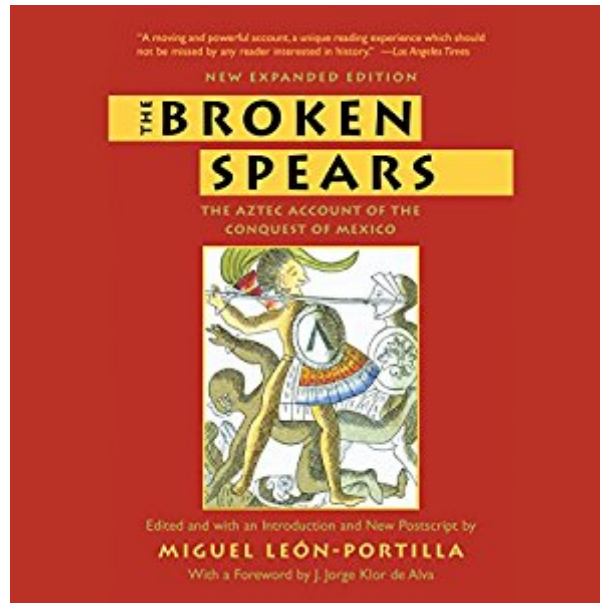


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# The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account Of The Conquest Of Mexico



## Synopsis

For hundreds of years, the history of the conquest of Mexico and the defeat of the Aztecs has been told in the words of the Spanish victors. Miguel Le f n-Portilla has long been at the forefront of expanding that history to include the voices of indigenous peoples. In this new and updated edition of his classic *The Broken Spears*, Le f n-Portilla has included accounts from native Aztec descendants across the centuries. These texts bear witness to the extraordinary vitality of an oral tradition that preserves the viewpoints of the vanquished instead of the victors. Le f n-Portilla's new postscript reflects upon the critical importance of these unexpected historical accounts.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This account uses narratives written by Aztecs and other native american groups around Mexico (the Aztec capital city) conquered by Cortes in the 1500s, presenting a perspective unknown to most. I grew up in Mexico City surrounded by evidence of the Aztecs as well as the Spanish, without a clear understanding of what happened to create the cultural mixture I saw there. As an adult, I read portions of a number of accounts of the conquest of Mexico, all based on Spanish sources. When you read these things, you're struck with amazement that they could happen and you wonder how much was only the Spanish interpretation of what they were told. Did the Aztecs really think the Spaniards were gods? Did Cortes and his men really just march into Mexico City as guests and then take Moctezuma captive? What were each of the groups thinking in this clash of opposing cultures? The Spanish, (for religious reasons?), wiped out most Aztec records, which were written in picture form. Their general propaganda treated Cortes as a hero. But when I was growing up, there was a strong movement towards painting Cortes as a weak, crippled, diseased man -- a disgusting

figure. There are murals that portray him this way. And in the middle of the city, the rediscovered Templo Mayor stands mostly underwater, with roughly 8 feet protruding, as a silent testimony to the culture wiped out in the conquest. I was left with the question, "What happened?" I was fascinated and moved as I read "Broken Spears". They spoke of terrible omens... they were expecting tragedy. They were aware of the Spanish ships the moment they landed and the Aztec emperor sent envoys to watch them, and later to communicate with them. The unfolding story may sound stark and boring to those who haven't studied the conquest of Mexico, but to me it filled in a vital missing piece. It doesn't matter whether these stories are eye witness accounts or not because they paint the Aztec impression of the conquest vividly. They didn't understand the revulsion and horror the Spaniards must have felt at their human sacrifices, but they were appalled at the senseless slaughter Cortes's men and allies engaged in. This is not a book for a weak stomach. Some of the descriptions are graphic. Some of the pictures show chopped off limbs and heads. It's not a masterpiece of excellent writing, either. That is not what makes this book valuable. It invites you into the heart of the Aztecs before their pride was broken and their people subjugated.

I enjoyed reading the Aztec account of the colonization of Colonial Mexico. The book is a translation of Nahuatl writings. See- the Spanish provided an alphabet which the Aztecs did not have prior to Spanish arrival and then the Aztecs applied the alphabet to their native Nahuatl language and began writing. The only concern a reader should have is accuracy- the documents of the account were written 10 years and more after the fact. A tip when reading: start with Chapter 14 which summarizes all the events, then read Chapters 1 - 13 which elaborate on events in detail, and finally conclude with chapters 15 - 16. I highly recommend this book for anyone studying Colonial Mexico History or persons who want to know more about Aztecs and their culture.

This book combines accounts from several, sometimes conflicting, sources to provide a better understanding of the conquest of Mexico. Something important to note is that the title is a bit inaccurate- not all the informants were Aztecs! Many were from neighboring groups who were ruled by and forced to pay tribute to the Aztecs, but not Aztecs themselves. This is important to note because some of these people were not very happy under Aztec rule and their accounts express this. The author gives background information at the beginning of each chapter about the sources used which is really helpful in sections where the accounts differ as it can help to expose biases and broaden understanding of the events. I think this book is really important because it was a reminder to me that no history text is flat-out truth and at this point, no amount of investigation will tell us

exactly what happened during this time period. All that said, the actual writing of the book is pretty dry. I had to read this for a class, and although I find the subject fascinating, I probably wouldn't have gotten halfway through it if I'd picked it up for pleasure reading!

Miguel Leon-Portillo's collection of Nahuatl accounts of the Spanish conquest affords the reader a unique opportunity to experience the conquest through the mind of the Amerindian. The book records the human response of the Nahuatl speaking peoples of central Mexico to the strange and terrifying events that ultimately destroyed their city and their way of life. Through songs, pictures, and oral tradition, the plight of the people was preserved, and some of the more powerful and eloquent of these are represented in "The Broken Spears." Do not expect an objective historical account of the conquest from this book. That is not the intention, as clearly stated by Leon-Portillo in his introduction. Rather, it is a glimpse into how the natives responded to and came to terms with events that were so strange and frightening to them that they bordered on the apocalyptic. What the reader gains, then, is an eloquent testimony to the passion and intellect of the native people of central Mexico who were so often, in many Spanish accounts, reduced to barbaric, blood-thirsty savages with little capacity for human sympathy.

The invasion and destruction of a civilization as seen through the eyes of the Nahuatl-speaking people who resisted and suffered it. Highlighted is the element of oral poetry, not merely a retelling of the events, but a soaring rhetoric that reflects the soul of a people whose natural evolution was cut short in a manner nothing short of Greek Tragedy. And, as to the author, the great Leon-Portillo, who has dedicated his life to getting out this message, what can one say? Perhaps he, along with other voices gradually coming to the cultural front, comprise the real return of Quetzalcoatl.

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