

**“On the Description and Greatness of Mexico City”:
A Translation of Book 4, Chapters 24 and 25,
of Francisco Cervantes de Salazar’s
*Crónica de la conquista de la Nueva España***

INTRODUCTION

The Spanish humanist Francisco Cervantes de Salazar (1518–1575) played a vital role in the cultural diffusion of Spanish Renaissance humanism in New Spain. Widely recognized as the father of Mexican humanism,¹ Cervantes de Salazar pursued this vocation as educator and rector at the Real y Pontífica Universidad de México, where he held a chair in rhetoric and taught classes in Latin. Cervantes represented perhaps more than any other of his time the new European *letrado*: a cultured layman with knowledge and appreciation of Latin and Greek classics, both sacred and secular. His literary works provide invaluable testimony to certain Renaissance currents, such as architecture and urban planning, that created the great modern city of Mexico.

Although Cervantes de Salazar composed the first university text used for the study of the Latin language in the New World,² this is not the only contribution upon which his fame as a humanist rests. In addition to the series of dialogues in Latin, four of which were composed while Cervantes lived in Spain, and three widely acclaimed dialogues³ on Mexico City, its environs, and the university, his *Crónica de la conquista de la Nueva España*, written between 1557 and 1564, is a long, glowing, patriotic account of the process of the Spanish discovery, conquest, pacification, and population of New Spain. The two chapters herein, translated from book 4 of the *Crónica*, provide abundant evidence that Mexico was not a primitive colonial outpost but a cultured, majestic, well-planned urban center with palatial homes, running water, wide roadways, and an admirable university to educate the students as exemplary citizens of the Spanish

Empire. The two chapters describing Mexico City, printed here for the first time in English translation, were written some years after the dialogues describing the viceregal center. These chapters furnish important details supplementary to the dialogues, particularly with regard to contemporary data on architecture⁴ and the city's topography. Cervantes returned to the theme of the city and its surroundings with an unwavering sensitivity for the unique nature and great majesty of the City of Mexico. Undoubtedly he saw himself as a herald with a sense of pride in the microcosm of Spanish culture he himself had nurtured.

The Spanish plan of urban development known as the *traza* is attributed to Hernán Cortés, though recognition must also be given to the strategic layout borrowed from the Aztec imperial city of Tenochtitlán.⁵ The *traza* reserved the center of the city for the Spanish to populate, to the exclusion of neighboring indigenous peoples. The *traza* divided the Spanish area into rectangular blocks bordered by the waterways of the Aztec city. In addition to the central quadrangle, the *traza* included the continuation of the street known as Tacuba, going west. Its purpose was to ensure a safe exit from the island city, should the need arise. The indigenous population was placed in four main barrios around the *traza* with no specific urban plan: San Juan Moyotla, Santa María Tlaquechiucan, San Sebastián Atzacualco, and San Pablo Teopan.⁶ Distribution of urban space to reflect the social hierarchy was the goal, for it was a powerful visible reminder of official Spanish dominance. Cervantes de Salazar's descriptions of the square plaza, linear streets, placement of churches and clock towers, rows of houses, and the like, all speak of an ordered existence and substantiate Angel Rama's premise regarding the relationship of the ordered city, the successful domination of Spanish culture, and the political and social role of the written word.⁷

In these two chapters, as well as in his dialogues, Cervantes gives recognition to those elements of Mexico City which most precisely embody the best of Spanish Renaissance culture: the university buildings, students, and teachers; architectural details of the cathedral, churches, official residences, waterways, and streets; and bustling mercantile districts, which bear witness to lively commercial interests. Cervantes also recognizes those who worked in an official capacity to implant the best of Spanish Renaissance culture in New Spain: conquistadors such as Cortés; Don Luis de Velasco, viceroy of New Spain; Governor Pedro de Ahumana Sámano; Claudio de Arciniega, Alonso de Estrada, Gonzalo de Salazar, and Rodrigo de Albornoz, officials of the king; and university professors such as

Alonso de la Veracruz, Blas de Bustamante, Arévalo Sedeño, Juan Negrete, and Bartolomé Frías, all of whom helped advance the progress of Spain's sense of manifest destiny. In the narrative Cervantes makes frequent comparisons between the viceregal center and Seville or Valladolid, equating the beauty and majesty of the great cities of Spain and New Spain, and also shows how the civic humanism inspired by humanists such as Luis Vives worked to advance Spanish civilization in New Spain.⁸

TRANSLATION

*Chapter 24: On the Description and Greatness of Mexico City Today Since the Spaniards Have Come to Populate It*⁹

It is a certainty, since there are so many eyewitnesses to it, that since in its heathen state the city of Mexico was head of this New World, so it is now after the holy Gospel has been promulgated throughout. And it surely deserves to be, for the districts and characteristics it has, which few towns in the world are possessed of. I described the interior and exterior of Mexico City in some *Dialogues* I added to those by Luis Vives, which seemed right to me since I was a resident of this distinguished city and University professor of the Latin tongue so common to all nations, that they might learn from me before anyone else the greatness and majesty of Mexico City, which would have been much greater (as would many other things) if the Viceroy had cared to pursue it.

The Spanish population is placed between the Indians of Mexico and of Tlaltelolco, which surround it on all sides. The layout is the one that Hernán Cortés suggested at the beginning, so fitting as was everything else he did. The ground is for the most part level; formerly there was water. The streets are all so wide that comfortably two vehicles are able to go, one in each direction, three side by side. They are very long and straight, populated on one side and the other by a string of stone houses, tall, great, and spacious; such that (on one hand) there is no town in Spain with such good and strong houses.

In the middle of the plaza, which is the greatest there is in all Europe,¹⁰ is the cathedral, which seems, based on the greatness of the city, more like a hermitage than a sumptuous church. The reason was that the officials of the king (Alonso de Estrada, Gonzalo de Salazar, and Rodrigo de Albornoz) made it at the beginning, quickly, when Fernando [sic] Cortés

was absent. It was enough of a church for the few Spaniards there were at the time. Afterward, when Cortés came, hoping that great officials would make it, as he said, as sumptuous as Seville's, he went back to Spain and that is how it has remained until now that the king has ordered it to be built. They are bringing the materials for it; the living will not live long enough to see it completed, based on the layout with which they plan to work.

The entire plaza, being so large, is enclosed on one side by portals and shops, where there is a very great quantity of all types of goods, and many people from outside the city flock to them, both Spaniards and Indians. The greater part of the house that Hernando Cortés built occupies a side that faces east, which is where the viceroy and the magistrates reside, with stores below that provide much income. This house is so big and of such majesty that in addition to housing the viceroy with all his servants and the magistrates with all their servants, there is within the royal jail, the money house, and a plaza in which there is an area where the noble gentlemen practice their skills, in addition to the many patios and gardens of the apartment of the viceroy and the magistrates. The part that leads to the plaza has some very sumptuous cut-stone archways, and the salons and courts where the audiences are given and the rooms where the secretaries attend them are of the same caliber. On the same side of the street, San Francisco street being in the middle,¹¹ the portals and shops continue until another street is reached, by which passes the city's main canal, on which is the other side, which faces north. On this [side] is the audience of the city authorities, the city jail, the houses of the town council, the foundry and royal treasure, and within the silversmith; all these houses are of cut stone, very big and spacious, with low portals and high stone corridors which beautify the plaza very much. An alleyway in the middle, the gates called Doña Marina follow with shops below and dwellings above them. On the other side of the street that looks toward the west are the houses of the marquis del Valle, which are very large and more majestic than those of Count Benavente in Valladolid, in which dwell Governor Pedro de Ahumada Sámano, his chief steward, and other officials of this house. Following on the same side, with the street that leads to the archbishop's houses and the hospital of tumors¹² in the middle, are many other houses, some very important, such as those of the Adelantado Montejo, and those of Alonso de Avila, Alvarado. Then one follows the other side, which empties into the street that goes to the Atarazanas,¹³ which is called Tacuba, all very populated with stores and commerce. Four towers adorn the

plaza; two of them are at the corners of the house where the viceroy and the magistrates live, made by the marquis del Valle [Hernán Cortés]; another is at the house of Montejo and another at the house of Joan Guerrero.

Leaving this distinguished plaza, there are six streets leading to six noble buildings. By the Audience of the Alcaldes one goes to San Agustín, the sumptuous Augustine monastery, the richest in income, ornaments, and silver to be found in these parts. The street bears the name of the monastery; there is a great number of shops and official commerce, and the butcher shops are on it. By the street that is by the corner of the houses of the marquis one goes to the Hospital de Nuestra Señora, which the marquis built and endowed, where the poor, sick people who come from Spain are cared for. It has great indulgences and pardons. It is not completed, [yet] it carries the beginnings of a very sumptuous building. In this street there are many important houses. On the other street, on the side of the marquis, one goes to the archbishop's houses, which are not very big, but are very strong with two tall limestone towers. The entire house is built on a mound that was formerly a *cu*,¹⁴ so elevated from the street that up to the first floor, where the archbishop has his apartment, it is a javelin in height.¹⁵ Straight ahead on this street, in front of the hospital of tumors, is a house of great devotion and for these parts an elegant building. Many sick people are cured here; many alms are given; there are many indulgences and pardons. Don Fray Joan de Zumárraga, first archbishop of Mexico, built the houses of the archbishop and this hospital.

Then on the same side, one goes by another very long street that leads to the Church of the Santísima Trinidad, and much further ahead to the fortress known as Atarazanas. Its alcalde is Bernardino de Albornoz, Regidor of Mexico. Below the Atarazanas are placed in order, *ad perpetuam memoriam*, the thirteen brigantines that the marquis ordered Martín López to make, with which the city was won. It gives pleasure to see them, and after so much time they are still as solid as when they were built. This fortress overlooks the lagoon, a beautiful scene, both for its own grandeur and the large rocks that are visible in it and for the fishing canoes. The building is decayed and it would be proper for the future for it to be as strong as the city's greatness deserves. Taking the other street that crosses by this one that goes to the Atarazanas, one goes to the monastery of Santo Domingo, of the Dominican Order. There are on this street, up to more than half of it, many shops of various types, and then, before reaching the monastery, there is a good square plaza, which in one

part has some cut-stone portals and dwellings above, with shops below. In front on the other side there are very sumptuous houses belonging to important gentlemen. The monastery, which is between one side and the other, is very big; it has a church of only one nave, of the largest (that I have) seen. Now another one is being built that will be worth seeing; it has toward the back a very pretty garden and irrigation ditch. There is in this house much study of letters [grammar]. By the other street, named Tacuba, which begins from the corner and clock tower, one goes to Veracruz Street, from which church emerge the guilds of Vera Cruz on Holy Thursday. From there, by the main road ahead, a good distance, is the church of San Hipólito, on whose feast day the city was taken. This street is so called because it goes directly to the town of Tacuba. On up to half or a little less of the street, on both sides, there is great bustling and commotion from all kinds of trades—officials, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, carpenters, tanners, sword cutlers, tailors, jubeteros,¹⁶ barbers, candle makers, and many others. From there ahead until Veracruz Street, on both sides, there are many very sumptuous houses of important people. This is the most beautiful and attractive street of the city, from [which] one [may] go directly to the gardens. This is the most beautiful exit that there is in many parts of the world, for its grandeur and good number of gardens, for the flowing water at foot [via small canals], and the strong and beautiful houses of pleasure. On the other street, which also is almost half shops and from there ahead the houses of the principal citizens, one goes to the Franciscan monastery of San Francisco. Its church and house are average; the garden and principal patio are very big. In this patio, which is surrounded by trees with a very high wooden cross in the middle,¹⁷ toward the west, is the Chapel of San José which, as I said in the *Túmulo Imperial*¹⁸ in which I wrote about the obsequies paid to the most invincible caesar Don Carlos V, has seven naves. All the Spanish population of the city fits in it when there is a feast to celebrate; it is a sight to see because it is artificially covered with wood above many columns. It has in front cut-stone arches for the water system, and is very clear because the chapel is very high and everything in front is open. The cut-stone arches are low and serve more as an ornament than as a coat-and-covering.

*Chapter 25: Wherein the Description of the Greatness
of Mexico Continues*

In addition to these churches that you reach by travelling the streets I have mentioned, there is the Church of San Pablo, which is in the Mexican district of town, where a great number of Indians and some neighboring Spaniards hear Mass on all the feast days. Ahead, on the Iztapalapa main road, is the hermitage of San Antón. There is in the other Spanish-population section a Madre de Dios convent, which, though not indicated by the building, in the number of sisters and the goodness and religious observance and quality of the people, is as famous as some of the renowned ones in Castile, because in it there are many nuns, most of them daughters of important men. They are beginning another house near this one, into which they will move, to have a more fitting church and dwelling. Toward this part, which also is called Mexico, there are many Indian churches, such as Santa María la Redonda, San Juan, and other churches for the Spaniards which lie above the channel that runs through. On one side of the monastery of San Francisco is the School for Orphan Boys,¹⁹ which is called Doctrine. Its students are many and very well taught, because there is always a chaplain there, a chief steward and a teacher who instructs them to read and write, with all the servants necessary. It is a very devout house, though not an outstanding building. The supreme pontiff granted to it the indulgences from Saint John Lateran in Rome, so the school has this patronage. Many Masses are said in it each day, because very few die without having Masses said. This house is governed by a rector who has to be one of the magistrates, and four deputies. Farther off is a hospital with very good shops that the Indians have made for income for it, where poor, sick Indians are cured. A little farther into the city, in front of the other part of San Francisco, is the School for Orphan Girls. It is a good, spacious house, of great retreat, in which there is a mother who governs it. There are many young girls: some are received out of love for God, up to a certain number; other young girls have rich families or estates that sustain them. They are received to be taught Christian doctrine and remain secluded, learning to embroider and sew, until the time comes when they choose their profession [take a husband or take religious vows].²⁰ Every year the Confraternity of Charity, whose rector and deputies are in charge of the administration of this house, which certainly was quite necessary in this city, marries off as many of the poor orphan girls as possible. Since it is

the most important [association] in which all people of good fortune are brothers, the Confraternity of Charity does a lot of charity work, not only in this but also in going out to receive the poor and infirm who come from Spain. A canon from the cathedral goes to the school, who up to now has always been Canon Santos. On the road there is a hospital called Perote,²¹ because in all the rest of the road there is little respite.

Also in the district of Mexico are the churches of Santa Catalina, San Sebastián, and Santa Ana. From this church begins the population of the Indians of Santiago, where the great plaza I spoke of is located. There are many Indian churches here, but in the plaza is a Franciscan monastery called Santiago, an exquisite building and great location to which the entire population flocks to hear Masses and sermons on feast days. Next to this monastery is a school, also well made and very large, where there are many Indians with their foolish looks, who learn reading, writing, and grammar. There are now among them some who know it well, though there is no reason for it, because by their incapability, they cannot and should not be ordained, and outside of that gathering they do not make good use of what they know.²² The guardian of the monastery is in charge of this school; they have tried to change [the office] to a Spaniard, which would be wise. And because cities of renown ought to have water to supply the inhabitants, and this city had had it running through some of its streets, today it is brought through all of them: on each corner there is a stone cistern, where the neighbors can take water, without which water would not enter many houses. The building where the water is received for distribution is very beautiful and of great artistry. Claudio de Arciniega, a great master of the works of Mexico, built this. He is the senior worker who attends to the works, by election of the city administrator, Don Fernando de Portugal, His Majesty's Treasurer.

The entire city is positioned with the Indian population very much in evidence. Many mountains and ranges surround it at three and four leagues' distance. The fields that are on the slopes are very smooth, very fertile, happy and healthy, through which flow a variety of streams and fountains.

In the country there are many Indian towns with very good churches and monasteries. They gather a lot of wheat and corn, and there are many mills and small livestock [sheep, goats, pigs]. The country has hunting grounds and small bountiful fishing lakes, because there is very little fishing in the rivers. It has common pastures in which all kinds of cattle graze. About half a league away, among the orchards, there is a fenced-in

woods, with a very beautiful fountain from which the water flows to the city; it is called Chapultepec. Don Luis de Velasco, Viceroy of New Spain, built a small but excellent round chapel, of its size the most accomplished and worth seeing that there is in the entire city; it has its parapets around it from which the entire city, small lakes, fields and towns are visible, truly one of the best panoramic views of the world. In this forest there are many rabbits, hares, deer, and some wild boars. The forest is closed in by a strong gate, above which I put the following words: *Nemus edifitio et amenitate pulchrum delitias populi Luduovicus Velascus, hujus provinciae prorex, Scaesari suo Consecrat*, which means "Don Luis de Velasco, Viceroy of this province, dedicates to the Emperor, his Lord, this forest, in building and freshness, beautiful recreation for the city."

These and many other celebrated things are in the very distinguished, very loyal and very famous city of Mexico, head of all this New World, from where captains and regiments have left and do leave, who in the name of His Majesty have conquered and do conquer, in their own manner, I will say, all the other provinces that up to now are subject to the royal crown of Castile. And so now it is right, because of the long digression I have made, which seemed to be necessary, to return to the context of the work and history and follow what else happened to Cortés while in Mexico.

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NOTES

1. See Gabriel Méndez Plancarte, *Humanismo mexicano del siglo XVI*, Biblioteca Estudiante Universitario 63 (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1946).

2. Printed by Juan Pablos in 1554, this work is entitled *Commentaria in Ludovici Vives Exercitationes Linguae Latinae a Francisco Cervantes de Salazar*.

3. With Edmundo O'Gorman, Joaquín García Icazbalceta, Agustín Millares Carlo, among others.

4. For specific studies on architecture, see George Kubler's *Mexican Architecture of the Sixteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948).

5. Jonathan Kandell points out that Cortés took advantage of what the Aztecs already had in place, including "a grid pattern of streets and canals, flatroofed villas and palaces blanketed with flowers and greenery, and neighborhoods dominated by municipal and religious buildings clustered around open squares," *La Capital* (New York: Random House, 1988), 129.

6. Edmundo O'Gorman's recent edition of *México en 1554* (Mexico: Porrúa, 1985) is a treasure of minutiae on early colonial Mexico. In particular, see page 32.

7. Angel Rama, *La Ciudad letrada* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones de Norte, 1984).

8. For example, the Confraternity of Charity received the poor and infirm who came from Spain; the schools for orphaned children taught Christian doctrine and additionally instructed boys in reading and writing, girls in sewing and embroidery.

9. These two chapters describing Mexico City are in book 4 of Francisco Cervantes de Salazar's *Crónica de la conquista de la Nueva España* translated from the Spanish text in *México en 1554 y Túngulo Imperial* (Mexico: Porrúa, 1985), Apéndice 2, 176-171. Translation mine.

10. This comparison of the plaza in Mexico and those in the great European cities is but one example of Cervantes' attempt at Old World/New World parity.

11. The palace occupied an entire block whose borders today are Tacuba on the north, Monte de Piedad to the east, to the south Francisco I. Madero Street, and to the west Isabela la Católica. Edmundo O'Gorman delineates this area in a note to Cervantes' dialogue on the interior of Mexico City: *México en 1554*, 93.

12. The "hospital de las bubas" is the Hospital Real del Amor de Dios.

13. Atarazanas is the fortress-arsenal Cortés ordered built on the shore of the lagoon to the east of the city for its defense and the safeguard of the brigantines.

14. *Cu* is the Aztec name given to the temples where they worshiped their gods.

15. A javelin thrown for distance in a contest is about eight and a half feet long.

16. Shops in which jackets and doublets are sold.

17. "In the patio there was . . . a cross, higher than the highest tower in the city . . . it was a great relief for the travelers to see it rising so tall; it was made of one very tall and full-grown cypress that had grown in the forest of Chapultepec." From Fray Juan de Torquemada's *Monarquía Indiana* 3.26.303, as noted in O'Gorman, 113, n. 143. Translation mine.

18. A work written by Francisco Cervantes de Salazar in honor of Carlos V at the time of his death.

19. Orphan boys and orphan girls are euphemisms for the illegitimate mestizo offspring of a Spanish father and an Indian mother, who were invariably abandoned by their fathers. This very serious problem was recognized by the Spanish crown and in 1533 the viceroy was ordered to place these children in safe homes where they would be protected and indoctrinated into Spanish ways, both religious and societal.

20. Although the text does translate as "choose their profession," I have chosen to be more specific about the only two acceptable options available to young girls at that time.

21. I have not been successful in finding more specific information on "Perote."

22. There was a church prohibition against the ordaining of native priests. Contrary to Cervantes' implications, however, the College of Santiago Tlatelolco—opened in 1536 and attended by elite Indian youth who studied Latin, theology, and philosophy—is graphic evidence of both the extraordinary abilities of the native Americans and the clergy's desire to maintain control over their Indian converts by prohibiting ordination. This college was closed four decades later because the Spanish colonists began to fear that "overeducated" natives might add to growing insolence among the Indians.