

Tlaxcala Documents A-E - *The Capture of Moctezuma II*

Interest Group: **Tlaxcala**

Introduction and History

The Tlaxcaltecas (people who live in Tlaxcala) took control of the Cholula region in center-south Mexico around C.E. 1350, and set up a self-governing state. They made war with their neighbors, growing a small empire for themselves.

The neighbors of the **Tlaxcala**, the **Mexica** (aka Aztecs), settled about 75 miles away on top of **Lake Texcoco**. These Mexica claimed a spiritual calling to create a temple for their sun god, Huitzilopochtli, at a location where they saw an eagle holding a snake, perched on a cactus. They claimed the title of “Aztec” for their new Empire. This name refers to the Tlaxcala and Mexica’s common origin story, the Aztlan region of the northwest.

For more than two hundred years, the Tlaxcaltecas retained their “confederation of four republics”, which contained about 150,000 people. They collect taxes and tributes from the cities they protect.

Unfortunately, the Tlaxcaltecas were surrounded by the Aztec Empire on every side, meaning that war with their rival was unending. The Aztec Empire used the Tlaxcala people as victims for their ritual human sacrifices, so they intentionally left them alone outside of frequent clashes called, “Flower Wars.” Both the Mexica and Tlaxcala viewed these battles as training grounds for their warriors, and believed that the battles gave their lives spiritual significance. The losers, which always seemed to be the Tlaxcala, would send prisoners of war to **Tenochtitlán**, the Aztec Capital, where they were sacrificed to appease the Aztec sun god’s thirst for blood.



1

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Document A - Map Where are the Tlaxcala located on this map?



2

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Document B - Written - What events occurred after Cortes first met the Tlaxcaltecas?

Adapted from the Codex Florentino, accounts compiled by the Benedictine priest Bernardino de

Sahagún, compiled ca. 1555, publ. 1585. This is an early primary source that describes the first meeting of the Spaniard and the Tlaxcaltecas.

And when the Tecoac had been defeated, the Tlaxcaltecas soon heard the news; they learned what had taken place there. They felt premonitions of death: terror overwhelmed them, and they were filled with foreboding. Therefore the chiefs assembled; the captains met together in a council. They talked about what had happened, and said: "What shall we do? Shall we go out to meet them? The Otomi is a brave warrior, but he was helpless against them: they scorned him as a mere nothing! They destroyed the poor macehual with a look, with a glance of their eyes! We should go over to their side: we should make friends with them and be their allies. If not, they will destroy us too"

Therefore the lords of Tlaxcala went out to meet them, bringing many things to eat: hens and hens' eggs and the finest tortillas. They said to the strangers: "Our lords, you are weary." The strangers replied: "Where do you live?" Where are you from?" They said: "We are from Tlaxcala. You have come here, you have entered our land. We are from Tlaxcala; our city is the City of the Eagle, Tlaxcala." (For in ancient times it was called Tlaxcala, and its people were known as Tlaxcaltecas.³)

Then they guided them to the city; they brought them there and invited them to enter. They paid them great honors, attended to their every want, joined with them as allies and even gave them their daughters. The Spaniards asked: "Where is the City of Mexico? Is it far from here?" They said: "No, it is not far, it is only a three-day march. And it is a great city. The Aztecs are very brave. They are great warriors and conquerors and have defeated their neighbors on every side."

At this time the Tlaxcaltecas were enemies of Cholula. They feared the Cholultecas; they envied and cursed them; their souls burned with hatred for the people of Cholula. This is why they bought certain rumors to Cortés, so that he would destroy them. They said to him: "Cholula is our enemy. It is an evil city. The people are as brave as the Aztecs and they are the Aztecs' friends." When the Spaniards heard this, they marched against Cholula. They were guided and accompanied by the Tlaxcaltecas and the chiefs from Cempoala, and they all marched in battle array.

When they arrived, the Tlaxcaltecas and the men of Cholula called to each other and shouted greetings. An assembly was held in the courtyard of the god, but when they had all gathered together, the entrances were closed, so that there was no way of escaping. Then the sudden slaughter began: knife strokes, and sword strokes, and death. The people of Cholula had not foreseen it, had not suspected it. They faced the Spaniards without weapons, without their swords or their shields. The cause of the slaughter was treachery. They died blindly, without knowing why, because of the lies of the Tlaxcaltecas.

And when this had taken place, word of it was brought to Moctezuma. The messengers came and departed, journeying back and forth between Tenochtitlán and Cholula. The common people were terrified by the news; they could do nothing but tremble with fright. It was as if the earth trembled beneath them, or as if the world were spinning before their eyes, as it spins during a fit of vertigo"

Document C - Written

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who accompanied Cortes into the central Mexican highlands in 1519,

reported the following conversation between Cortes and Xicotencatl. These frequent wars between the Tlaxcaltecas and Mexicas were called, "Flower Wars," because the prisoners captured in combat were used for ritual human sacrifice to Huitzilopotchli in Tenochtitlan.

"Xicotencatl said that Moctezuma and his Mexicas (Aztecs) could place a hundred and fifty thousand men in the field. Cortes asked them how it was that with so many warriors as they said came down on them (Tlaxcaltecas) had never been entirely conquered. They answered that although the Mexicas sometimes defeated them and killed them, and carried off many people for sacrifice, many of the Aztecs were also left dead, and others made prisoners. Xicotencatl said that the Triple Alliance of the Mexicas could never come so secretly that the Tlaxcaltecas did not get some warning. They would then muster all their forces and call on their neighbors for help. Xicotencatl said that all the regions reigned by Moctezuma were illdisposed towards his Mexicas, saying that Moctezuma waged similar wars against them on a yearly basis."

John Schmal collected a history of the Tlaxcalteca people in 2023. He describes the Flower Wars in greater detail below.

"Some historians believe that Tenochtitlán could have overwhelmed Tlaxcala without too much difficulty, and the reason it did not is probably that it wanted a nearby source of victims for the human sacrifices. The clashes between the Tlaxcalans and Mexica were called the "Flower Wars" (Xochiyaoyotl). The chief purpose of these "ceremonial battles" was to furnish captives to be used in their sacrificial rites. It is likely that both the Mexica and Tlaxcalan also saw war as a convenient way of testing and training young warriors for future wars. During this time, it was a common belief in Central Mexico that offering human sacrifice to their gods would ensure the continued movement of the sun and hence the other processes needed to maintain life."



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=33487396>

The flower wars took place in the 15th and 16th centuries between the Aztecs, Tlaxcalans and others in central Mexico.



A detail from a larger manuscript page in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, this scene was created by an indigenous painter in central Mexico. In this fragment, Xicotencatl, the head of the indigenous state of Tlaxcala, greets Hernán Cortés, the leader of the Spanish conquistadors. The two men would become allies, banding together to defeat Motecuzoma and his capital city, Tenochtitlan. Below and at the center of the image stands doña Marina; her placement underscores the role she played as linguistic and cultural mediator.

References

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