

★ **Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs****Camilla Townsend**

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Camilla Townsend's excellent historical text covers the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs with important additional context. Anecdotes from translated works and introductions to crucial Indigenous characters result in a gripping, novelistic narrative that explains the situation before, during, and after the arrival of the conquistadors.

The book makes excellent use of its sources. Written in the Nahuatl language, they detail the competition and alliances between various Aztec city-states. Compelling characters lead to strong narratives about Mexica life before 1519, beginning with the princess Chimalxochitl, who, after her father declared himself an independent king and was defeated by other Aztecs in 1299, ordered her own men to sacrifice her rather than let her captors shame her. Itzcoatl, meanwhile, allowed his brother's son to rule and served him loyally until his death, avoiding a power struggle and still coming to power later in life, while Malintzin served as a translator and guide to the conqueror Hernan Cortes, helping him defeat city-states that were rivals of her people.

Because of these and other historical figures, *Fifth Sun* reads as a compelling drama as it discusses the Spanish invasion and the mysterious illnesses that wiped out many among the Indigenous population. The book also places the Spanish conquest in important context, explaining how it exploited rifts between Aztec peoples and how different groups met different fates. The text shows how the surviving Mexica community dealt with forced religious conversion, internal Spanish politics, and more waves of disease in the aftermath of the conquest.

After centuries of the end of the Aztec empire being related through a Spanish lens, *Fifth Sun* and its use of Mexica firsthand accounts and perspectives is a needed corrective. It helps fill in a story that's been one-sided for far too long.

JEFF FLEISCHER (November / December 2019)

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