

XICOTENCATL: RETHINKING AN INDIGENOUS MEXICAN HERO¹

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One of the major indigenous heroes of Mexico is the Tlaxcaltec general, Xicotencatl Axayacatl² (also known as Xicotencatl the Younger), but in the colonial-period accounts of the conquest of Mexico, he is cast as a traitor, both to the Spaniards and to his home province of Tlaxcallan. Since the War of Independence, however, his reputation has undergone a radical transformation and he is widely regarded as a hero for having opposed Cortés and the Spanish domination of Mexico. In both cases, however, Xicotencatl's reputation has grown less from his own actions and purposes than from how the Conquest has been regarded during each time: in the colonial period, the Conquest was officially seen as good and thus everyone who opposed it was bad whereas post-colonial Mexico, having achieved independence, sought to glorify its indigenous past and vilify Spain, so Xicotencatl was reinterpreted as an anti-Spanish hero.

Both perspectives trivialize Xicotencatl's life, interpreting his actions simply as reactions to the Spanish presence. But the details available in many scattered sources suggest that his acts and fate are considerably more complex and merit fuller analysis. The interpretation of Xicotencatl as anti-Spanish derives from positions he took, or was claimed to have taken, during the conquest of Mexico in 1519-21. Indigenous or mestizo accounts of his actions all post-date by many decades the events chronicled, and most of these were written by

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² The name Xicotencatl means "He is a Dweller in Xicotenco" (Xicotenco means "Place of the edge of the Bumblebee"); Axayacatl means "Water-mask" and, in this case is usually written Axayacatzin, by dropping the -tl noun ending and adding the honorific -tzin. Throughout this paper, I am dropping the honorific -tzin so that proper spellings of the names will be apparent.

people or groups who were not participants and are thus not presenting eyewitness accounts but, rather, the conventional wisdom of the day. The only first-hand accounts are Spanish, and most of these were also written years after the events in question.

Standard History of Xicotencatl

The conventional view of Xicotencatl is the one that emerges from the early colonial accounts. Xicotencatl the Younger was the commanding general of the Tlaxcaltec army (Cortés 1963:42; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:189) and led a combined force of the four provinces of Tlaxcallan, plus Huexotzinco, against the Spaniards when they first appeared and actively or passively opposed them until his death. When the Spaniards first marched toward Tlaxcallan, they saw a small party of armed Indians, which they advanced on with their horsemen. The Indians repelled them and then fell back, enticing the Spaniards forward. Once they reached a compromising position, a large concealed force ambushed the Spaniards, who were saved only by virtue of their weapons (harquebuses, crossbows, cannons, and mounted lancers) which were hitherto unknown in central Mexico. Nevertheless, Tlaxcaltec weapons were effective, and in this battle one Spaniard was killed, although at the cost of seventeen Tlaxcaltecs (Aguilar 1977:70-71; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:188; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:208; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:94-96; Oviedo y Valdés 1959, 4:16; Tapia 1950:48).

While the Indians withdrew, they were professional soldiers who had attacked in unison, used complementary shock and projectile weapons, and displayed a high degree of expertise. But the Tlaxcaltec attack posed an even greater political threat than military. Since Cortés had promised aid to other Indians who had already allied with him (notably the Totonacs), he risked losing their support and having them turn against him too. Thus, the threat to his alliances prevented him from withdrawing (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:205-7). Tlaxcaltecs attacked and again drew the Spaniards into another ambush, costing them one dead, fifteen wounded, and four or five horses killed (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:189-92). The Spaniards were in a precarious position: they could not dominate the battlefield against the vastly larger Tlaxcaltec army and were forced into a defensive stance that threatened to degenerate into a war of attrition that they would inevitably lose.

The next day, the Tlaxcaltecs attacked again, and again the Spaniards fended them off with superior firepower. Nevertheless, the Spaniards were hard pressed and to make his forces more effective, at least

defensively, Cortés divided his men, ordering some to reload cross-bows and harquebuses while others fired, and directed the mounted lancers to make short forays to disrupt the Tlaxcaltecs' formations and frustrate their attacks. At battle's end, all of the horses were wounded, one Spaniard was dead, and sixty more were wounded (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:194-96).

The Tlaxcaltecs next tried a night attack which limited the effectiveness of the Spanish arms by concealing the targets in darkness. The Spaniards relied on greater accuracy because their arms fired at only one-sixth the rate of the Tlaxcaltecs' arms. The Spaniards were denied this advantage by darkness.³

Ten thousand warriors, led by their commanding general, Xicotencatl, attacked the Spaniards' camp, and although while darkness provided cover, once their formations were disrupted by mounted lancers, they were unable to reassemble in the dark, and the attack ultimately failed (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:187, 189). Nevertheless, by this time, over forty-five Spaniards had been killed, a dozen were ill, several horses had been slain, and their food and arms supplies were dwindling (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:198).

Cortés sought peace, but was unsuccessful and his men were near mutiny. He began foraging and first attacked and sacked the Otomí town of Tecoac and then marched on Tzompantzinco, where its lords gave them food (Aguilar 1977:73; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:202-3; Tapia 1950:51). Nevertheless, with a force now reduced to approximately 250 Spaniards (not all fit), about ten horses (all wounded), a couple of hundred non-combatant porters, and fewer than a hundred Indian warriors, Cortés's ultimate defeat was inevitable (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:198).

But the Tlaxcaltecs were reconsidering their position. The Tlaxcaltec rulers were divided over what to do. With Tlaxcallan's failure to achieve a decisive victory and their mounting losses, the rulers decided to make peace with the Spaniards (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:200-1). They then ordered Xicotencatl to stop fighting. He refused, and after sending this demand four times, the rulers directed the army not to obey Xicotencatl (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:208). The soldiers from Huexotzinco and one of the four provinces of Tlaxcallan withdrew and Xicotencatl finally acquiesced and ceased hostilities (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:213-14). Later, after Cortés and the other survivors of their flight from Tenochtitlan reached the Otomí town of Hueitlipan within Tlaxcallan, Xicotencatl urged the rulers no to re-ally

³ See Hassig (1994:69) for a discussion of Spanish rates of fire.

with the Spaniards, but he was rebuffed (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:406). Then, in April, 1521, after Cortés had reentered the Valley of Mexico and was poised to begin the siege of Tenochtitlan, he requested additional troops from Tlaxcallan. Some were led into the Valley by another Tlaxcaltec general, Chichimecateuctli, and an additional army was led to Tetzaco by Xicotencatl (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:499-500). But that night, Xicotencatl crept out of the camp, leaving his men there, and returned to Tlaxcallan. On learning of this, Cortés dispatched Spanish and Indian soldiers who captured him (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 2:10-11). Cortés hanged him for desertion and so informed the rulers of Tlaxcallan who supported his actions, as they also executed deserters (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 2:11).

Xicotencatl's Importance

Because of his early death (at age 37), Xicotencatl did not play a major role in the success of the conquest of Mexico, as he did not participate in the final and pivotal three-month siege of Tenochtitlan. His historical importance, instead, lies in his opposition to the Spaniards, or in what has since been made of it.

As a result of his continued opposition to the Spaniards, Xicotencatl has become a major symbol of indigenismo and anti-Spanish sentiment (e.g., Anzola Gómez 1945:3; Campos Barrón 1981:21). And this characterization is buttressed by numerous allegations that he was negotiating an alliance with the Aztecs. Indeed, this claim is among the earliest accusations against Xicotencatl—though not one made by Cortés—and is alleged throughout the Conquest, being asserted both during Cortés's initial entrada (Aguilar 1977:97; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:211) and again later, during the siege of Tenochtitlan (Anzola Gómez 1945:33; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:406; Gibson 1952:25; Madariaga 1969:346; Muñoz Camargo 1984:170, 259; Teroba Lara 1962:41-42; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:234). Many modern writers looking at Xicotencatl have accepted these interpretations largely as presented (e.g., Innes 1969:181; Thomas 1993:490; White 1971:191) or they have taken them even further in the indigenismo direction to claim that his motivation was to free Tlaxcallan from a foreign yoke (Anzola Gómez 1952:25), that he wanted to ally with the Aztecs because they offered to split their empire with Tlaxcallan (Gibson 1952:25), and even that he sensed the impending social subordination of the Indians (Marks 1993:227).

The image of Xicotencatl the Younger that is generally presented is of a single disgruntled Tlaxcaltec who was anti-Spanish and who op-

posed Cortés against the policies and desires of the rest of Tlaxcallan. Thus, when he was killed, everyone —Spaniards and Indians alike—agreed that it was justified. Xicotencatl had betrayed both the Spaniards and the Tlaxcaltecs.

Questioning Convention

There are indications in the scanty records of Xicotencatl's life, however, that this story is incomplete and perhaps wrong. If the standard account was so straight-forward and simple, one would expect considerable consensus over the story. But there are marked discrepancies. Cortés, who wrote soonest after the events in question, does not mention Xicotencatl's opposition, his desertion, or his execution. All of the accounts of Xicotencatl's perfidy emerge decades after the Conquest, as the standard story is coalescing. Thus, as Cortés's surrogate twenty-five years later, López de Gómara (1965-66, 2:212) mentions Xicotencatl's opposition to Tlaxcallan re-allying with the Spaniards after their flight from Tenochtitlan on La Noche Triste. Of the two conquistadors who do mention some of these events, almost forty years after the Conquest Francisco de Aguilar said only that the Aztecs sought an alliance with Xicotencatl the Younger and he later agreed to kill the Spaniards, while Bernal Díaz del Castillo provides a more detailed account, albeit almost sixty years after the events in question. He records three major claims. First, he claims that Xicotencatl the Younger refused to obey the cease-fire orders of the Tlaxcaltec rulers; that when Cortés sought refuge in Tlaxcallan after La Noche Triste, Xicotencatl the Younger plotted with the Aztecs to kill him, but was stopped by his father, Xicotencatl the elder; and that Chichimecateuctli led one Tlaxcaltec army into the Valley of Mexico to support Cortés and Xicotencatl the Younger led another, but later, Chichimecateuctli discovered that Xicotencatl had secretly returned to Tlaxcallan to seize the rulership by force. Chichimecateuctli informed Cortés who immediately dispatched five Tetzcocha nobles and two Tlaxcaltec nobles (presumably with support personnel) to force him to return. But Xicotencatl refused, so Cortés sent five Spaniards and five Tetzcochas to seize him and hang him as a traitor in a town near Tetzcocho.

By the mid-sixteenth century, Xicotencatl the Younger's treason had become part of the standard tale of the Conquest (Cervantes de Salazar 1914:197, 653-54; Muñoz Camargo 1984:169-70, 259; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:232, 234, 271-72). Yet this assessment of Xicotencatl rests on the twin assumptions that he actually did the things

attributed to him and that the groups that allied with the Spaniards (and especially Tlaxcallan) did so as relatively coherent blocs. That these groups were united follows logically from the Spanish version of the Conquest in which the Spaniards dominated the various indigenous polities and they joined as dependent vassal polities. Under such conditions, Xicotencatl the Younger's actions can, indeed, be understood as the treason of an isolated individual who was then justifiably executed.

But even if Xicotencatl did oppose the Spaniards and did flee Tetzaco, why would Cortés have hanged him? His anti-Spanish attitudes were likely to have been shared by others who allied with the Spaniards as a matter of probabilities. After all, since alliances were by polities as wholes and not by individuals, even pro-Spanish states must have harbored people or factions who were opposed to the Spaniards. For example, when Cortés destroyed statues of native gods at Cempohuallan, the commoners revolted and had to be restrained, suggesting a significant breach between the political elite and many of their followers (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:160-3).

Where Xicotencatl differed from many other Indians who shared his perspective, and his experience of the ostensible precipitating incident, was his desertion from Tetzaco. Treason was apparently a capital offense in Tlaxcallan (Martínez Baracs and Sempat 1994:198-99), as it was among the Aztecs (Casas 1967, 2:400; Hernández 1946, 1:66), but that involves betrayal. Was merely departing from Tetzaco, especially before there was any fighting, treason? In no other case during the Conquest does it seem to have been treated so. For example, after the Aztecs seized 68 Spaniards in battle on the Tlacopan causeway on 30 June, 1521, many of Cortés's Indian allies departed without consequence (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 2:41-45). Military support that fluctuated with the tide of battle seems to have been a common feature of Mesoamerican warfare. There could be political repercussions for a supporting or withdrawing group that subsequent events showed to have been the wrong decision, but punishment for treason was not among them. Nor did the Spaniards exact it except in this one instance.

Perhaps it can be argued that Xicotencatl's departure fell within the Spanish notion of treason, though that seems to apply to desertion during combat or defection to the enemy (Alfonso el Sabio 1972, 1:316-18). Cortés did, on two occasions, order the hanging of Spaniards for fomenting rebellion, as he saw it (Aguilar 1977:68-69; Cortés 1963:34-36; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:174-80, 493-95; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:85-86, 229; Tapia 1950:43-44). But in both cases, the dissident leaders sought the wholesale departure of Spanish sol-

diers, whereas Xicotencatl departed as an individual, leaving all of his men behind (if, in fact, he did leave), which would not have undermined Cortés's forces in the Valley of Mexico. Indeed, if Xicotencatl were in league with the Aztecs, it would have been far easier, quicker, and safer for him to have simply fled to Tenochtitlan. The stated logic for Xicotencatl's flight is flawed, and an explanation of his death that hangs on a legalistic determination of technical treason, as opposed to an act that had a practical impact on the war, not only seems inadequate for the action taken, but is contradicted by the behavior of Spaniards and Indians alike in all other circumstances.

Political Background

But the Spanish accounts are patently self-serving, designed less to describe and explain the events of the Conquest than to present the Spaniards in the best light possible so the participants could reap the benefits of royal largess. Among the many reasons to reject the Spanish claims as presented is the pervasive evidence of Indian factionalism and the pivotal role it played.⁴ For example, Cuitlahuac opposed Moteuczoma and Ixtlilxóchitl opposed Coanacoch, so Xicotencatl the Younger's opposition to Maxixcatl can be seen as typical of a broader political dynamic in precolumbian central Mexico. As a result, the actions of Xicotencatl the Younger (and the reactions of Cortés) can be best understood only after a critical examination of Tlaxcaltec internal politics.

Although generally treated as a unit in the Conquest accounts, Tlaxcallan was not a hierarchically integrated polity, but a confederacy of four provinces—Quiyahuiztlan to the west, Tepeticpac to the north, Tizatlan to the east, and Ocotelolco to the south (Cervantes de Salazar 1914:240; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:97; Martínez Baracs and Sempat, 1994:89-90; Muñoz Camargo 1984:38; Torquemada 1975-83, 1:275). Each province had its own king, whose succession was an internal provincial matter rather than a concern of the confederacy. When Cortés arrived in 1519, the four kings were Citlalpopoca (Quiyahuiztlan), Tlehuexolotl (Tepeticpac), Xicotencatl the Elder (Tizatlan), and Maxixcatl (Ocotelolco) (Muñoz Camargo 1984:38, 66; Martínez Baracs and Sempat 1994:197-98; Torquemada 1975-83, 1:275), and it was they who made the executive decisions for Tlaxcallan

⁴ For a more expansive presentation of an interpretation of the conquest of Mexico that rejects the explicitly pro-Spanish perspective of most accounts, see Hassig 1994.

as a whole. Tlaxcallan's main ally was the city-state of Huexotzinco (Muñoz Camargo 1984:180-81), but it did not play a major role in Tlaxcaltec deliberations. Most likely, Huexotzinco was not fully trusted since it had switched allegiance to the Aztecs in 1512 after a war with Tlaxcallan, and only re-allied with the latter in 1517 (Chimalpahin 1965:232-33; *Códice Vaticano* 1964-65:284; Alvarado Tezozómoc 1975b:638-40; Durán 1967, 2:454-55; Muñoz Camargo 1984:181).

Even though decisions were reached by the rulers of the four Tlaxcaltec provinces, neither the provinces nor their kings were equal. The first province to be established was Tepeticpac, six or seven royal generations before the Conquest. The first king divided the land with his brother, who then founded Ocotelolco (anciently called Tecpan) as the second province. Thereafter Tizatlan, which was originally part of Tepeticpac, was founded, followed last by Quiyahuiztlan (Muñoz Camargo 1984:271-74). Given this history, one would presume that the importance of these four provinces would be reflected either in the order of their founding, assuming the more powerful were earlier, with the less important provinces established later, or in the inverse order, assuming that newer provinces broke away because they were stronger. But neither assumption is borne out: the founding order seems to have played no role, but politics did, and the rule of past Tlaxcaltec kings had frequently been marked by tyranny, intrigue, assassinations and other unexplained short reigns, and internal discord (Muñoz Camargo 1984:271-75). So the rise and fall in influence of the various provinces and their rulers did not result from some established internal ordering process, but from the caprice of politics and, by 1519, the first and fourth provinces, Tepeticpac and Quiyahuiztlan, were of relatively minor importance. Although the kings of Tepeticpac and Quiyahuiztlan were included in confederacy deliberations, the real power lay with Tizatlan and Ocotelolco (Torquemada 1975-83, 5:299), and their kings vied for dominance.

Maxixcatl's power was economic, and Ocotelolco was the site of the main market (Torquemada 1975-83, 2:107), while Xicotencatl the Elder's lay with the military, as Tizatlan controlled the army, whose leading commander was the king's 35-year old son, Xicotencatl the Younger. Xicotencatl was not only heir apparent, he, in fact, exercised most of the power in Tizatlan on behalf of his blind and infirm father. The political struggle in Tlaxcallan was between Ocotelolco and Tizatlan in the personifications of King Maxixcatl and, not King Xicotencatl the Elder who, as the oldest of the four rulers, was also the one likeliest to die soon, but his son and apparent successor, Xicotencatl the Younger, whose power and relative position could be

contested. Most, if not all, major political issues deliberated by the four kings of Tlaxcallan must have been occasions for expressing this bipolar competition. Where two reasoned, but divergent, positions could be supported, Maxixcatl and Xicotencatl would probably be found on opposing sides, as they were over their responses to the arrival of the Spaniards (Cervantes de Salazar 1914:195; Muñoz Camargo 1984:169; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:116, 127).

Contested Positions

The kings of Tlaxcallan clearly knew of the approach of Cortés, the strange-looking Spaniards, and hundreds of accompanying Totonac warriors and porters, who were Aztec tributaries. An army some 3,000 men strong was marshaled and dispatched to intercept the Spaniards (Aguilar 1977:70-71; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:188; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:208; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:94-96; Oviedo y Valdés 1959, 4:16; Tapia 1950:48), which must have reflected a policy decision reached by the kings. But that the Tlaxcaltecs instantly adopted a hostile strategy is not at all clear, which may have been a reflection of the divided opinions likely to have emerged from council deliberations. The Tlaxcaltecs did not attack the Spaniards outright, though they adopted a passive strategy in which they placed a small, seemingly-vulnerable party in the path of the Spanish advance (perhaps to see if it would be attacked or simply approached in a peaceful manner).

From the extant records, there is no way to determine whether the Tlaxcaltecs would have attacked the Spaniards later, but at that point, the nature of their initial contacts with Tlaxcallan was entirely in Spanish hands. And they chose to seize the Tlaxcaltecs and pursue them when they fled, thus triggering the ambush (Aguilar 1977:70-71; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:188; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:208; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:94-96; Tapia 1950:48).

Perhaps to test the Spaniards had been the intent of the kings of Tlaxcallan. Later, certainly, they were split on how to deal with the Spaniards and if this was true from the outset, as seems to have been the case, presenting them with a situation in which they had to act first and make their intentions clear was an ideal compromise. But once the Spaniards made the choice for them, Xicotencatl the Younger now threw his forces into war and steadfastly supported it thereafter.

Opting for a military solution may have been logical for Xicotencatl the Younger, as war leader, and presumably also for his father, much of whose power derived from the army. But since Maxixcatl was

Xicotencatl's main rival for ascendancy within the Tlaxcallan confederacy, and the latter's success would elevate his status, the former almost by default would have been placed in the opposing camp, whether that was his honestly held opinion or not. Xicotencatl's embrace of a military response virtually guaranteed Maxixcatl's opposition.

Breaching enemy formations so that one's own troops could pour through, turn their flanks, and thus defeat them was a standard, though elusive, goal of Mesoamerican warfare. But breaching an opposing formation is exceptionally difficult when both sides share the same basic weapons and tactics, which was the case in central Mexico (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:198). And unfortunately for Xicotencatl's position, victory did not come immediately. Indeed, Spanish arms proved to be not only effective against individuals, but very disruptive against infantry formations.

The Tlaxcaltecs were winning the war: almost 20 percent of the Spaniards had been killed, virtually all were wounded, and their arms and foodstuffs were dangerously low.⁵ But Tlaxcaltec losses were so high that this must have weighed against the pro-war faction in the Tlaxcallan council's deliberations. And at the same time, the Tlaxcaltecs recognized the asset that even a few Spaniards could be with their formation-disrupting arms when wedded to their own large armies. The political ambition of Maxixcatl doubtlessly played a role, but the high cost of continuing the war, coupled with the political gains of ending it and forging a military alliance against the Aztecs, who had Tlaxcallan in a precarious and, ultimately, hopeless position, proved to be a potent combination and the council shifted its position (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:200-1).

The Tlaxcaltec council ordered Xicotencatl the Younger to break off his attacks, but he refused (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:208). And his refusal to desist has been taken as evidence of Xicotencatl's virulent anti-Spanish attitude. But more than this was at stake. If he could persist and win, Xicotencatl's political status would be enhanced, as would Tizatlan's preeminence: if he desisted, as ordered, he would be seen as having failed and his political stock would suffer while the status of the opposing position—championed by Maxixcatl—would rise. So although the conflict may have been with the Spaniards, its outcome was a result of internal political struggles.

Perhaps Xicotencatl could have vanquished the Spaniards, even in the limited time in which he could resist the council, but his military

⁵ See also Hassig (1994:69-70) for a discussion of the Spanish exhaustion of arms and supplies.

authority was not absolute. He was the commanding general (presumably the *tlacochcalcatl*)⁶ of the Tlaxcaltec army, but it was a force made up of armies of each province and their ally. When the order to desist arrived, Xicotencatl ignored it, but Chichimecateuctli, commander (presumably a *tlacateccatl*) of Ocotelolco's forces, did not. He withdrew his forces and those of Huexotzinco left as well, leaving Xicotencatl with too few men to guarantee success, forcing him to stop fighting as well (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:208).

Was Chichimecateuctli's action benign? Was he merely loyally following the dictates of the royal council? Perhaps, but he was also under the direct rule of Maxixcatl, who opposed Xicotencatl, and there are indications that his troops were not engaging the Spaniards as enthusiastically or effectively as they should have, even when the war was the official policy of Tlaxcallan (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:195). In short, Chichimecateuctli's interests were opposed to Xicotencatl's: at best, he did not support his rival leader fully, and at worst, he actively undermined his efforts while nominally following the council's dictates, and at the first opportunity to legitimately remove himself and his troops from battle, he did so, simultaneously undermining Xicotencatl while advancing both his interests and those of Maxixcatl.

Once the decision was made to ally with Cortés, the Spaniards were allowed to enter Tlaxcallan, which they did on 23 September, 1519 (Aguilar 1977:74; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:211-14; Muñoz Camargo 1984:235-36). In this new political context, both Maxixcatl and Xicotencatl the Elder still jockeyed for power, and Cortés was most likely unaware, or at least uncertain, who was his true ally. Obviously, there had been a shift in Tlaxcaltec policy since the initial ambush, but he must have been uncertain whether this reflected a change by the leadership as a whole or by an emergent, victorious leader or faction.

When he reached Tlaxcallan, Cortés was greeted by both Maxixcatl and Xicotencatl the Elder (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:219-20). And since alliances between indigenous rulers were commonly cemented through marriage (Carrasco 1984), the rulers of Tlaxcallan also tried to do this with the Spaniards. Xicotencatl the Elder gave one of his daughters—later baptized and renamed doña Luisa—to Cortés, who in turn gave her to Pedro de Alvarado (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:222, 225; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:214; Muñoz Camargo 1984:238; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:131). Maxixcatl also gave the Spaniards a daughter—also later baptized and renamed doña Elvira—who was given to Juan

⁶ This rank is challenged by Torquemada (1975-83, 2:107), but he conflicts with all of the other sources.

Velázquez de León. More than 300 daughters of other nobles were given to, among others, Gonzalo de Sandoval, Cristóbal de Olid, and Alonso de Ávila (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:225; Muñoz Camargo 1984:237). While in Tlaxcallan, the Spaniards appear to have stayed sequentially in the palaces of both Xicotencatl the Elder and Maxixcatl (Muñoz Camargo 1984:235-36, 239), but both rulers were always in attendance with Cortés (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:222).

With an alliance reached, Cortés next marched to Cholollan on 1 October, 1519 (Aguilar 1977:76; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:230-31; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:214; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:116-17; Oviedo y Valdés 1959, 4:22). There, according to Spanish accounts, he was welcomed, but upon learning of a plot between the Chololtec rulers and an Aztec army hidden nearby to ambush and massacre the Spaniards, Cortés ordered the nobles of Cholollan into the central courtyard and killed them in a preemptive strike. He then placed another noble on the throne, accepted his fealty, and departed (Aguilar 1977:77; Chimalpahin 1965:234; Cortés 1963:49-50; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:236-39, 242-43, 245; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:216; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:117, 119-22; Muñoz Camargo 1984:250-51; Oviedo y Valdés 1959, 4:22-23; Sahagún 1975:29, 1989:58; Tapia 1950:57-58, 60-61). This explanation of these events as given by the Spaniards does not ring true. There was, in fact, a massacre at Cholollan, a new ruler took the throne, and the city did ally with Cortés, but it is unlikely that an Aztec army could have been mustered, much less dispatched to Cholollan, in the time that elapsed.

When Cortés entered their territory, the Tlaxcaltecs must have been suspicious: he was accompanied by Aztecs and also by Totonacs who, as far as the Tlaxcaltecs knew, were still Aztec tributaries. Moreover, he had attacked the small party of Tlaxcaltecs who had been placed in his path. While an alliance may have been struck between the Tlaxcaltecs and the Spaniards, the former had little reason to trust the latter. Removing Cholollan, an Aztec ally and a threat to Tlaxcallan, would have been an effective and useful test of Spanish trustworthiness.

As for the Spanish version of events in Cholollan, there is no evidence of a hidden Aztec army, nor of the traps the Spaniards claimed to have seen outside the city, and the assertion of Chololtec duplicity would have come only from Cortés (though he makes no mention of it in his letters) (Hassig n.d.). In sum, the Spanish explanations for why they massacred the Chololtecs have little substance if examined critically. That does not mean there was no reason for the massacre, just that it did not lie in Chololtec intentions, but rather, in Tlaxcaltec politics.

Cholollan had been allied with Tlaxcallan until the previous year or two, when it became an Aztec ally (Cortés 1963:47; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:235; Sahagún 1975:29, 1989:578; Tapia 1950:34). This was a political blow to Tlaxcallan and a major military threat, and Cortés's trip to Cholollan, which was not on the route to Tenochtitlan, was most likely prompted by the Tlaxcaltecs.

Even though Cholollan had become an Aztec ally, it was a politically divided city (Cervantes de Salazar 1914:254; Leonardo de Argensola 1940:162; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:135). But the shift toward the Aztecs had reduced or eliminated Tlaxcaltec influence there, severely reducing the influence of Chololtec nobles with kin ties to Tlaxcallan. Moreover, it diminished the political clout of Tlaxcaltec nobles with ties to Cholollan, which was the ruling lineage of Ocotelolco—Maxixcatl and his descendants (Muñoz Camargo 1984:167). Thus, a Spanish-led pre-emptive strike against the ruling elite of Cholollan simultaneously tested the loyalty of the Spaniards, placed them irrevocably in the anti-Aztec camp, eliminated an enemy city only one day's march from Tlaxcallan, repositioned Cholollan as a Tlaxcaltec ally, placed new rulers on the Chololtec throne who presumably had kin ties to Tlaxcallan, and strengthened the latter city and, especially, Maxixcatl and his province.

The almost two months that passed between the first appearance of the Spaniards on Tlaxcaltec borders and their departure from Cholollan had seen a transformation of Tlaxcallan's political position from an embattled confederacy surrounded by enemy states to a significant power with a new ally possessing pivotally effective arms and with a renewed alliance with Cholollan. But even more remarkable was the political shift within Tlaxcallan: when Cortés first appeared, Maxixcatl's position was eroding vis-à-vis Xicotencatl. He had lost the major external political support of Cholollan and in the first encounter with the Spaniards, his position declined in relation to Xicotencatl's. But by the time Cortés left Cholollan, Xicotencatl the Younger had been made to seem ineffectual, Maxixcatl's position had been upheld in the council, he had married one of his daughters to a major Spaniard, and his support by, and influence in, Cholollan had been reestablished.

Renegotiated Alliance

Cortés marched from Cholollan to Tenochtitlan and, in the following eight months, seized the king, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, ruled through him, defeated Narváez's superior force, which had been sent to capture

him, and was then forced to flee Tenochtitlan, again reaching Tlaxcaltec territory at Hueiotlipan. Despite Cortés's initial successes, he had suffered over 865 Spanish and 1,000 Tlaxcaltec fatalities (Aguilar 1977:92; Cortés 1963:100-1; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:400-2; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 2:233; Sahagún 1975:79; 1989:96-97; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:229-30). This setback must have damaged Maxixcatl's position. The policy he advocated had led to major Tlaxcaltec losses and the kin tie he had established with the Spaniards was ended when both his daughter and Juan Velázquez died in the flight from Tenochtitlan (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:404). Nevertheless, when the surviving Spaniards reached Tlaxcallan, Cortés was housed in the palace of Maxixcatl (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:404; Muñoz Camargo 1984:95; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:230),⁷ though Alvarado stayed with Xicotencatl the Elder whose daughter he had been given. Xicotencatl the Younger seized the opportunity to argue against continuing the alliance, but he was unsuccessful (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:406; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:234). Perhaps the merits of the case were against him, or maybe it was because Maxixcatl's side was still stronger after the Cholollan re-alliance than it was originally, while Xicotencatl the Younger still suffered from being seen as unable to defeat the Spaniards himself.

The kings of Tlaxcallan reaffirmed their alliance with the Spaniards, though they made greater demands in terms of their future rights and shares (Información 1870-75, 20:17, 21, 140, 145; Muñoz Camargo 1984:94, 261). But since Tlaxcallan demanded, *inter alia*, lordship over Huexotzinco, Cholollan, and Tepeyacac, and at least the first two were already allied with Ocotelolco, this suggests that Maxixcatl's position had, indeed, weakened and the Tlaxcaltecs' outright rejection of Xicotencatl the Younger's position was less complete than later sources indicate. In any case, the Spanish enterprise continued, and Cortés carried out a series of campaigns against cities near Tlaxcallan (perhaps as a test of their renewed resolve, as one of these targeted cities was the already-promised Tepeyacac) and then, in late December, 1521, marched back into the Valley of Mexico, accompanied by Tlaxcaltec troops, added a major new ally in the Acolhua of Tetzococo under Ixtlilxóchitl, and carried out a number of military excursions (Aguilar 1977:95; Cortés 1963:123; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:440-41; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 1:455, 2:241-42; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:22-29; Oviedo y Valdés 1959, 4:89). Some, such as the attack on Ixtlapalapan, failed, but most succeeded in gaining new allies and cordoning off the Valley from Aztec

⁷ Ixtlilxóchitl (1975-77, 2:235) improbably claims the Cortés stayed in the palaces of Xicotencatl the Elder at this time.

allies farther afield (Cortés 1963:125-26; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:442-44; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 1:456, 2:246; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:230; Oviedo y Valdés 1959, 4:90-91). While this was happening, the Tlaxcaltecs, under the direction of Martín López, were cutting and shaping wood to construct the thirteen brigantines Cortés would launch into Lake Texcoco to control Aztec canoes (Aguilar 1977:94; Cortés 1963:113, 116; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:432-35).

During this time, however, the political situation had shifted. Narváez's expedition brought smallpox to Mexico and by the autumn of 1520, an epidemic raged in Tenochtitlan and spread throughout central Mexico (Aguilar 1977:96-97; Alvarado Tezozómoc 1975:160; *Códice Aubin* 1980:86; Cook and Borah 1971:80-82; Ixtlilxóchitl 1975-77, 1:454, 2:236; López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:191-92; Sahagún 1975:83; 1989:102). Among its many victims were the Aztec king, Cuitlahuac, who replaced Moteuczoma (who was killed during La Noche Triste) and, as Martín López discovered when he reached Tlaxcallan, King Maxixcatl (Torquemada 1975-83, 2:246).

Succession in Tlaxcallan was, in theory at least, hereditary from the king to his son of his officially designated wife, even if there were other, older sons by other wives (Torquemada 1975-83, 4:62). After Maxixcatl died in December, 1520, he was succeeded by his son, don Lorenzo Maxixcatl (Muñoz Camargo 1984:166; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:247), who was only twelve or thirteen years of age (Cortés 1963:118). The loss of an experienced ruler and his replacement by a boy weakened Ocotelolco and enhanced Xicotencatl's position. From Cortés's perspective, this must have been an ominous development. Any shift in policy or even resolve among the four rulers of Tlaxcallan could significantly undermine his campaign, and Maxixcatl's death made this a distinct possibility. This threat was offset, in part, by Cortés's new alliance with the Acolhua, which gave him troops, local logistical support, and a secure foothold in the Valley of Mexico. But still, he could not risk returning with his men to Tlaxcallan to take direct action. Doing so might threaten the continuation of his shipbuilding project, which was essential to the conquest of Tenochtitlan and depended on massive Tlaxcaltec labor. Moreover, absenting himself from Tetzcoco might undermine Cortés's support there, as the legitimate king of that city remained in Tenochtitlan with troops loyal to Tetzcoco's legitimate king, Coanacoch, and without Spanish support, Ixtlilxóchitl's faction might be forcibly ousted. While in an overall stronger position vis-à-vis the Aztecs, Cortés was unsure of the situation in Tlaxcallan and so bided his time.

When he was ready to launch the major assault on Tenochtitlan, Cortés summoned more troops from Tlaxcallan. An army, reportedly of

60,000 men (López de Gómara 1965-66, 2:246; Torquemada 1975-83, 2:271), came from Tlaxcallan under the command of Xicotencatl the Younger and another one made up of Tlaxcaltecs, Huexotzincas, and Chololtecs under Chichimecateuctli (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:499-500).

That night, Xicotencatl reportedly deserted (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 2:10-11; Muñoz Camargo 1984:169). Yet that he would march with his army for three days to the Valley of Mexico and then turn around and leave (allegedly for a women he left behind, even though he could easily have brought with him, or to seize control in Tlaxcallan without his army) lacks credibility. The situation can be better explained by examining it from Cortés's perspective; that is, it was close to ideal to remove a problem. Cortés had strong allies in the Acolhua, so he was less dependent upon the Tlaxcaltecs, he had gotten his shipbuilding supplies and assembled the brigantines, so that was no longer as dependant on good relations with Tlaxcallan. And though his political support there may have been weakened by Maxixcatl's death and replacement by a boy, he had managed to pull most of the troops out of Tlaxcallan and bring them to Tetzaco, where he could more easily control them, and he had brought his one major opponent, Xicotencatl the Younger, there as well.

If Xicotencatl the Younger could be legitimately removed, the potential threat in Tlaxcallan would evaporate and the troops in Tetzaco could be placed under other, more loyal commanders, such as Chichimecateuctli. Did Xicotencatl flee to Tlaxcallan did he go alone, and did he go at night? And how likely is it that his absence would be unknown to his own men yet discovered by Chichimecateuctli who was not only his arch rival (Díaz del Castillo 1977, 1:406), but the main beneficiary of the events that followed?

The improbability of this sequence of events, coupled with the substantial series of benefits that would accrue to both Cortés and Chichimecateuctli strongly suggest that, whether Xicotencatl the Younger was seized that night in Tetzaco or he learned of the plot, fled, and was seized in or near Tlaxcallan,⁸ he was hanged as a result of politics and rivalry (Cervantes de Salazar 1914:654; Díaz del Castillo 1977, 2:11; Muñoz Camargo 1984:170). And once his death was a fait accompli, Cortés's allies in Tlaxcallan accepted the proffered excuse of desertion (Muñoz Camargo 1984:170, 259) and his opponents bowed before this political shot across their bows. Even though this

⁸ It seems unlikely that a few Spaniards could seize a resisting Xicotencatl the Younger in his home province, but claiming that it occurred there was probably a way for Cortés to suggest that his actions were legitimate.

naked act of political violence would allow Cortés to claim greater support from Tlaxcallan because Tizatlan would not now dominate his ally, Ocotelolco, it would not, however, place Cortés in a very good light in the eyes of the Spanish crown, so it, like all else that occurred in the Conquest, was dressed in the garb of Spanish justice.

Conclusion

Xicotencatl the Younger may well have been anti-Spanish. Many of his recorded actions suggest as much. But the reasons for his anti-Spanish posture have little to do with those now commonly attributed to him; rather, the Spanish presence was merely another backdrop against which the internal political struggles of Tlaxcallan were played out. And once having opposed the Spaniards, Xicotencatl's political fortunes were tied to the success of that policy since his main opponent, Maxixcatl, adopted the opposite position. We cannot be sure who adopted which policy first, and that may not be significant. But once the ruler of either Tizatlan or Ocotelolco made a choice, that the other would adopt the opposite seems an almost foregone conclusion, given their apparent struggle for ascendancy.

The irony of Xicotencatl's death may be its very pointlessness. After Maxixcatl died and a boy succeeded him on the throne, Ocotelolco was politically diminished and the two Xicotencatls were doubtlessly the dominant power in Tlaxcallan. No further Tizatlan/Ocotelolco struggle need have occurred. Indeed, in the four months or so that elapsed between Maxixcatl's death and his own, Xicotencatl the Younger was free of that major constraining influence. He had his best opportunity to date to withdraw Tlaxcaltec support or even to move against the Spaniards if he so chose, yet he took no documented action against Cortés, the other Spaniards, their Indian supporters, or the alliance itself. There was no need to do so unless removing the Spaniards had been his true objective. But the context of his adoption of an anti-Spanish position suggests that it was not actually his goal, just one more means to the end of his political dominance in Tlaxcallan. And once that was achieved, the primary cause of Xicotencatl's opposition had been removed and he no longer actively opposed the Spaniards. In short, there were no Indian versus Spanish interests at that time for Xicotencatl to have championed, only Tlaxcaltec interests, Aztec interests, Acolhua interests, and so on. Yet, paradoxically, even if Xicotencatl did not see the Conquest in Indian versus Spanish terms, Cortés did, recasting events entirely in terms of his own interests. To him, Xicotencatl was an enemy and a

threat. And in this view, he may well have been urged on by Chichimecateuctli, who stood to gain the position of commanding general of Tlaxcallan and, as post-Conquest events reveal, with Xicotencatl gone, Ocotelolco emerged as dominant during the early colonial era (Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson 1986:2). Thus, it was Cortés's view of Xicotencatl that doomed him, not the reverse.

Was Xicotencatl the Younger the anti-Spanish traitor of the colonial era or the anti-Spanish hero thereafter? He was probably neither. He fought on behalf of his own interests and those of his province, as had all the other Indian rulers, and when the Spaniards arrived on the stage, they merely incorporated the Spanish troops into their other, older, on-going struggles and only too late did the Indians discover that these were not Cortés's concern and that the outcomes of the Aztec overthrow would produce an altogether different, and largely unanticipated, end through which their actions would be recast as good or evil, depending on the interpreter. Thus, factional conflict that used Cortés's presence but was not caused by it has been elevated to the level of a more politically correct resistance to Spanish domination. But, in so doing, it has deprived Xicotencatl the Younger of the right to be seen as a human being who made his own decisions in pursuance of his own interests as he saw them.

What advantage is offered by seeing Xicotencatl in this light? It is hoped that so doing will make intelligible events that currently are not, or which rest on the most tenuous of logics. But more importantly, by changing the reasons and motivations behind the actions in this portion of the Conquest to alter the picture from one dominated by the treasonous actions by Xicotencatl to one of a more complicated struggle internal and endemic to Tlaxcallan, it no longer reduces him to an untrustworthy cog in the Spanish plan and recasts him as very much his own man, albeit one doomed by Cortés's own egocentric view of events, and it may open other areas of the Conquest for reanalysis in terms of Indian interests rather than solely Spanish.

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