the digitization of the *Florentine Codex* by the World Digital Library, the online publication of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* by the Mesolore Project (**Figure 5**) has turned this previously inaccessible

Mesoamerican primary source into an incredible teaching tool. In addition to presenting the *Lienzo* as a whole, the Mesolore website allows students to zoom in on individual cells and click on them, which then opens up a small window identifying every person, place, or event depicted. In addition, there is also a strong overall introduction as well as in-depth discussions of several prominent scenes. So much detail is captured in this digital reproduction and so much information is readily made available, it is now possible to include an in-depth study of this difficult, and yet so important indigenous primary source in an undergraduate classroom.

In terms of the composition of the *Lienzo*, one large scene dominates the top of the image and portrays Tlaxcalan municipal history emphasizing Tlaxcala's dominant political roles, both within a Mesoamerican as well as a Spanish colonial context. Below, a seven-by-thirteen grid of cells largely constitutes military history and tells the story of "how the Tlaxcalans and their Spanish allies defeated the Aztecs and took over their empire."³¹ The roles are reversed from the very beginning: the Tlaxcalans are the conquistadors, the Spaniards their allies. The Spanish king needed to understand that.

Even though the *Lienzo*'s message is more complex, above all, it is the Tlaxcalans' military support that is emphasized. The visual rendition of the conquest of Cholula (**Figure 6**), for example, makes two very clear arguments, both of which remind us of arguments in the *Florentine Codex*: Spanish weapons sliced through the bodies of indigenous warriors as if they were paper, and indigenous warriors—in this case, Tlaxcalan—were instrumental to Spanish successes in battle.

In addition to the clear emphasis on Tlaxcalan allies, the *Lienzo* also touches upon the reality of other central Mexican communities choosing an alliance with the Spanish against the Mexica. For example, the depiction of the final attack on Tenochtitlan shows warriors from four nearby communities involved: Xochimilco, Coyoacan, Tlacopan (Tacuba), and Tepantepec (**Figure 7**). Of course, those are in addition to the ever-present force of Tlaxcalans.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the scene depicting the conquest of Tenochtitlan, Cortés' final target, does not mark an endpoint in the *Lienzo*'s pictorial narration. Contrast this to the *Florentine Codex*, where street-by-street combat and the final capture and sorrow-filled surrender of the last Mexica ruler, Cuauhtemoc,

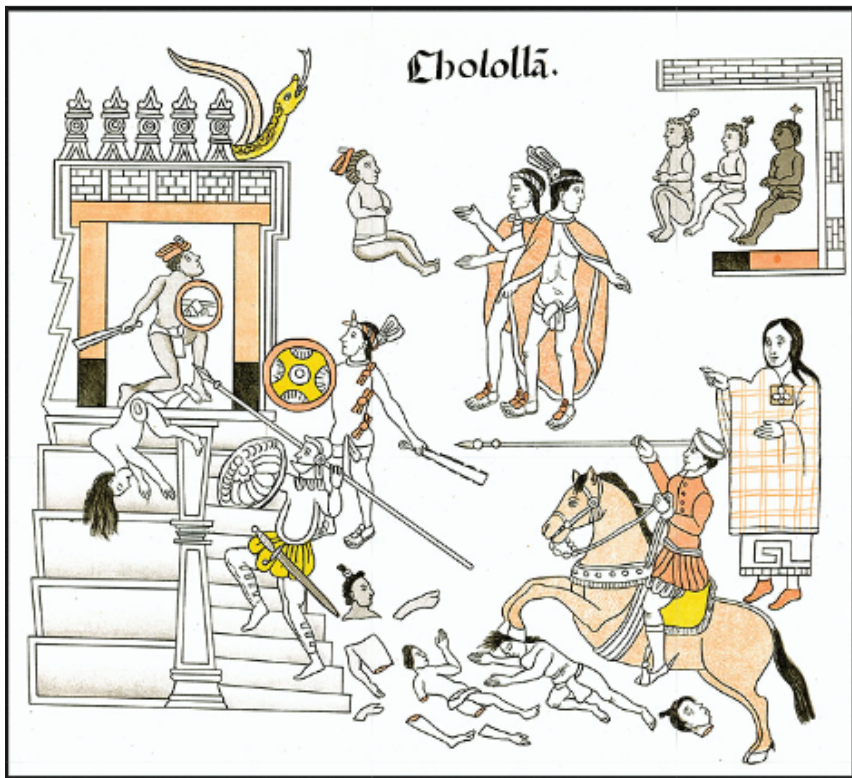


Figure 6: Malintzin directs the joint Spanish-Tlaxcalan attack against Cholula. Cell 9 of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Digital image provided by the Mesolore Project, Brown University.

concludes the narrative. The Tlaxcalan perspective could not be more different, as the narration begins, ends, and is centered on Tlaxcala. Tenochtitlan may have been a particularly significant conquest, which is why the *Lienzo* artists placed that scene at the center of the cell-by-cell military narrative, but it is still one conquest among many. In fact, the editors of the Mesolore Project argue that from a Tlaxcalan perspective, the fall of Tenochtitlan made possible the beginning of a new age, when Tlaxcala overthrew Tenochtitlan, the most powerful indigenous force in central Mexico.³² This is suggested by the placement and composition of Cell 29, which appears in the exact center of the *Lienzo* as a whole and depicts a golden sun rising above Cortés and Xicotencatl, the most prominent of the four Tlaxcalan lords at the time of the conquest (**Figure 8**).

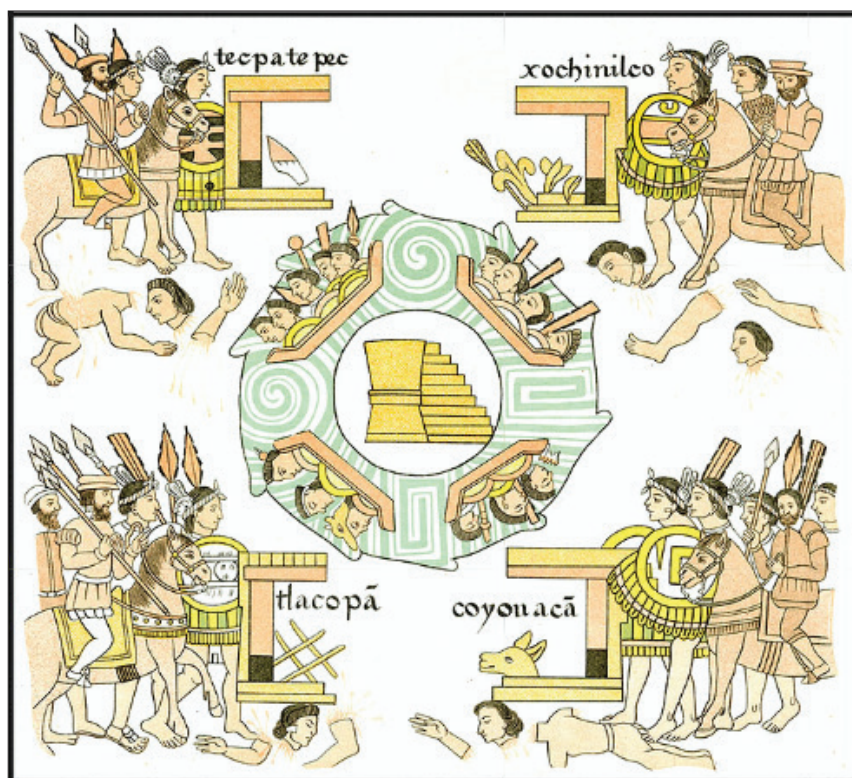


Figure 7: The final attack on Tenochtitlan including several important indigenous allies. Cell 42 of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Digital image provided by the Mesolore Project, Brown University.

The Mesolore editors argue that based on what is known about Mesoamerican origin stories, sunrises often indicate the separation of the present time from a more distant, and also flawed past. In other words, they indicate the beginning of a new, and more desirable political order. What is depicted here, as remembered by Tlaxcalan political elites of the 1550s, is Cortés' promise of Tlaxcala's political rise to power. No other conquest account suggests anything of this sort. Cortés himself hardly mentions the Tlaxcalans at all. Bernal Díaz gives the Tlaxcalans credit as the Spaniards' most important indigenous allies, as does the *Florentine Codex*. Yet all sources, Spanish and Tlatelolca, agree that the fall of Tenochtitlan uncontestedly ushered in Spanish rule. When reading the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* in isolation, one could easily miss this point.



Figure 8: Tlaxcala and the first sunrise. Cell 29 of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Digital image provided by the Mesolore Project, Brown University.

The Representation of Malintzin: Ideas for Discussion Questions and Simple Writing Exercises

One indigenous ally who gets particular attention in the indigenous sources—and who already appeared in some of the above images from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*—is Malintzin, or Doña Marina, as the Spaniards called her. Malintzin was a Nahuatl noble woman who had been traded away to a Maya noble household by her stepmother and eventually found herself as one of nineteen women the Maya lords of Potonchán gifted to Cortés and his men.³³ Unlike her many female counterparts all across the Americas who are almost completely excluded from the histories of conquest no matter who is telling it, Malintzin's role as Cortés' most important translator

was recognized even in some Spanish accounts. Bernal Díaz, for example, mentioned her with much respect, even if Cortés himself limited his credits to her to one mention without a name. In the Mesoamerican sources, however, Malintzin rises to unquestionable importance and authority. Without her, both the Tlatelolca and Tlaxcalan authors imply, it would have been difficult for Cortés to secure his vast army of indigenous allies, who ultimately led him to victory. The *Florentine Codex* and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* both forcefully argue that Malintzin played an important role in the early sixteenth-century Spanish conquests (**Figure 9** and **Figure 10**).

In her article, “Enabling Students to Read Historical Images: The Value of the Three-Level Guide for Historical Inquiry,” Barbara Ormond lays out three levels of questions to ask students when engaging in visual primary source analysis and interpretation.³⁴ These questions can be handed out to students to work on individually or in small groups, or you may be able to draw the whole class into a discussion from the beginning. I tend to do this, especially when teaching smaller-capped seminars, although I find these kinds of larger conversations helpful even in lecture courses, as they bring the class together and give even more quiet students a relatively safe space to speak.

At the first level, ask students to describe simply and straightforwardly what they see. Students, even those who have never heard of Malintzin, are able to participate, as they perhaps describe her clothing and hairstyle, her positioning within the composition of the image, or her size (especially compared to the sizes of prominently featured Spanish and indigenous lords). More attentive students might also notice that she often is painted pointing her index finger and that squiggly lines spring from her mouth.

A second-level question then asks students to interpret the meaning of the visual imagery. In my experience, students are able to make the connection between fine clothing and elite status, especially as this is further underlined by Malintzin’s consistent depiction as equal in size to some of the most important men in Mexican conquest history. Commenting on her hairstyle gets more complicated, as the two indigenous sources depict it differently. The *Florentine Codex* depicts Malintzin in the hairstyle of Nahua noble married women (**Figure 9**), while the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* shows her with her hair down in the style of Nahua maidens (**Figure 10**). But what about



Figure 9: Malintzin negotiates with a Mexica on behalf of Cortés. Folio 29 in Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*. Digital image provided by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.

the finger-pointing and the squiggly lines? This is where you will have to interject and briefly explain that these are symbolic markers of authority that ancient Mesoamerican codex writers had used for centuries and that still appear in these early colonial indigenous texts. They are evidence of the continuities of ancient conventions of writing as well as sociocultural values well past the conquest years. They are evidence that, despite the Spanish influences on these texts, they are still conveying an indigenous worldview. They are powerful symbols of indigenous perceptions of Malintzin.

Next, we get to level three questions: What do you think the artist is trying to communicate? What are the underlying ideas or messages? It is at this point that I often switch to a brief writing

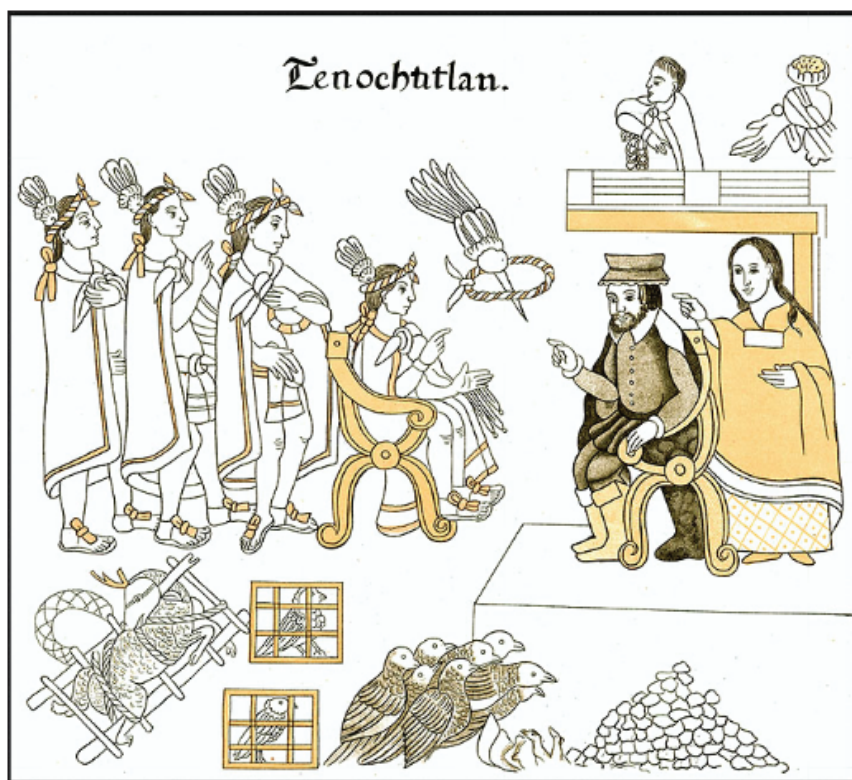


Figure 10: Cortés and Malintzin meet with Moteuczuma and negotiate supplies. Cell 11 of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Digital image provided by the Mesolore Project, Brown University.

exercise in order to allow each student to think for themselves, before their more vocal peers drown out their voice. The students now have the tools that they need to attempt this step on their own. Much has been clarified in the discussion of the first two levels of questions. The goal is to get students to articulate Malintzin's significance during the conquest years according to indigenous sources. Once the students have an opportunity to write down their thoughts (I usually allow ten to fifteen minutes), I return to an in-class discussion.

Depending on how much time you may have already spent on discussing Spanish sources, students may comment on how different her portrayal here is. Some of them may remark that the authority and

the respect that she is granted stands in stark contrast to the negative connotations that are associated with her in Mexican popular culture.³⁵ The important point is to underline that the authors of the *Florentine Codex* and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* clearly acknowledged the significant role of Malintzin. They perceived her as someone endowed with authority, someone who understood enough of Nahuatl and Spanish culture to function as an intermediary, and someone who spoke both languages well enough to be lead negotiator for both sides. Right or wrong, good or bad, these are not necessarily the questions that these texts put forth or answer. But they clearly state that Malintzin shaped Mexican conquest history in profound ways. And to that extent, they force students to rethink the traditional conquest narrative that for centuries has been so focused on European male agency.

Conclusion

Mesoamerica is the only region in the Americas that had developed writing systems before the arrival of the Spanish. And because writing was a part of indigenous culture before the conquest, the indigenous peoples of central Mexico kept on writing throughout and after the conquest years as well. It is important that we pay attention to this history, because it is the only conquest history with a written indigenous record. The *Florentine Codex* was authored by the descendants of those who had no choice but to fight Cortés until the bitter end, because they shared the same island with the very city that Cortés quickly understood was his ultimate prize—México Tenochtitlan. The authors of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, on the other hand, were Cortés' most important and perhaps closest allies. They were stewards of tremendous resources both in supplies and labor, and they decided to cast their lot with the Spanish and against their long-standing enemy, the Mexica. We have to listen to these indigenous voices in order gain an appreciation for the many diverse actors and perspectives of Mexican conquest history.

While excerpts from these and other indigenous sources have appeared on college syllabi for several decades now, the recent emphasis on digitization has made them available in their entirety. Students now can go online and decide for themselves which passages or images they want to focus on. They can also see for themselves what they think about how these sources have been used

in published texts in the past. The digitization of primary sources allows for inquiry-based learning and encourages group work, both of which contribute to the development of critical thinking skills and long-term memory. And even when not in class, students are not left to rely on their own interpretations, as a growing number of academic websites provides context, glossaries, and concrete identifications of the people, places, and events that are depicted. Using digitized indigenous primary sources together with complementary academic websites opens up tremendous opportunities to enhance instruction in the classroom and foster student engagement well beyond our time with them.

Notes

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1. At the time of the conquest, Nahuatl was spoken across central Mexico. It was also the language of the Mexica, the most powerful group in the region and the ultimate target of Cortés. Today, Nahuatl still is the most widely spoken indigenous language in Mexico.

2. In terms of Anglophone scholarship, the University of California, Los Angeles, under the pioneering leadership of the late James Lockhart emerged as a focal point. James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992). For an overview of the scholarship, see Matthew Restall, "Heirs to the Hieroglyphs: Indigenous Writing in Colonial Mesoamerica," *The Americas* 54, no. 2 (October 1997): 239-267; and Matthew Restall, "A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History," *Latin American Research Review* 38, no. 1 (2003): 113-134.

3. For the *Florentine Codex*, see “General History of the Things of New Spain by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: The Florentine Codex. Book XII: The Conquest of Mexico” at the World Digital Library, <<https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10623/>>. For the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, see “Lienzo de Tlaxcala” at the Mesolore Project by Brown University, <<http://mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>>.

4. An excellent example of how to use digitized Mexican conquest sources is Nancy Fitch’s contribution to a 2004 American Historical Association project, “Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age: Reconceptualizing the Introductory Survey Course,” <<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/classroom-content/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age>>, which offers historians models of how to use digitized primary sources in World History and History of the Americas survey courses. Fitch includes the *Florentine Codex* and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* in her analysis as well, choosing specific passages and images and providing valuable context, discussion, and study questions around them. I highly recommend visiting the website, and find that the website together with this essay is a great start for a non-specialist to prepare a primary source-driven and hands-on course segment on Mexican conquest history.

5. Nineteenth-century historian Leopold Von Ranke argued that scientific history—that is, primary source-driven historical research—would necessarily produce objective history or, in other words, the Truth.

6. Barbara Ormond, “Enabling Students to Read Historical Images: The Value of the Three-Level Guide for Historical Inquiry,” *The History Teacher* 44, no. 2 (February 2011): 181.

7. Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de Relación*, introduction by Manuel Alcala (Mexico City, Mexico: Porrúa, 2005); Anthony Pagden, ed., *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico*, third ed., trans. Anthony Pagden, introduction by J. H. Elliott (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

8. Cortés’ letters are online in various formats, in their entirety or in excerpts selected according to specific topics or themes. His second letter is included in its original form and in translation at the World Digital Library Collection: Spanish version at “Carta de Relación de Hernán Cortés,” <<https://www.wdl.org/es/item/7335/>>; English version at “Narrative Letter by Hernán Cortés,” <<https://www.wdl.org/en/item/7335/>>.

9. Díaz also responded to a hagiography of sorts authored by Cortés’ personal chaplain and secretary, Francisco López de Gómara, who further aggrandized Cortés’ already lavish stories about his accomplishments.

10. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico, Written in the Year 1568*, trans. Maurice Keatinge (London, United Kingdom: 1800), available from The University of Chicago via the HathiTrust at <<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001445711>>.

11. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, trans. Janet Burke and Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2012).

12. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid, Spain: Espasa Libros, 2015).

13. Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquests* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2003). For an excellent discussion of “New Conquest History” scholarship, see Matthew Restall, “The New Conquest History,” *History Compass* 10, no. 2 (February 2012): 151-160.

14. For an excellent recent historical discussion of the *Florentine Codex*, see Kevin Terraciano, “Three Texts in One: Book XII of the Florentine Codex,” *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 51-72. See also Diana Magaloni Kerpel, *The Colors of the New World: Artists, Materials, and the Creation of the Florentine Codex* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2014) for a truly unique analysis by an acclaimed art historian.

15. Terraciano, “Three Texts in One,” 64.

16. *Ibid.*, 51.

17. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España, Que en Doce Libros y Dos Volumen Escribió*, three vols., ed. Carlos María Bustamante (Mexico City, Mexico: Imprenta del Ciudadano Alejandro Valdéz, 1829-1830); Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, vols. 5-8, ed. Francisco Paso y Troncoso (Madrid, Spain: Hauser y Menet, 1905-1907); Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. and trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2012 and Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 2012).

18. Miguel León-Portilla, ed., *Visión de los Vencidos: Relaciones Indígenas de la Conquista* (Mexico City, Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1959); Miguel León-Portilla, ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1962). The most recent Spanish and English editions are both from 2007, with many editions in between.

19. James Lockhart, ed., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1993).

20. Compare also Kevin Terraciano, “Three Views of the Conquest from the Other Mexico,” in *The Conquest All Over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and Painting Spanish Colonialism*, ed. Susan Schroeder (Brighton, United Kingdom: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 15-40.

21. Lockhart, *We People Here*, 150.

22. *Ibid.*, 150-152.

23. *Florentine Codex*, World Digital Library, <<https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10623/>>.

24. Magaloni Kerpel, *The Colors of the New World*.

25. Lockhart, *We People Here*, 181-182.

26. For an excellent collection of essays on this topic, see Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, eds., *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007). See also Florine Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan, A Nahuatl Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2004); Laura E. Matthew, *Memories of Conquest:*

Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

27. James Lockhart, Frances Berdan, Arthur J. O. Anderson, eds. and trans., *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala (1545-1627)* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1986).

28. Ibid., 51.

29. Ibid., 62-63.

30. *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Mesolore Project, <<http://mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>>.

31. Ibid.

32. "Before the Emperor: Mirrors and Shields," Mesolore Project, <<http://mesolore.org/tutorials/learn/19/Introduction-to-the-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala-/56/Before-the-Emperor-Mirrors-and-Shields>>.

33. For a brilliant book-length discussion of the historical Malintzin, see Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

34. Ormond, "Enabling Students to Read Historical Images."

35. I am referencing here the interpretations of Malintzin as a traitor, which were popularized after Mexican Independence and still hold a considerable grip on her historical memory today. The literature on this topic is vast and outside my area of expertise; I will cite just a few examples: Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]framing the "Bad Woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014); Rolando Romer and Amanda Nolacea Harris, eds., *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 2005); Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991).