

Chapter 16 Primary Source Activity



There are only a few surviving accounts of the Spanish conquest of Mexico as told by Aztec authors. (textbook pages 395–397). This excerpt is from a history written in Nahuatl in 1528, by a group known as the “anonymous authors of Tlatelolco” (a city near Tenochtitlan). ♦ *As you read, think how the Spanish soldiers viewed this incident. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The Massacre in the Temple of Tenochtitlan

During this time, the people asked Motecuhzoma [Moctezuma] how they should celebrate their god’s fiesta. He said: “Dress him in all his finery, in all his sacred ornaments.”

During this same time The Sun [Pedro de Alvarado] commanded that Motecuhzoma and Itzcohuatzin, the military chief of Tlatelolco, be made prisoners. The Spaniards hanged a chief from Acolhuacan. . . . They also murdered the king of Nauhtla. . . .

For this reason, our warriors were on guard at the Eagle Gate. The sentries from Tenochtitlan stood at one side of the gate, and the sentries from Tlatelolco at the other. But messengers came to tell them to dress the figure of Huitzilopochtli [the sun god]. They left their posts and went to dress him in his sacred finery: his ornaments and his paper clothing.

When this had been done, the celebrants began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death. The dancers and singers were completely unarmed. They brought only their embroidered

cloaks, their turquoises, their lip plugs, their necklaces, their clusters of heron feathers, their trinkets made of deer hooves. Those who played the drums, the old men, had brought their gourds of snuff and their timbrels.

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers—and even the spectators—were also killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.

. . . The Sun treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the Captain [Cortes] left for the coast. We allowed the Captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might, and that was the beginning of the war.

“The singers—and even the spectators—were also killed.”

Source: *The Broken Spears*, ed. Miguel Leon-Portilla (Beacon Press, 1992).

CHAPTER 16

Questions to Think About

1. What actions by the Spaniards had made the Aztecs wary?
2. How were the Aztecs celebrating the festival of the sun god?
3. What did the Spaniards do after killing the people celebrating the fiesta?
4. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** According to this account, what did the Aztecs do in response to the massacre?

© Prentice-Hall, Inc.