Fifth Sun

Introduction

“History is written by the victors.” It’s a saying you’ve probably heard before. And sadly, most of the time, it’s true. Take American history, for example. Kids are still taught in school that, in 1492, Columbus “discovered” America. But what about the indigenous people who were already there when the Spanish arrived? What about their history? How did they end up in the Americas? Welcome to the Blink to Camilla Townsend’s Fifth Sun. Professor Townsend has spent years researching works on Aztec history, history written by the Aztecs themselves. And let’s just say, her research shows the Spanish didn’t get everything right. So, in these blinks, you’ll discover a revised account of what actually happened when the Spaniards arrived on the beaches of modern-day Mexico. You’ll learn how the Aztecs went from being a small tribe to founding one of the most impressive civilizations the world had ever seen. And although that civilization was brutalized by European imperialism, you’ll also learn that the Aztecs were never truly defeated. Today, one and a half million people still speak their language, and countless more consider themselves their direct descendants. But the history of the Aztec people, or the Mexica, as they called themselves, wouldn’t have been possible without the efforts of dedicated intellectuals living many centuries ago. As their world crumbled around them, they made sure its history would not be forgotten.

The collection of history and the birth of an empire

The recording of history was something the Mexica had been doing for centuries before the Spanish arrived. In fact, they had a word for this process in their native Nahuatl language: xiuhpohualli, meaning the yearly collecting of history into annals. Every year, communities gathered to take part xiuhpohualli ceremonies. One by one, people came forward to give their account of the past year. These stories were then collected and archived by priests using pictographic symbols representing the rise and fall of emperors, important wars, and natural phenomena. But xiuhpohualli didn’t only involve gathering recent history; the community also used these events as an opportunity to recount ancient anecdotes. Sitting around campfires, elders spoke of how their people came to inhabit the Valley of Mexico. How their ancestors hailed from lands to the distant north, and had trekked over mountains and across deserts to reach their current home. By around 11,000 years ago, the Ice Age was over, and the land bridge sank beneath the rising seas. The Old World was separated from the New. It’s likely the Mexica were aware of at least four of the great wars and famines that drove their ancestors south. In fact, their religion was based on the belief that the universe had been destroyed four times before – and they were now living in the era of the “Fifth Sun.” The Mexica were among the last to arrive in the fertile Mexico Valley. With all the best land already occupied, they set up shop on a small island on Lake Texcoco. They named their village Tenochtitlan. To make up for the lack of fertile land in Texcoco, the Mexica piled mud and silt in the swampy waters surrounding the island. They made mounds of earth above the water, trapped with straw and wood. And so the village slowly transformed into a city. Rows of houses and floating gardens sprung up, and Tenochtitlan’s population and prestige grew. From their island base, the Mexica slowly began exerting political influence on their neighbors. The most effective way of doing this was through polygamous marital alliances with the nobility of surrounding city-

states. Marriages could be used to prevent (or start) war, strengthen economic ties, and unite dynasties. By the end of the fifteenth century, the city was truly a sight to behold. Its majestic painted pyramids could be seen from miles away. Its library consisted of hundreds of books detailing Mexica history through intricate pictographs. Music and dance filled the streets, and its sprawling marketplace drew in tens of thousands of people every day. However, the empire was not born without oppression. And its continued renown relied upon extracting tribute from conquered peoples and, occasionally, sacrificing dozens of prisoners in public spectacles. The Spanish would later label these sacrifices as barbarian acts undertaken purely to please the indigenous gods. But, in reality, the rationale was much more political. After a military victory over a rebelling neighbor, for example, sacrificing prisoners of war served as a public statement. The news of these sacrifices would spread far and wide – and keep enemies in check. By the turn of the sixteenth century, the Aztec Empire had established stability throughout Mexico Valley. Its population, around five million people, lived in relative peace. Little did the Mexica know that across the ocean, another empire was making plans that would put an end to the world as they knew it.

Strange warriors from across the ocean

The Mexica paid a price for the political stability they created. Enduring resentment was felt by the nobility from conquered lands. After a neighboring city-state was captured, the chief's daughters would be divided up. Daughters of the more powerful wives were sent back to Tenochtitlan to marry unmarried princes, while daughters of the lower wives were often sold off as slaves. One such unlucky daughter was called Malinche. Malinche spent her whole childhood serving these foreign masters. Then, one day, something happened that changed her life forever. Strange warriors came ashore from huge boats, and defeated her masters' warriors in battle. As a result of this loss, the Chontal offered the strangers tribute in the form of food and enslaved people, one of whom was Malinche. After being handed over to her new owners, Malinche befriended their interpreter. His name was Jerónimo de Aguilar. Eight years earlier, Jerónimo had been taken prisoner by Mayans after his ship capsized off the coast. During this time, he learned the Mayan language, which meant that Malinche could easily communicate with him. Aguilar explained to her that his people came from a land across the ocean. He also told her what had transpired during the recent battle between her people and the Spanish. Although the Chontal were far superior in number, they suffered heavy losses against the Spaniards' superior technology. The Spanish had powerful weapons made of metal, and armor that could withstand even the sharpest of stone arrows. The Spaniards also rode on horses, powerful animals that were ten times stronger than deer, and all of this meant they had cut down their adversaries with ease – and at great speed. The Spanish were heirs to a Eurasian civilization that had developed sedentary lifestyles 7,000 years before anyone in the Americas. In terms of technological development, that's a long time. So, while the Mexica were political and cultural equals to the Spanish, they hadn't had the necessary conditions to discover the power of metal, build huge ships, or develop the wheel. Anyway, back to Malinche. Aguilar told her that his leader, Hernán Cortés, had heard that a rich nation existed somewhere to the west of Mayan lands. Hernán Cortés was determined to find – and conquer – this nation. And in so doing, he would take the nation's riches and make a name for himself back home as a great discoverer. It wasn't long before Cortés and his party crossed into Mexica lands. They were soon intercepted by a small Mexica party. Aguilar stepped forward, intending to continue his role as interpreter. But they were no longer in Mayan territory; the Mexica spoke Nahuatl, which Aguilar had zero knowledge of. As Cortés grew

increasingly angry, Malinche decided to step in. She told Aguilar that they were speaking the language of her people, and that she could help him interpret. Today, Malinche is often painted as a traitor who helped the colonists conquer her fellow indigenous people. But at the time Malinche had no concept of “indigenous” or “natives.” To her, the Mexica were the ones who had conquered her own people – and sold her into slavery. No other indigenous American at the time would have questioned her motives for helping the newcomers.

The Mexica at war

Moctezuma, the Mexica emperor, was a pragmatic man. These strangers were turning his neighbors against him, and threatening the stability of the region. He decided, finally, to grant Cortés the meeting he so desperately wanted. As the two men finally came face to face at the gates of Tenochtitlan, gifts were exchanged. Then, Moctezuma announced that the hospitality of Tenochtitlan lay at the Spaniards’ disposal. By hosting them in his city, Moctezuma would be able to learn more about these powerful newcomers – and identify their weaknesses. The Spanish were not only impressed; they became increasingly excited. Cortés couldn’t believe his luck. With so much wealth to plunder, he would surely return to Spain a rich man. Cortés and his men were to stay in the palace of a former emperor. And for the next few months, they were treated like honored guests. All the while, Moctezuma was gathering intelligence on the Spaniards. One day, Moctezuma received information that thirteen new Spanish ships had been sighted. He decided it was now or never – he ordered his people to prepare for war. Cortés, however, was even faster – he had Moctezuma kidnapped and taken to the Spanish quarters. They proclaimed that any rescue attempt would result in Moctezuma’s immediate execution. War had begun. It was the Mexica who attacked first. Warriors attempted to gain entry into the fortress, but to no avail. After many days of fighting, Moctezuma was sent to the fortress walls, and yelled out to his people to lay down their arms. He knew the situation was hopeless, and that even more Spaniards were on their way. The technological imbalance was too great to defeat, he proclaimed. His people didn’t listen, however. They decided instead to starve out the Spaniards, and went about destroying all the causeways connecting the island to the mainland. If the Spaniards tried to escape, they would have nowhere to run. The plan worked. Seven days later, Cortés planned a late-night escape for him and his forces. They would use wooden planks as makeshift bridges. And, before leaving, they would kill Moctezuma. That way, his people would have no leader to rally around. Suddenly, as they attempted to quietly cross the lake, canoes descended upon them from all directions. It was a massacre. Most of the makeshift bridges were destroyed; arrows and spears rained down upon the swimming Spaniards and their local allies. By the end of the night, more than two-thirds of the Spaniards and their horses were dead. Many had drowned, weighed down by their armor or the gold they had hoped to smuggle out. Their native allies suffered even heavier losses. Back in Tenochtitlan, the joy of victory was short-lived. The city went into a state of mourning over Moctezuma’s death. And although the Spanish were gone, they had inadvertently left behind a deadly, invisible enemy.

An invisible enemy

It turned out that superior technology wasn’t the only thing the Spaniards had brought from the Old World. The most recent arrivals had introduced smallpox to Tenochtitlan. The devastation spread quickly. Within two months of their heroic victory against the

Spanish, more than a quarter of Tenochtitlan's population was dead. Meanwhile, events were moving fast outside the city. Neighboring states, also dealing with smallpox outbreaks, faced a reckoning. They'd heard about the Mexica's victory against Cortés, but word was spreading that thousands of Spanish reinforcements were on their way. Even the mighty Mexica would be unable to defeat such a formidable force.

Maintaining history in the face of conquest

Cortés, now in control, finally shed any semblance of diplomacy he had previously shown. When indigenous leaders didn't reveal where they kept their gold, they were tortured. And if not enough gold was found, prisoners of war were branded as slaves – and sent off to the Caribbean to be sold. Even women were not spared the violence; many were forced into prostitution. Things got so bad that two years into the new colonial regime, the Spanish King issued a proclamation. His conquistadors were told to dial it back – in particular, to stop their sexual enslavement of indigenous women. The brutal violence eventually decreased. Cortés carved out new fiefdoms and gifted them to his conquistadors. Indigenous inhabitants were to pay tribute to their new Spanish lords, as well as provide regular amounts of manual labor. Such labor power was immediately put to use in Tenochtitlan. A new city was to be built on top of the rubble, together with a new name: Ciudad de México, or Mexico City. Throughout the 1520s, an endless stream of Europeans arrived. Among them were Catholic friars. Their job was to rid the land of what they perceived as its sacrilegious, pagan religion – and replace it with Christianity. The friars started by trying to convince the indigenous chiefs to change their ways, but to little effect. Some chiefs, such as don Alonso Chimalpopoca, decided to convert in order to maintain his position – and keep the peace. The friars then turned their attention to the chiefly sons. If the old wouldn't listen, they would instead indoctrinate a whole generation of indigenous princes. Don Alonso's son Cristóbal was one of these young men who were taken away to missionary school. He returned home three years later speaking fluent Spanish, writing beautiful Latin letters, and praying to the God of Abraham. Cristóbal's newfound skills fascinated don Alonso. He explained to his father that Latin letters could be understood by millions of people all over the known world. This was in stark contrast to the indigenous pictographic symbols only understood by a select few. Even if all the friars were to die, Cristóbal said, the words in their books would live on. It was with this knowledge that don Alonso set out to write a history of his people. He and other elders would do the talking, while Cristóbal and other youths would do the writing. They would use Latin letters, but write phonetically in Nahuatl. The history would serve practical purposes, he hoped. For example, it could function as a record of landholding arrangements – and be used as evidence in the new Spanish courthouses. But don Alonso knew such a work should also hold a deeper purpose. As a chief, he was all too aware that the memories of the past were fading around him. He could see it in his own son. And he knew that ordinary people, having to contend with extreme poverty, had little time or energy to spend on passing down history to the next generation. Don Alonso, along with the others who had the foresight to write down their history, turned out to be half-right. It did turn out that their descendants forgot how to read the pictographs of the past. And by the eighteenth century, the tradition of collecting yearly annals was extinct. The history of the Mexica and their neighbors slowly faded to myth. However, the indigenous people of the Mexico Valley did not die out. They continued speaking their native languages. And even as centuries passed, the majority maintained an awareness that they descended from a

great civilization. Don Alonso would be overjoyed to find out that, today, nearly two million people still speak his language. And while many still live in poverty, others write, research, and teach in Nahuatl. Some indigenous poets even write that we are now living under the Sixth Sun.