**Description of Tenochtitlan**

Bernal Diaz del Castillo

| *The following passage is taken from a 16th century book, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico, by Bernal Dias del Castillo. Dias was an officer in the army of the Spanish conquer, Hernan Cortes, and was an eyewitness to the events he described. In this excerpt, Dias recalls his wonder at seeing the splendors of the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlan.**The Aztecs had built Tenochtitlan as a copy of the earlier city of Teotihuacan, a deserted ancient city the Aztecs called the “city of the gods” which now lay in ruins further north in the Valley of Mexico. While Diaz never saw or described Teotihuacan, his description of the newer Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan conveys an indirect sense of the appearance and scale of the earlier city as well.* |
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....We proceeded along the Causeway which is here eight paces in width and runs...straight to the City of Mexico [Tenochtitlan]....It was so crowded with people that there was hardly room for them all, some of them going to and others returning from the city, besides those who had come out to see us, so that we were hardly able to pass by the crowds of them that came; and the towers and temples were full of people as well as the canoes from all parts of the lake.

Gazing on such wonderful sights, we did not know what to say, or whether what appeared before us was real, for on one side, on the land, there were great cities, and in the lake ever so many more, and the lake itself was crowded with canoes, and in the Causeway were many bridges at intervals, and in front of us stood the great City of Mexico….

When we arrived at the great marketplace, we were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise that it contained, and at the good order and control that was maintained, for we had never seen such a thing before. The chieftains who accompanied us acted as guides. Each kind of merchandise was kept by itself and had its fixed place marked out. Let us begin with the dealers in gold, silver, and precious stones, feathers, mantles, and embroidered goods. Then there were other wares consisting of Indian slaves both men and women; and I say that they bring as many of them to that great market for sale as the Portuguese bring negroes from Guinea. They brought them along tied to long poles, with collars round their necks so that they could not escape, and others they left free. Next there were other traders who sold great pieces of cloth and cotton, and articles of twisted thread, and there were cacahuateros who sold cacao. In this way one could see every sort of merchandise that is to be found in the whole of New Spain. There were those who sold cloths of henequen and ropes and the sandals with which they are shod, which are made from the same plant. Sweet cooked roots, and other tubers which they get from this plant, all were kept in one part of the market in the place assigned to them. In another part there were skins of tigers and lions, of otters and jackals, deer and other animals and badgers and mountain cats, some tanned and others untanned, and other classes of merchandise....

When we arrived near the great Temple and before we had ascended a single step of it, the Great Montezuma sent down from above, where he was making his sacrifices, six priests and two chieftains to accompany our Captain. On ascending the steps, which are one hundred and fourteen in number, they attempted to take him by the arms so as to help him to ascend (thinking that he would get tired) as they were accustomed to assist their lord Montezuma, but Cortés would not allow them to come near him. When we got to the top of the great Temple, on a small plaza which has been made on the top where there was a space like a platform with some large stones placed on it, on which they put the poor Indians for sacrifice, there was a bulky image like a dragon and other evil figures and much blood shed that very day.

When we arrived there Montezuma came out of an oratory where his cursed idols were, at the summit of the great Temple, and two priests came with him, and after paying great reverence to Cortés and to all of us he said: "You must be tired, Senor Malinche, from ascending this our great Temple," and Cortés replied through our interpreters who were with us that he and his companions were never tired by anything. Then Montezuma took him by the hand and told him to look at his great city and all the other cities that were standing in the water, and the many other towns on the land round the lake, and that if he had not seen the great market place well, that from where they were they could see it better.

So we stood looking about us, for that huge and cursed temple stood so high that from it one could see over everything very well, and we saw the three causeways which led into Mexico, that is the causeway of Iztapalapa by which we had entered four days before, and that of Tacuba, and that of Tepeaquilla, and we saw the fresh water that comes from Chapultepec which supplies the city, and we saw the bridges on the three causeways which were built at certain distances apart through which the water of the lake flowed in and out from one side to the other, and we beheld on that great lake a great multitude of canoes, some coming with supplies of food and others returning loaded with cargoes of merchandise; and we saw that from every house of that great city and of all the other cities that were built in the water it was impossible to pass from house to house, except by drawbridges which were made of wood or in canoes; and we saw in those cities temples and oratories like towers and fortresses and all gleaming white, and it was a wonderful thing to behold….

After having examined and considered all that we had seen we turned to look at the great market place and the crowds of people that were in it, some buying and others selling, so that the murmur and hum of their voices and words that they used could be heard more than a league off. Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome, said that they had never beheld so large a market place and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged.