

DIEGO DURÁN (ca. 1537–1588)

THE HISTORY OF THE INDIES OF NEW SPAIN (1579)

Chapter III: Which Treats of the Arrival of the Aztecs in this Land of Mexico and of the Events that Took Place Before They Reached It

So great were the feats and exploits of the Aztecs, so full of adventure, that those who are not acquainted with these exploits and with these people will enjoy hearing of their ancient customs and of their origins and descendants, and of many other events regarding them that are worthy of remembrance. I am aware of the great difficulties in relating these ancient histories, especially since they begin so far back in the past. Moreover, some early friars burned ancient books and writings and thus they were lost. Then, too, the old people who could write these books are no longer alive to tell of the settling of this country, and it was they whom I would have consulted for my chronicle.

It also seems to me that it will be impossible to tell everything that has occurred in this New Spain, as it is such a large country. There are so many kingdoms, provinces, cities, and villages here, so many large towns where innumerable people lived, divided into many nations, languages, and ways of life, as well as dress and customs. The good and bad fortunes that befell a single one of these nations would be enough for one painstaking historian. He would still have enough to do in writing the exploits of only one people, even though he abbreviated the history, which is what I have attempted here.

However, this brief history will have a special purpose: that nothing regarding the Aztec nation be left unsaid, because although the feats of all the people were to be scattered over most of this New Spain during many epochs, and were achieved by courageous men, the real origin for all these valorous deeds was, after all, Mexico-Tenochtitlan. For it was here that information about all that passed in the other provinces and kingdoms was reported, because it was the head and center of them all. So great was the power and importance of this center that it has been my desire to revive it and bring it to life again after so long a time.

This happy land has produced sons of fine and subtle intellect, sons who could have revived its ancient glories and given it new life with their outstanding skills. Thus the ancient splendor would have lived forever in the memory of men and they would have been adorned with the beauty of their own qualities, so that newly arrived foreign peoples of different nations and from different regions, like those who come to this land, attracted by its fertility and richness, would have been pleased to observe these things. Thus they would lose the bad and false opinion that these Aztec people were barbarian and uncivilized, as they have been called. Because, although they showed blindness and diabolic self-deception in their rites and idolatries, in matters of government and good order, submission and reverence, majesty and authority, courage and fortitude, I have found no one to surpass them. And I want to point out all these things so the memory of these people will last forever.

With this in mind . . . I venture to . . . bring to light this obscure and forgotten history. Even if we had no more record than the stones carved with the likenesses of the ancient kings in the enclosure at Chapultepec, where the rulers had their portraits carved at the end of their days, and many other images and sculptures one comes upon at every turn, these alone would suffice to tell of the grandeur, great deeds, origin, and

descendants of these people. Although these images do not tell the whole story, at least they are an indication of the greatest achievements of these nations.

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The Aztecs left the Seven Caves and embarked upon their journey in order to seek the land promised them by their gods, according to traditions left by their priests. I find in their painted manuscripts and in their oral traditions that the people made long stops on the migration and lived for years at a time in peaceful, fertile places abounding in water and forests. In some places they stayed twenty years, in others fifteen, and in others ten, more or less. In a painting that I was shown in Santiago Tlatelolco, I saw depicted many towns founded during this migration, some of them still inhabited and others now abandoned because the people there have died off. Only vestiges remain of the buildings and temples erected to their god . . .

Taken from Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 20–22.

ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA (1798)
“NEGRO”

NEGRO, *Homo pelli nigra*, a name given to a variety of the human species, who are entirely black, and are found in the Torrid zone, especially in that part of Africa which lies within the tropics. In the complexion of negroes we meet with various shades; but they likewise differ far from other men in all features of their face. Round cheeks, high cheek-bones, a forehead somewhat elevated, a short, broad, flat nose, thick lips, small ears, ugliness, and irregularity of shape, characterize their external appearance. The negro women have the loins greatly depressed, and very large buttocks, which give the back the shape of a saddle. Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness, treachery, revenge, cruelty, imprudence, stealing, lying, profanity, debauchery, nastiness and intemperance, are said to have extinguished the principles of natural law, and to have silenced the reproofs of conscience. They are strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself.

Taken from “Negro: Encyclopaedia Britannica,” in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995): 669.