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**The Spectacle of Death in Early Colonial New Spain  
in the *Manuscrito del aperreamiento***

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Modern viewers cannot help but be shocked at the central image of death in the *Manuscrito del aperreamiento* (*Manuscript of the Dogging*), which provides a haunting picture of Mexico's immediate post-conquest years (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1.  
*Manuscrito del  
aperreamiento*.  
Courtesy of the  
Bibliothèque  
Nationale de  
France.

Though called a “manuscript,” the *Manuscrito del aperreamiento* was actually painted on a single sheet of European paper sometime in the middle of the sixteenth century, and is housed, today, in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. At the center of the painting, a chained dog, controlled by a Spaniard, brutally kills a bound, indigenous priest; the dog’s fangs sink into the defenseless man’s neck, creating a profusion of blood that demands our attention and outrage. Indeed, the image of the brutalized body becomes a locus of sympathy for viewers, an unintended response to this record of corporal punishment, elucidated by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish*. The response typical of modern viewers—sympathy for the victims and outrage towards the perpetrators—was, however, most likely not the original intention of the painting, which was likely more mundane and political.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I provide a reading of the *Manuscrito* to show how the dogging may have been seen as justified in a Spanish legal context. I then consider the implications of this punishment by considering what Cortés might have gained by carrying out so brutal a sentence against this particular victim. Public executions were fairly common at this time, functioning as political rituals that communicated power. However, the use of a dog would have surely shocked the indigenous lords who witnessed the extraordinary execution and would have understood this death as a public warning of their need to submit to the Spaniards and their religion. As I will show, such a spectacular execution, carried out in the grand tradition of a Spanish *auto de fe*, would have been a powerful means of asserting, to both the indigenous peoples and to his fellow Spaniards, Cortés’s authority over these newly conquered, but not yet subdued, peoples.

### **Reading the *Manuscrito del aperreamiento***

The primary means of communication in the *Manuscrito del aperreamiento* is visual, with events communicated via the figures’ actions and placements, as well as through a combination of both a hieroglyphic system of writing for names and places, and Nahuatl, imparted through European script. Though heavily indebted to indigenous figural representation, the work reveals European influences, seen, for example, in the use of shading that gives the image the illusion of volume. Stylistically, this suggests that the painting was made towards the middle of the sixteenth century, but no later than 1560—a date supported by the presence of an alphabetic annotation added after the visual imagery was completed. According to this Nahuatl text, located at the bottom of the painting, “*Ynacico marques ya onpohualxihuitl once axcan ynauh xihuayoc yn ya miq tlatoque*” (The Marques came forty-one years ago, four years later the rulers died). Because

Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519, the annotation must have been written in 1560, and we can place the depicted events as occurring just four years after Cortés's arrival, or in 1523.

At the center of the painting, a bound indigenous priest is brutally attacked and killed by a chained dog that is controlled by a Spaniard. Six more indigenous lords are shown chained together along the right border of the painting, surely next in line to be “dogged,” or *aperrado*. The apparent director of events, Hernán Cortés, stands at the top of the painting, dressed in an elaborately brocaded jacket and feather-tufted hat. His indigenous translator, doña Marina, stands next to him, also elegantly dressed, but in a combination of indigenous clothing and European-style shoes. Marina holds a rosary and Cortés raises his hands in communication, gestures that clearly signal their attempts to proselytize the indigenous men. Based on their captivity and impending punishment, the men must have refused these overtures. In fact, the first man in the chained group holds a European sword, suggesting an outright rebellion against Cortés's Christian message.

The executions must have taken place in Coyoacan. In the *Manuscrito*, a place glyph of a coyote by a series of hills signifies the *Place of the Coyotes*, or Coyoacan, and is shown below the dogging. An associated gloss reads “*Yn momoquiliqui coyoacan tlatoque chicomeh*” (Seven lords died there, at Coyoacan). Coyoacan was Cortés's headquarters in the years just after the fall and destruction of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, and numerous Spaniards and indigenous lords were gathered there in these years. Moreover, Doña Marina remained in Coyoacan with Cortés and continued to help him in his dealings with indigenous lords (Townsend 133), hence her inclusion in the *Manuscrito*.

As revealed by the alphabetic annotations that accompany the visual imagery, the victims of the doggings were noblemen brought to Coyoacan from various towns within the larger city-state of Cholula, which, after the conquest, was divided into six territories, called *cabeceras* (headtowns) by the Spaniards. Beginning with the chained men and reading from top to bottom, the first alphabetic annotation reads “*San pablo tlatoque ometzin*” (Two rulers from San Pablo). The first man is named “*tecohtli mexitly*” (Lord Mexitli), and the second man is “*tecohtli tecamecatl*” (Lord Tecamecatl). The next gloss reads “*Sanct andrés tlahtoque*” (The rulers from San Andrés), and these three men are named Quahuitzcuitzin, Itzcohuamani, and Coahuapixqui. The alphabetic annotation near the final man reads “*Sancta Maria ychan quetzalmazatzin*” (Quetzalmazatzin, whose home is Santa Maria).<sup>3</sup> These Spanish saints' names—San Pablo, San Andrés, and Santa Maria—correspond to three of the six *cabeceras* of the Cholula city-state. In a 1581 map that accompanied Cholula's *Relación Geográfica* (a compilation of responses to a series of questions sent by the Crown to learn about its new possessions and compiled by Cholula's *corregidor* Gabriel de Rojas), each of these *cabeceras* is pictured along the right border and



particular *cabecera* was the capital of the Cholula city-state, as is also suggested by its placement at the top of the map. After the conquest, the Spaniards gathered a number of towns within Cholula, including one called Tianquiznahua, into the *cabecera* of San Miguel Tecpan (*Suma de Visitas* 61). This confirms that the primary victim was one of the most important religious figures from one of the most prestigious towns within the Cholula city-state.

Located in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley, the Cholula city-state, with its capital at San Miguel Tecpan Tianquiznahuac, was probably the oldest, continuously occupied territory in pre-conquest Mesoamerica. Throughout its long history, the city was considered an *axis mundi*, or sacred place.<sup>5</sup> Its oldest temple, the Great Pyramid or Tlachihualtepetl, was the largest ever built in Mesoamerica. Aware of its sacred significance, the Spaniards placed a Catholic church dedicated to the Virgen de los Remedios at its summit. By the time the Spanish arrived in Central Mexico, Cholula had a different main temple devoted to the cult of Quetzalcoatl, one of the most important gods in Late Post-Classic Central Mexico and generally associated with the priesthood and civilization (Nicholson 1971, 428–430).<sup>6</sup> As David Carrasco (3) has argued, the god also symbolized sanctified authority, and the heads of the cult of Quetzalcoatl were Cholula's two main priests, the Tlalchiach, and another priest, who was called Aquiach. They played key roles in investiture ceremonies for the region. As described in Cholula's *Relación Geográfica*: "Also, these two said priests had the preeminence in the state of confirming all of the governors and kings of this New Spain in this manner—upon inheriting the kingdom or *señorio*, these kings and caciques came to this city to recognize obedience to the idol of Quetzalcoatl!" (Rojas 160–62). As a ritual that bound the people of the Puebla-Tlaxcala valley together, this investiture ceremony suggests that Cholula's high priests also played a key political role for the region (Pohl 169–170; Carrasco and Sessions 435). The sacrality of Cholula and its priests was further conveyed by the city-state's full name, Tollan Cholollan, with the word *tollan* metaphorically signifying great and sacred cities in Mesoamerica.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Cholula's sacred significance was felt far beyond the city-state's borders, as its temples, devoted to a multitude of gods, made it a major pilgrimage destination. It was compared to ancient Rome and Mecca by Motolinía (123) and Torquemada (1, 282), both Spanish missionaries and historians.<sup>8</sup>

This reading shows that the primary victim of the *Manuscrito's* dog attack was one of the two highest priests of Cholula, one of the most sacred cities in central Mexico, an *axis mundi* and a *tollan*. This, then, was not an indiscriminate attack on an indigenous lord, but a brutal punishment of one of the most highly-revered religious and political figures in Central Mexico. It was an act of domination, perhaps, over indigenous religion itself.

The relatively mundane scene at the bottom of the painting must depict

the aftermath of these violent executions. A Spanish conquistador, identified as Andrés de Tapia, speaks with two indigenous men who are named Temetzin and don Rodrigo Xochitotzintli. The associated alphabetic gloss explains the scene:

Ynicuac omicque tlatoque chicometin niman con qui tlatocatlali Tabia temetzin. Çan chicuepohualtica on catca niman no conpiloco yn tabia. Auh niman contlali y don Rodrigo Xochitotozintli, ixquelle maquelle in Chololan chane. Ynacico marques ya onpohualxihuitl once axcan ynauh xihuayoc yn ya miq tlatoque.

(When the seven *tlatoque* died, then Tapia installed Temetzin as ruler. After only one hundred and sixty days, Tapia came to hang him. And then don Rodrigo Xochitotzintli was made ruler, he was a citizen of Cholula. The Marques came forty-one years ago, four years later the *tlatoque* died).

The forty-one years since Cortés's arrival are repeated at the bottom of the painting where one dot is followed by eight groupings of five dots each, for a total of forty-one. Moreover, four of these dots are painted red and separated by a cross. As Simon Reinisch has pointed out, the use of red may be a symbolic reference to the bloodshed that characterized the years from Cortés's arrival to the punishment of the indigenous men in 1523.<sup>9</sup> In the previous year, Cortés had given Cholula to Andrés de Tapia as an *encomienda* (land grant). As Cholula's *encomendero*, Tapia would then have had the authority to appoint don Rodrigo as the city's latest ruler, which he must have done in the wake of the deaths of Cholula's previous rulers.<sup>10</sup>

Visual cues within the *Manuscrito* relate important information about the identities of the indigenous victims and their resistance to Christian rule. For example, the indigenous regalia of the victims link them more to the pagan past than the Christian present. Moreover, the men wear their hair with a short tuft at the front and the rest elegantly twisted and bound with an item called a *quetzallalpiloni*, which carried militaristic associations.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the *Codex Mendoza* (f64r–65r), painted in 1541, high-ranking Aztec warriors wear the *quetzallalpiloni*, and according to the Spanish missionary, Bernardino de Sahagún (1959–1982 8, 73–74; 1993, 65r, translated in Sullivan 245), Nahua rulers gave the *quetzallalpiloni* as gifts to brave warriors. Thus, the headdresses of these men, along with the European sword held by the first man in the chained group, visually communicate military resistance and suggest open rebellion against Cortés's Christian message.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the indigenous men at the bottom of the painting are shown as more accepting of the Spaniards and their religion. For example, they are dressed more modestly in full mantles and no longer wear the gold

chestpieces or the *quetzalapilloni*. Their hair is now cut short, and the men even have slight stubble on their faces, which suggests an association with the bearded Spaniards. Moreover, one of these men, don Rodrigo, has a Spanish name, which he would have received upon baptism. In contrast, his countrymen still carry full Nahuatl names, suggesting that of all the indigenous men shown, don Rodrigo was the only true Christian.

The visual record, then, communicates that these Cholulteca noblemen refused to submit to the Spaniards and their religion, and as punishment, were executed. Don Rodrigo, in contrast, had accepted the Spaniards and their religion, and was appointed Cholula's ruler by its *encomendero*, Andrés de Tapia. Returning to the dots that signify years at the bottom of the painting, the four red dots that may reference the blood spilled in Cholula over these years, are separated from the others by a cross, perhaps referencing both the arrival of Christianity in Cholula in 1523 through its new ruler, and the ensuing, relative peace that presumably followed in the city. In short, don Rodrigo would have stood the most to gain through a record of these events, as they established the legitimacy of his rule, in a Spanish context.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Intentions of Hernán Cortés**

Because don Rodrigo would have benefited by recording the events pictured, it does not seem likely that the *Manuscrito* was created with the intention of holding Cortés accountable for the brutality of these punishments. Cortés actually stood to gain through the attempted conversion and subsequent execution of the Tlalchiach. Based on his political and religious significance for the indigenous peoples, the death of the Tlalchiach would have created an opening at the top of the indigenous ruling hierarchy that Spaniards now had to fill.

Cortés's attempted conversion of the Tlalchiach was surely carried out with political intentions in mind. In the chaos of the conquest and its aftermath, public conversions could not have reflected any genuine understanding of Christianity. It seems more likely that the indigenous people converted, in name only, in order to send political statements about new alliances. For their part, the Spaniards were only too happy to accept the conversions as nominally valid for, by doing so, they effectively undercut indigenous ruling hierarchies and separated indigenous rulers from the local priesthood (Hassig 177, 185). In this context, the results of Cortés's attempted conversion of Cholula's Tlalchiach and other elites would have had political implications, definitively distinguishing these men as either his allies or his enemies.

Because the Tlalchiach played a key role in investiture proceedings, his

death would have caused a rupture in the political leadership of the indigenous peoples. With the deaths of so many indigenous nobles during the conquest, this break with past ceremonies would have been acutely felt by the people, and would have created a vacuum that Spanish authority had to fill. Under Spanish colonial rule, a priest of Quetzalcoatl would no longer confirm new indigenous *tlatoque*; instead, a Spaniard, acting in the name of the Christian God, would appoint new rulers. Indeed, the scene at the bottom of the *Manuscrito* must picture a new investiture ceremony, with Cholula's *encomendero*, the Spanish conquistador Andrés de Tapia, confirming don Rodrigo as Cholula's newest ruler. The death of the Tlalchiach allowed Cortés to effectively decapitate this indigenous political hierarchy, and its associated rituals, and replace it with a Spanish one. Structurally speaking, Andrés de Tapia became Cholula's new Tlalchiach.

Additionally, this death enabled Cortés to decapitate the indigenous religious hierarchy and prepare the way for the Christianization of the indigenous peoples, which was a key concern of his (Liss 50; Schroeder 8). According to the Spanish conqueror and chronicler Bernal Díaz (110), Cortés made a habit of telling the indigenous peoples he encountered about Christianity, and he made a point of destroying indigenous idols in temples and replacing them with images of the cross and Mary. In his letters to Charles V, Cortés (106, 332) mentioned his conversations with indigenous leaders about Christianity, and he implored the emperor to send religious personnel to evangelize the indigenous peoples. When the first group of Franciscans finally came to New Spain in 1524, he made their arrival a dramatic event, gathering indigenous nobles to witness his greeting of the friars and kneeling, himself, before the priests in solemn welcome, thereby initiating the spiritual phase of the conquest (Phelan 33). As Richard Trexler puts it, the image of Cortés theatrically kneeling before the friars in greeting became “the visual image par excellence of the spiritual conquest” (578). It also established an hierarchical structure in which God's dominance prevailed over all other secular authority. The Franciscans subsequently lauded Cortés's religious efforts, and many promoted him as the initiator of Christianity in the New World (Elliott 55; Braden 76, 79; Phelan 30–33; Schroeder 11).

Cortés's targeting of a priest such as Cholula's Tlalchiach, and other indigenous priests as well, would have suppressed a powerful resistance to the new Christian religion. His *modus operandi* became well-established. For example, according to the *Anales de Tlatelolco* (Lockhart 271–73), he had another priest, the Tlilancalqui of Tenochtitlan, thrown to the dogs. This was one of the highest priests of the Aztec capital, in charge of a temple called the “black house,” in which idols of conquered territories were housed, making him essentially the keeper of the indigenous pantheon. Moreover, according to the indigenous historian Chimalpahin (*Las ocho relaciones* II: 157), Cortés also had a number of priests sequestered after the



conquest, and in a dialogue between indigenous elders and Franciscan friars known as the *Coloquios*, the elders complained of the numerous deaths among the indigenous priesthood (Sahagún *Coloquios*). Cortés's actions against these priests would have silenced their oppositional voices and, again, would have created a power vacuum to be filled by Spanish personnel. Only with the imprisonments and deaths of these priestly officials could the spiritual conquest begin. As Cortés's objectives at this time were to secure his conquered territories, squelch any possible rebellions, and initiate the spiritual phase of the conquest, it made sense for him to target priests, such as Cholula's Tlalchiach, especially considering the close ties between religion and politics in both the indigenous and Spanish worlds.

Though shocking to us today, Cortés's punitive actions were justified by both the church and secular authorities. The Spanish Crown and its missionaries debated the appropriate use of force in the evangelization process, and a general consensus emerged that if the indigenes refused to submit to Christianity, they could be forcibly subjugated (McAlister 70–71; Rivera 53). This legal justification is contained in the *requerimiento*, a document that was to be publicly read by Spanish conquerors (such as Cortés) to the native peoples. The *requerimiento* demanded the indigenes hear the gospel, and warned that if they refused, just war could be waged against them (Rivera 32–35; Seed 69–70).<sup>14</sup> Any refusal of these indigenous lords to submit to evangelization would have legitimated Cortés's brutal attack against them, essentially marking them as rebels against the Christian faith. In fact, some of the early Franciscan friars were equally harsh in their punishments of native heretics.<sup>15</sup> Though modern readers may view such executions as cruel and deviant actions, they were by no means exceptional; such brutalities were considered necessary demonstrations of Spanish power (Krippner-Martínez 36–45). Moreover, these punishments sent a powerful message to others on the benefits of complying with Spanish ideology through Christian conversion (Liss 123).

### **The Spectacle of Doggings**

The relation of these executions to Christianity and their processional aspects liken this event to an *auto de fé*, a public ceremony during which violators of Catholicism were judged and punished by the Inquisition.<sup>16</sup> In Spain, the *auto de fé* was a spectacular event, with thousands of people gathering to watch the executions. As a ritualized performance, it was highly symbolic, a theatrical reenactment of the Last Judgment, and a visual display of justice (Flynn; Gonzalez de Caldas; Avilés). When the *auto de fé* was brought to the New World, it came to be associated with imperial legitimization and political authority (Cañeque 323–324), just as large-scale

spectacles also crossed into the New World and served as hegemonic tools of the state, allowing Spaniards to symbolically take possession of a new land and visualize the power of both Church and State (Curcio-Nagy 275–7).

In the *Manuscrito*, it becomes clear that Cortés has adopted Inquisitorial practice as a model. He stands with doña Marina who holds the Catholic rosary, signifying conversion, and suggesting one last chance for the indigenous prisoners to accept the new religion. Such final chances were typically offered preceding the punishments in an *auto de fé*. It was also typical for convicted heretics to be shamed through public processions.<sup>17</sup> The chaining of the men pictured in the *Manuscrito*, and their journey from Cholula to Coyoacan in this humiliating manner, suggests a similar shaming through ritual procession. Of course, Cortés was not working in the official capacity of an inquisitor, but as a product of late medieval Spain, he would surely have been aware of the symbolic implications of this act and of public spectacles in general. In effect, he tapped into an inquisitorial mentality to theatrically assert his authority over his newly conquered territories.

Though couched in religious reasoning, the spectacular deaths by dogging recorded in the *Manuscrito* also clearly served political ends. As Foucault has argued, all public executions are essentially political rituals, with the right to punish being “an aspect of the sovereign’s right to make war on his enemies” (48). The act of ordering a public execution, then, would have marked Cortés as New Spain’s sovereign.<sup>18</sup> The intended result of this punishment would have been to establish a relationship of dominance between Cortés and the indigenous peoples. Taking the issue of the spectacle of punishment back to early modern Europe, Pieter Spierenburg notes that the essence of criminal justice and punishment is a relationship of subordination; the person receiving punishment is, by definition, subordinate to the punisher. He writes, “If there is no subordination, there is no punishment” (2). By ordering this execution, Cortés communicated his dominance over some of the most elite men in Central Mexico, marking his sovereignty and superiority over these newly conquered territories and peoples.

Likewise, the choice of a dog to mete out punishment may have been done for strategic effect. Inga Clendinnen has noted the dramatic nature of Cortés’s actions throughout the conquest of Mexico: “He knew how to stage a theatrical event for maximum effect [. . .] when he did use force he had a flair for doing so theatrically, amplifying the effect” (72). Clearly these theatrical gestures continued after the conquest as well, with an execution via dogging inflicting maximum terror, both to its victims and witnesses. Native peoples were highly fearful of the Spanish *alans* (wolfhound), a cross between a mastiff and a bulldog, as their experiences with canines were limited to the small and relatively harmless Mexican hairless dog. A description of Spanish dogs from Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* focuses on their fierce nature: “And their dogs were huge creatures, with their ears

folded over and their jowls dragging. They had burning eyes, eyes like coals, yellow and fiery” (1959–1982 12, 79). Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas’s account of Spanish atrocities reiterates the brutality unleashed by these “wild dogs who would savage a native to death as soon as look at him, tearing him to shreds and devouring his flesh as though he were a pig. These dogs wrought havoc among the natives and were responsible for much carnage” (17).

The dramatic nature of an execution via dogging may have been heightened by the fact that it was a fairly atypical form of punishment, and presumably one chosen for extraordinary circumstances; there are relatively few mentions of doggings in indigenous sources, while executions by hanging, garroting, or decapitation are far more common (Batalla Rosada 106). The *Anales de Tlatelolco* (in Lockhart 271–273) is one of the few indigenous sources to mention others who were executed via dogging—the Tlillancalqui and some lords from Xochimilco and Texcoco—but provides no clear explanations as to why. The indigenous historian Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl mentions a dogging by Cortés, who he says ordered some indigenous lords sentenced to death—“unos ahorcados y otros les echaron los perros que los despedezaron” (1, 484) (some hanged and others thrown to the dogs who tore them to pieces)—for inciting a rebellion against the Spaniards. Of the pictorials, the *Lienzo de Chontalcoatlan*, an eighteenth-century copy of a lost sixteenth-century original, also pictures a dogging carried out by Cortés in Coyoacan; according to an associated annotation on the *lienzo*, Cortés had summoned indigenous lords to Coyoacan in order to distribute their lands in *encomienda* and those who did not obey were ordered attacked by dogs (Jiménez and Villela 149–150).<sup>19</sup> Two conquest histories, the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan* and the *Lienzo de Analco*, also picture doggings that were carried out by Spanish conquistadors against rebellious indigenous groups (Asselbergs 180, 236). Nevertheless, in each of these sources, the doggings are just one episode within a much larger history, and not the focus of the narrative, as in the *Manuscrito del aperreamiento*.

Though admittedly few, these indigenous references to doggings suggest that this sentence may have been associated with acts of rebellion, as is further supported by its ancient precedents. Luis Weckmann has argued that there was no judicial foundation to the doggings of indigenous peoples in the New World (452); however, one of the modes of execution mentioned in the *Siete Partidas*, a codification of Spanish law created in the thirteenth century and still in use in the sixteenth century, is “echando a las bestias bravas” (Batalla Rosada 99) (throwing to ferocious beasts). The ancient Romans traditionally threw criminals to the beasts, which at times included dogs, and death by *bestias* (beasts) was considered an aggravated punishment and one reserved for lesser members of society (Robinson 106, 190). This form of punishment even continued into the Christian era and was specifically called

for to punish practitioners of human sacrifice (Robinson 137). This is significant because a large portion of the *Siete Partidas* was indebted to Roman precedents (Stein 65–66). In fact, the *Siete Partidas* reiterates the Roman practice of throwing traitors to the beasts, which suggests its applicability in later times (Scott 509). This form of punishment, then, was not entirely a Spanish colonial phenomenon, and it must have carried symbolic implications perhaps related to its earlier associations with rebellion, paganism, and sacrifice, all crimes the Cholulteca victims were likely accused of committing. As Weckmann has pointed out, a death by dogging “implicitly suspended the native’s status as a rational being and even his human nature” (452); that is, the act of being killed by a beast essentially diminished the victim’s status to that of a beast; hence, its association with lower members of society. Accordingly, for Cortés to order so brutal a punishment suggests his low regard for these men.

It is difficult to say exactly what the Nahuas would have made of this new and vicious manner of death. Because the dogs were specifically associated with the Spaniards, the terror they unleashed at their command would have sent a particularly strong message regarding Spanish power, a message heightened by the sheer brutality and excessiveness of this punishment. Moreover, the indigenes believed that how one died determined one’s afterlife. Accordingly, the unprecedented nature of a death by dogging may have caused these deaths to be seen as an upheaval of their views on the afterlife. In fact, the Nahuas believed that souls of the dead were guided to the afterlife by companion dogs. With dogs now bringing death itself, there would have been no way of knowing the fate that awaited the souls of these men, surely a troubling spiritual question given the high religious status of the primary victim, Tlalchiachteotzin.

### **Witnesses to the Executions**

As the ravaged body of the Tlalchiach was a sign of Cortés’s absolute authority over New Spain and its peoples (and a clear break with past traditions and beliefs), the execution needed an audience to be meaningful. If the main goal of public executions was to set an example and visualize power, then public executions had to be dramatized as morality plays, as warnings to the viewing public not to transgress (Foucault 57–58; Spierenburg 43, 55). The execution of Cholula’s nobles was as much about the message sent to the witnesses as it was about the victims’ apparent crimes:

[P]unishment is a ceremonial of sovereignty; it uses the ritual marks of the vengeance that it applies to the body of the condemned man; and it

deploys *before the eyes of the spectators* an effect of terror as intense as it is discontinuous, irregular and always above its own laws, the physical presence of the sovereign and of his power (Foucault 130, my emphasis).

Thus, both the crime and the sovereign were made visible on the tortured/executed body of the criminal. For their part, the audience that gathered in Coyoacan understood this in terms of power, with, perhaps, a slight variation in implication.

For the Spaniards gathered in Coyoacan, who were by no means a unified group, this dogging would have represented a reiteration of Cortés's social and royal prerogative. Cortés had his fair share of enemies and critics amongst his fellow conquistadors, and a public execution, such as the dogging, would have underlined his authority to these men. In fact, when this execution occurred, Cortés may still have been unaware of the king's reaction to the conquest or even his own position vis-à-vis control over New Spain; it was not until September of 1523 that he finally received a response from the king appointing him captain general of New Spain (Clendinnen 73). Nevertheless, with or without the king's approval, this act of execution would have established Cortés as New Spain's supreme authority, an important signal to send to his fellow Spaniards and at a time when the legality of the entire enterprise was still uncertain.

Meanwhile, for the Nahuas gathered in Coyoacan, Cortés's actions embodied a usurpation of traditional power structures and constituted a forcible break from the recognized past, to a potentially terrifying future. It is clear that Cortés executed and tortured a large number of indigenous noblemen in Coyoacan just after the conquest. Surely the most famous of these was Cuauhtemoc, ruler of the conquered Tenochtitlan and the last in a lineage of kings. Cortés tortured him, presumably in an effort to learn the location of lost Aztec gold, and to, yet again, display his dominance over his foremost indigenous rival. It is also clear that Cortés allowed a great number of the indigenous lords he sequestered in Coyoacan, and who would have witnessed his acts of terror, to eventually return to their homelands and rule over their local communities. For example, three Mexica noblemen—don Juan Velasquez Tlacotzin, don Andrés de Tapia Motelchituzin, and don Diego Huanitzin—were also kept in Coyoacan by Cortés, and each of these men was eventually appointed by the Spaniard as ruler of Tenochtitlan (*Codex Chimalpahin* I: 217–19). Furthermore, the investiture ceremony that is shown at the bottom of the *Manuscrito* must have also taken place in Coyoacan, as no other place glyphs are shown. Therefore, Temetzin and don Rodrigo likely also witnessed the doggings of their countrymen. Those rulers who were gathered in Coyoacan, and were later allowed to return home and resume rule, must have been terrorized by violent executions, such as the doggings shown here. That they were allowed to go home and rule—

indeed, were allowed to live—suggests that these men heard loud and clear Cortés’s message: accept Spanish hegemony or face the consequences.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusions

Despite the *Manuscrito del aperreamiento*’s haunting image of this execution via dogging, the event itself is not well-known in colonial studies, nor did it make an impact in sixteenth-century accounts of the early post-conquest years. There are references in some colonial sources to doggings, but I have found no others that mention the specific targeting of Cholula’s high priest. Perhaps this is because our only known record of the event, the *Manuscrito*, was not originally intended as an indictment of Cortés, but, instead, was created to serve local interests, namely the legitimacy of don Rodrigo Xochitotzintli’s rule over Cholula. In fact, the religious justifications for the deaths shown in the *Manuscrito* may have caused these events to signify differently than other cruelties for which Cortés did have to answer.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that the *Manuscrito* and numerous other accounts of Cortés’s brutalities were recorded from an indigenous perspective reveals that these executions did have an impact on spectators, who must have told others about what they had seen, and took the intended message to heart. Cortés clearly used terror as a strategy to impose his dominance over New Spain, and the death of Cholula’s Tlalchiach served a number of functions that helped him to do so. In general, the Tlalchiach’s place at the top of the political and religious hierarchy of Cholula and Central Mexico helped Cortés to establish Spanish political and religious authority over an indigenous ruling hierarchy. Moreover, in the chaotic aftermath of the fall of Tenochtitlan, Cortés would have needed to make a theatrical display of his power, and the public execution of Cholula’s Tlalchiach through a dog attack would have been a dramatic and shocking way of doing so. The terror of this event would have marked the victims as barbarians and traitors, while simultaneously stunning witnesses of this transformation into submission. For these witnesses, both indigenous and Spanish, the ravaged body of Cholula’s Tlalchiach signaled the expediency of accepting Cortés’s authority.

Images typically have lives that exceed their original contexts of creation. Despite the fact that the *Manuscrito* may not have been created with the intention of provoking either sympathy for the dogging victims or accountability for Cortés, the shocking image of this brutal execution does bring to light the acts of terror that must have followed the conquest. Though its original patron may not have intended such a reading, today, the unforgettable representation of the brutalized Tlalchiach recorded in the

*Manuscrito* remains a lasting sign of the traumas both inflicted upon, and witnessed by, the colonized, in the immediate post-conquest years.

## Notes

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2. Stephanie Wood has cautioned against mistaking our modern reactions with indigenous intentions: “In many of these scenes that are so disturbing from a modern perspective we do not know the full intention of the author-painter or whether an indigenous observer of that period would have seen in them a sad, an angry, or a cautionary portrait” (32).
3. With the exception of the first man in the chained group, all are also identified with indigenous name glyphs. Perla Valle provides a thorough discussion of these hieroglyphic compounds and their correspondence, or lack thereof, with the annotations.
4. For more detailed information on this position, see Rojas (160), Muñoz Camargo (253), and the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (143).
5. For overviews of Cholula and its conception as a sacred space, see Olivera, Mountjoy and Peterson, McCafferty (2000, 2001), and María Elena Bernal García.
6. For Cholula as the seat of Quetzalcoatl worship, see Muñoz Camargo (116), Motolinía (137), Torquemada (1, 282), Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1, 531, 538), and Alvarado Tezozomoc (117). For more on Quetzalcoatl’s significance as both a deity and mytho-historical figure, see Florescano, Carrasco, and Nicholson (2001).
7. On the map accompanying its *Relación Geográfica* (Fig. 2) and in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976), the place glyph of Cholula consists of reeds growing from swirling waters, which evokes the literal meaning of *tollan*, “among the rushes, reeds, or cattails” (Heyden 94–97). Elizabeth Boone and David Carrasco have separately analyzed the metaphoric implications of Mesoamerica’s *tollans*, including Cholula.
8. Cortés claimed to have counted over 400 temples in the Cholula city-state (75) and Motolinía said there were over 300 and that pilgrims came from as far as “forty leagues” to visit the city (123).
9. Simon Reinisch’s unpublished notes on the painting, written in 1867, are now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Fonds Mexicain 419–17).
10. We learn elsewhere that Tapia had Temetzin hanged because he would not supply him with gold and that the Cholula *encomienda* was eventually taken from Andrés de Tapia because of his mistreatments of his indigenous charges. Andrés de Tapia, and later his son Cristóbal, continually but unsuccessfully petitioned the crown for the return of Cholula to the Tapia family; the documentation on these lawsuits is housed in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville (AGI Justicia 206, legajo 2). In fact, Cristóbal’s lawsuit was begun in 1560, which coincides with the dating of the alphabetic annotations on the *Manuscrito*; for more on the possible connections between these lawsuits and the *Manuscrito*, see Diel (n.d.).
11. Justyna Olko provides information on this headpiece and other accoutrements in her

- thorough work on Aztec insignia.
12. The identification of the Cholula captives as priests, warriors, or lords is not clear, but it is possible they were all three. In the *Códice de Cholula*, which was created in Cholula at about 1580, an image of an earlier Tlalchiach shows the priest holding the shield and obsidian crusted sword typical of warriors, and in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (43), an illustration of Cortés's entry into Tenochtitlan shows a Cholulteca warrior wearing the same headpiece. Thus, elites in Cholula may have played both priestly and military roles.
  13. This interpretation also makes sense because of the political factionalism of Cholula both before and after the conquest; for more on this and its relation to the *Manuscrito*, see Diel (n.d.).
  14. Of course, because the *requerimiento* was read to indigenous peoples in Spanish, they could not have understood its language nor its implications, which led Bartolomé de Las Casas to famously lament that he did not know whether to “laugh or cry” at its absurdity (Seed 71).
  15. For example, in about 1525, Fray Martín de Valencia ordered the executions of four Tlaxcalteca for idolatry (Gibson 34–37). Also, in 1539, New Spain's first bishop and protector of the Indians, Juan de Zumárraga found the indigenous ruler of Texcoco, don Carlos Ometochtzin, guilty of numerous crimes against Christianity and ordered him burned at the stake (Greenleaf 1994, 360). A few years earlier, the Spanish conquistador Nuño de Guzmán had also ordered the execution of the *Cazonci*, or indigenous leader, of the Michoacan region for idolatry and rebellion (Krippner-Martínez 50). The executions of the *Cazonci* and don Carlos did stir controversy in Spain and brought about a swift backlash against such cruel punishments of indigenous converts; however, executions did continue. For example, in Oaxaca in 1560, two indigenous idolaters were burned at the stake, though this, too, sparked an investigation into the harsh punishment (Greenleaf 1994, 368–9).
  16. In Spain, the Dominicans were in charge of the Inquisition and, through a play on their name, *domini canes*, they were also known as “hounds of the Lord.” Interestingly, one might say that in the *Manuscrito*, the dog also acts for God, or as a *domini cane*.
  17. For more on the Spanish inquisition, see Kamen, and for its transplantation to the New World, see Greenleaf (1969, 1994) and Cañeque.
  18. In early Modern Europe, though there was an acceptance of violence and no real sensitivity to the suffering of convicts, there was a negative attitude towards executioners (Spierenburg 12–13). Accordingly, in the *Manuscrito*, Cortés orders the punishment, but another Spaniard, unnamed, acts as executioner.
  19. Perla Valle provides a comprehensive overview of this and other dog attacks in New Spain.
  20. Cortés was not alone in using execution as spectacle; as James Krippner-Martínez elucidates, Nuño de Guzmán sent the same message through the execution of the *Cazonci*, a leader in the Michoacan region. The *Cazonci* was found guilty of both idolatry and the killings of Spaniards, and his sentence was that he be secured to a horse's tail and dragged through town with a town crier proclaiming his crimes. Then he was garroted and burned at the stake (Krippner-Martínez 50). Though controversial, this sentence, too, was justified in a Spanish legal context, and as Krippner-Martínez argued, the public and humiliating nature of this execution “symbolically demonstrated Spanish domination of the region and created a context in which indigenes would benefit from seeking an alliance with factions of colonizers to improve their position within an emerging colonial state” (43).
  21. For example, in 1529, a *residencia* was held for Cortés; this was a Spanish legal



proceeding in which a government official had to answer for his actions while in office. The *residencia* contained numerous accusations against Cortés for many of the brutalities he administered against indigenous peoples, both during and after the conquest. Two of the events that stand out are his massacre of a great number of unarmed citizens of Cholula during the conquest (known as the Cholula Massacre), and his torture of Cuauhtemoc. He was also asked about general mistreatments of indigenous peoples, but not specifically about the doggings of Cholula's noblemen. In fact, one of the accusations against Cortés was that he did not make a sufficient effort to convert indigenous peoples under his rule. In this light, the *Manuscrito's* image of Cortés wishing to proselytize native men may have actually served his interests rather than hurt them. The *Residencia* takes up six books in the AGI (Justicia 220–225) and portions of the proceedings are published in Martínez.

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