
With all their limitations, Indian accounts of the conquest offer important insights and form a valuable part of Mexico’s historical literature. They deserve careful scrutiny not only as the “visión de los vencidos,” and thus crucial to historicity, but also on their literary merits. Less detailed than relations by contemporary Spanish observers, the native views are powerfully descriptive, evoking unforgettable images. If native pictograph writings were lacking in subtlety, the spoken language (recorded by post-conquest scribes) was vigorous and rich in its diversity. The versions we read in English obviously owe much to the translators, who, at their best, are poets.

Indian accounts have been handily available to readers of English for many years in The Broken Spears, edited by Miguel León-Portilla. Superbly translated by Lysander Kemp from Angel Garibay’s Spanish translation from Nahuatl, that book consists primarily of excerpts from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, although other native views are included as well.

Professors Anderson and Dibble undertook the ambitious task several years ago of producing a scholarly translation of Sahagún’s massive treatise on Aztec life, according to elderly Indian informants, an early and brilliant example of oral history. The resulting Florentine Codex is the most important work we have for the study of Aztec culture. The Anderson–Dibble project resulted in the publication of the thirteen parts, slender volumes, which included the Nahuatl version, with the English translation and extensive notes. The volume under review is concerned with the conquest of Mexico, based on Book 12 of the foregoing. However, it is shorter and a more simplified rendering, omitting the Nahuatl and most of the notes. The book is profusely illustrated, but the old paintings, although of interest, reproduce poorly. Otherwise the oversize volume is handsomely produced. The translations of Sahagún in this volume are often quite different from those in The Broken Spears, but both versions have their merits. Serious students should of course use the multivolume Anderson–Dibble work, but this shorter version is perhaps best for undergraduates and the general public.

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