

# **POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN ARCHAEOLOGY**

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## DE-COLÓN-IZING MALINTZIN

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La Malinche, the female consort of Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, is one of the most reviled (and misunderstood) individuals in history. Combining art historical, ethnohistorical, and archaeological arguments this paper will re-conceptualize Malintzin, the native princess, within her indigenous context. In a society where women held prominent political and religious offices, Malintzin was trained for precisely the kinds of courtly intrigues and alliance building that resulted in the overthrow of the Aztec empire. I argue that Malintzin was not only an active participant in the Conquest, but to a considerable extent she was the brains behind the successful campaign.

The Colonial period in the Americas began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus, or in Spanish, Cristobal Colón. I haven't been able to find an etymological link between "Colón" and "colonialism", but the title "De-Colón-izing Malintzin" is intended to evoke the idea of taking the Spanish colonial bias out of interpretations of the Indian princess who played such a prominent role in the conquest of Mexico. As such, it presents a post-colonial perspective on the Conquest by empowering the voices of sub-altern, non-dominant authors for the creation of alternative native and feminist histories (Gosden 2001).

Doña Marina was baptized shortly after she was transferred to the army of Hernán Cortés, along with 19 other women, by the cacique of Potonchan in the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico (Díaz del Castillo 1963; Karttunen 1997). Upon learning of her unique language abilities, bilingual in at least Maya and Nahuatl dialects, Cortés claimed her for his own, and she became his translator, advisor, and mistress. Most of what is known from historical sources was recorded by Colonial chroniclers Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1963) and Fernando López de Gómara (1964); Cortés (1986) only alludes to Doña Marina as a native woman who accompanied the army, in a re-

vealing description of his attitude toward the mother of the heir to his empire.

Based primarily on these historical accounts, and fuelled by nationalist, anti-Spanish fervour during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Doña Marina has been reviled as *La Malinche*, the traitor who sold out her people for her love of Cortés (Cypess 1991). This perspective is best represented in the deep-seated machismo of Octavio Paz (1961) in his quasi-historical book *Labyrinth of Solitude*. In it, La Malinche is portrayed as the proto-typical 'bad' woman, a slave to her base emotions, passive and stupid, a pawn in the great game of conquest. She is the antithesis of the 'good' woman, personified as the Virgin of Guadalupe. This contrast between 'good' and 'bad' parallels the descriptions elaborated by Bernardino de Sahagún (1950-82, Book 6) in his 16<sup>th</sup> century *History of the Things of New Spain*. The characterization of La Malinche as a traitor to her people is deeply ingrained in Mexican culture, as seen in the term "*malinchista*" to describe someone who prefers foreign (nowadays North American) ideals to traditional Mexican culture.

In contrast to the historical Mexican perspective, however, are numerous images found in indigenous sources, especially the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (1979), painted in native

hand shortly after the Conquest. In these images the woman Malintzin, meaning 'precious grass' probably based on the calendar date *malinalli*, is consistently shown in prominent (if not dominant) position relative to Cortes, and is clearly an active participant in the unfolding events (Peterson 1994). She negotiates with the highest lords of the land, wields weapons in battle, and even directs the assault on the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl in Cholula. In the remainder of this paper I will develop a cultural context for Malintzin using indigenous voices as heard through native-style codices, and based on ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence for pre-Columbian gender structures.

### A HISTORY OF MALINTZIN

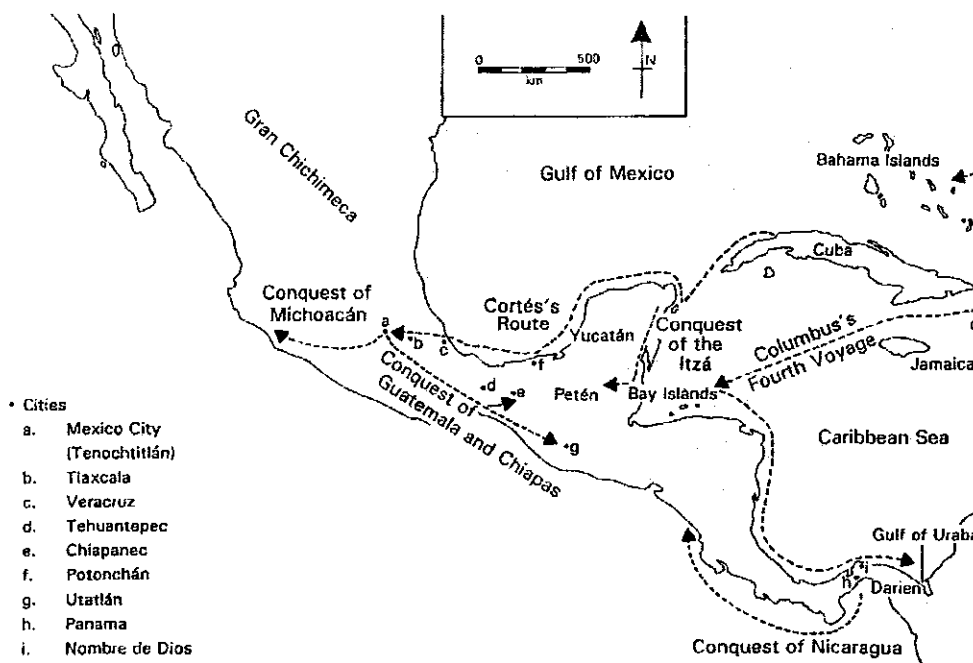
According to Colonial sources, Malintzin was born into a noble lineage in the southern Gulf Coast, as heir to the throne of the small city-state of Painala (Díaz del Castillo 1963; López de Gómara 1964). As such, it is reasonable to infer that she was schooled in subjects similar to those taught Aztec noble children in the *calmecac* of Tenochtitlan: ritual, military strategies, and statecraft (Calnek 1988). Additionally, since the southern Gulf was the homeland of the Olmeca-Xicallanca, merchant groups related to the Chontal Maya and known for their long distance trading networks, Malintzin was likely trained in the arts of negotiation and in multiple languages (Karttunen 1994). As will be seen in the history of the Conquest, these were essential skills that she provided to the Spanish invaders.

As she matured, her father died and her mother re-married, producing a son for her new husband. At that time, and to clear the path for the son's succession to the throne, Malintzin was sent away to the coastal capital of Potonchan. In most accounts it is suggested that she was sold into slavery, though evidence to support this interpretation is

weak (Karttunen 1997; Restall 2003). A more likely scenario for the daughter of a noble family would be for her to be sent to a temple to be trained as a priestess and to serve the gods. This was certainly the path of noble European girls who were sent into the convent, and in the early Colonial period native noble girls were treated similarly.

If Malintzin had entered a temple then she would have received further training in religious practices. If it were a female temple, similar to that of the goddess Tlazolteotl (a prominent deity of the Gulf Coast), her training probably would have included midwifery and healing, as well as ritual prostitution (McCafferty and McCafferty 1999; Sullivan 1982). This is obviously speculation, but it makes sense within the context of what little we know about temple organization in Postclassic Mexico. Sahagún (1950-82, Book 10) and Diego Durán (1971) provide information about the temple priestesses, including vague hints of their role in accompanying soldiers into battle, in dances with victorious warriors, and even the cost of taking a priestess home for the night (McCafferty and McCafferty 1999). A possible temple complex has been excavated in El Zapotal, Veracruz, north of Potonchan, with sculptures of priestesses and burials of numerous young women. Xochitecatl, adjacent to Cacaxtla in the Mexican highlands, also featured a female temple, the Pyramid of the Flowers, where hundreds of female figurines and sculpture depicts women in various activities and life stages (Serra Puche 2001). I suggest this is precedent for young Malintzin's situation in Potonchan.

Upon their turbulent arrival in Potonchan (Figure 1), Cortés and his small band of Spanish mercenaries were given gifts, probably as a bribe to keep them moving north in search of Aztec gold. The gifts included twenty women, among them was Malintzin (Díaz del Castillo 1963). These women were ostensibly to cook for the sol-



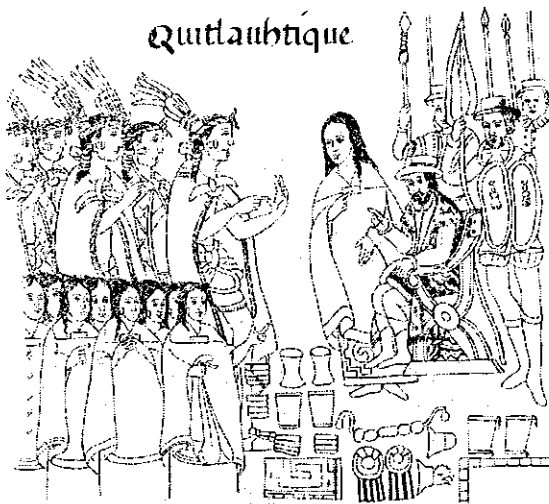
**Figure 1: Map of Cortés' travels in Mexico (after Burkhart and Gasco 2007: Figure 4.1).**

diers, but undoubtedly they were to perform other 'services' as well. Obviously medical abilities would be advantageous to an army, and perhaps the women were selected for this purpose. One question arises as to who these women were? Did the ruler of Potonchan arbitrarily select the wives and daughters of his people to accompany these barbarians into the arms of the powerful Aztec army? That seems like an unpopular move. Far more disposable would have been the temple women, including Malintzin, who were not part of any household and, as in the case of Malintzin, may have come from a distant kingdom.

Upon arrival in what is now Veracruz, Cortés discovered a problem. Up to that point a shipwrecked Spaniard named Aguilar, who had been rescued by Cortés near Cozumel, had translated between the Maya and Spaniards, but Mayan dialects were not spoken in the central Gulf Coast region and so Aguilar was stumped. Discovering Malintzin's ability to "chat up the locals", however, prompted Cortés to claim her to fill in the missing link in the communication chain

from Nahuatl to Maya to Spanish in a tenuous game of 'telephone.' Frances Karttunen (1994, 1997) has written extensively on the practicalities and challenges of this network, pointing out that native nobles, especially among the Aztecs, spoke a form of noble speech involving complex metaphors that were specifically designed to be incomprehensible to commoners. The implication is that Malintzin was knowledgeable in this dialect (Figure 2). Probably the weak link was the Spaniard Aguilar, who had been a slave on the Caribbean coast of the Yucatan peninsula where he learned some of the Mayan language, but could hardly have been fluent and was certainly ignorant of noble speech. It is likely, but again speculative, that Malintzin was quickly able to pick up enough Spanish to communicate directly with Cortés. That she became pregnant with Cortés' heir suggests that Aguilar was not always the middleman.

Malintzin's role in the conquest extends far beyond simple translation. In one of the critical events, and shortly after she became affiliated with Cortés, the Spanish entered



**Figure 2: Malintzin translating (after the Lienzo de Tlaxcala 1976).**

the city of Cempoala where they were welcomed by the Totonac ruler known as the "Fat Cacique" (Cortés 1986; Díaz del Castillo 1963). Note that Totonac is neither a Nahuatl nor Maya dialect, so this suggests that Malintzin may have been fluent in yet another major language. The Cempoalans were tributaries of the Aztec empire, but not particularly content with that arrangement, which was a relatively recent development. Shortly after the Spanish entered the city, Aztec tax collectors arrived. At Cortés' instigation, at least according to his account, the Aztecs were arrested on the promise that the Spanish would protect the Cempoalans from repercussions. However, Cortés then released the Aztecs and sent them home with a message that he was coming to Tenochtitlan, and perhaps with the subtle intent of sewing dissent among the native polities. It is farfetched to believe that the Spaniard had enough command of the nuances of the culture, politics, and language to pull off such a complicated ploy. Far more likely, in my opinion, is the central role of Malintzin in this intrigue, as she would have recognized the ethnic politics, the tension over the tributary status, and the opportunity to widen a rift. Once the Aztec

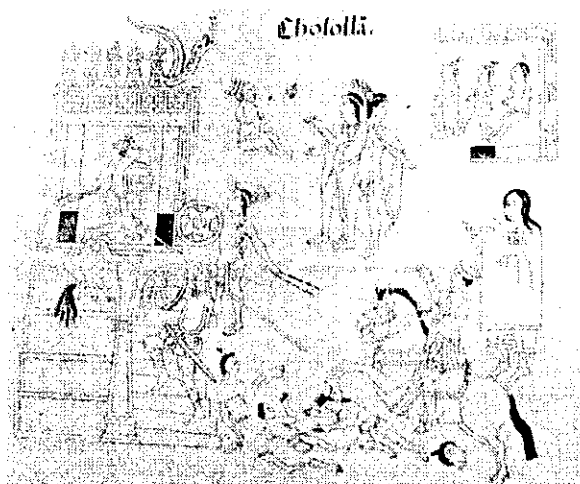
tax collectors were discovered to be missing, someone had to be able to convince the "Fat Cacique" that his only hope was to ally himself with the Spanish.

## THE CHOLULA MASSACRE

Further evidence of Malintzin's complicity, and of her own agency, is found in the events leading up to the Cholula massacre (McCafferty 2000). The Spanish army and their Cempoalan allies arrived at the highland kingdom of Tlaxcala, where they were engaged militarily, nearly defeated, but were ultimately able to strike a tentative alliance (Díaz del Castillo 1963). Cortés wanted to push on to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, but to appease his new friends his army (now augmented by the Tlaxcaltecs as well as the Cempoalans) detoured to Cholula, the great city in the Puebla valley south of Tlaxcala. The Cholultecas had been traditional allies of Tlaxcala in ritual 'flower wars' against the Aztec Triple Alliance, but apparently had betrayed the Tlaxcaltecs shortly before the arrival of the Spanish (Muñoz Camargo 1966). The Tlaxcaltecs wanted revenge, and the Spanish wanted to eliminate a potential enemy on their line of retreat, so they entered Cholula in October of 1519 (Peterson and Green 1987).

After an initially cordial welcome, the *conquistadores* began to notice signs of trouble: the food and firewood stopped being delivered, barricades were being erected, and cooking pots were being prepared for *mole de gringo* (Díaz del Castillo 1963). As tensions rose, Malintzin was approached by an "old noble woman" of the town who warned her that an ambush was imminent and that she should escape. Instead, Malintzin warned Cortés: a decision that has traditionally been identified as her moment of treason against the native people of Mexico. Cortés summoned the people of Cholula into the Great Square in front of the

Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl and, upon his signal, he launched the Cholula Massacre in which thousands were killed and the city plundered (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Cholula massacre, showing Malintzin directing assault on Pyramid of Feathered Serpent (after Lienzo de Tlaxcala 1976).**

Several aspects of the Massacre are curious. For one, Cholula was a multi-ethnic city that was home to the Olmeca-Xicallanca, merchants with ethnic origins on the southern Gulf Coast, precisely the homeland of Malintzin (McCafferty 2007; Olivera and Reyes 1969). As a noble woman herself, it is likely that she was recognizable to members of that faction, and the “old noble woman” may have even been a kinswoman. Secondly, in an effort to minimize ‘friendly fire’ incidents, the native Tlaxcalteca and Cempoalan allies shed their traditional military insignia in favour of headbands of twisted grass, or *malinalli* (León Portilla 1992). This could be interpreted as the allied warriors identifying themselves as soldiers of Lady Malintzin, “Precious Grass”. Finally, Díaz del Castillo (1963) observed that a few days after the massacre, nobles of another faction arrived to welcome Cortés to their city, and they apologized for any unpleasantness that may have transpired from

their political rivals. It is possible that, as Cholula had long been allied with the Tlaxcalteca, ethnic factionalism between rival Tolteca-Chichimeca (affiliated with the Nahuas of central Mexico, including the Aztecs) and the Olmeca-Xicallanca (from the Gulf and possible affiliated with the Tlaxcalteca) had created a serious rift in the community and political leadership had changed hands. In addition to Malintzin warning the Spanish, perhaps her primary goal may have been to warn her kinfolk, the Olmeca-Xicallanca, to spend the weekend in the hills until the smoke settled.

In the image of the Cholula Massacre found in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (1979: plate 9) it is Malintzin herself who directs the attack, with Spanish and allied warriors shown following her orders as they attack defenders on the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent. Interestingly, a group of native lords seem to watch the attack from the apparent safety of an adjoining building, perhaps in reference to the friendly faction alluded to by Díaz del Castillo.

The events leading up to the Cholula Massacre demonstrate the agency of Malintzin, as her information may have precipitated the ambush on the Cholula nobles. An even more sinister spin can be suggested if, following the possibility that the Olmeca-Xicallanca faction was spared from the attack, Malintzin orchestrated the overthrow of the dominant group through manipulation of Spanish fear. According to Cortés, an army of 50,000 Aztec warriors was waiting in ambush outside the city; curiously, however, once the battle began the Aztecs did not join in, and they may have simply been an imagined threat introduced by Malintzin to heighten tensions and precipitate Cortés’ attack.

Regardless of the instigating factors, the Cholula market reopened within days of the massacre, supplied with exotic goods from throughout Mesoamerica by the *pochteca*

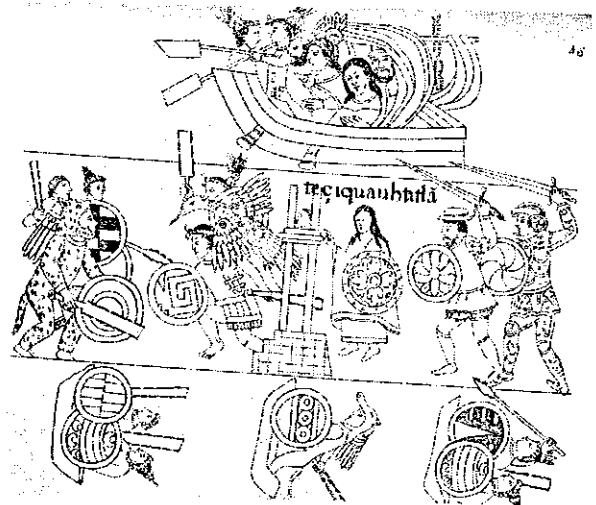
merchants affiliated with the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, and probably comprised of Olmeca-Xicallanca. The confidence that Cortés had in this group is demonstrated by the fact that warriors from Cholula were allowed to join the Spanish army alongside the Tlaxcalteca and Cempoalans in the final assault on Tenochtitlan. This seems an unlikely choice if these were warriors of the same faction that he had just massacred.



**Figure 4: Malintzin and Cortes with Maria Ilamatecuhtli (after Codex of Cholula).**

Another curious outcome of the Cholula Massacre is found on the *Cholula Codex* (Bittman Simons 1968a, b), which is actually more of a *lienzo* in that it consists of a large map of the city illustrated with historical imagery of the Massacre. Surrounded by scenes of violence, Malintzin kneels before a woman identified as Doña Maria Ilamatecuhtli at the base of the Tlachihualtepetl pyramid, while Cortés stands behind Malintzin (Figure 4). Notably Ilamatecuhtli was the name of a member of the female Earth/Fertility deity complex, synonymous with the Aztec goddess Toci (Sullivan 1982). Ilamatecuhtli literally means "old

noble woman," precisely the same term used by Díaz de Castillo to describe the woman who allegedly warned Malintzin of the impending ambush. If Doña Maria Ilamatecuhtli was the same woman with whom Malintzin had met previously, then it is possible that there existed in the holy city of Cholula a female temple institution, comparable to the one in which she herself may have been a priestess back in Potonchan. Later, during the final attack on Tenochtitlan, Malintzin is shown in front of a temple dedicated to Toci as she prepares leads the Spanish into battle (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Malintzin leading assault on Tenochtitlan, before altar of Ilamatecuhtli/Toci (after Lienzo de Tlaxcala 1976).**

The Spanish army was allowed to enter Tenochtitlan, and resided in palaces in the ceremonial centre. Lord Moctecuhzoma, the most powerful individual in New World history up to that time, was convinced to put himself under protective custody of the Spanish (Figure 6). This must have been another virtuoso performance of noble speech on the part of Malintzin. Shortly thereafter the Aztec empire came to a violent end.



**Figure 6: Malintzin conversing with Moteuczoma in Tenochtitlan (after Sahagun 1950-82, Book 12: Figure 101).**

## CONCLUSION

Post-colonialism is a complex process designed to challenge colonialist interpretations of the past that are critically viewed as continuing the process of colonialism. Post-colonial approaches attempt to break the cycle by considering voices of non-dominant members of society, and thereby opening the way for multiple histories. The Colonial history of Mexico has been dominated by historical accounts largely created by members of the conquering and colonizing society, and consequently they have rarely focused on sub-altern groups; when they have the interpretations have been highly Eurocentric. A good example is found in attempts to characterize female status in Aztec society as abject subordination to dominant males. This perspective is only justified based on a non-critical reading of Colonial sources, particularly when that reading is done with a presentist predisposition toward a gender hierarchy of

male superiority (Rodriguez Shadow 1989; but see McCafferty and McCafferty 1999).

This paper has been written within a feminist paradigm that envisions complementarity between male, female, and alternative gender roles (Kellogg 1988). I have attempted to recognize alternative, non-colonial sources painted by indigenous hands or based on native informants describing their world before the arrival of the Spanish. This includes much 'reading between the lines', and that obviously provides an avenue to indulge my own gender biases. Nevertheless, the 'her-story' that I have crafted is, I believe, at least as rigorous as other accounts of Malintzin, and incorporates contextual background on women's roles in Postclassic Mexico and the ethnic factionalism that was the political mosaic into which Cortés arrived.

Malintzin was an intelligent, educated, and skilful woman who assisted in the conquest of the Aztecs, and ultimately the advent of the Colonial era. However, as a disenfranchised noblewoman from the southern Gulf Coast, the Aztecs were not her "people," and as indicated in the events leading up to the Cholula massacre she may have been acting to enhance the political status of her Olmeca-Xicallanca kinfolk. Furthermore, as an active agent in her own self-interest, she was wonderfully effective. Her son, Martín Cortés, was designated heir to New Spain and eventually became a knight of St. James (Karttunen 1997; Lanyon 1999). Malintzin herself married a Spanish nobleman and was awarded, in her own name, a large *encomienda* estate in the mountains between Veracruz and Puebla. In a revealing scene, recorded by Díaz del Castillo (1963), Malintzin met her mother and stepbrother after the fall of Tenochtitlan, and she reportedly told them that she bore them no animosity, since she had achieved so much since being sent away from her home. And indeed she had.



Removing colonial blinders and allowing indigenous authors to describe events of the Conquest can suggest an alternative history. Is this better? Is it more 'truthful'? The beauty of the message is in the eye of the beholder.

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