In the Shadow of Cortés: From Veracruz to Mexico City

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The research for this exhibit is based on 61 interviews of people living along the Ruta de Cortés (May 2006 to May 2008). Selections from the interviews will be published in a forthcoming book.

The photographs were taken in May 2008.

Several of the original 16th century manuscripts and books about the conquest are currently on display at the Lilly Library.

1. The route that Cortés and his army took, called the Ruta de Cortés, began in the port of Veracruz and then proceeded up the coast to the capital of the Totonaco Indians, Zempoala, before heading inland through Xalapa, the confederation of Tlaxcala, the city of Cholula and on to center of the Aztec empire, Mexico-Tenochtitlan. The map shown here also includes other routes that Cortés used during the conquest. [Courtesy of Arqueología Mexicana (v. 9, n. 49, 2001) and Bernardo García Martínez (information); Monika Beckmann (illustration); Fernando Montes de Oca (digital design).]

2. A map of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, probably derived from the 1524 map by Hernán Cortés, shows evidence of having been reworked for print; it represents Tenochtitlan as an ideal medieval island-city. (Libro di Benedetto Bordone, 1534, courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.)

3. A 16th century manuscript (codex) with native Mesoamerican iconography depicts the violent clash between the Mexica (Aztecs) and Spaniards. The nopal (cactus) growing on a stone is the glyph for Tenochtitlan: tetl (stone) + nochtli (prickly pear) + tlan (place of). (Diego Durán, Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme, c. 1581, courtesy of the Spanish National Library, Madrid.)

4. A menacing dawn breaks over Isla de los Sacrificios, a Totonaco Indian ceremonial site. Two Spanish conquistadors landed on the island near the entrance to the harbor at modern-day Veracruz—Juan de Grijalva in 1518 and Cortés a year later. The now extinct Olmec civilization (500 CE to 200 CE) once inhabited the island, which is today controlled by the Mexican Navy.

5. The Fort of San Juan de Ulúa in Veracruz harbor served as the storehouse for the transfer of wealth from the Americas to Spain. Treasures from as far away as the markets of Manila were stored here to wait for the annual Spanish gold fleet of 50 to 70 galleons. The fort, including its modest parade ground, was reconstructed in the eighteenth century.
6. A seaman gives school children an insider’s account of the round-the-clock operation of the Port of Veracruz. Moving more than 50,000 containers a month, the port is one of the busiest in Mexico. Giant roll-on/roll-off ships, called “ro-ros,” load new cars day and night from a Volkswagen assembly plant in nearby Puebla and a Nissan factory in Toluca.

7. Sixth graders celebrating primary school graduation learn about their national history at the Baluarte Santiago, one of nine forts built by the Spanish in the 17th century to protect the settlement of Veracruz from pirates. The fort is the only one still standing and is a destination for end-of-the-term field trips for school children from all over Mexico.

8. The 18th century towers of the Veracruz state government and a nearby cathedral rise over the Zocálo in the port city of Veracruz. From Cortés’ arrival until 1700, the port was a barebones operation for Spanish conquerors and colonists because of the “vómito negro,” a mosquito borne illness that easily killed Europeans. The domed Church of Santo Domingo in the background was part of one of the many huge convents built in Veracruz.

9. On most evenings Veracruz’s central plaza, called the zócalo, fills with ambling musicians, including one with a harp unique to the city. On Thursdays, people gather to dance the graceful danzón, an art form originated in nearby Cuba at the end of the 19th century. Veracruz has a strong Afro-Caribbean presence.

10. A local storyteller stands vigil over the ruins of what is popularly called the “Casa de Cortés” in Antigua de la Veracruz, a town that promotes itself as part of the Ruta de Cortés. Although Cortés never lived here, the building served as the office of the Spanish port authority between 1523 and 1600, when the seat of government was moved to nearby Veracruz.

11. Built in 1523 at the edge of Antigua, the Hermitage of the Rosario was the first chapel in Mesoamerica, a region and cultural area extending from central Mexico to Honduras and Nicaragua. Travelers prayed in the chapel before embarking for Europe by sea or along the Camino Real, the so-called royal road that eventually reached as far as Santa Fe, New Mexico and San Francisco, California.

12. Popocatepetl, a volcano sacred to pre-Hispanic cultures, looms over Puebla, a central Mexico industrial city founded in 1531 by Spanish colonists. Puebla is internationally recognized as a gem of baroque religious architecture. In colonial times, the city was known as a New World Paradise for Christianity, boasting scores of churches, convents and monasteries.
13. Young people gather in the central plaza of Puebla. The streets of Puebla follow a Spanish grid design with central plazas, the focal point of community life, built in front of many colonial churches.

14. The Maestro Desiderio Hernández Xochitiozin spent decades (1957-95) painting a series of murals of Tlaxacalan history inside Tlaxcala’s city hall. Here, the artist highlights the alliance between Cortés and the four legendary leaders of the confederation of local altepetl or towns. Malinalli, more widely known as La Malinche, plays a central role as Cortés’ interpreter and concubine, the legendary founder of the mestizo race.

15. About to be christened, Lizath Zoe Nohal enters the first Franciscan church built in Mexico, Nuestra Señora de la Asunción in Tlaxcala (1525). An ardent supporter of the Franciscan Order, Hernán Cortés invited the order to be the first to evangelize in New Spain.

16. The Lienzo de Tlaxcala, a post-conquest codex, depicts Tlaxcalans’ role as the first large-scale indigenous group to accept conversion to Christianity. In return for their loyalty to Crown and Church, Tlaxcala was granted numerous privileges. (Courtesy of Papel y Cartón de México, S.A.)

17. Storyteller Don José Guadalupe Ramos Flores shares an affectionate moment with his granddaughter, Ofelia Andrea Huerta Vergara, in Tzompantepetl near Puebla in central Mexico. Cortés and his army defeated Tlaxcalan forces at the base of the hill near Ramos’ home. Interviewed by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Mexico’s National Institute of Anthropology and History, Ramos regularly recites his conquest story at local re-enactments of the 1519 battle.

18. A couple descends from the Sanctuary of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, a colonial church built atop the ancient pyramid to Quetzalcoatl in Cholula. Inside, visitors come from across Mexico to see the sacred statue carried by Cortés’ army. Known to some people as the Virgen Conquistadora, because she was said to have appeared miraculously and led the Spanish army in battle, and known to others as “Nuestra Madrecita Tonantzin,” the Virgin of Remedios is the focus of fervent Cholullan religious devotion.

19. A priest leads a procession carrying a replica of the Virgin of Remedios in the Plaza de la Concordia, the site of the Massacre of Cholula. Both Spanish and pre-Hispanic cultures had traditions of parading their saints and deities.
20. On Sundays in the Plaza de la Concordia, Ernesto Cuizpalli and his family re-enact traditional Nahua (Aztec) spiritual rituals with dances, ball games, and burning copal. He calls the conquest “a brutal massacre of identity” and visits Nahua spiritual leaders living at the base of a nearby volcano to receive teachings.

21. In pre-Hispanic style, a 16th century codex depicts the founding of Tenochtitlan on the lake where, according to legend, the Mexica found an eagle standing on a nopal (prickly pear cactus). The eagle and nopal were later adapted for the Mexican national seal and flag as a symbol of Mexico’s indigenous past. (Codex Mendoza, ca. 1540, courtesy of Bodleian Library, Oxford.)

22. Warm, early-evening sunlight bathes a conchero Aztec dancer who celebrates Toxcatl, a ceremony dedicated to the sun and Mexico’s bountiful dry season, on the zócalo in downtown Mexico City. The dancers are called concheros for the conch and armadillo shell instruments they use. While most are nominally Roman Catholic, the concheros have become a powerful symbol of a resurgent interest in indigenous cultures and spirituality.

23. Evoking the spirit of another time, a conchero dances in Mexico City’s zócalo. The plaza, which sits adjacent to the remains of the Templo Mayor, or the Aztec sacred Temple to the Sun, is a popular gathering place for cultural performances, religious celebrations, and political protests. The zócalo also is home to the Metropolitan Cathedral, third largest in the world and built with stone razed from the Templo Mayor.

24. Gabino López, a Mexico City archeologist, helped unearth the remains of Templo Mayor (background), the ruin of the great double pyramid temple built on the spot that the Aztecs considered the center of the earth. In 1978 workmen digging at the nearby Metropolitan Cathedral uncovered a huge stone portraying the decapitated and dismembered moon goddess Coyolxauqui, a discovery that meant they had found the Aztec temples that were thought buried beneath the cathedral. Mexico now requires the completion of an archeological survey before any construction in the eight square-blocks around the sacred Aztec temple.

25. Children dress as Indians, or indios, for the Feast of Corpus Christi on Mexico City’s zócalo. The celebration begins with a procession of Roman Catholic clergy from the nearby Metropolitan Cathedral to an open-air Mass on the plaza with priests blessing baskets of fruit and food carried by the children. During the colonial period, Corpus Christi was a popular and elite baroque spectacle of theater, processions, and music. Today’s custom of dressing children as indios is believed to symbolize Christ’s humility.
26. The sanctuary of the first Franciscan monastery in Mexico-Tenochtitlan — the Templo de San Francisco — is a haven for prayer and reflection. With Cortés’ blessing, construction of what would become the largest monastic complex in the Americas began in 1524. Today, only the main church remains of the four square block monastery.

27. The famed muralist Diego Rivera depicts Cortés as a greedy, syphilitic old man, while celebrating the diversity of pre-Hispanic civilizations. Painted in the 1930s, the murals fill the walls of the interior courtyard of the National Palace in Mexico City.

28. In pre-colonial times, the Aztecs developed a system of canals, which led more than one Spanish chronicler to compare the city to Venice. Today, pedestrians dart through a maelstrom of automobiles and buses on Mexico City’s zócalo. Even with an extensive, well-organized system of public transportation for 19 million inhabitants of the greater metropolitan area and a licensing system that restricts car use to six days a week, traffic clogs nearly all the central avenues for hours.

29. A father comforts his sleeping son at the weekly Cholula market, which spreads eight blocks long and four blocks wide in downtown Cholula. The bountiful markets that awed Cortés and his army continue to thrive throughout central Mexico, although many now include imported merchandise from the United States and China along with local agricultural products.

30. In the Plaza de la Conchita in Coyoacán, Mexico City, where Cortés and Malinalli lived after Tenochtitlan was destroyed, poet Blanca Luz Pulido talks about the conquest: “Cortés is a light and dark figure, from whom it is very hard to separate ourselves. After all, he had children here; he left his seed. He began a conquest that others carried on. In order to resolve our ambiguity as a country, we must unite the distinct elements that are part of us—accept completely our indigenous roots and leave behind our racist contradictions. If we don’t accept ourselves completely, as a country, how can we accept Cortés?”

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