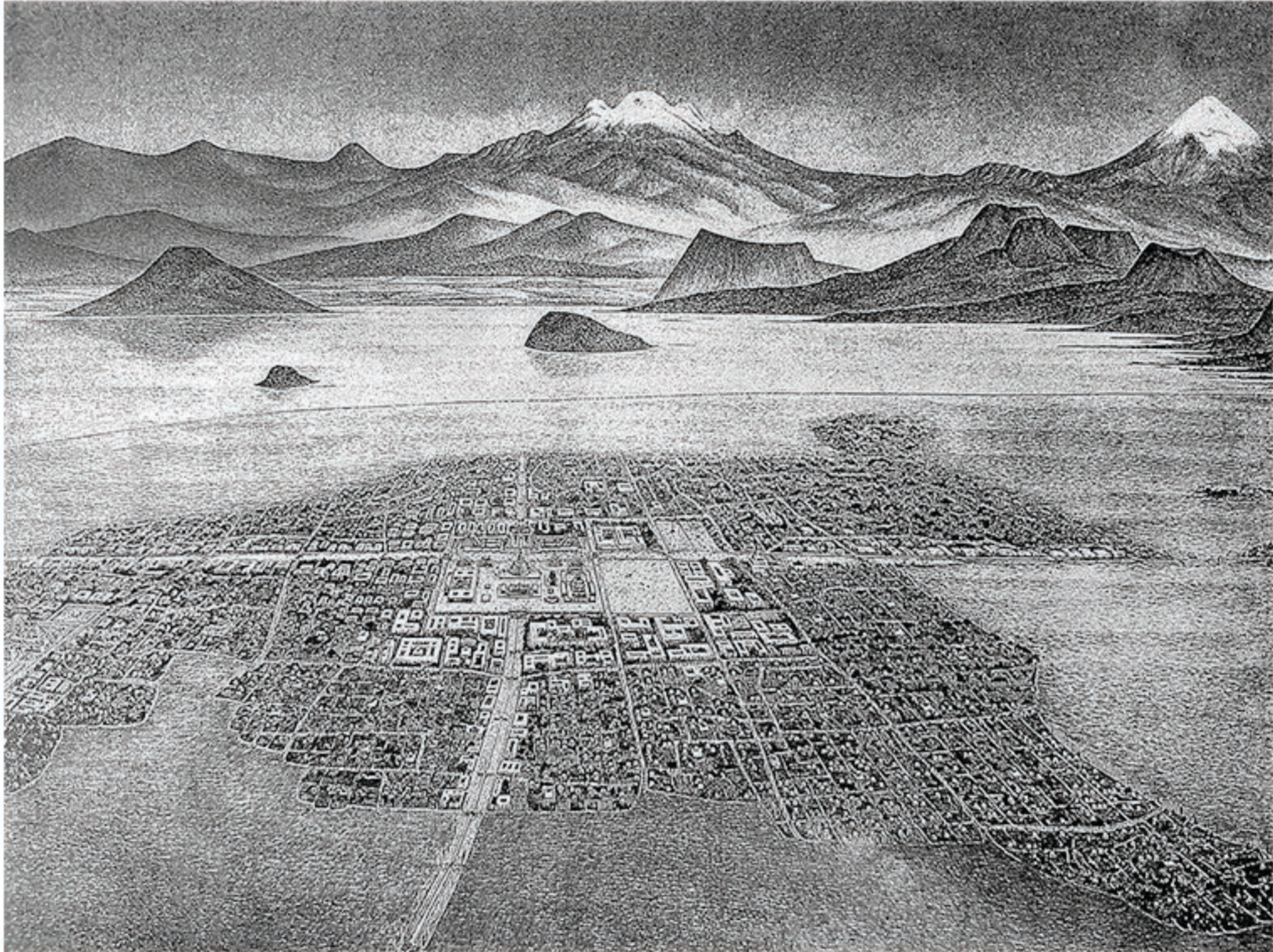


THE CITY OF MEXICO

BY

ALFRED PERCIVAL MAUDSLAY, M.A.,

HON. PROFESSOR OF ARCHÆOLOGY, NATIONAL MUSEUM, MEXICO



“The population of Tenochtitlan (the City of Mexico) at the time of the conquest is variously stated. No contemporary writer estimates it at less than sixty thousand houses, which by the ordinary rules of reckoning would give three hundred thousand souls. If a dwelling often contained, as it asserted, several families, it would swell the amount considerably higher.”

The supply of food for such a population must have been a matter of no little difficulty, for the soil on the hill-sides is scanty, many of the slopes are composed of *tepetatle*, a mixture of volcanic ash and scoria fit only for growing Maguey, and considerable surfaces are covered with lava and carry no loam at all. The scarcity of good soil must have led to an intensive cultivation, and this is also shown by

THE CITY OF MEXICO

the care with which manure was collected as is the case in China and Japan to-day.

Food must have been brought from very considerable distances, and the want of sufficient supply from the near neighbourhood must have had much to do with the predatory nature of the Aztec dominion.

The lakes of Zaltocan and Zumpango are now almost dry during the summer months. The Lake of Chalco has been drained dry, excepting the southern edge round Mixcuic, and is now one vast maize field.

Zochimilco is reduced to a swamp traversed by many water-ways and the water from its springs is being utilized for the supply of drinking water to the City. Texcoco alone remains, in a shrunken condition, and no further drainage of its waters is contemplated, as the evaporation from its surface is one of the main factors contributing to the equable climate of the valley.

The two towns of Tenochtitlan and Tlaltelolco appear to have risen side by side, each retaining control of its own local affairs, until the time of Axayacatl, the sixth ruler of Tenochtitlan (1473), when, after a fierce battle in the streets of the City, Tlaltelolco was conquered, its chiefs killed, and it became a part of the City of Tenochtitlan. It is, however, this growth of the City in two distinct parts that accounts for the existence of the two centres of religious worship, the great teocalli of Tenochtitlan with its surrounding courts and temples (where the Cathedral of Mexico now stands), and the still larger and more important teocalli of Tlaltelolco and the adjacent temples, courts, and priests' houses, etc., which are so fully described by Bernal Díaz in the text.

The following quotation is from the writings of the "Anonymous Conqueror" who himself beheld Mexico in the days of Montezuma:—
"The great city of Temistan (Tenochtitlan) Mexico, has and had many wide and handsome streets; of these two or three are the principal streets, and all the others are formed half of hard earth like a brick pavement, and the other half of water, so that they can go out along the land or by water in the boats and canoes which are made of hollowed wood, and some are large enough to hold five persons. The inhabitants go abroad some by water in these boats and others by land, and they can talk to one another as they go. There are other principal streets in addition, entirely of water which can only be traversed by boats and canoes, as is their wont, as I have already said, for without these boats they could neither go in nor out of their houses."

THE CITY OF MEXICO

Cortés in his second letter to the Emperor says :

“There are many very large and fine houses in this City, and the reason of there being so many important houses is that all the Lords of the land who are vassals of the said Montezuma have houses in this City and reside therein for a certain time of the year, and in addition to this there are many rich Citizens who also possess very fine houses. All these houses in addition to having very fine and large dwelling rooms, have very exquisite flower gardens both on the upper apartments as well as down below.”

“The principal houses were of two stories, but the greater number of houses were of one storey only. The materials, according to the importance of the buildings, were tezontli and lime, adobes formed the walls plastered with lime, and in the suburbs and shores of the island (the houses were constructed) of reeds and straw, appropriate for the fishermen and the lower classes”

Of the external ornament or decoration of the more important houses or palaces we know nothing, as the destruction of the City was complete. If the ornamentation was elaborate we hear nothing about it from the conquerors, and it must in any case have been of plaster or some perishable material, otherwise some fragments of it would have survived. It seems therefore probable that the architectural decoration of the houses was of a very simple character, and that the more elaborate stone work was reserved for the teocallis and temples of their gods.

Notwithstanding the above qualifications, the ancient City of Tenochtitlan must have been a place of much beauty and even of considerable magnificence, and it could not have failed to make a vivid impression on the Spaniards, who, it must be remembered, until they set foot in Yucatan, two years earlier, had seen nothing better during the twenty-five years of exploration of America than the houses of poles and thatch of Indian tribes, none of whom had risen above a state of barbarism. Much no doubt was due to the natural surroundings; the white City with its numerous teocallis was embowered in trees and surrounded by the blue waters of the lake sparkling under a tropical sun, a lake that was alive with a multitude of canoes passing and repassing to the other white cities on its shores, and in every direction the horizon was closed with a splendid panorama of forest-covered hills, while to the south-east the eye always rested with delight on the beautiful slopes and snow-covered peaks of the two great

THE CITY OF MEXICO

volcanoes. It is an enchanting scene to-day, in spite of the shrinkage of the lakes, the smoke from factory chimneys, and the somewhat squalid surroundings of a modern city, and but little effort of imagination is needed to appreciate the charm that it must have exercised in the days of Montezuma.

Gardens and groves were evidently numerous in the City itself; the Mexicans were distinguished for their love of flowers, and there is no climate where gardening is more remunerative than in these tropical highlands when water is plentiful. The flowering plants cultivated on the roofs of the houses must have added greatly to the picturesque aspect of the streets and canals.

Bernal Díaz tells us how clean the surroundings of the great temple were kept, where not a straw or a spot of dust could be seen (filth seems to have been confined to the temples themselves where the horrid rites of their religion were performed) and this cleanliness probably extended to the City itself, for it will be observed by any traveller in Mexico or Central America that the purely Indian villages of considerable size are almost always kept swept and tidy, while this is not the case in the towns and villages inhabited by the mixed race.