From Conquerors To Conquered: The Rise And Fall Of The Aztec Empire Essay, Research Paper

From Conquerors to Conquered:

The Rise and Fall of the Aztec Empire

History is possibly the most important area of study in the modern world. We begin our study of history at an early age and continue throughout our lives. We need to keep an account of the past in order to truly understand who we are today. The old saying, +history repeats itself,+ has a great deal of truth to it. The development of agriculture, architecture, and literature are just a few areas in which history has indeed repeated itself in different times, in different lands, but often from similar causes and with similar consequences. However, sometimes history+s repetition takes on an ironic twist. Societies designed to empower the wealthy are overthrown by the poor. Individuals who are scorned and rejected during their lifetime are later realized for their progressive genius. An aggressive culture takes over an area, builds a great empire, only to be eventually overthrown by somebody else. This, the endless cycle of the conqueror becoming the conquered, is the case with the Aztec empire.

One of the most prominent topics of interest when studying history is conflict. We want to know what factors led to certain wars, how the winning side succeeded, and what the immediate and long term effects of the war were. The major difficulty in studying wars is the fact that their accounts are generally recorded by the victors. The losers are usually not in a position to challenge the victors+ accounts or even to plead their case. This is the situation we face when we study the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The majority of the material on this subject has been taken from the Spanish accounts, such as the True History of the Conquest of Mexico by Bernal Diaz del Castillo, and the Letters from Mexico by Hernando Cortes. This makes it difficult to get an objective view of this important historical event. For this reason, a testimony such as The Broken Spears is a vital reference tool. The Broken Spears is a record of the conquest of Mexico taken from passages written by Aztec natives. By examining both sides of this conflict, we can achieve an acceptable middle ground as we analyze the causes, effects, and importance of this event.

Certainly the Spanish conquest completely changed Mexico and is the major source of the culture present there today. But what of the culture which was present in Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors? Although the first human beings came across the Bering Strait and onto the American continent approximately 20,000 years ago, the first of these early wanderers probably did not reach Mexico for about another 10,000 years. It would take another 8,000 years or so for these people to develop a relatively sophisticated agricultural system (Leon-Portilla xxviii).

Of all of the nomadic tribes who wandered southward into Mexico, the Aztecs were one of the last. At first spurned and driven away by established tribes, the Aztecs persevered to develop an empire of immense wealth and power by the late fifteenth century. Due in large part to the accomplishments of their ruler Itzcoatl, the empire expanded to include millions of people from a host of different tribes, including the Cempoala, who would later aid the Spanish in defeating the Aztecs (Leon-Portilla xxxvii-xl).

Because of the numbers of different people within the empire, the Aztecs had a very stratified culture. This could be witnessed in the great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, whose grandeur and importance grew with the empire+s expansion. In the capital city, there was compulsory education for male children, including instruction in reading, memorization, history, religion, and ethics (Leon-Portilla xlii). In addition to being a civic and cultural center, Tenochtitlan was also a religious center of great importance. Religion was an integral part of the empire, and the Aztecs frequently honored their gods with festivals and sacrifices, including human ones (xxxvii).

To the Aztecs, it seemed as if the earth and sky were warning them about the coming danger. For months and even years before the Spanish arrived, a series of omens had foretold that something bad was going to happen (Leon-Portilla 3-12). These signs weighed heavily on the mind of the of the Aztec leader Motecuhzoma on that fateful day in November of 1519, when he received reports of +`towers or small mountains++ floating off of the Mexican coast (13). Was it Quetzalcoatl, the legendary figure who had one day promised to return from across the ocean (xxx)? In his distress, the superstitious Motecuhzoma sent messengers bearing gifts to the Spanish ships, in order to appease these +gods+.

However, the Aztec leader was not alone in his attempt to curry favor with these strangers. Fearful of the Spanish, and hateful of the wealth and power of the Aztecs, some of the native tribes, particularly the Cempoala and others from the cities of Tlaxcala and Tezcoca, joined forces with Cortes. After the Spaniards annihilated the Cholultecas, the terrified people of the Aztec empire did their best to please them, as the Europeans made their way inland (Leon-Portilla 40-41, 47-49). By the time Cortes reached Tenochititlan, this combination of envy and fear had helped him to accumulate a large number of allies.

Believing that Cortes was indeed Quetzalcoatl, Motecuhzoma greeted the Spanish with great deference. Cortes responded, +`We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear++ (Leon-Portilla 65). Nevertheless, Motecuhzoma was kept under guard by the suspicious conquistador. Instead of resisting, Motecuhzoma did everything he could to please the Spanish, ordering his attendants and servants to supply everything that Cortes requested. Even when Cortes offered to release the Aztec king, Motecuhzoma displayed his desire to stay with the Spanish. Cortes explains this to Charles V:

. . . by announcing publicly to all the natives . . . that it was Your Majesty+s wish that Mutezuma should remain in power, acknowledging the sovereignty which Your Highness held over him, and that they could best serve Your Highness by obeying him and holding him for their lord, as they had before I came to this land . . . Many times I offered him his liberty, begging him to return to his house, and each time he told me that he was pleased to be where he was and he did not wish to go, for he lacked nothing. (Cortes 91)

Motecuhzoma+s weakness in cowering to the Spanish and becoming their lackey angered many of his followers, who began to lose respect for their king.

Cortes and his men were awed by the splendor of the Aztec capital. The Spanish leader expressed this in his second letter to Spain;

The city is so big and so remarkable that . . . the little I will say is, I think, almost unbelievable, for the city is . . . supplied with the produce of the land, namely, bread, fowl and game and fresh-water fish and vegetables and other things they eat which are very good . . . There is jewelry of gold and silver and precious stones and other ornaments of featherwork and all as well laid out as in any square or marketplace in the world. (Cortes 67)

The Spanish were overcome with covetousness. They raided the treasure houses, including Motecuhzoma+s, melting down all of the beautiful gold jewelry and artifacts into ingots (Leon-Portilla 66-69). In addition, the Spanish carried out unprovoked attacks on Aztec temples and military leaders. Cortes then had Motecuhzoma instruct his angry people not to retaliate, declaring that the Spanish were too powerful and could not be resisted. However, this angered the Aztecs even more, both at the Spanish and Motecuhzoma.

As advanced as the Aztecs were, they were no match for the Spanish forces. The Spanish weapons and training were much more advanced: their cannons, cavalry, crossbows, and iron weapons against the primitive spears and rocks of the Aztecs. Even though the Aztecs often outnumbered the Spanish, they could not overcome the superior weapons of the invaders. As Cortes explains: +There was so great a number of them [Aztecs], that the artillery had no need to aim but only to point their guns at the Indian forces+ (Cortes 131).

It is known that Motecuhzoma died during the siege of Tenochtitlan, but it is not known exactly how. Some say that he was killed by a stone slung by one of his own people, while others say that the Spaniards stabbed him to death (Leon-Portilla 90). Cortes claimed to be present when Motecuhzoma receives a fatal blow from a stone: +He received a blow on his head from a stone; and the injury was so serious that he died three days later+ (Cortes 132).

It took Cortes little more than two years to conquer most of the Aztec empire. The native leaders were imprisoned and many of them fled from their once beautiful capital. Some of the natives peoples were assimilated into the Spanish colonial culture, while others lived as exiles. Most of the buildings, schools, and homes lay in ruins. The victory provided gold and glory for Spain, and increased Spanish influence in the New World. Towns and missions spread throughout the newly conquered lands. In larger towns, such as Medellin and Vera Cruz, tithes were collected and used to build churches, pay the clergy, and take care of other religious activities (Cortes 334-335). Both the Spanish culture and their religion, Christianity, became irrevocably entrenched on the American continent.

Although so much of the Aztec culture had been destroyed, the survivors continued to pass down stories of the golden age of the Aztecs, as well as those of their bitter conquest. Some of this tradition was written down into manuscripts which provide some of the knowledge that has survived to the modern era. In fact, today there are approximately one and a half million native descendants who are attempting to preserve their ancient cultural heritage (Leon-Portilla 168).

The Spanish conquest of Mexico is an amazingly interesting topic. This is one of the reasons that it is such a popular area of study, especially in the United States. The conquest exhibited all of the qualities necessary for a legend. There was a great deal of mysticism surrounding the campaign. The bad omens, the signs in the heavens, and other strange events seemed to foretell the Aztecs+ destruction. In addition to these was the belief that Quetzalcoatl would return from across the sea one day. Cortes, being so foreign to the Aztecs and so powerful, just seemed to be in an opportunistic place at an opportunistic time. Seeing that omens and myths were at the root of the Aztec religion, Cortes+ success and Motecuhzoma+s downfall take on an added dimension of fate.

Another fascinating aspect of the conquest was the incredible success of Cortes in regard to the Spanish propaganda that drove the purpose for the conquest. His letters display a sycophantic loyalty to Charles V, as if everything that he and his men are doing is for the glory of the Spanish crown. In addition, Cortes+ propaganda takes on a religious tone, making the destruction of the Aztec empire appear necessary for the perpetuation of Christendom. He even relates how he goes to Mass before a hard day+s work slaughtering natives (Cortes 224).

Probably the most interesting aspect of the Aztec conquest was the irony of the whole situation. The Aztecs were a very powerful and sophisticated population for this region. They had conquered many other tribes to achieve their position of power and status. The the Spanish arrived and gave them a dose of their own medicine. The Aztecs became a conquered people forced into subservience. They were no longer in charge of their own lives. Forced to adapt to a new social environment, the greatness of the Aztec culture quickly faded away.

The idea of a conquering civilization becoming a conquered civilization is so fascinating because it is a scenario seen throughout history. It happens to all great civilizations. One might say it is inevitable. There are some common characteristics to great cultures right before they collapsed. The most obvious of these is the presence of a poor leader, or the lack of a good one. When the Roman Empire was ravaged by the Huns, Valentinian III, failed to unite his people against the invaders. The Egyptians fell to the Cushites under Ramses III, whose ability was far surpassed by his predecessors.

The seeming inevitability of the demise of great civilizations has lead me to ponder the future of our own. Throughout its history, the United States has grown into a world power. It has grown and survived in some part due to conquest: expelling the British in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the defeat of the Native American tribes as the fulfillment of +manifest destiny+, and the victories in the two World Wars. Now that the United States is the last surviving super power, I wonder how much longer we have as a great nation. Some would say that our decline has already begun, while others, especially in this election year, say that our best days are yet to come. As our nation enters the third millennium, I wonder how much longer it will take for history to repeat itself.

Cortes, Hernan. Letters from Mexico. Trans. and Ed. Anthony Pagden. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.

Leon-Portilla, Miguel, ed. The Broken Spears. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.