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Mexico City, main plaza and cathedral, 1550, detail of map attrib. to Alonso de Santa Cruz, in the collections of the Univ. of Uppsala, Sweden; digitization by SysRep (Dr. Lily Díaz, director), Univ. of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland

Francisco Cervantes de Salazar

LIFE IN THE IMPERIAL AND LOYAL CITY OF MEXICO IN NEW SPAIN

1554 _____ EXCERPTS

Francisco Cervantes de Salazar was the official historian of Mexico City and a Latin professor at the newly-founded University of Mexico. For practice exercises in Latin, he wrote a collection of Latin dialogues describing the city, including this dialogue entitled *Civitas Mexicus*.

___THE INTERIOR OF THE CITY OF MEXICO___

ZUAZO, ZAMORA, INHABITANTS ▪ ALFARO, A FOREIGNER

ZUAZO. Clearly it is time, Zamora, that we conduct our friend, Alfaro, a second Ulysses, through the City of Mexico, as he earnestly desires, that he may view the magnitude of so great a city. Then, while we are explaining to him its more salient features, we ourselves shall learn, as it will turn out, entirely new things or the corroboration of old ones.

ZAMORA. You have spoken wisely as usual. We shall never instruct with greater profit than when, in teaching others, we ourselves are made wiser. But which seems better for our purpose, to go on foot or on horseback?

ZUAZO. Let Alfaro decide this, for we are going to spend today in his interest alone.

ALFARO. It will be better to go on horseback, that we may talk as we ride without becoming tired. We can dismount whenever it is desirable to enter the churches or the palace. . . .

ZUAZO. What street shall we start on?

ZAMORA. Tacuba Street, one of the more famous, which will lead us straight to the plaza.

ALFARO. How the view of this street exhilarates the mind and refreshes the eyes! How long it is, how wide! How straight, how level it is! And the whole street is paved with stones to prevent its becoming muddy and filthy in the rainy season. Through its middle, water flows in an open canal, which adds to its beauty and its usefulness to the people, and gives them more pleasure.

Excerpted and images added by the National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. In *Life in the Imperial and Loyal City of Mexico in New Spain and the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico as Described in the Dialogues for the Study of the Latin Language Prepared by Francisco Cervantes de Salazar for Use in His Classes and Printed in 1554 by Juan Pablos*, facsimile with translation by Minnie Lee Barrett Shepard, intro/notes by Carlos Eduardo Castañeda (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1953), pp. 37-42, 47, 52-53, 55-59, 65-67. Reproduced by permission. Digitization of the 1550 map of Mexico City by SysRep (Systems of Representation; Dr. Lily Díaz, director), Media Lab, University of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland. Map sections reproduced by permission of Dr. Lily Díaz and of the University of Uppsala Library, Sweden. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

ZAMORA. What do you think of the houses on both sides of the street, built so regularly and evenly that none varies a finger's breadth from another?

ALFARO. They are all magnificent and elaborate, and appropriate to the wealthiest and noblest citizens. Each is so well constructed that one would call it a fortress, not a house.

ZUAZO. Because of the large hostile population, they to be built like this at first, since it was impossible to surround the city by walls and defend it by towers.

ALFARO. A wise plan; and that nothing might be overlooked, the houses do not exceed a proper height. This was done, if I am not mistaken, so that they might not fall of their own height when shaken by earthquakes, which are frequent in these regions, I hear, and that all might equally admit the sun, with none shading the others. . . .

ZUAZO. On this street which, as you see, crosses the wide Tacuba Street, live the workmen and artisans of every kind of mechanical and common skills, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, locksmiths, weavers, barbers, bakers, painters, armorers, candle-makers, bow makers, sword cutlers, biscuit makers, inn-keepers, lathe-turners, and others. They live on both sides of the street, clear up to the market-place, and no man of any other trade or skill has been admitted to the street.

ALFARO. What an uproar, and what a multitude and bustling of people on horseback and on foot! One could certainly say that this is not a public street, but a market-place. Who occupy the upper stories of this wing of the building, that is adorned with such large windows?

ZUAZO. The royal counselors,¹ and the interior part, which is even more magnificent, is occupied by the viceroy.

ALFARO. This domicile is certainly worthy of such distinguished men. But what is the meaning of those weights that hang down from above the ropes? Ah! I had not noticed; they are the controls of the clock.

ZUAZO. You are right. It is so placed on this lofty tower, which also connects both sides of the building, that when it strikes it is heard by the inhabitants of the city in every quarter.

ALFARO. Wisely done!

ZUAZO. Now here is the plaza. Look carefully, please, and note if you have seen another equal to it in size and grandeur.

ALFARO. Indeed, none that I remember; and I don't think that its equal can be found in either hemisphere. Good heavens! How level it is and how spacious! How gay! How greatly embellished by the superb and magnificent buildings that surround it on all sides! What order! What beauty! What a situation and location! Truly, if those colonnades that we are now facing were removed, it could hold an entire army!

ZUAZO. The reason for the great size



¹ Although the text reads *Regii consilarii*, the reference is to the Royal Audiencia, the highest tribunal in New Spain, comparable to our Supreme Court today. [Castañeda, intro/notes, *Life in the Imperial and Loyal City*, footnote, p. 41]

of the plaza is to prevent goods from being offered for sale in other places. . . [T]his one market-place is for all the people of the City of Mexico. In this one market-place weekly market days were established; here the auctions are held; here is found whatever there is for sale; and to this place the merchants of the whole province bring and import their wares. To this market-place also, to sum it up, flow in whatever things are most desirable in Spain. . . .

ZAMORA. The soil on which this city is located was once entirely covered with water. The Mexicans [Aztecs] were unassailable and were superior therefore to all the other Indians. For since they lived in a lake, they safely made expeditions against their neighbors, in great hollowed tree trunks which they used for boats. Receiving no harm from their enemies, they retreated to their homes, as if into a well-fortified asylum that nature protected by the surrounding water.

ALFARO. Then how could it happen that Cortés was able to subdue such a multitude of men in a swampy place unfit for either cavalry or infantry?

ZUAZO. He outdid their skill with his skill. First having determined the depth of the water, with the aid of Martín López [a shipbuilder], he constructed small boats of such sort that one was capable of attacking and conquering many of the Indians' canoes.

ALFARO. Oh ingenious man, excelling all others in spirit, and born only for the greatest enterprises!

ZAMORA. His palace is located opposite the royal palace. Consider how clearly it bears witness to the invincible and peerless spirit of its builder. . . .

ALFARO. Along this street, too, which leads to the convent, water is carried down in open canals.

ZAMORA. A more plentiful supply is brought into the monastery by hidden subterranean channels, so that it flows clear and limpid.

ALFARO. Where does so much water come from?

ZUAZO. From Chapultepec, noted in the chronicles of the Indians and also for its abundant water supply. If you like, we'll go there after lunch to look at the environs of the City of Mexico from a mountain ridge, near by, lest no view escape us. . . .

ALFARO. What excellent construction in those houses facing each other near by!

ZUAZO. And just as handsome as well built.

ALFARO. Such houses are always highly regarded, I notice, but those beyond the canal have a much more pleasing appearance with their inner gardens and colored roofs. . . .

. . . But what sort of people live in this quarter that we are now entering? It is very gracious and striking with its large distinguished homes. And praiseworthy, too, for its two-fold water supply, one for sprinkling the pavements, the other quite suitable for drinking.

ZUAZO. The nobles dwell here, and some of those who brought under the emperor's power this region



unknown to historians: the Cervantes, Aguilares, Villanuevas, Andrades, Jaramillos, Castañedas, Juárez, and Avilas, and the rest too numerous to mention.

ALFARO. What an elegant plaza follows next, and how admirably it enhances these houses about it, in themselves no less handsome. And the view from here along the paved street into the country is more charming. . . .

ZUAZO. In a direct line of view is the college [orphanage] for boys of mixed blood, which has been dedicated to both [saint] Johns.

ALFARO. Whom do you call mixed?

ZUAZO. The Spanish-Indians.

ALFARO. Explain more clearly.

ZUAZO. Orphans, born of Spanish men and Indian women.

ALFARO. What do they do, confined there?

ZAMORA. They read, write, and better still, they are trained in those matters that pertain to the worship of God. Clad in ankle-length garments, they walk about by twos, but generally by fours, being small boys.

ALFARO. What are they going to do when they grow up?

ZUAZO. Those endowed with talent apply themselves to the liberal arts; other, not equally endowed, to handicrafts and jobs about the market-place. For this reason, it happens that they increase in virtue with age, so that when they have become men they cannot be led into evil, except unwillingly.

ALFARO. Never is the interest of the state so well served as when boys are so trained that, having imbibed virtue, so to speak, and grown strong afterwards, they can never depart from it.

ZUAZO. The principles which have been instilled from childhood and have become firmly established are of utmost importance to one's unhappiness or unhappiness.

ZAMORA. This is another drainage canal, a crosswise one, and, if we follow it, it leads around to the western side of the convent.

ZUAZO. From here we can observe closely the huts of the Indians, which we couldn't do if we rode on horseback among them, because they are low and spread along the ground.



ALFARO. And without orderly arrangement.

ZUAZO. Such has always been their custom. . . .

ALFARO. Look at the large number of skiffs there! How many cargo canoes, the best for bringing in merchandise! There is no reason for missing those of Venice! In the neighborhood, facing the third side, is the extensive market-place of the Indians. In its center, erected on an elevation, is a cymbal for beating. At the side, there is a fork-shaped gallows, to which, entering through a door, one mounts by several steps. It is clearly visible from a distance because it is elevated high from the ground. How many Indians of every type and age stream in here to buy and sell! What a great row of things to sell, and how many are sold, things which I have never found for sale elsewhere!

ZAMORA. The nature, the productive quality, of the lands is as diverse as the characters and tongues of men.

ALFARO. “Men are of a thousand kinds, and as diverse their enjoyment of things.” There is also that well-known saying: “India sends ivory; incense, the soft Sabeans.”

But those Indian men and women sitting there—what wares are they selling? Most of them seem cheap and of very little worth?

ZUAZO. What the earth brings forth: ají [chili], beans, Persian pears, guavas, mameyes, zapotes, camotes, gícamas, cacomites, mesquites, tunas, gilotes, xocotes, and other fruits of this nature.

ALFARO. I have never heard of such names or seen such fruits! What drinks are those in the large earthenware jugs?

ZUAZO. Atole, chia, zotol, made of certain ground seeds.

ALFARO. Outlandish names!

ZAMORA. As ours to them. . . .

ZUAZO. If Cortés had lived longer, I do not doubt that the hospital dedicated to the Virgin Mother which he left superbly begun would have equaled his other works.



Map of Mexico City attributed to Alonso de Santa Cruz, 1550, details



ALFARO. The beginnings of this building certainly promise greatness.

ZAMORA. Shortly, these will be surpassed with that money which thus far has been piled up from taxes, with which the hospital is being increased day by day.

ALFARO. Assuredly the building has an elegant façade and the very best arrangement. But, tell me, pray, whether the ill are being received in it—a fact that would increase its praiseworthiness—and with what care and kindness they are looked after?

ZUAZO. All Spaniards whatsoever who are seized by a violent fever are admitted, and they are relieved of their illness with such attention and kindness that the rich are not better and more tenderly cherished in their own homes than the poor are there.

ALFARO. Oh, thrice and four times blessed Cortés, to whom it befell to leave behind in this province monuments of a devotion that will never let him die! But why are you pressing on your horse so urgently?

ZAMORA. That we may arrive in time for lunch, for the hour is past twelve.

ALFARO. You have pricked up my sluggish and half-dead appetite. . . .

ZUAZO. . . . So dismount, pray, for this dwelling of mine is for the common use of my friends, and do us the honor of eating with us. We can go more conveniently from here to Chapultepec later to get a clear and unobstructed view of the environs of the City of Mexico.

