

The Fall of Tenochtitlan

THE CORTÉS CONQUEST

In 1521 Hernán Cortés attacked the Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan, to seize Mexico for Spain. The Aztec had superior numbers, but inferior technology and vulnerability to foreign diseases doomed their empire.



THE SPANISH SIEGE

This 18th-century oil painting, part of the Conquest of Mexico series at the Library of Congress, shows Hernán Cortés poised at the gates of the capital of the Aztec Empire.

EILEEN TWEEDY/ART ARCHIVE

The first reference to the New World was made in 1503 by the Italian explorer and financier Amerigo Vespucci—for whom the entire continent of America was later named. The sheer scale of the “new” landmass became further apparent to Europeans in the course of the expedition led by Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who in 1513 crossed Central America to reach the Pacific.

At first, colonization by the burgeoning new world power, Spain, was centered on the islands of the Caribbean, with little contact with the complex, indigenous civilizations on the mainland. It was not long, however, before the lure of wealth spurred Spain’s adventurers beyond exploration and into a phase of conquest that would lay the foundations of the modern world. Whole swaths of the Americas rapidly fell to the Spanish crown, a transformation begun by the ruthless conqueror of the Aztec Empire, Hernán Cortés.

Like other conquistadores of the early 16th century, Cortés had already gained considerable experience by living in the New World before embarking on his exploits. Born to modest lower nobility in the Spanish city of Medellín in 1485, Cortés stood out at an early age for his intelligence and his restless spirit of adventure inspired by the recent voyages of Christopher Columbus.

In 1504—as Vespucci’s New World pamphlet was circulating through Europe—Cortés left Spain for the island of Hispaniola (today, home to the Dominican Republic and Haiti), where he rose through the ranks of the fledgling colonial administration. In 1511 he joined an expedition to conquer Cuba, where he was appointed secretary to the island’s first colonial governor, Diego Velázquez.

During these years, Cortés developed the skills that would stand him in good stead in his short, turbulent career as a conquistador. He gained valuable insights into the organization of the islands’ indigenous peoples and proved an adept arbiter in the continual squabbles

HERNÁN CORTÉS reaches Veracruz, where he scuttles his ships. He crosses Mexico and enters Tenochtitlan for the first time.

FACING an Aztec revolt, the Spanish flee Tenochtitlan during the Night of Sorrows. They regroup to defeat the Aztec at the Battle of Otumba.

HAVING LAID siege to Tenochtitlan, the city falls to Cortés at last. He takes Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc as his prisoner.

FACING charges of negligence, Cortés travels to Spain. After being appointed marquis by the king, he returns to the New World in 1530.

BACK IN Spain, Cortés tries to return to the Indies one last time. Suffering from poor health, he dies in 1547.

that broke out among the Spaniards, forever vying to enlarge their estates or snag lucrative administrative positions.

In 1518 Velázquez appointed his secretary to lead an expedition to Mexico. Cortés—as Velázquez was to discover to his cost—was set on becoming a leader rather than a loyal follower. He set off for the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula in February 1519 with 11 ships, about 100 sailors, 500 soldiers, and 16 horses. Over the following months Cortés would take matters into his own hands, disobey the governor’s orders, and turn what had been intended to be an exploratory mission into a historic military conquest.

A World Ends

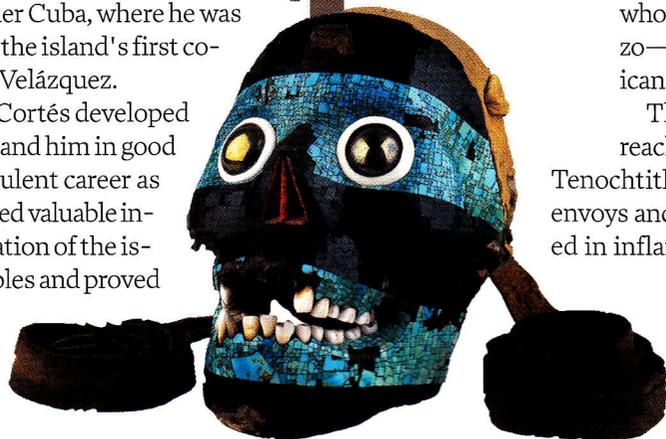
To the Aztec, 1519 was a year that began with their empire as the uncontested power in the region. Its capital city, Tenochtitlan, ruled 400 to 500 small states with a total population of five to six million. The fortunes of the kingdom of Moctezuma, however, were doomed to a swift and spectacular decline once Cortés and his men disembarked on the Mexican coast.

Having rapidly imposed control over the indigenous population in the coastal region, Cortés was given 20 slaves by a local chieftain. One of them, a young woman, could speak several local languages and soon learned Spanish too. Her linguistic skills would prove crucial to Cortés’s invasion plans, and she became his interpreter as well as his concubine. She soon came to be known as Malinche, or Doña Marina. The conquistador had a son with her, Martín, who is often regarded as the first ever mestizo—a person of mixed European and American Indian ancestry.

The news of the foreigners’ arrival soon reached the Aztec emperor, Moctezuma, in Tenochtitlan. To appease the Spaniards, he sent envoys and gifts to Cortés, but he only succeeded in inflaming Cortés’s desires for more Aztec

riches. Cortés once described the land near

MOSAIC MASK OF TURQUOISE AND LIGNITE COVERS A HUMAN SKULL AND REPRESENTS AN AZTEC GOD, TEZCATLIPOCA.



1519
1520
1521
1528
1540-47
ERICH LESSING/ALBUM

The Women in Cortés's Life

Veracruz, the city he founded on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, as rich as the mythical land where King Solomon obtained his gold. As a mark of his ruthlessness, and to quash any misgivings his crew may have had in disobeying the orders of Governor Velázquez, Cortés ordered the destruction of the fleet he had sailed with from Cuba. There was now no turning back.

Cortés had a talent for observing and manipulating local political rivalries. On the way to Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards gained the support of the Totonac peoples from the city of Cempoala, who hoped to be freed from the Aztec yoke. Following a military victory over another native people, the Tlaxcaltec, Cortés incorporated more warriors into his army. Knowledge of the divisions among different native peoples, and an unerring ability to exploit them, was central to Cortés's strategy.

The Aztec had allies too, however, and Cortés was especially belligerent toward them. The holy city of Cholula, which joined with Moctezuma in an attempt to stall the Spaniards, was sacked for two days at Cortés's command. After a grueling battle lasting more than five hours, as many as 6,000 of its people were killed. Cortés's forces seemed invincible. In the face of their unstoppable advance, Moctezuma stalled for time, allowing the Spaniards and their allies to enter Tenochtitlan unopposed in November 1519.

Fighting on Two Fronts

Fear gripped the huge Aztec capital on Cortés's entry, the chroniclers wrote: Its 250,000 inhabitants put up no resistance to Cortés's small force of a few hundred men and 1,000 Tlaxcaltec allies. At first Moctezuma formally received Cortés. Seeing the value of the emperor as a captive, Cortés seized him and guaranteed his power over the city.

Establishing a pattern that would recur throughout his career, Cortés soon found himself as much at threat from his own compatriots as from the peoples he was trying to subdue. At the beginning of 1520 he was forced to leave Tenochtitlan to deal with a punitive expedition sent from Cuba by the enraged Diego Velázquez. In his absence, Cortés left Tenochtitlan under the command of Pedro de Alvarado and a garrison of 80 Spaniards.

According to the chronicler Francisco López de Gómara, Cortés had a fondness for the ladies; he was "very given to women and always gave into temptation." His biography abounds in romantic entanglements. In 1504, for instance, he was unable to leave for the Indies because of the injuries he suffered after falling off a wall during a romantic tryst. Throughout his career, Cortés's eventful and colorful personal life revealed a manipulative streak. In 1514 he wooed a young Spanish woman named Catalina Suárez, a relative of Governor Diego Velázquez. Cortés might have been more interested in her family's connections and power than in her heart. After a prolonged courtship, the two married, and Cortés received a promotion. But Cortés would not prove faithful, especially after the conquest of Mexico. Malinche, an Aztec woman who served as his interpreter, also became his lover. She bore him a son. Catalina endured this and other infidelities, but her death ended the marriage. She was found dead in her own bed under mysterious circumstances in 1522. Cortés was suspected of her murder, but the charges against him were dropped. Cortés then took as a consort Princess Isabel Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor's daughter. She and Cortés had a daughter, but he later abandoned them. In 1529 Cortés took a Spanish noblewoman, Juana de Zúñiga, as his bride and became a marquis, securing both a high social status and a rather lecherous reputation.



MALINCHE AND CORTÉS IN MURALS DEPICTING MEXICAN HISTORY PAINTED BY DIEGO RIVERA, IN PALACIO NACIONAL, MEXICO CITY

A *smallpox* epidemic prevented the Aztec from *finishing off* the defeated Spanish army. It gave Cortés enough time to regroup.

The hotheaded Alvarado lacked Cortés's skill and diplomacy. During Cortés's absence, Alvarado's execution of many Aztec chiefs enraged the people. After defeating Velázquez's forces, Cortés returned to Tenochtitlan on June 24, 1520, to find the city in revolt against his proxy. For several days, the Spaniards vainly used Moctezuma in an attempt to calm tempers, but his people pelted the puppet king with stones. Moctezuma died a few days later, but his successors would fare no better than he did.

On June 30, 1520, the Spanish fled the city under fire, suffering hundreds of casualties. Some Spaniards died by drowning in the surrounding marshes, weighed down by the vast amounts of treasure they were trying to carry off. The event would come to be known as the Night of Sorrows.

A smallpox epidemic prevented the Aztec forces from finishing off Cortés's defeated and demoralized army. The outbreak weakened the Aztec while giving Cortés time to regroup. Spain would win the Battle of Otumba a few days later. Skillful deployment of cavalry against the elite Aztec jaguar and eagle warriors carried the day for the Europeans and their allies. "Our only security, apart from God," Cortés wrote, "is our horses."

Victory allowed the Spaniards to rejoin with their Tlaxcaltec allies and launch the recapture of Tenochtitlan. Waves of attacks were launched on settlements near the Aztec capital. Any resistance was brutally crushed: Many indigenous enemies were captured as slaves and some were even branded following their capture. The sacking also allowed the Spaniards to build up their large personal retinues, taking captives to use as servants and slaves, and kidnapping others for exchanges and ransoms. Growing in number to roughly 3,000 people, this group of captives vastly outnumbered the fighting Spaniards.

Complete Devastation

For an assault on a city the size of Tenochtitlan, the number of Spanish troops seemed paltry—just under 1,000 soldiers, including harquebusiers, infantry, and cavalry. However, Cortés knew that

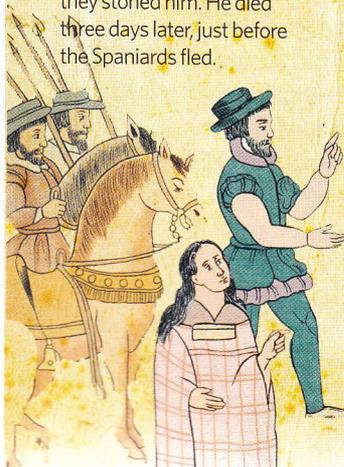
THE PATH

In 1519 Hernán Cortés's forces struck



Emperor Moctezuma

Hernán Cortés took him prisoner when he entered Tenochtitlan. In June 1520 Cortés forced Moctezuma to speak to his subjects but they stoned him. He died three days later, just before the Spaniards fled.



1

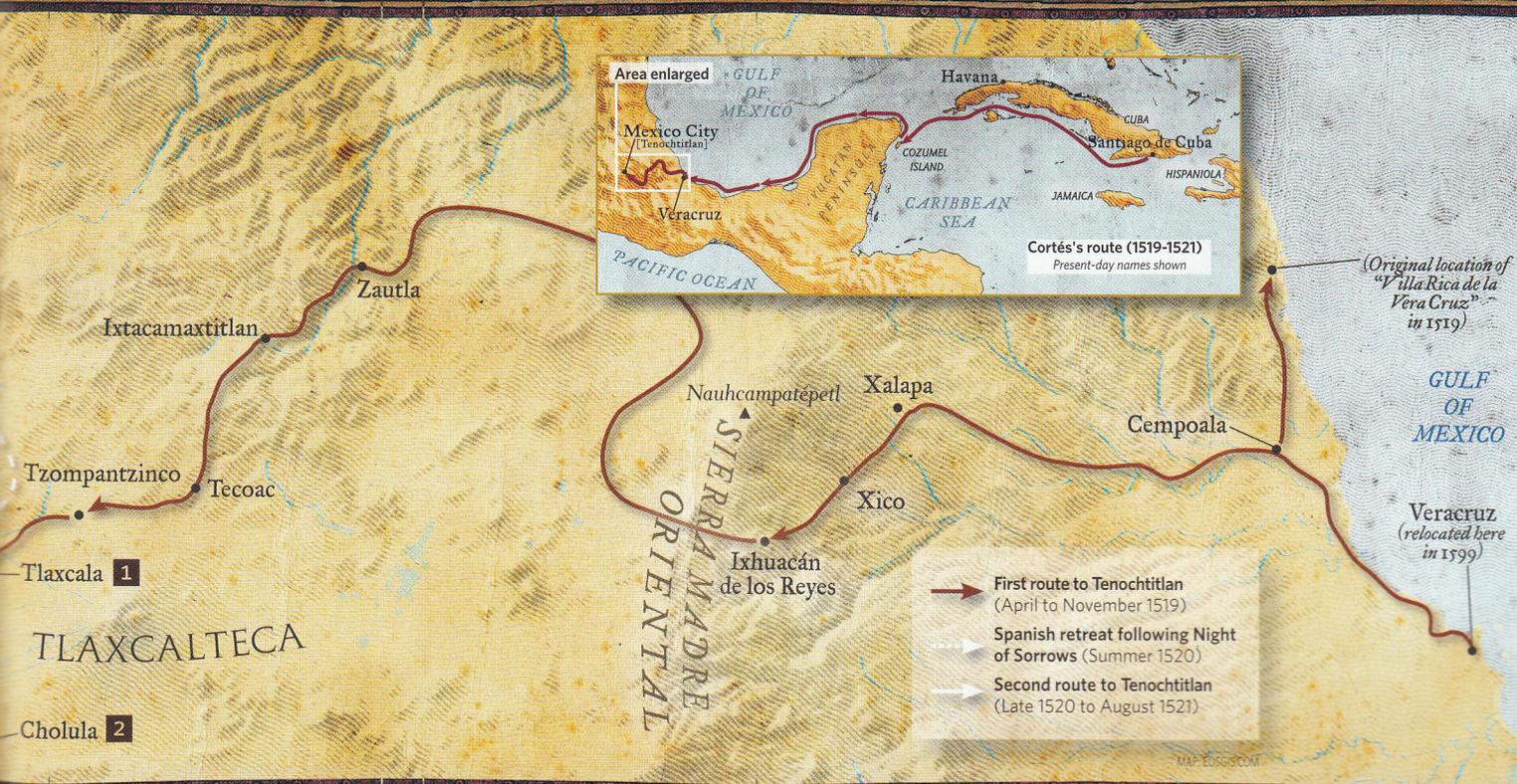
THE TLAXCALA ALLIANCE

Marching toward Tenochtitlan, Cortés assumed he had an alliance with the people of Tlaxcala, who were an enemy of the Aztec. However, the Tlaxcaltec fought the Spanish forces in a fierce, three-day battle after which the Tlaxcaltec decided to negotiate with Cortés. Xicoténcatl, Lord of Tlaxcala, agreed to deal with him, as his god had prophesied that "men would come from far-off lands from the direction in which the sun rises to rule over them." He offered the Spaniards 300 women, and Cortés gave them textiles and salt. Later, the Tlaxcaltec military assistance ultimately helped Cortés topple the Aztec Empire in 1521.

CORTÉS AND MALINCHE PARLEY WITH A TLAXCALTEC. ILLUSTRATION FROM HISTORY OF TLAXCALA CODEX

TO TENOCHTITLAN

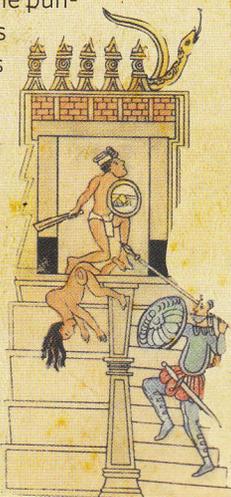
into the Mexican interior seeking to capture Tenochtitlan, capital of the empire.



2

THE CHOLULA MASSACRE

On leaving Tlaxcala, Cortés wanted to take Cholula, a city allied with Tenochtitlan. The Cholulteca let the Spaniards stay in their city but secretly planned to attack them. When Cortés discovered the plot, he summoned the city nobles to the courtyard of the Temple of Quetzalcoátl and warned them that in Spain the punishment for traitors was death. Then his soldiers fired theirarquebuses at the assembled nobles. From there, the violence spiraled. Some sources speak of as many as two, four, or even six thousand dead in total.



SPANISH SOLDIERS ATTACKING THE NOBLES IN CHOLULA (HISTORY OF TLAXCALA)

3

THE NIGHT OF SORROWS

In June 1520 Cortés and his men (including the Tlaxcaltec) were besieged by the Aztec in their barracks in Tenochtitlan. On the night of June 30, they retreated in heavy rain, using a mobile bridge to cross the canals that cut across the road—but they were spotted, reportedly by a woman, who cried: "Captains, Mexicans, our enemies are leaving! Go and chase them." Hundreds of canoes came after them. Many Spaniards drowned in the canal and others were captured to be sacrificed. Up to 600 Spaniards died in what was the worst Spanish disaster in the conquest of Mexico.



AZTEC CAPTURE A SPANIARD ON THE NIGHT OF SORROWS. (HISTORY OF TLAXCALA)

4

THE FALL OF TENOCHTITLAN

Having regrouped, Cortés planned to capture Tenochtitlan. Two months into the siege, hunger ravaged the city's defenders while Spanish cavalry and Tlaxcaltec warriors killed hundreds of enemies every day. Cortés later wrote, on entering the city: "We found many piles of bodies in the streets; one could not help but step on them." Cuauhtémoc, the young Aztec emperor, was unable to mount an effective defense, and was captured. At first Cortés spared his life, but he had him killed three years later.



THE SURRENDER OF CUAUHTÉMOC TO CORTÉS (HISTORY OF TLAXCALA)



PUTTING ON A SHOW

Part of the Conquest of Mexico series at the Library of Congress, this painting depicts Aztec ambassadors observing maneuvers by Cortés's troops at Veracruz, a gesture combining diplomacy with an intimidating display of strength.

ERICH LESSING/ALBUM

The siege of *Tenochtitlan* was not a given. During fighting in July 1521, *the Aztec* even managed to capture Cortés himself.

his superior weaponry, coupled with the additional 50,000 warriors provided by his indigenous allies, would conquer the city, which was already weakened from starvation and thirst. In May 1521 the Spaniards had cut off the city's water supply by taking control of the Chapultepec aqueduct.

Even so, the siege of Tenochtitlan was not a given. During fighting in July 1521, the Aztec held strong, even capturing Cortés himself. Wounded in one leg, the Spanish leader was ultimately rescued by his captains. During this setback for the conquistador, the Aztec warriors managed to regain lost ground and rebuild the city's fortifications, pushing the Spanish onto the defensive for nearly three weeks. Cortés ordered the marshland to be filled with rubble for a final assault. Finally, on August 13, 1521, the city fell.

"Not a single stone remained left to burn and destroy," one witness wrote. The loss of human life was staggering, both in absolute figures and in its disproportionality. During the siege, around 100 Spaniards lost their lives compared to as many as 100,000 Aztec.

The conquest of Tenochtitlan and the subsequent consolidation of Spanish domination over the former Aztec Empire was the first major possession in what became the Spanish Empire. This vast territory would reach its greatest extent in the 18th century, with territory throughout North and South America.

Cortés's triumph would be short-lived. In just a few years, he would lose many of his lands in the New World. Despite being made a marquis years later, the Conqueror of Mexico did not have a glorious end. In 1547, at the age of 62, he died in a village near Sevilla, Spain, embroiled in lawsuits and his health broken by a series of disastrous expeditions. Decades of rapid expansion in the Americas seemed to have eclipsed his own exploits, and few bells tolled for the man whose ruthlessness and cunning transformed the Americas. ■

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RISE AND SET

Near Mexico City, the Pyramid of the Sun looms over Teotihuacan, a city that flourished in the third century A.D. Its culture was later imitated by the Aztec, who believed it was where the sun god was born.

DAVID R. FRAZIER/AGE FOTOSTOCK

TECHNOLOGY TRIUMPHS

Although the Aztec had the superior numbers, advanced Spanish weaponry ultimately gave them the upper hand. With firearms and steel blades at his disposal, just one Spaniard might annihilate dozens or even hundreds of opponents: "On a sudden, they speared and thrust people into shreds," wrote one indigenous chronicler, having witnessed the terrifying impact of European arms. "Others were beheaded in one swipe . . . Others tried to run in vain from the butchery, their innards falling from them and entangling their very feet."

THE SPANISH IRON AND STEEL

Armor

Linked steel plates offered almost complete protection from Aztec weapons.



Gauntlet

Cuisse

Halberd

A deadly combination: a six-foot-long spear and ax

Greave



Harquebus

Also called a hackbut, this early gun had a firing range of less than 650 feet.



Sword

Its long steel blade was sharp, light, and easy to handle.



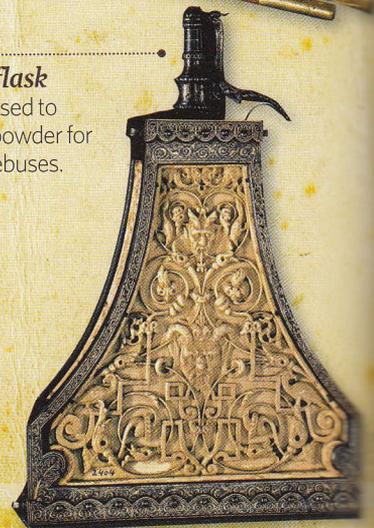
Cannon

Made of cast bronze and iron, its range was more than a mile.



Powder flask

This was used to carry gunpowder for the harquebuses.



Crossbow

Made of two lengths of metal, it shot projectiles more than 1,000 feet.





Superior Strategy

Aztec military tactics also put them at a disadvantage, even in situations where they seemed to have the advantage—such as in this engraving, where Aztec are besieging Spaniards in Moctezuma's palace. Unlike the Spanish, Aztec soldiers did not march in columns, nor did they charge or retreat in unison, making it hard for them to fight as one.

**THE AZTEC
STONE AND WOOD**



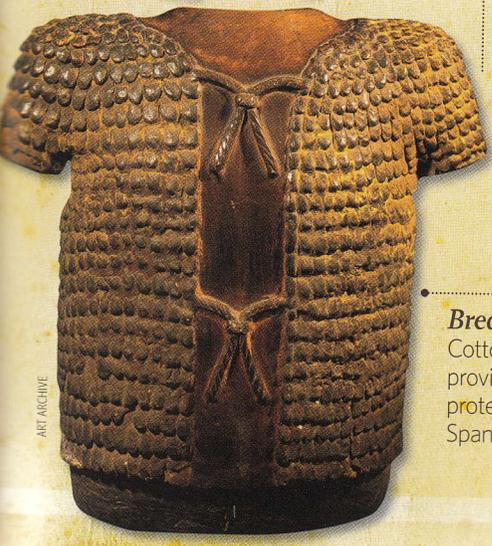
AGE FOTOSTOCK

Flint tip
Some spears had flint tips—no match for Spanish suits of armor.



ART ARCHIVE

Crown
Made of quetzal feathers, gold, and precious stones, it is a royal headdress.



ART ARCHIVE

Breastplate
Cotton-lined, it provided poor protection against Spanish weapons.



ART ARCHIVE

Eagle warrior
Elite Aztec soldiers wielded spears or wooden clubs with obsidian tips.

Light cuirass

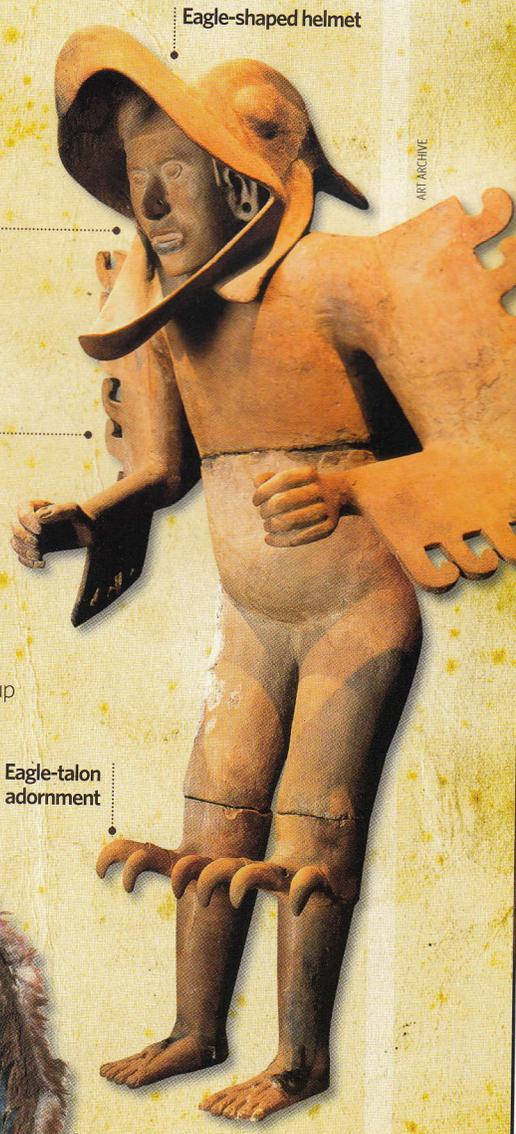
Atlatl
A weapon like this could launch spears and darts at speeds up to 93 miles an hour.

Eagle-talon adornment



ART ARCHIVE

Shield
Made of wood, leather, and feathers, it could not stand up to iron and steel.



ART ARCHIVE

Eagle-shaped helmet