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Archaeological perspectives on the Spanish-Aztec War on its quincentennial

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH-AZTEC WAR ON ITS QUINCENTENNIAL

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Five hundred years after the Mexica leader Cuauhtemoc submitted to the joint Spanish and Native Mesoamerican forces led by Hernando Cortés—on August 13, 1521—the narrative behind the Spanish-Aztec War, or “conquest of Mexico,” is being reexamined by academic and broader publics. Community-informed research projects within archaeology, history, and related disciplines have been central in bringing previously excluded perspectives to light. This all takes place within a context of global efforts to highlight colonial legacies and Indigenous resilience in the present day and to decolonize historical perspectives grounded in Eurocentric texts.

In this article, we provide an overview of some recent archaeological insights into these momentous events, their quincentennial commemoration in Mexico and elsewhere, and how historical

memory of them is engaged in the construction of modern identities. Our focus emphasizes recent research in the Mexican state of Tlaxcala (ancient Tlaxcallan), as one of the last to resist the expanding Triple Alliance empire, which was headed by the Mexica of Tenochtitlan but also included the Acolhua of Texcoco and Tepaneca of Tlacopan. In its unique role as site of imperial resistance and Spanish alliance, Tlaxcala represents a challenge to dominant Spanish and Mexica narratives. We write from our collective experience working on various projects in the contemporary state, to explore the ways that contact-era Tlaxcallan can serve as a case study for using archaeology to trace the legacies of colonial violence and Indigenous resistance into the present. We highlight some recent research that we and colleagues have undertaken to better understand central Mexico on the eve of this encounter, the violent conflict involved in the invasion and

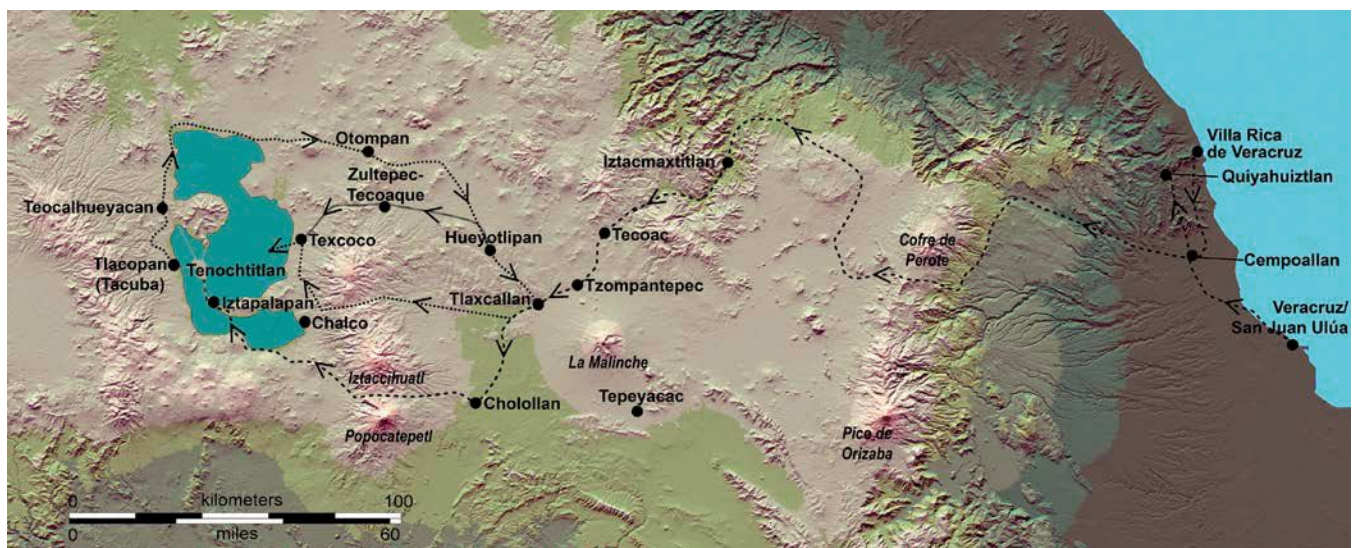


Figure 1. Overland invasion route with dashed line representing the route from the Gulf of Mexico through Tlaxcala to Tenochtitlan and stippled line representing the retreat to Tlaxcala following expulsion by the Mexica during the Noche Triste/Victoriosa and final siege launched from Texcoco. (Map by David Carballo.)

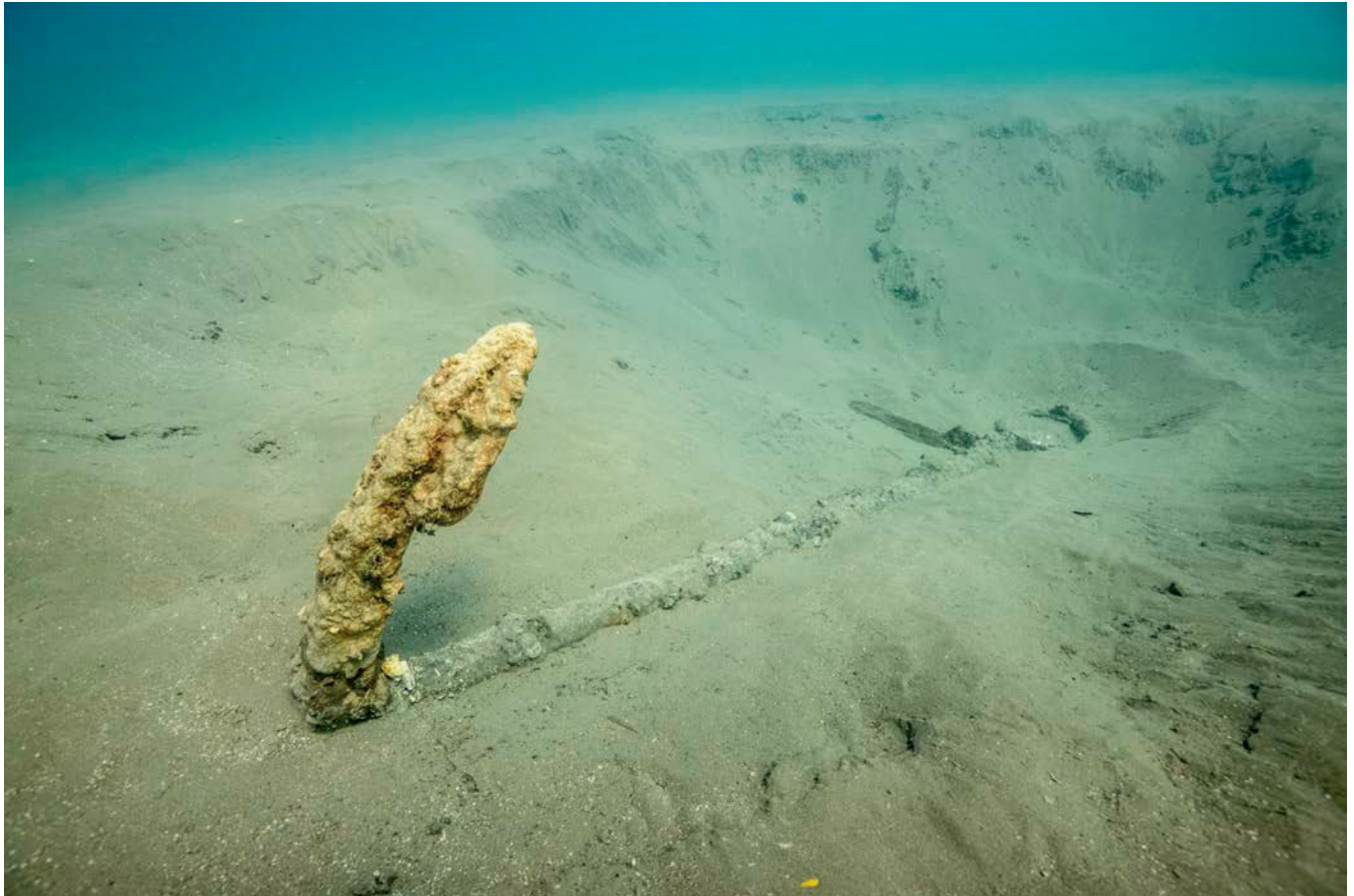


Figure 2. Anchor off the coast of Villa Rica de Veracruz discovered by the Subdirección de Arqueología Subacuática, INAH. (Photo by Jonathan Kingston/SAS-INAH courtesy of SAS-INAH. Used with permission.)

aftermath during the colonial period, and the role of foodways in reviving and perpetuating the values of Indigenous relationships to land and community, even 500 years later.

Archaeological Perspectives on the “*Conquista*”

The invasion and colonization of Mesoamerica was framed by Spanish authors in the sixteenth century as a *conquista*, and that term remains common within literature on the topic. It has been critiqued in recent decades for the connotations of heroism, purposefulness, and finality it implies for what was in actuality a protracted process of subjugation and colonialism (Restall 2003).¹ Ever since Cortés sent his first letters back to Spain narrating the still-in-progress events, historical texts have been the dominant source marshaled in their retelling. Texts also include the voices of Native authors, whom Mexican scholars such as Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora began elevating into historical narratives in the seventeenth century, though they were not centered by historians outside of Mexico until the last few decades. It

will not come as novel to readers of the *Record* that archaeological perspectives can augment or contradict understandings derived exclusively through texts. They help decolonize narratives of these events by counterbalancing the biases of colonial period authors through querying the physical world of landscapes, sites, and material culture (Figure 1).

An especially vivid illustration of the mythistory surrounding the Spanish invasion is the fiction introduced into secondary sources—but absent in eyewitness accounts—that Cortés burned his fleet of ships, rather than merely scuttling them, at Villa Rica de la Veracruz before marching inland to conquer Mexico-Tenochtitlan. References to the purported event began in the sixteenth century but became legendary through epic poems of the eighteenth century (Reynolds 1959). The myth is still used popularly today as a metaphorical Caesar-crossing-the-Rubicon type moment. Roberto Junco Sánchez, of Mexico’s Institute of Anthropology and History’s (INAH) Subdirección de Arqueología Subacuática,

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH-AZTEC WAR ON ITS QUINCENTENNIAL



Figure 3. Fortified stronghold of Tepeticpac, Tlaxcala, showing (left) elevated location and (right) defensive walls. (Photos by Aurelio López Corral.)

and an international team of underwater archaeologists have been working off the coast of Veracruz to dredge compelling evidence for the scuttled ships. Discoveries include an anchor with preserved wood from Spanish forests radiocarbon dated to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century (Junco et al. 2020) and two others that stylistically match this date but do not have adhering wood (Figure 2). The sunken ships appear to be spaced apart in the harbor consistent with a premeditated event to decommission vessels that had become unseaworthy while keeping the ropes, rigging, and fastenings to use in building new ships, including the brigantines that were later launched on the lakes of the Basin of Mexico in the siege and final assault on Tenochtitlan.

While marching inland to the Mexican Altiplano (high plains), the Totonaca scouts and porters with the Cortés expedition advised following a route through Tlaxcallan, as its inhabitants were rivals to the Triple Alliance who had successfully resisted incorporation into the empire. Some debate remains regarding the entry point through a northern frontier populated by ethnic Otomis and a first battle outside of a small city-state named Tecoaac, but recent excavations and landscape analysis of the estimated distances mentioned by chroniclers have helped to clarify the route and its regional setting (Carballo 2020:171–177; Heath-Stout 2019). A close read of primary sources makes it clear that the Tlaxcalteca first fiercely resisted the Spanish near the town of Tzompantepec for some 20 days before forging a key alliance and joining forces with them. The Tlaxcalteca strategically downplayed their initial opposition in colonial period texts and foregrounded their support to enjoy certain privileges and autonomy as an “Indian Republic” (Martínez Baracs 2014), but also formed political obligations to the Spanish Crown that fostered the conquering ambition of Tlaxcalteca leaders, such as providing people for the colonization of the northern and western territories of the newly conceived New Spain.

When the Tlaxcalteca welcomed the foreigners into their city, in late September of 1519, Cortés assessed its largest marketplace,

at Ocotelulco, to be grander than Granada’s and compared its sociopolitical organization to the republics of northern Italy. The mapping, surface collections, and excavations of Lane Fargher, Richard Blanton, Verence Heredia, Lisa Overholtzer, and colleagues have confirmed the more pluralistic political organization of Tlaxcallan while also showing the capital city to have been an integrated urban expanse with an estimated population of some 35,000 people, rather than the four-*altepetl* (city-state) model described in colonial period texts (Fargher et al. 2010, 2011; Martínez Baracs 2014).

As a polity, Tlaxcallan was clearly more than a city-state and probably consisted of at least 28 allied multiethnic populations, according to López de Gómara (2006 [1552]) and other historians. Recent investigations have been centered on the urban core, including sections such as Tepeticpac, where López Corral and colleagues (2016; Santacruz Cano and López Corral 2014) have extensively excavated and consolidated the city’s stronghold (Figure 3). The architecture and artifacts that have been recovered support characterization as a more pluralistic system with lower socioeconomic inequality in the form of widespread simple construction techniques, the proliferation of plazas to host massive collective events, the construction of relatively small temples, and equitable access to certain types of common and bulk luxury goods such as codex-type polychrome vessels that promote ceremonies for festivities and deity veneration, and social mobility through defending the polity in battle (Fargher et al. 2020; López Corral et al. 2019). Alcántara’s (2020a) analysis of paleodiet at Tepeticpac demonstrates a dietary homogeneity that supports a state-level distribution of goods, perhaps through feast events held in the many plazas. Nevertheless, other previous and recent work at the regional level suggests that the sharing of power in Tlaxcallan did not imply sociopolitical or economic egalitarianism (García Cook 2014; Merino Carrión 1989). Although Tlaxcallan exhibited a more collective model of government with respect to other regional *altepeme*h, much remains to be known about the sociopolitical relations between the various settlements of the larger geopolitical entity, or *huey altepetl*.



Figure 4. 3D scan of the Tlaltecuhтли monolith, Proyecto Templo Mayor. (Image courtesy of Leonardo López Luján and Saburo Sugiyama. Used with permission.)

On the other side of the snowcapped volcanoes to the west sat the Triple Alliance core of the Basin of Mexico and the largest city in the Americas, the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan. Now covered by Mexico City, teams of Mexican archaeologists have been excavating Tenochtitlan’s sacred precinct for the last four decades as part of two urban archaeology projects overseen by the INAH: the Proyecto Templo Mayor and the Proyecto Arqueológico Urbano. It would be difficult to overstate the complex logistics of these projects, directed by Leonardo López Luján and Raúl Barrera Rodríguez, respectively. They contend with seven centuries of urban stratigraphy and a high water table, while working amid the bustle of the historical core of one of the most populous cities on the globe. Recent finds at the foot of the Great Temple provide tangible counterparts to textual references to the city’s central ballcourt (*tlachco*), elite school (*calmecac*), skull rack (*tzompantli*), the palaces (*tecpancalli*) of Moctezuma II and Axayacatl, a temple to the wind-god Ehecatl, and the eagle-head decorated altar (*cuauhxicalco*) used for cremating the remains of Mexica emperors and in other rituals (López Luján 2019; López Luján and Chavez Balderas 2019). They have also revealed exquisite art and artifacts only alluded to textually, including a monolith of the earth goddess Tlaltecuhтли that is even larger than the iconic Mexica Sun Stone (Figure 4). The projects provide testaments to the richness of Tenochtitlan’s sacred precinct and the religious system that awed and terrified the Spaniards, who were set on destroying it.

Aztec resistance to the invasion is chronicled through several sources, with a key interval being the June 1520 expulsion of the foreigners and their Native allies from Tenochtitlan in what the Spaniards termed the “Noche Triste,” but which has been rebranded in Mexico as the “Noche Victoriosa.” Few material remains of this battle have been uncovered, with the exception of a gold bullion discovered on the route across the western causeway of the city that provides a testament to the loot in Aztec metal work the Spaniards sought to take from the city (López Luján and Ruvalcaba Sil 2020).

An exceptional archaeological context attesting to Native resistance comes from the site of Tecoaque, located in northwestern Tlaxcala and excavated by an INAH project directed by Ana María Jarquín Pacheco and Enrique Martínez Vargas (2015, 2017). Zultepec-Tecoaque was a town under the rule of the Acolhua of Texcoco. In 1520, a Spanish caravan was captured and all of its members sacrificed on the festival of Panquetzaliztli during the fifteenth month of the Aztec ritual calendar (the *tonalpohualli*). When Cortés learned about the events, he commanded Gonzalo de Sandoval “to raze to the ground a large town, subject to Tesuico [Texcoco], which stands on the border of Tlascalteca [Tlaxcala], because the inhabitants had killed five horsemen and forty-five foot soldiers” (Cortés 1986:183–184). Knowing of the great threat that would befall them, Zultepec’s villagers tried to hide the evidence of the sacrificial event and quickly left the town. The rapid abandonment made it possible to have extraordinary preservation conditions and to recover archaeological evidence of various objects of European origin and human remains of Spanish, African, and Taíno individuals, including men, women, and infants, who were sacrificed, dismembered, some of them probably ritually eaten, and their skulls placed in a *tzompantli* in front of the main temple (Figure 5). Following these events, the town was renamed Tecoaque, or “the place where they were eaten.”

These projects provide only a glimpse into the archaeological reconstruction of central Mexico on the eve of and during the Aztec-Spanish War. Scholarship of the material and societal transformations following that encounter, which created colonial New Spain, is equally robust and includes interdisciplinary perspectives grounded in archaeology, art history, and history on the founding of Mexico City on the remains of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco (for examples, see Mundy 2015; Rodríguez-Alegría 2016; Wesp 2020).

Historical Memory and Commemoration

The tragic parallel between the epidemic of smallpox and other pathogens that devastated Native populations in October–December of 1520 and our current COVID-19 pandemic is hard to miss. The present pandemic has upended several planned quincentennial commemorations of the events of 500 years ago, including museum exhibits and the filming of an Amazon mini-series, while forcing others to adapt to remote formats. Webinar

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH-AZTEC WAR ON ITS QUINCENTENNIAL



Figure 5. Central plaza at the site of Zultepec-Tecoaque where skulls of individuals from a captured Spanish caravan were displayed on a tzompantli. (Photo by David Carballo.)

formats have had the benefit of permitting broad international participation, if lacking the intimacy of in-person gatherings. Before the pandemic struck, there were a number of live conferences sponsored by Mexico's INAH, National Museum of Anthropology, and National Autonomous University (UNAM). Additionally, there were also very localized commemorations, particularly in the city of Tlaxcala, where the collective memory of their heroic defense against the Mexica "imperial" expansion, the resilience during an alleged 50-year-long economic boycott, and their strategic alliance with the Spanish keeps resonating strongly in the local political and academic discourse. Even more community-focused celebrations occurred in local municipalities such as Tzompantepec, Tlaxcala, where Spanish and Tlaxcalteca forces first battled before creating the alliance, and in Cortés's hometown of Medellín, Spain. The diversity of commemorative events underscores the multiplicity of stakeholders interested in framing historical memory in the present, at different scales of community, national, and international audiences and along different axes of social and ethnic identity.

The Mexican government has taken the approach of marking the three centennials simultaneously, with rounding, including not only 500 years since the fall of Tenochtitlan but also 700 years since its founding (usually placed at 1325 in the Gregorian calendar) and 200 years since independence from Spain was fully realized in 1821—thereby bookending the nationally fraught event of Cuauhtemoc's surrender with two others viewed positively in the national consciousness. National and international debate of these issues has been politicized, with Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador requesting apologies from the Spanish Crown and the Vatican for abuses to Native populations and corresponding blowback by Spain's political right parties, such as Vox, seeking to celebrate Cortés's violent exploits (e.g., Minder and Malkin 2019).

On the side of public dissemination of recent scholarship of the Aztec-Spanish War, two notable efforts in Mexico are special sections and issues of the print and e-magazine *Arqueología Mexicana* and the engaging blog and social-media efforts of

UNAM's *Noticonquista* (<https://www.noticonquista.unam.mx/>). These have helped to introduce nuance into national conversations about structures of power and Native agency in cases such as the Mesoamerican groups and individuals who allied with the Spaniards, most notably the logistical and military aid provided by the Tlaxcalteca and the key Native translator of the encounter, the woman baptized Doña Marina by the Spaniards (also known as Malintzin or Malinche), both historically demonized in a Mexica-focused narrative as “traitors” to Mexico. An example of a symposium framing the resonances of these events in the present is one organized by UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, “La caída de la Gran Tenochtitlan y el impacto en la sociedad mexicana del siglo XXI,” dealing with impacts on twenty-first-century Mexican society with a focus on Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities.

Tensions are apparent in how history is marshaled for different purposes and how narratives can be contradictory at different scales or audiences (i.e., national versus local narratives). It manifests in whether Native allies to Cortés are today viewed negatively or as strategic actors who were conquistadors in their own right and co-created a new colonial order they could not have known would involve the degree of disease, territorial control, social disruption, and exploitative labor that it would. At the level of historical actors, this includes not only figures like Doña Marina/Malintzin, but also juxtaposing Native leaders deemed to have been appeasers or resisters: Motecuhzoma versus his nephew Cuauhtemoc for the Mexica, Xicohtencatl “the elder” versus his son “the younger” for the Tlaxcalteca. At the level of groups, these allies include most notably the Tlaxcalteca but also peoples of *altepemeh* in southern Puebla and eventually the second largest of the Triple Alliance, Texcoco, who broke their alliance with the Mexica Tenochca and served as a port for launching the newly built brigantines for naval battle against the imperial city. These groups participated in later conquests south to Guatemala, north to New Mexico, and even across the Pacific to Guam and the Philippines. Recent commemorations note how they were thereby active agents in creating a new globalized world order that linked the Atlantic and Pacific worlds. These events changed the world profoundly, including in the realm of foodways and global cuisine.

Historical Memory and Modern Legacies through Foodways

Just as with the sites and artifacts associated with the encounter of five centuries ago, foodways provide a tangible link between the past and the present. When Cortés first visited the market of Ocotelulco, Tlaxcallan, he emphasized its grandeur and complexity. But beyond its value in abundance, the market, and the food in it, signaled much more than economic value. Ancestral foodways across the Americas held stories, memories, social norms, and community histories. *Arqueología Mexicana* has produced several volumes titled and dedicated solely to the abundant and complex wisdom embodied by key Mesoamerican ingredients

(*maíz, maguey, cacao, pulque, insectos, amaranto*), drawn from early colonial codices and written records. Food was its own language. Food was knowledge. And within seemingly innocuous diets and recipes, we can find evidence of a plurality of narratives, and ways of resisting colonial projects. Through foodways, we see that resistance does not have to be dramatic battles or grand gestures but can persist through the mundane events of daily meals.

Bioarchaeological analyses using dietary isotopes have helped create a baseline for understanding the variable ways that foodways in central Mexico shifted following colonialism and the “Columbian Exchange” (Alcantara 2020a; Moreiras Reynaga et al. 2020). Importantly, these studies also show the idiosyncrasies of food histories and traditions, using diet to get at individual experiences across central Mexico. Archaeological analyses of trade systems in Mesoamerica have shown that amid a constantly shifting political landscape, maintaining small-scale networks of trade and household-level production provided a stopgap that could outlive the rise and fall of state powers (Blanton 1996). Today we call this “food sovereignty,” a social movement that seeks to put the power of the food system back into networks led by local stakeholders. Through ethnographic interviews and participating in knowledge shares, Alcantara has used contemporary grassroots food sovereignty movements to show how food is voice—a way to transmit decolonial values, memories, and worldviews across space and time. The two cases below provide illustrations of foodways as a language of colonial resistance.

El Mercado Alternativo Agroecológico de Tlaxcala

The Tlaxcala Alternative Agroecological Market is a small group of 8–12 stands that meets in the Plaza San Nicolás in Tlaxcala City on Friday mornings, its modest cluster a sharp contrast to the blocks-long Saturday Mercado. Each producer sells what they themselves have grown and harvested locally (nopales, wild mushrooms, honey, pulque, insects). As Alcantara analyzed isotopic dietary data from burials excavated at the nearby site of Tepeticpac, the colorful and fragrant ingredients sold in the market gave life to the inert Excel spreadsheet of carbon and nitrogen isotope values, helping her link ingredients to the social contexts of their consumption (Figure 6).

Through interviews, Alcantara found that individuals actively chose to revive agroecological methods and plant-based foodways that had lain dormant in their families to address contemporary health issues like diabetes and heart conditions. Rather than a case of uninterrupted knowledge, the market represents intentional revival of wisdom preserved in a pozole recipe here, a mole recipe there. This revival also aligns with the growth of the GMO and hybrid farming industry. Early colonialism turned to European plant cultivation, animal husbandry, and less sustainable monocropping strategies, at the expense of local ecologies. These production strategies generated income as part of an incipient

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH-AZTEC WAR ON ITS QUINCENTENNIAL



Figure 6. The abundant uses of the nopal, taught by market producer Zeferino Manohatl Tetlamatzi. (Photo by Keitlyn Alcantara.)



Figure 7. Foodways in the milpa, a meal with producer Jaime Gaspar Garcia of Herencia del Magueyal. (Photo by Keitlyn Alcantara.)

capitalist world economy aimed at creating an impoverished and disempowered underclass—trends that were exasperated by the industrialized “green revolution” in the twentieth century. Yet, while fields of wheat and herds of cattle became abundant on the central Mexican landscape, the persistence of *verdolagas*, *tlacoyos*, and *tacos de gusano de maguey* in local foodways hints at the persistence of anti-colonial social systems and networks of knowledge. They represent a daily commemoration of Native cultural contributions (Figure 7).

Sazón Nashville

During her graduate career at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, Alcantara began a series of after-school cooking workshops (Sazón Nashville, 2017–2020) with Latinx middle schoolers. The project started as a way to share the deep history of Latin American foodways, while also combatting their colonization and erasure within pervasive FDA/USDA “healthy eating” programming (Alcantara 2020b). Five hundred years

after the start of a new era of colonialism in the Americas, students’ family histories represented the outcomes of capitalism and globalization, driving diverse stories of immigration. Some had immigrated in recent months and some had arrived to the United States in early infancy, while others only knew about their Latin American roots through their parents’ stories and recipes, which painted a hazy understanding of homeland.

Whether students were intimately familiar with the sights, sounds, and feels of the countries of their roots, or only knew about them through folklore, when the members of the course cooked, it became clear that through food students knew a lot more than they thought they did. In one activity, students were given raw ingredients to smell and taste and link to memories (Figure 8). They knew that *manzanilla* (chamomile) was for belly aches; that *canela* (cinnamon) was the cozy warmth of *arroz con leche* or *café de olla*; that chiles meant *caldo*, *mole*, and *salsas* (Figure 9). This project emphasized the legibility of foodways as a secret, persistent language; even when

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH-AZTEC WAR ON ITS QUINCENTENNIAL



Figure 8. Students at Croft Middle School test their knowledge of Latin American ingredients. (Photo by Keitlyn Alcantara.)



Figure 9. A student learns to use the molcajete to make salsa. (Photo by Keitlyn Alcantara.)

removed from geographic ties, ingredients call back memories and knowledge from place. In archaeology, the life of much material culture remains rooted in pasts we can only imagine, but food transcends time, carrying remnants of past lifeways with it.

Conclusion

Half a millennium after initial European colonialism in the mainland Americas, archaeologists are increasingly engaging issues of indigeneity, decolonization, community partnership, and how historical memory shapes life in the present. The years that bracket the Cortesian invasion of Mesoamerica, the Spanish-Aztec War, and its early colonial aftermath provide a touchstone for current archaeological investigations, community commemorations and reinterpretations, and awareness of how these domains are entangled and mutually informing. The tangible authenticity of material culture—be it in the form of a 500-year-old anchor or the product of a cherished family recipe—connects us intimately to globally transformative events

and a more accurate framing of their contemporary significance for diverse groups of stakeholders. Centennial anniversaries help to foreground these events and to jump-start realignments in priorities and interpretations, but the work involved in investigation and community partnerships takes sustained effort and commitments to mutual respect that extend well beyond commemorative anniversaries. We hope this overview provides some pathways for future research and reframing of how knowledge of this pivotal encounter is co-created, shared, and deeply meaningful within Mexico, the United States, and the broader hemisphere.

Resumen en español

A quinientos años de la guerra azteca-española, la academia y el público en general se encuentran reexaminando la narrativa detrás de este conflicto que moldeó gran parte del México moderno. En este ambiente de remembranza, recientes investigaciones arqueológicas relacionadas con los eventos históricos de la caída de Mexico-Tenochtitlan permiten reevaluar los constructos históricos

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH-AZTEC WAR ON ITS QUINCENTENNIAL

coloniales contrastando la evidencia material con la historia oficial de los siglos 16 al 19. Desde restos de barcos ligados a la mítica quema de las naves de Cortés en Veracruz, pasando por la alianza o sujeción de poblaciones mesoamericanas, el desarrollo de una historia oficial con señalamiento prejuiciosos de aliados y traidores a la patria, hasta la resiliencia cultural de tradiciones alimentarias y culinarias, vemos cómo la narrativa oficial es reevaluada no como un acto heroico, útil y necesario, sino como un proceso que en esencia fue de sujeción y colonialismo. En este entorno, la retórica de la invasión española y sus repercusiones en las antiguas poblaciones nativas ha permeado el discurso político y la percepción social, incluso motivando al presidente de México a solicitar formalmente una disculpa pública del Vaticano y España por las atrocidades cometidas por sus antepasados. El quincentenario de la guerra hispano-azteca y sus secuelas coloniales, son una piedra angular para las actuales investigaciones arqueológicas y el estudio de las conmemoraciones y reinterpretaciones culturales de las comunidades, creando así conciencia de cómo estos dominios se entrelazan y se retroalimentan mutuamente.

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Note

1. Throughout the text, we also try to avoid Eurocentric designations such as "pre/postcolonial" and "pre/posthispanic," referring instead to early Mesoamerican cultures as ancestral or by appropriate ethnonyms. These terms are also in the process of being rethought with goals to balance intercultural respect, accuracy, and intelligibility.

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