
Documents

Considering the Evidence: State Building in the Early Modern Era



The empires of the early modern era were the projects of states, though these states often made use of various private groups—missionaries, settlers, merchants, mercenaries—to achieve the goals of empire. Such imperial states, Qing-dynasty China, Mughal India, the Ottoman Empire, and France, for example, were invariably headed by monarchs—kings or emperors who were the source of ultimate political authority in their lands. Each of those rulers sought to govern societies divided by religion, region, ethnicity, or class.

During the three centuries between 1450 and 1750, all of these states, and a number of non-imperial states as well, moved toward greater political integration and centralization. In all of them, more effective central bureaucracies curtailed, though never eliminated, entrenched local interests; royal courts became more elaborate; and the role of monarchs grew more prominent. The growth of empire accompanied this process of political integration, and perhaps helped to cause it. However, the process of state building differed considerably across the early modern world, depending on variations in historical backgrounds, the particular problems and circumstances that each state faced, the cultural basis of political authority, and the policies that individual leaders followed.

The documents that follow allow us to examine this state-building effort in several distinct settings through the writings of monarchs, the edicts they issued, or outsiders who observed them. Pay attention to both the similarities and the variations in this process of state building as you study the documents. You may also want to consider how these early modern states differed from the states of later centuries. To what extent was government personal rather than institutional? In what ways was power exercised—through coercion and violence, through accommodation with established elites, through the operation of new bureaucratic structures, or by persuading people that the central authority was in fact legitimate?

Document 14.1

The “Self-Portrait” of a Chinese Emperor

Of all the early modern states, China had the longest tradition of centralized rule and political integration. By the time the Qing dynasty came to power in 1644, China could look back on many centuries of effective unity. Although interrupted periodically by peasant upheaval, external invasion, or changes in dynasties, cultural expectations nonetheless defined a unified state, headed by an emperor, as the norm. The Qing dynasty, although of Manchurian origin and proud of its military skills, generally accepted Chinese conceptions of statecraft, based on literary learning and a long-established system of civil service examinations designed to recruit scholar-officials into official positions. During the long reign of Kangxi (reigned 1661–1722), that dynasty initiated a vast imperial project extending Chinese control deep into inner Asia. (See the map on p. 644, and see pp. 643–45.) Document 14.1 contains a number of Kangxi’s personal reflections on the management of this huge imperial state and its bureaucracy. Drawn from his own writings, this “self-portrait” of the Chinese emperor was compiled by the highly regarded historian Jonathan Spence.

- What major challenges to the effective exercise of state authority does Kangxi identify in this document?
- How would you describe Kangxi’s style of governance or his posture toward imperial rule?
- Look carefully at the second paragraph of the document. Why did Kangxi impose a harsher penalty on Hu Chien-ching than the one originally given?
- What does this document suggest about the sources of Kangxi’s authority?

THE EMPEROR KANGXI

Reflections

1671–1722

Giving life to people and killing people—those are the powers that the emperor has.... He knows that sometimes people have to be persuaded into morality by the example of an execution....

Hu Chien-ching was a subdirector of the Court of Sacrificial Worship whose family terrorized their native area in Kiangsu, seizing people’s lands and wives and daughters, and murdering people after falsely accusing them of being thieves. When a commoner finally managed to impeach him, the Governor was slow to hear the case and the Board of Punishment recommended that Hu be dismissed

Source: Jonathan D. Spence, *Emperor of China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 29–58.

and sent into exile for three years. I ordered instead that he be executed with his family, and in his native place, so that all the local gentry might learn how I regarded such behavior....

I have been merciful where possible. For the ruler must always check carefully before executions and leave room for the hope that men will get better if they are given the time....

Of all the things that I find distasteful, none is more so than giving a final verdict on the death sentences that are sent to me for ratification.... Each year we went through the lists, sparing sixteen out of sixty-three at one session, eighteen out of fifty-seven at another....

There are too many men who claim to be *ju*—pure scholars—and yet are stupid and arrogant; we'd be better off with less talk of moral principles and more practice of it.... This is one of the worst habits of the great officials, that if they are not recommending their teachers or their friends for high office, then they recommend their relatives....

There is no way the emperor can know every official in the country, so he has to rely on the officials themselves for evaluation, or on censors to impeach the wicked. But when they are in cliques, he has to make his own inquiries as well; for no censor impeached the corrupt army officers Cho-ts'e and Hsu-sheng until I heard how they were hated by their troops and people and had them dismissed....

The emperor can get extra information in audience, on tours, and in palace memorials. From the beginning of my reign, I sought ways to guarantee that discussion among the great officials be kept confidential. The palace memorials were read by me in person, and I wrote rescripts on them myself.... [R]egular audiences are crucial with military men, especially when they have held power for a long time. There might have been no rebellion if Wu San-kuei, Keng Ching-chung, and Shang Chih-hsin had been summoned for regular audiences and made properly fearful. And army officers on the frontiers tend to obey only their own commander, acknowledging him as the ruler....

On tours I learned about the common people's grievances by talking with them, or by accepting

their petitions. I asked peasants about their officials, looked at their houses and discussed their crops. I heard pleas from a woman whose husband had been wrongfully enslaved, from a traveling trader complaining about high customs dues, from a monk whose temple was falling down, and from a man who was robbed on his way to town....

In 1694 I noted that we were losing talent because of the way the exams were being conducted: even in the military *chin-shih* exams, most of the successful candidates were from Chekiang and Chiangnan, while there was only one from Honan and one from Shansi. The successful ones had often done no more than memorize old examination books, whereas the best should be selected on the basis of riding and archery....

Even among the examiners, there are those who are corrupt, those who do not understand basic works, those who ask detailed questions about practical matters of which they know nothing, those who insist entirely on memorization of the *Classics*... those who put candidates from their own geographical area at the top of the list....

My divines have often been tempted to pass over bad auguries, but I have double-checked their calculations and warned them not to distort the truth: the Bureau of Astronomy once reported that a benevolent southeast wind was blowing, but I myself calculated the wind's direction with the palace instruments and found it to be, in fact, an inauspicious northeast wind; I told the Bureau that ours was not a dynasty that shunned bad omens; I also warned the Bureau not to guess or exaggerate in interpreting the omens that they observed, but simply to state their findings.... And being precise about forecasting the motions of the sun, moon, and planets, the winter and summer festivals, the eclipses of the sun and moon—all that is relevant to regulating spring planting, summer weeding, and autumn harvest....

I have never tired of the *Book of Changes*, and have use it in fortune-telling and as a source of moral principles; the only thing you must not do, I told my court lecturers, is to make this book appear simple, for there are meanings here that lie beyond words.

Document 14.2

The Memoirs of Emperor Jahangir

The peoples of India, unlike those of China, had only rarely experienced a political system that encompassed most of the subcontinent. Its vast ethnic and cultural diversity and the division between its Hindu and Muslim peoples usually generated a fragmented political order of many competing states and principalities. But in the early modern era, the Mughal Empire gave to South Asia a rare period of substantial political unity. Document 14.2 offer excerpts from the memoirs of Jahangir, who ruled the Mughal state from 1605 to 1627, following the reign of his more famous father Akbar (see pp. 645–46). Written in Persian, the literary language of the eastern Islamic world, Jahangir's account of his reign followed the tradition of earlier Mughal emperors in noting major events of his lifetime, but it departed from that tradition in reflecting personally on art, politics, family life, and more.

- Why do you think Jahangir mounted such an elaborate coronation celebration for himself?
- In what ways did Jahangir seek to ensure the effective authority of the state he led?
- In what ways was Jahangir a distinctly Muslim ruler? In what respects did he and his father depart from Islamic principles?
- How would you compare the problems Jahangir faced with those of Kangxi? Notice, among other things, that each of them had to adjust to a long-established cultural tradition—Kangxi to Chinese Confucianism and Jahangir to Hinduism. In what ways did they do so?

JAHANGIR

Memoirs

1605–1627

At the age of thirty-eight, I became Emperor, and under auspices the most felicitous, took my seat on the throne of my wishes....

As at the very instant that I seated myself on the throne, the sun rose from the horizon; I accepted this as the omen of victory, and as indicating a

reign of unvarying prosperity. Hence I assumed the titles of... the world-subduing emperor, the world-subduing king. I ordained that the following legend should be stamped on the coinage of the empire: "Stricken at Agrah by that... safeguard of the world, the sovereign splendor of the faith, Jahangir, son of the imperial Akbar."

On this occasion I made use of the throne prepared by my father, and enriched at an expense without parallel for the celebration of the festival of the

Source: *The Memoirs of the Emperor Jahangir*, translated from the Persian by Major David Price (London: Oriental Translation Committee, 1829), 1–3, 5–8, 15.

new year... Having thus seated myself on the throne of my expectations and wishes, I caused also the imperial crown, which my father had caused to be made after the manner of that which was worn by the great kings of Persia, to be brought before me, and then, in the presence of the whole assembled Emirs, having placed it on my brows, as an omen auspicious to the stability and happiness of my reign, kept it there for the space of a full astronomical hour....

For forty days and forty nights I caused the... great imperial state drum, to strike up, without ceasing, the strains of joy and triumph; and... around my throne, the ground was spread by my directions with the most costly brocades and gold embroidered carpets. Censers^o of gold and silver were disposed in different directions for the purpose of burning odoriferous drugs, and nearly three thousand camphorated wax lights... illuminated the scene from night till morning. Numbers of blooming youths, beautiful as young Joseph in the pavilions of Egypt, clad in dresses of the most costly materials... awaited my commands, rank after rank, and in attitude most respectful. And finally, the Emirs of the empire... covered from head to foot in gold and jewels, and shoulder to shoulder, stood round in brilliant array, also waiting for the commands of their sovereign. For forty days and forty nights did I keep open to the world these scenes of festivity and splendor, furnishing altogether an example of imperial magnificence seldom paralleled in this stage of earthly existence....

I instituted... special regulations... as rules of conduct, never to be deviated from in their respective stations.

1. I remitted [canceled] altogether to my subjects three sources of revenue taxes or duties....

2. I directed, when the district lay waste or desolate of inhabitants, that towns should be built.... I charged the Jaguir-daurs,^o or feudatories of the empire, in such deserted places to erect mosques and

substantial... stations for the accommodation of travelers, in order to render the district once more an inhabited country, and that wayfaring men might again be able to pass and repass in safety.

3. Merchants traveling through the country were not to have their bales or packages of any kind opened without their consent. But when they were perfectly willing to dispose of any article of merchandise, purchasers were permitted to deal with them, without, however, offering any species of molestation....

5. No person was permitted either to make or sell either wine or any other kind of intoxicating liquor. I undertook to institute this regulation, although it is sufficiently notorious that I have myself the strongest inclination for wine, in which from the age of sixteen I have liberally indulged....

6. No person [official] was permitted to take up his abode obtrusively in the dwelling of any subject of my realm....

7. No person was to suffer, for any offense, the loss of a nose or ear. If the crime were theft, the offender was to be scourged with thorns, or deterred from further transgression by an attestation on the Koran.

8. [High officials] were prohibited from possessing themselves by violence of the lands of the subject, or from cultivating them on their own account....

10. The governors in all the principal cities were directed to establish infirmaries or hospitals, with competent medical aid for the relief of the sick....

11. During the month of my birth... the use of all animal food was prohibited both in town and country; and at equidistant periods throughout the year a day was set apart, on which all slaughtering of animals was strictly forbidden.

[H]aving on one occasion asked my father [Akbar] the reason why he had forbidden any one to prevent or interfere with the building of these haunts of idolatry [Hindu temples], his reply was in the following terms: "My dear child," said he, "I find myself a powerful monarch, the shadow of God upon earth. I have seen that he bestows the blessings of his gracious providence upon all his creatures without distinction. Ill should I discharge the duties of my exalted station, were I to withhold my compas-

^oCensers: containers for burning incense.

^oJaguir-daurs: local rulers granted a certain territory by the Emperor.

sion and indulgence from any of those entrusted to my charge. With all of the human race, with all of God's creatures, I am at peace: why then should I permit myself, under any consideration, to be the cause of molestation or aggression to any one? Besides, are not five parts in six of mankind either Hindus or aliens to the faith; and were I to be governed by motives of the kind suggested in your inquiry, what alternative can I have but to put them all to death!

I have thought it therefore my wisest plan to let these men alone. Neither is it to be forgotten, that the class of whom we are speaking... are usefully engaged, either in the pursuits of science or the arts, or of improvements for the benefit of mankind, and have in numerous instances arrived at the highest distinctions in the state, there being, indeed, to be found in this city men of every description, and of every religion on the face of the earth."

Document 14.3

An Outsider's View of Suleiman I

Under Suleiman I (1520–1566), the Ottoman Empire reached its greatest territorial extent and perhaps its "golden age" in terms of culture and economy (see Map 14.3, p. 647). A helpful window into the life of this most powerful of Muslim states comes from the writings of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, a Flemish nobleman who served as a diplomat for the Austrian Empire, which then felt under great threat from Ottoman expansion into central Europe. For six years in the mid-sixteenth century, Busbecq represented Austria in the Ottoman Empire, from which he sent a stream of letters to a friend. The excerpts in Document 14.3 present his view of the Ottoman court and his reflections on Ottoman military power.

- How do you think Busbecq's outsider status shaped his perceptions of Ottoman political and military life? To what extent does his role as a foreigner enhance or undermine the usefulness of his account for historians?
- How did he define the differences between Ottoman Empire and Austria? What do you think he hoped to accomplish by highlighting these differences?
- What sources of Ottoman political authority are apparent in Busbecq's account?
- What potential problems of the Ottoman Empire does this document imply or state?

OGIER GHISELIN DE BUSBECQ

The Turkish Letters

1555–1562

On his [Suleiman's] arrival we were admitted to an audience; but the manner and spirit in which he listened to our address, our arguments, and our message, was by no means favorable. The Sultan was seated on a very low ottoman, not more than a foot from the ground, which was covered with a quantity of costly rugs and cushions of exquisite workmanship; near him lay his bow and arrows. His air, as I said, was by no means gracious, and his face wore a stern, though dignified, expression. On entering we were separately conducted into the royal presence by the chamberlains, who grasped our arms. This has been the Turkish fashion of admitting people to the Sovereign ever since a Croat, in order to avenge the death of his master... asked Amurath [an earlier Sultan] for an audience, and took advantage of it to slay him. After having gone through a pretense of kissing his hand, we were conducted backward to the wall opposite his seat, care being taken that we should never turn our backs on him....

The Sultan's hall was crowded with people, among whom were several officers of high rank. Besides these there were all the troopers of the Imperial guard and a large force of Janissaries; but there was not in all that great assembly a single man who owed his position to aught save his valor and his merit. No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks.... In making his appointments the Sultan pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into consideration recommendations or popularity.... It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should only be assigned to the competent.... Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they

actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth....

Among the Turks, therefore, honors, high posts, and judgements are the rewards of great ability and good service. If a man be dishonest, or lazy, or careless, he remains at the bottom of the ladder, an object of contempt; for such qualities there are no honors in Turkey! This is the reason that they are successful in their undertakings, that they lord it over others, and are daily extending the bounds of their empire. These are not our ideas, with us [Europeans] there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the public service....

[T]ake your stand by my side, and look at the sea of turbaned heads, each wrapped in twisted folds of the whitest silk; look at those marvelously handsome dresses of every kind and every color; time would fail me to tell how all around is glittering with gold, with silver, with purple, with silk, and with velvet; words cannot convey an adequate idea of that strange and wondrous sight: it was the most beautiful spectacle I ever saw.

With all this luxury, great simplicity and economy are combined; every man's dress, whatever his position may be, is of the same pattern; no fringes or useless points are sewn on, as is the case with us, appendages which cost a great deal of money, and are worn out in three days.... I was greatly struck with the silence and order that prevailed in this great crowd. There were no cries, no hum of voices, the usual accompaniments of a motley gathering, neither was there any jostling; without the slightest disturbance each man took his proper place according to his rank....

On leaving the assembly we had a fresh treat in the sight of the household cavalry returning to their quarters; the men were mounted on splendid horses, excellently groomed, and gorgeously accoutred. And so we left the royal presence, taking with us but little hope of a successful issue to our embassy.

Source: Charles Thornton Forester and F. H. Blackburne Daniell, *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq* (London: C. Kegan Paul and Co., 1881), 114–15, 152–56, 219–22.

The Turkish monarch going to war takes with him over 40,000 camels and nearly as many baggage mules, of which a great part, when he is invading Persia, are loaded with rice and other kinds of grain.... The invading army carefully abstains from encroaching on its magazines^o at the outset.... The Sultan's magazines are opened, and a ration just sufficient to sustain life is daily weighed out to the Janissaries and other troops of the royal household.

From this you will see that it is the patience, self-denial, and thrift of the Turkish soldier that enable him to face the most trying circumstances.... What a contrast to our men! Christian soldiers on a campaign refuse to put up with their ordinary food, and call for thrushes, beccaficos,^o and such like dainty dishes! If these are not supplied they grow mutinous and work their own ruin; and, if they are supplied, they are ruined all the same. For each man is his own worst enemy, and has no foe more deadly than his own intemperance, which is sure to kill him, if the enemy be not quick.

It makes me shudder to think of what the result of a struggle between such different systems must be; one of us must prevail and the other be destroyed.... On their side is the vast wealth of their empire, unimpaired resources, experience and practice in arms, a veteran soldiery, an uninterrupted series of victo-

ries, readiness to endure hardships, union, order, discipline, thrift, and watchfulness. On ours are found an empty exchequer, luxurious habits, exhausted resources, broken spirits, a raw and insubordinate soldiery, and greedy generals; there is no regard for discipline, license runs riot, the men indulge in drunkenness and debauchery, and, worst of all, the enemy are accustomed to victory, we, to defeat. Can we doubt what the result must be? The only obstacle is Persia, whose position on his rear forces the invader to take precautions. The fear of Persia gives us a respite, but it is only for a time. When he has secured himself in that quarter, he will fall upon us with all the resources of the East. How ill prepared we are to meet such an attack it is not for me to say.

[In the following passage, Busbeq reflects on a major problem of the Ottoman state, succession to the throne.]

The sons of Turkish Sultans are in the most wretched position in the world, for, as soon as one of them succeeds his father, the rest are doomed to certain death. The Turk can endure no rival to the throne, and, indeed, the conduct of the Janissaries renders it impossible for the new Sultan to spare his brothers; for if one of them survives, the Janissaries are forever asking largesses. If these are refused, forthwith the cry is heard, "Long live the brother!" "God preserve the brother!"—a tolerably broad hint that they intend to place him on the throne. So that the Turkish Sultans are compelled to celebrate their succession by imbruing their hands in the blood of their nearest relatives.

^o **magazines:** supplies.

^o **beccafico:** a small bird.

Documents 14.4 and 14.5

French State Building and Louis XIV

Like their counterparts in the Middle East and Asia, a number of European states in the early modern era also pursued the twin projects of imperial expansion abroad and political integration at home. But consolidating central authority was a long and difficult task. Obstacles to the ambitions of kings in Europe were many—the absence of an effective transportation and communication infrastructure; the difficulty of acquiring information about the population and resources; the entrenched interests of privileged groups such as the nobility,

church, town councils, and guilds; and the division between Catholics and Protestants.

Perhaps the most well-known example of such European state-building efforts is that of France under the rule of Louis XIV (reigned 1643–1715). Louis and other European monarchs, such as those in Spain and Russia, operated under a set of assumptions known as “absolutism,” which held that kings ruled by “divine right” and could legitimately claim sole and uncontested power in their realms. Louis’s famous dictum “*L’etat, c’est moi*” (“I am the state”) summed up the absolutist ideal. Documents 14.4 and 14.5 illustrate several ways in which Louis attempted to realize this ideal.

Document 14.4, written by Louis himself, focuses on the importance of “spectacle” and public display in solidifying the exalted role of the monarch. The “carousel” described in the document was an extravagant pageant, held in Paris in June of 1662. It featured various exotic animals, slaves, princes, and nobles arrayed in fantastic costumes representing distant lands, together with much equestrian competition. Unifying this disparate assembly was King Louis himself, dressed as a Roman emperor, while on the shields of the nobles was that grand symbol of the monarchy, the sun.

- What posture does Louis take toward his subjects in this document?
- How does he understand the role of spectacle in general and the carousel in particular?
- What does the choice of the sun as a royal symbol suggest about Louis’s conception of his role in the French state and empire?

Document 14.5 explores yet another effort at French state building, expanding the power of *intendants*, royal officials appointed by the king. They differed from other officials in that they were not native to the regions they administered and did not own the offices they held. Thus they were instruments of royal authority and more centralized control. Document 14.5, written in 1680 by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis’s famous minister of finance, instructs these intendants on their duties.

- What was the main purpose of the intendants according to this document?
- What kind of opposition do you expect the intendants experienced?

LOUIS XIV

Memoirs

1670

It was necessary to conserve and cultivate with care all that which, without diminishing the authority and the respect due to me, linked me by bonds of affection to my peoples and above all to the people of rank, so as to make them see by this very means that it was neither aversion for them nor affected severity, nor harshness of spirit, but simply reason and duty, that made me more reserved and more exact toward them in other matters. That sharing of pleasures, which gives people at court a respectable familiarity with us, touches them and charms them more than can be expressed. The common people, on the other hand, are delighted by shows in which, at bottom, we always have the aim of pleasing them; and all our subjects, in general, are delighted to see that we like what they like, or what they excel in. By this means we hold on to their hearts and their minds, sometimes more strongly perhaps than by recompenses and gifts; and with regard to foreigners, in a state they see flourishing and well ordered, that which is spent on expenses and which could be called superfluous, makes a very favorable impression on them, of magnificence, of power, of grandeur. . . .

The carousel, which has furnished me the subject of these reflections, had only been conceived at first as a light amusement; but little by little, we were carried away, and it became a spectacle that was fairly grand and magnificent, both in the number of

exercises, and by the novelty of the costumes and the variety of the [heraldic] devices. It was then that I began to employ the one that I have always kept since and which you see in so many places. I believed that, without limiting itself to something precise and lessening, it ought to represent in some way the duties of a prince, and constantly encourage me to fulfill them. For the device they chose the sun, which, according to the rules of this art, is the most noble of all, and which, by its quality of being unique, by the brilliance that surrounds it, by the light that it communicates to the other stars which form for it a kind of court, by the just and equal share that the different climates of the world receive of this light, by the good it does in all places, ceaselessly producing as it does, in every sphere of life, joy and activity, by its unhindered movement, in which it nevertheless always appears calm, by its constant and invariable course, from which it never departs nor wavers, is the most striking and beautiful image of a great monarch.

Those who saw me governing with a good deal of ease and without being confused by anything, in all the numerous attentions that royalty demands, persuaded me to add the earth's globe, and for motto, *nec pluribus impar* (not unequal to many things): by which they meant something that flattered the aspirations of a young king, namely that, being sufficient to so many things, I would doubtless be capable of governing other empires, just as the sun was capable of lighting up other worlds if they were exposed to its rays.

Source: Robert Campbell, *Louis XIV* (London: Longmans, 1993), 117–18.

JEAN-BAPTISTE COLBERT
Instructions for Intendants
 1680

The King has instructed me to repeat most strongly to you the orders which His Majesty has given you, in every preceding year, about the inspection of the generality in which you serve. He wants you to apply yourself to this task even more vigorously than you have in the past, because he wishes there to be equality in the allocation of taxes and a reduction in all kinds of abuses and expenses, thus bringing further relief to his peoples in addition to that which they have received from the lowering of taxation.

The King intends that, as soon as you have read this letter, you should begin your visit to each of the elections in your generality:

That, during this tour, you should examine with the utmost care the extent of landed wealth, the quality of livestock, the state of industries and in fact everything in each election [district] which helps to attract money there; that you should seek out, with the same diligence, anything which might help to increase animal foodstuffs, to expand industrial production or even to establish new manufactures. At the same time, His Majesty wants you to journey to three or four of the main towns in each election, excluding those which you have chosen in earlier years, and in these places to call before you a large number of the tax-collectors and leading inhabitants from the surrounding parishes; to take pains to find out all that has taken place concerning the receipt of the King's orders, the nomination of collectors, and the allocation and payment of the *taille*;° to ferret out all the malpractices in these procedures; try to remedy them yourself; and, in case you find some which can be treated

only by a royal judgment or decree, to send me a report in order that I may inform His Majesty....

Listen to all the complaints which are brought to you about inequalities in allocation on the rolls of the *tailles*, and do everything which you consider appropriate to stamp out these iniquities and to make the allocation as fair as possible. Examine with the same thoroughness the expenses which are incurred, both by the receivers in relation to the collectors and by the collectors in relation to the taxpayers.... One of the most effective methods which His Majesty wishes you to use in repressing these abuses is to suspend the receiver of the *tailles* who seems the most culpable in your generality, and to entrust his duties to someone else for the next year. This punishment will assuredly cause the disappearance of many of these evil practices. His Majesty will also offer a reward to the receiver who has run his election the most effectively, and who has incurred the least expenses.

His Majesty likewise requires that you should report every three months, without fail, on the number of prisoners who have been arrested concerning the *taille* or the various indirect taxes....

You must also inspect in each election the amount of the taxes collected to date, both for last year and for this, giving all the necessary orders for hurrying up the whole process....

He also requires you to keep watch over everything involving the coinage throughout your generality, which is to say that only coins authorized by royal edict and decree may be in circulation. On this same subject, His Majesty wants you continually to ascertain that there are no mints producing false coins; and, if you should find one, to send word immediately, so that His Majesty may issue the necessary orders for bringing the culprits to trial without delay, because there is no crime which is more prejudicial to the interests of the people than this one.

° **taille**: land tax.

Using the Evidence: State Building in the Early Modern Era

1. **Making comparisons:** To what extent did these four early modern states face similar problems and devise similar solutions? How did they differ? In particular, how did the rulers of these states deal with subordinates? How did they use violence? What challenges to imperial authority did they face?
2. **Assessing spectacle:** In what different ways was spectacle, royal splendor, or public display evident in the documents? How would you define the purpose of such display? How effective do you think spectacle has been in consolidating state authority?
3. **Distinguishing power and authority:** Some scholars have made a distinction between “power,” the ability of a state to coerce its subjects into some required behavior, and “authority,” the ability of a state to persuade its subjects to do its bidding voluntarily by convincing them that it is proper, right, or natural to do so. What examples of power and authority can you find in these documents? How were they related? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each, from the viewpoint of ambitious rulers?
4. **Comparing past and present:** It is important to recognize that early modern states differed in many ways from twentieth or twenty-first century states. How would you define those differences? Consider, among other things, the personal role of the ruler, the use of violence, the means of establishing authority, and the extent to which the state could shape the lives of its citizens.

Visual Sources

Considering the Evidence: The Conquest of Mexico Through Aztec Eyes



Among the sagas of early modern empire building, few have been more dramatic, more tragic, or better documented than the Spanish conquest of Mexico during the early sixteenth century (see Map 14.1, p. 627). In recounting this story, historians are fortunate in having considerable evidence—both documentary and visual—from the Aztec side of the encounter.

The peoples of central Mexico had long used a type of book called a codex to record their history. Codices included drawings and symbols (glyphs) painted by carefully trained high-status persons known as *tlacuilo* (artist-scribes). Although Spanish invaders destroyed most of these codices, the codex tradition continued in a modified form in the century following conquest. These new codices, often assembled under the supervision of European missionaries, were largely composed by native peoples, many of them new converts to Christianity and some of them literate in both Spanish and Latin. These codices included numerous paintings by local artists as well as written texts in a variety of Mesoamerican languages using the Roman alphabet.

The *Florentine Codex*, for example, was compiled under the leadership of Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, a Franciscan missionary who felt that an understanding of Aztec culture was essential to the task of conversion. Because Sahagun relied on Aztec informants and artists, many scholars believe that the Florentine and other codices represent indigenous understandings of the conquest. However, they require a critical reading. They date from several decades after the events they describe. Many contributors to the codices had been influenced by the Christian and European culture of their missionary mentors, and they were writing in a society thoroughly dominated by Spanish colonial rule. Furthermore, the codices reflect the ethnic and regional diversity of Mesoamerica rather than a single Aztec perspective. Despite such limitations, these codices represent a unique window into Mesoamerican understandings of the conquest.

In the Aztec telling of the Spanish conquest, accounts of earlier warnings or omens of disaster abound. One of these was described as follows in the *Florentine Codex*: “Ten years before the arrival of the Spaniards an omen first



Visual Source 14.1 Disaster Foretold (Biblioteca Nacional Madrid/Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive)

appeared in the sky like a flame or tongue of fire.... For a full year it showed itself.... People were taken aback, they lamented.”²⁸ That ominous appearance was illustrated in the *Duran Codex*, presented here in Visual Source 14.1 showing the Aztec ruler Moctezuma observing this omen of death from the rooftop of his palace. Some scholars suggest that such stories reflect a postconquest understanding of the traumatic defeat the Aztecs suffered, for other evidence indicates that the Aztecs were not initially alarmed by the coming of the Spanish and that, instead, they viewed the Europeans as “simply another group of powerful and dangerous outsiders who needed to be controlled or accommodated.”²⁹

- Why might Aztec contributors to the codices have included accounts of such supernatural events preceding the arrival of the Spanish?
- Why do you think the Spanish frequently incorporated such accounts into their own descriptions of the conquest?
- Why might the artist have chosen to show Moctezuma alone rather than in the company of his supposedly fearful people?



Visual Source 14.2 Moctezuma and Cortés (The Granger Collection, New York)

In February of 1519 Hernán Cortés, accompanied by some 350 Spanish soldiers, set off from Cuba with a fleet of eleven ships, stopping at several places along the Gulf of Mexico before proceeding to march inland toward Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire. Along the way, he learned something about the fabulous wealth of this empire and about the fragility of its political structure. Through a combination of force and astute diplomacy, Cortés was able to negotiate alliances with a number of the Aztecs' restive subject peoples and with the Aztecs' many rivals or enemies, especially the Tlaxcala. With his modest forces thus greatly reinforced, Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlán

on November 8, 1519, where he met with Moctezuma. Visual Source 14.2 presents an image of that epic encounter, drawn from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, a series of paintings completed by 1560. They reflect generally the viewpoint of the Tlaxcala people.

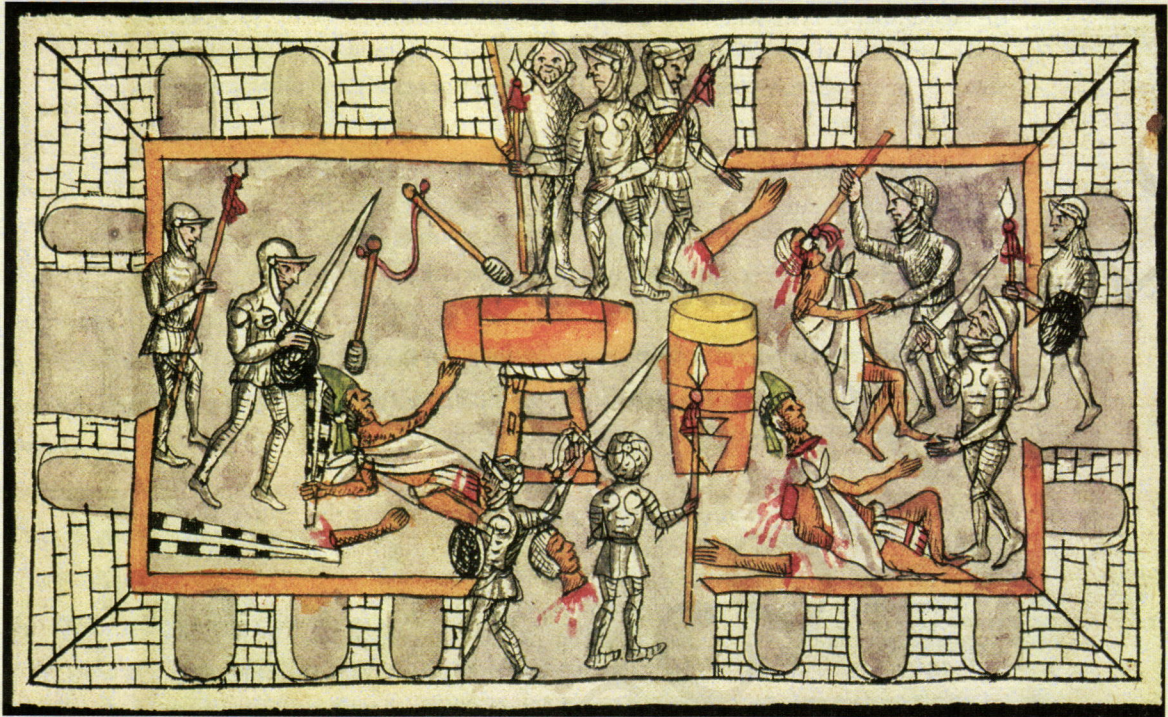
- How does this painting present the relationship between Cortés and Moctezuma? Are they meeting as equals, as enemies, as allies, as ruler and subject? Notice that both sit on European-style chairs, which had come to suggest authority in the decades following Spanish conquest.
- What do the items at the bottom of the image represent?
- Does this image support or challenge the perception that the Aztecs viewed the Spanish newcomers, at least initially, in religious terms as gods?
- What might the painter have tried to convey by placing three attendants behind Moctezuma, while Cortés appears alone, except for his translator?

The woman standing behind Cortés in Visual Source 14.2 is Doña Marina (sometimes called La Malinche), a Nahuatl-speaking woman who had been a slave in Maya territory and was given as a gift to Cortés's forces in April 1519. She subsequently became an interpreter for the Spanish, as well as Cortés's mistress. Doña Marina appears frequently and prominently in many of the paintings of the era. Cortés himself wrote that "after God we owe this conquest of New Spain to Doña Marina." But in Mexico, some have condemned her as a traitor to her people, while others have praised her as the beginning of European and Native American cooperation and mixing.

- What impression of Doña Marina does this image suggest?

Whatever the character of their initial meeting, the relationship of the Spanish and Aztecs soon deteriorated amid mutual suspicion. Within a week, Cortés had seized Moctezuma, holding him under a kind of house arrest in his own palaces. For reasons not entirely clear, this hostile act did not immediately trigger a violent Aztec response. Perhaps Aztec authorities were concerned for the life of their ruler, or perhaps their factional divisions inhibited coordinated resistance.

But in May 1520, while Cortés was temporarily away at the coast, an incident occurred that set in motion the most violent phase of the encounter. During a religious ceremony in honor of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec patron deity of Tenochtitlán, the local Spanish commander, apparently fearing an uprising, launched a surprise attack on the unarmed participants in the celebration, killing hundreds of the leading warriors and nobles. An Aztec account from the *Florentine Codex* described the scene:



Visual Source 14.3 The Massacre of the Nobles (Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, NY)

[W]hen the dance was loveliest and when song was linked to song, the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants. They all ran forward, armed as if for battle. They closed the entrances and passageways... then [they] rushed into the Sacred Patio to slaughter the inhabitants.... They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor. They attacked all the celebrants stabbing them, spearing them, striking them with swords.... Others they beheaded... or split their heads to pieces.... The blood of the warriors flowed like water and gathered into pools... [T]hey invaded every room, hunting and killing.³⁰

Visual Source 14.3 shows a vivid depiction of this “massacre of the nobles,” drawn from the *Codex Duran*, first published in 1581.

- What elements of the description above are reflected in this painting?
- What image of the Spanish does this painting reflect?
- What do the drums in the center of the image represent?

The massacre of the nobles prompted a citywide uprising against the hated Spanish, who were forced to flee Tenochtitlán on June 30, 1520, across a causeway in Lake Texcoco amid ferocious fighting. Some 600 Spaniards and several thousand of their Tlaxcala allies perished in the escape, many of them laden with gold they had collected in Tenochtitlán. For the Spaniards it was *La Noche Triste* (the night of sorrow), while for the Aztecs it was no doubt a fitting revenge and a great triumph. Visual Source 14.4, from a Tlaxcala codex, depicts the scene. Cortés and his Tlaxcala allies to the left of the image are shown on the causeway, while many others are drowning in the lake, pursued by Aztec warriors in canoes.

- Whose perspective do you think is represented in this image—that of the Spanish, their Tlaxcala allies, or the Aztecs? How might each of them have understood this retreat differently?
- In neither Visual Source 14.3 or 14.4 are the Spanish portrayed with their firearms. How might you understand this omission?
- Notice the blending of artistic styles in this image. The water, the boats, and shields of the warriors are shown in traditional Mesoamerican fashion, while the Spanish are portrayed in European stereotypes. What does this blending suggest about the cultural processes at work in the codices?



Visual Source 14.4 The Spanish Retreat from Tenochtitlán (The Rout of *La Noche Triste* [June 30, 1520], Lienzo de Tlaxcala, Pl 18. Library of Congress)



Visual Source 14.5 Smallpox: Disease and Defeat (Private Collection/Peter Newark American Pictures/The Bridgeman Art Library)

While the Aztecs may well have thought themselves permanently rid of the Spanish, La Noche Triste offered only a temporary respite from the European invaders. Cortés and his now diminished forces found refuge among their Tlaxcala allies, where they regrouped and planned for yet another assault on Tenochtitlán. Meanwhile, smallpox had begun to ravage the Aztec population, which lacked any immunity to this Old World disease. The *Florentine Codex* described the situation: “[A]n epidemic broke out, a sickness of pustules.... [The disease] brought great desolation; a great many died of it. They could no longer walk about... no longer able to move or stir... Starvation reigned, and no one took care of others any longer.... And when things were in this state, the Spaniards came.” Visual Source 14.5, likewise from the *Florentine Codex*, is an Aztec portrayal of the disease.

In mid-1521, Cortés returned, strengthened with yet more Mesoamerican allies, and laid siege to the Aztec capital. Bitter fighting ensued, often in the form of house-to-house combat, ending with the surrender of the last Aztec emperor on August 13, 1521. In Tenochtitlán, all was sorrow and lamentation, as reflected in some of the poetry of the time:

Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow are left in Mexico and
Tlateloco

where once we saw warriors and wise men....

We wander here and there in our desolate poverty.

We are mortal men.

We have seen bloodshed and pain where once we saw beauty and valor.

We are crushed to the ground; we lie in ruins....

Have you grown weary of your servants?

Are you angry with your servants, O giver of Life?³¹

- How does Visual Source 14.5 represent the impact of the smallpox epidemic and Aztec response to it?

Using the Evidence: The Conquest of Mexico through Aztec Eyes

1. **Evaluating images as evidence:** What are the strengths and the limitations of these images as sources for understanding the colonial conquest of Mexico? How well did the native artists who created them understand the Spanish?
2. **Analyzing perspectives:** How might you define the perspective from which these visual sources approach their subjects? Keep in mind that they were drawn by native artists who had been clearly influenced by Spanish culture and religion. In what ways are they criticizing the Spanish conquest, celebrating it, or simply describing it?
3. **Portraying the Spanish:** In what ways do these visual sources portray the Spanish? How might the Spanish themselves present a different account of the conquest?
4. **Describing the conquest:** Based on the information in this section, write a brief description of the conquest from the Aztec point of view.

