

Tlaxcala In Defense of Its Past

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Drawing by Rossana Bohórquez

The Tlaxcaltecs arrived in this tiny part of Mexico's territory—about 0.2 percent—covered with small valleys, mountains, hills and its great volcano, Matlalcuéytl or Malinche, about the year 1100. They were part of the vast migrant group known as the Teochichimecs. Like other peoples who settled in Mexico's central highlands, the Tlaxcaltecs began their trip at Chicomoztoc, "The Place of the Seven Caves," a site that down through the years became almost mythical, which history books have located somewhere in the northeast.

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The long years of wandering and coexisting with more developed cultures like the Toltec and Teotihuacan civilizations allowed the Tlaxcaltecs to polish their forms of socioeconomic, cultural and religious organization. To establish themselves in the Puebla-Tlaxcaltec valley, they had to subdue other peoples settled there like the Otomí and the Olmec-Xicalancas, the creators of the splendor that is Cacaxtla.

Both historical sources and archaeological exploration have contributed information to clarify the foundation of the Tlaxcaltec settlements and their evolution. The first known settlement was Tepetícpac, meaning "Between the

Hills," founded by Culhuatécuhli Quanez in around the twelfth century.

The second settlement was Ocotelulco, or "In the Place of the Pines," which originated with the population and land that the Lord of Tepetícpac gave to his brother Teyohualminqui. Power struggles among the Ocotelulcas led to the assassination of the governing family and put a Cholultec group at the head of the fief. Under these circumstances, a group led by Tzompante decided to leave Ocotelulco and establish themselves in Teotlalpan. After more bloodshed, like the assassination of ruler Xayacamachan, a group of Tlaxcaltecs left and founded the fief of Tizatlán, "Place of the

White Stone,” the third largest fief. After some years, a new group of Teochichimecs asked the Tlaxcaltecs to be allowed to settle in the land under their rule, leading to the building of Quiahuiztlán.

When the Spaniards arrived in Tlaxcaltec lands in 1519, the four aforementioned fiefs were the most important in the region, despite the existence of other important communities like Chiautempan, Atlihuetzía, Tepeyanco and Hueyotlipan.

Generally speaking it was the *tecuhтли* who topped the pyramid of Tlaxcaltec political organization. Even when his decision making was supported by a council of elders, the final choice was in his hands.

In the long struggle by the Tlaxcaltecs to consolidate and preserve their territory, they had to face and stop the expansionism of cities like Cholula, Huejotzingo, Tezcoco and Tenochtitlan.

The rivalry among these peoples, despite its depth, was not very old. Historical sources refer to the constant coexistence among members of the governing elites of Tlaxcala, Tenochtitlan and Tezcoco, in addition to the important trade that the Tlaxcaltecs did with the peoples of the Valley of Mexico and the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico until the mid-fourteenth century.

We should, then, try to clarify how intercultural relations between the Mexicas and the Tlaxcaltecs became as strained as what the Spaniards found on their arrival. This would put the alliance or military agreement between Spaniards and Tlaxcaltecs into its historical context.

About 1454, given the bad harvests caused by a drought that affected a large geographical area, some rulers and their councilors agreed to program

armed clashes, attributing the lack of rain to the anger of their gods. In addition to appeasing the gods, some of these pacts to do combat served as training and education for Mexica, Tezcocan, Tlaxcaltec and Cholultec warriors, as well as those from all the cities who accepted participating in the “flowery wars.” Some chroniclers, like Friar Diego de Durán, took down what these wars consisted of and the protocol that regulated them, in addition to noting the disputes and enmities that rose out of the clashes and some of the consequences that tainted relations among the peoples, such as the death of Tlachuepatzin, the son of Moctezuma, *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan.

The Mexicas began to block the flow of goods from Tlaxcaltec traders. The blockade went as far as to ban their traveling certain routes under the control of the *pochtecas*, or Mexica merchants, making it impossible for them to trade with the peoples of the Gulf of Mexico and the Valley of Mexico.

With time, this blockade strengthened the Tlaxcaltecs’ character and independence; they learned to live without products like salt or cotton, and in other cases, they took initiatives to try to substitute them. Also, the defense of their territory in the face of continual threats from neighboring peoples became vital for later generations.

Circumstances like those described contribute to explaining why it was relatively easy for the Tlaxcaltecs to make a pact with the Spanish expedition commanded by Hernán Cortés, but there are also other factors. Initially, the Tlaxcaltecs interpreted the Spanish incursion as a new threat to their territorial integrity, thinking the Spanish were emissaries or allies of the Mexica emperor Moctezuma Xoco-

yotzin. They had decided to fight the new invaders with the resources at their disposal, charging the Otomís living on their lands and serving as “border guards” with fighting the strangers and if possible, preventing them from entering. Defending the territory was a task that the Tlaxcaltec troops joined in. During the battles, the defenders practiced all kinds of strategies: for example, night fighting, given their supposition that the sunlight favored the foreigners. After a series of armed encounters in September 1519 in which the Spaniards’ combat superiority was clear—they had steel, gunpowder and horses—the Tlaxcaltecs decided to receive them in peace.

Cortés took advantage of his stay in Tlaxcala to explain to the lords of that land the principles supposedly underlying his expedition: discovering new territories and spreading the Catholic religion among their inhabitants, putting them under the aegis of the One True God and Emperor Carlos V. Achieving these aims, particularly appearing before the powerful Moctezuma in Tenochtitlan, required the support of the Tlaxcaltecs in the form of men, arms and foodstuffs.

The council discussed the question of supporting the Spaniards in their enterprise. There were those who predicted the danger that, once the Mexicas had been beaten, the Spaniards would refuse to recognize the independence of Tlaxcaltec society and would try to subject it by imposing authorities or demanding tribute. Xicohtécatl Axayacatzin, the warrior son of Xicohtécatl the Elder, lord of Tizatlán, who only a few days earlier had distinguished himself in the defense against the Spaniards, was one of the most tenacious exponents of this point of view.

Nevertheless, the prevailing opinion, held by Maxixcatzin, lord of Ocotelulco, was to offer the aid requested.

Several events symbolically sealed the Spanish-Tlaxcaltec alliance. One was the acceptance of the Spanish god by the main lords, who were even baptized and given Christian names.¹ This sacrament was the beginning of the acceptance of the Spaniards as representatives of a different culture, another power and its symbols.

The alliance was strengthened by the offering of a group of maidens of good lineage, in whom a new seed, new blood would germinate. The Spaniards, for their part, knew how to take full advantage of the Tlaxcaltec aid and, overcoming difficulties and setbacks—we must not forget *The Sad Night*—² achieved their purpose August 13, 1521.

An alliance between indigenous and Spaniards? It was not the first, nor the only one, nor was it to be the last. The Tlaxcaltec lords were neither the first nor the only ones to negotiate with the Spaniards the terms under which they would march together to conquer Tenochtitlan. Over the years, many have pointed to this alliance by the Tlaxcaltecs with the Spanish invaders as “treason.” From the strictly historical point of view, the Tlaxcaltecs, like the Cempoaltecs before them or the Xochimilcas after them, limited themselves to weighing the advantages and disadvantages in joining in a conquest by a technologically more advanced army like the Spaniards’ against a regime, like the Mexica regime, that had done everything to try to subdue them.

From that same point of view, it should be remembered that pre-Hispanic political and military history has numerous examples of alliances made to conquer peoples and territories. Thus,

following the custom of the time, the Tlaxcaltecs allied with the Spaniards pursuing the same military objective. The notions of nationality or sovereignty did not figure in the equation; these concepts were used to refer to the physical area dominated by a particular culture through language, economic-political forms, cultural creation and a specific world view.

The big difference for the Tlaxcaltecs is the advantage they were able to extract from this alliance. This advantage was not merely momentary, but lasted for years or even centuries.

In addition to their participation in the conquest of Tenochtitlan, the Tlaxcaltecs gave very important aid to the Spaniards during the conquest and

the Tlaxcaltecs would enjoy other prerogatives like their lands being excluded from the distribution of land grants to Spaniards or their inhabitants being exempt from the payment of some tributes.

Around 1535, the Tlaxcaltecs requested that the Spanish Crown formally recognize their alliance during the conquest of these lands; this petition was resolved by granting Tlaxcala the title of “Loyal City,” modified 50 years later by Felipe II, who broadened the definition to “Distinguished, Most Noble and Very Loyal City.”

A decade before the end of the sixteenth century, a new project for expanding the territory would once again call the Tlaxcaltecs to cooperate with the

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pacification of New Spain. They participated in the battalions that conquered and pacified the lands to the north, all the way to New Galicia, and to the south all the way to Central America.

Tlaxcaltec participation in this process defined an exceptional relationship to the Spanish Crown and gave them tangible benefits, like the right to reorganize their structure of government, taking some elements from their pre-Hispanic political tradition; for example, the distribution of the land by fiefs and the ability to name a representative of each fief in the new government, as well as the right to name an indigenous governor. With the years,

Spanish Crown. After the discovery of rich veins of precious metal, particularly silver, the Spanish tried to impose themselves and their economy on the vast lands north of Mexico City. However, continual Chichimec rebellions forced the use of a large part of the human and material resources earmarked for working the mines to protect the nascent Spanish towns and the caravans that transported foodstuffs, clothing, tools or precious metals.³

After several failed attempts to subdue the rebels forcibly or send missionaries and gifts, another solution was found: moving Christianized indigenous families to the Great Chichimec area to contribute to the pacification

and indoctrination of the Chichimecs, in addition to teaching them to “live in good order,” as the different pacification initiatives emphasized. The Tlaxcaltecs, of course, were the chosen ones. Although this proposal has been attributed to several people—the viceroys the Marquis of Villamanrique and his successor Luis de Velasco II, the Spanish monarch Felipe II and Captain Miguel Caldera—it may be the latter who originated the idea. Of Spanish father and Guachichil indigenous mother, Captain Caldera may have himself experienced the advantages and disadvantages of having both indigenous and Spanish blood.

In any event, after arduous negotiations between Luis de Velasco II and

vis the viceregal authorities since it was firmly established that their council had the right to audience with the Spanish monarch. However, this did not mean, of course, that the right to maintain government with slight but defined Spanish participation was complied with in all cases to the letter.

Upon the imposition of the Bourbonic reforms in the last third of the eighteenth century, the new administrative organization for New Spain implied subjecting Tlaxcala to the intendancy of Puebla. This led the Tlaxcaltecs to defend their autonomy yet again, arguing—as was to be expected—their historical role as allies. After the presentation of royal letters and arguments by the Tlaxcaltec council, interviews

Fortunately, the objective, scientific study of pre-Hispanic cultures has made it possible to discard the ominous ideas—or better said, prejudices—about Tlaxcaltec treachery. The task of reformulating the role and weight of the Tlaxcaltecs in our history could be termed titanic. It is certainly a job that implies different levels of participation, knowledge and analysis. But, Rome was not built in a day. Some decisions to orient our historical road have already been made; it is up to this and future generations to review and repair the errors of interpretation that still cloud our vision of the past; and if history is also the root that unites and strengthens, why not nourish it with better elements every day? **MM**

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the Tlaxcaltec municipal council, and thanks to the good offices of the Franciscans Jerónimo de Mendieta and Jerónimo Zárate, a caravan of 400 families was finally formed that left Tlaxcala en route to the Great Chichimec between June 6 and 9, 1591. The caravan was protected by the Spanish authorities and had a series of benefits like the right to found towns separate from the Spanish settlements and the right to use the noble title “Don” before the names of the males, the exemption from taxes for a certain period, water rights, etc.⁴

For the 300 years of Spanish government, the Tlaxcaltecs were able to maintain certain independence vis-à-

with the viceroy and petitions to the Spanish court, Carlos IV finally ordered that Tlaxcala be separated from Puebla, assigning it a military governor answerable to the viceroy.

After the independence of New Spain, well into the nineteenth century, many attempted to use the study of history to unify or create a national consciousness. For those beginning historians, many of them staunch anti-Spaniards, the Tlaxcaltecs were to be situated with the invaders, naturally described as traitors to their own race and blood.

The great national histories and even twentieth-century Ministry of Education textbooks maintained this idea.

NOTES

¹ Friar Juan de Torquemada states in his *Monarquía indiana* (Indian Monarchy) that Xicoténcatl was baptized Vicente; Maxicatzin, Lorenzo; Tlehuexolotzin de Tepeticpac, Gonzalo; and Citlalpopocatl de Quiahuitlán, Bartolomé. *Monarquía indiana* vol. 3 (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1986), p. 169.

² The Sad Night is the name commonly given in Mexico to the episode before his final victory when Hernán Cortés broke down and wept after hundreds of his men and thousands of Tlaxcaltecs perished during a retreat from the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan. [Editor's Note.]

³ “Chichimec” was the generic name given to Cazcans, Guachichiles, Copuces and Pames, among other inhabitants of the territory known as the Great Chichimec or the Great Tunal, because of the abundance of cacti and *tuna*, or prickly pears.

⁴ The results of this initiative are a contrast with the 1560 failure promoted by Viceroy Luis Velasco senior when there was an attempt to take Tlaxcaltec colonizers to reinforce the Spanish towns or build new ones; this proposal was rejected outright by the Tlaxcaltec municipal council.