

Working from very different premises, contemporary Aztec writers arrived at conclusions on Montezuma little more flattering than those of their Spanish conquerors.

How the Aztecs Appraised Montezuma

BY SARA E. COHEN

In 1519 Hernan Cortez arrived on the shores of Veracruz with 600 men. The Aztec Empire was at the peak of its military and economic power. Nevertheless, the invading Spaniards quickly prevailed over the Aztecs and totally destroyed their civilization. Particularly when we consider the great disparity in numbers between the Spaniards and the Aztecs, we wonder how this was possible.

The Aztec Empire, despite its impressive appearance, was undermined by the intense hostility of the alien tribes it ruled. Due to the size of its territory, stretching from Texas to Guatemala, a uniform and satisfactory imperial

policy was impossible. Taxes were high, the Aztec conquerors demanding, and the resultant revolts frequent and bloody. However, even all this cannot adequately explain how five million people were subjugated by a mere handful of foreign invaders. To complete our understanding of this remarkable conquest, two other important factors must be examined: first, the weak leadership of Montezuma, the Aztec Emperor, during the crucial period of the Spanish assault; and second, the religious and psychological climate of the Aztec people prior to the arrival of the Spaniards.

Montezuma's personality has long been debated. Even in the sixteenth century the image created by contemporary historians varies a great deal. The Spanish chroniclers, mostly priests who needed a moral justification for the conquest, presented Montezu-

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ma as a cruel, power-hungry tyrant who wantonly destroyed whatever displeased him.¹ One such account can be found in *The Aztecs: History of the Indies of New Spain*, written by Fray Diego Duran.² Duran's principal aim was to defend the wholesale destruction of the Aztec civilization (and the subsequent forced conversion of the natives to Christianity) by presenting a negative view of the Aztec religion and culture. Inherent in this view is a hostile attitude toward Montezuma.

At least one Spaniard, however, was sensitive to the greatness of the Aztec nation and held a somewhat more sympathetic attitude toward Montezuma. This man was Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, a pioneer Spanish missionary who almost singlehandedly compiled the most complete encyclopedia on the Aztec people, the *General History of the Things of New Spain*.³ This monumental twelve-volume work was formulated with the help of native Aztec scholars. Written first in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, it was later translated into Spanish by Sahagun himself. The manuscript contains the original Nahuatl version, along with a parallel Spanish translation. It is richly illustrated by native Aztec artists. The first eleven volumes of Sahagun's *General History of the*

Things of New Spain are a compendium of the culture, the fauna, the flora, the religion, the society and the history of the Aztec people up to the time of the Spanish conquest.

Book XII of Sahagun's *General History* deals entirely with the destruction of the Empire by the Spaniards. For this Book, Sahagun had his Aztec students record the history of the conquest as remembered by the old men who had been alive at the time of the great defeat. The work was begun in 1538, seventeen years after the collapse of the Empire, and although it was not finished for more than thirty years, every attempt was made to record events as experienced and understood by the Aztecs themselves. The account found in Sahagun's *History* is invaluable as one of the few Aztec versions of the events. Utilizing a microfilm copy of the Florentine Codex of Book XII, we have made the following summary of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. All quotations therefrom are our own translation of the Spanish text.

Book XII leaves little doubt that the Aztec historians placed a great deal of the blame for the Aztec defeat on the personality and poor leadership of Montezuma. Montezuma's emotional weakness, his unquestioning religious orientation

(Opposite page) *A typical page from Sahagun's General History of the Things of New Spain (Florentine Codex). Illustrations depict march of the Spaniards to the Aztec capital.*



Purification of messenger after meeting with Cortez. He is being sprinkled with blood of human sacrifice.

and his credulous mind intensified the negative psychological tenor of the time. According to Sahagun's work, the climate of fear and defeatism that pervaded the last years of the Empire had been generated by many frightening supernatural events which took place shortly before the arrival of the Spaniards. These happenings, interpreted by the magicians and the priests as omens foretelling a great catastrophe, had great psychological impact on the credulous and superstitious population. Whether these events and miraculous occurrences actually took place is not important. Their effect on the people is

attested by their subsequent resignation and acceptance of the inevitability of the Spanish victory.

The history of the Spanish conquest begins, therefore, with the signs and omens that allegedly appeared as warnings of great impending danger. Sahagun's work records in great detail eight miraculous events, which aim to convince the reader of the inevitability of the Aztec defeat. One of the most dramatic omens mentioned was that the sky had been full of stars and comets the like of which had never been seen before. At times these celestial signs looked like a gigantic tongue of fire that



The meeting between Cortez and Montezuma. The woman (center) is Marina, Cortez' faithful interpreter and mistress. Notice the little tongues to symbolize speech.

spread over the midnight skies and turned the night into blazing daylight. Another time the waters of the oceans and the lakes seemed to boil and foam from within. Indeed, the character of water itself seemed to have changed. One day one of the temples caught fire, but the more water was poured on it, the more it burned. People reported that they heard unusual voices late at night, especially the lament of a mother repeating again and again, "Oh! my children, we

will be lost. Oh! by children whither shall we flee?" Furthermore, the priests related they had opened a bird that had been sacrificed to the gods and had seen inside it a vision of men, ships and horses approaching the shores of Mexico.

From Book XII we also learn the strange story of Quetzalcoatl, who had left Mexico promising one day to return. According to the Aztec legends, Quetzalcoatl had white skin and blond hair and had come

from the East. The legends said he had taught the Aztecs how to plant, work metal and build. He also developed the Aztec calendar. One day, however, he was driven out by a rival tribe and left, but not before promising that he would return to deliver his people from bondage. The year prophesied for his return was the same year Cortez began his march into Mexico. It is therefore understandable that Montezuma, who had been brought up within this mythological and religious tradition, was entirely convinced that Cortez and his men were none other than the god Quetzalcoatl and his divine retinue making their return, as had been related and expected for so long.

Equally important to remember is that Hernan Cortez was not the first Spaniard to come to Mexico. A couple of years before him a short exploratory expedition had been undertaken by Juan de Grijalva. The news of Grijalva's visit had filled Montezuma with fear. Montezuma immediately assumed that he was a herald of the god Quetzalcoatl. Summoning all the principal noblemen of his empire he told them of the long-awaited arrival of their god and showed them the glass beads left behind by Grijalva. These were stored in the palace in a special room under constant guard and security, becoming priceless religious relics. A great fear began to manifest itself in the Emperor and

seemed never to have left him thereafter. Indeed, his fears were justified, since it was Grijalva's report to his superiors that led Cortez to land on the Mexican shores near Veracruz a year later.

Convinced that Cortez and his companions were the gods who had returned, Montezuma sent messengers laden with jewels and gifts to greet them. Needless to say, Cortez was surprised and delighted by this welcome. Through his interpreters he learned that the Aztecs believed him to be a god. Shrewd and perceptive about human nature, Cortez decided to use this belief to his advantage. Therefore, in order to further impress and frighten Montezuma's envoys, he had several cannon balls fired from his ships. The Aztec messengers, we are told in Sahagun's *History*, fainted at the sight and sound of these cannons. They had to be revived and sedated with wine before they could be sent back to Montezuma. Cortez' main objective, nevertheless, had been achieved — the messengers returned to Montezuma with fantastic tales about the white gods.

When the messengers returned to Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, Montezuma did not permit them to speak until they had been duly purified by the priests. Primitive man believed that any contact with the deity, holy as it might be, pollutes man with an invisible mysterious power. The messengers who had just

seen Cortez needed, therefore, to be cleansed. In order to purify them, several human victims were sacrificed and their blood used to sprinkle the men. At last they were permitted to speak. Exactly as Cortez had planned, they told Montezuma how strong and powerful these newly arrived gods were. The following selection from Sahagun relates how Montezuma reacted:

Montezuma listened to all that his messengers told him and was very frightened; and he began to tremble. He was amazed at what the Spaniards ate, at the business of the artillery, especially the thunders that broke your ears and the smell of the gunpowder that seemed to be an infernal thing; of the fire that it spat through its mouth and of the power of the ball that was able to destroy a tree at one blow. And they also told him how strong were the armaments used by the Spaniards in their offensive and defensive tactics . . . and also they told him of the horses and how large they were, and how the armed Spaniards could climb them and then you could only see the eyes of their faces. And they told him how they had white faces, blue eyes, red hair, long beards, and how there were some black ones among them who had black curly hair.

It is important to imagine and understand the psychological state of Montezuma at this time. The Aztec historian quoted above reports that while Montezuma was awaiting the messengers' return, he

could not eat, sleep, nor do anything with joy. Instead he was very sad and sighed deeply many times. He was in great anguish, and no amusement gave him pleasure. Nothing gave him contentment and he bemoaned his fate saying: "What will become of us? Who is going to have to suffer these ills? None other than I because I am lord and king in charge of all. . . . Where shall I go? How shall I escape?"

With their ruler in this state of mind, it is not surprising that soon the entire Aztec people began to suffer a strange kind of mass hysteria and paralysis. The continual traffic of messengers between Montezuma and Cortez gave rise to a great many rumors and speculations. The Indians were terrified by the Spaniards. They had never seen horses, or men riding horses. They had never heard of gunpowder. Furthermore, taking their cue from Montezuma, they too believed that the Spaniards were gods. They believed the horses were part of the men and that both were immortal. In order to preserve this myth, the Spaniards would bury immediately any man or horse that died so that no knowledge of it would reach the Indians. The myth of the Spaniards' divinity traumatized the normal reactions and means of self-preservation and self-defense of the Aztec peoples. The blame for this, however, must rest upon Montezuma's extraordinary gullibility and lack of leadership.

For example, Montezuma continued to be hospitable to the Spaniards in spite of mounting evidence that these were simple human beings possessed of an enormous desire for wealth and power. He maintained a policy of appeasement from beginning to end and continually presented the Spaniards with jewels and gold. In his credulity he went so far as to sacrifice human victims and offer the

blood of these unfortunates to the Spaniards. The reaction of the Spaniards is not hard to imagine. The Aztec historian in Sahagun's Book XII recorded the following:

When the Spaniards saw that food (tortillas with human blood), they were nauseated by it. They began to spit and abominate it because the bread smelled of human blood. This had been done on orders from Montezuma. He had ordered it done because he believed these men were gods who had come from the heavens and the black he believed were black gods. They all ate, however, the white bread without blood and the eggs and fowl and the fruit with which they had been presented. They also accepted and received food for their horses.

At one point Montezuma was emboldened to send his magicians and sorcerers with orders

to see if they could do something against them [the Spaniards]. Some enchantment or spell in order that they might get sick or die or never come back.

The magicians dutifully obeyed and tried their best. However, they were compelled to return to Montezuma with the news that "these peoples are very strong and we are nobody against them." At the news of the failure of this magical mission, Montezuma became even more disheartened and indecisive. He felt absolutely overwhelmed and hopeless in coping with the situation and could think of nothing to do. His only desire was to flee to the mountains.

Another interesting incident in Sahagun's *History* that gives us insight into the extent of Montezuma's fears is his reaction to Cortez' curiosity. Cortez was very eager to know all he could about Montezuma.

He questioned extensively anyone who knew him. News of this reached Montezuma and frightened him even more. We know from the Aztec historians that Cortez was very anxious to ascertain Montezuma's age and personal appearance. When Montezuma heard of Cortez' interest in him, he was frightened and wanted to flee from his palace, and it took a great deal of persuasion on the part of his advisers to have him remain in Tenochtitlan. However, under no circumstances would he agree to go to meet Cortez. He sent one of his closest associates to impersonate him before the Spaniards. Cortez, however, had by now allied himself with some of the traditional enemies of the Aztec Empire, and these people were not fooled by Montezuma's impersonator. They informed Cortez of it and he rejected the Aztec delegation, much to its surprise. Cortez sent them back to Tenochtitlan with the following warning to Montezuma:

Do you think that we are fools? That you will be able to deceive us? Neither will Montezuma be able to hide himself from us no matter what he does. Even if he be a bird, or even if he crawls under the earth, he will not be able to hide from us. We will see him and we will listen to what he has to tell us!

Montezuma felt completely trapped by these all-knowing gods. Still unshaken in his superstitious beliefs he tried once more to drive away the Spaniards with witchcraft, the only tactic he ever used against them. Again he sent sorcer-

ers and magicians to defeat the Spaniards, but this group never reached Cortez at all. On the way there they met a strange drunken man who stopped and scolded them:

Why do you insist again on coming here? What are you expecting? What does Montezuma plan to do now? Now he wakes up? Now he begins to fear? Now when there is no longer any cure since [the Spaniards] have caused so many unjust deaths, and destroyed so much. They have caused so many injuries, and perpetrated so many deceits and mockeries.

The drunkard, who according to the Aztec historian was really one of the Aztec gods, also showed them a vision of Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) burned and completely destroyed. After this the sorcerers refused to continue and returned to Montezuma to tell him of their ill-fated adventure. Upon hearing their story, Montzuma remained silent for a long time, deep in thought. Finally, he decided to camouflage the roads by planting shrubbery and thus mislead Cortez. This simple-minded trick failed, of course, to stop the Spaniards; and once more they continued their virtually unchallenged progress to the capital. When they finally arrived in Tenochtitlan, Montezuma had no choice and went to greet them. He received them with great honor and ceremony and handed over the entire Aztec Empire to Cortez, still believing him to be an unconquer-

able god. He addressed Cortez as follows:

Oh, our lord, may you be very welcome, you have come to our land and your nation and to your home — Mexico. You have come to sit on your throne and on your seat, which in your name I have possessed some days. Other men, who are already dead, have possessed it before me. . . . I am the last of them all who had the responsibility of governing this your people of Mexico. We have all laboriously carried this your republic on our shoulders. . . . I am neither asleep nor am I dreaming. With mine own eyes I see your face and for you I have been waiting many days. Many days has my heart been looking in the direction from which you came out of the clouds and out of the fog, from a place hidden to all of us. This is verily what our former kings had said to us — that you were to return and rule these kingdoms and that you would again sit on our throne and on our seat. Now I see that it is true, all that they have said to us. May you be welcome. You have indeed suffered many hardships in travelling such a long way, descend now. You are in your own house and in your palaces. Take them and rest in them with all the captains and companions who have come with you.

There was something infinitely tragic about Montezuma. He was a man deeply committed to Aztec beliefs. He devoutly worshipped the gods of his tradition who ultimately destroyed him and his people. Had he been less convinced, had he questioned and doubted more, he might have, perhaps, delayed the Spaniards and saved his people from the lightning-quick defeat that destroyed their civilization. Although his tragic story evokes in us pity and compassion, we cannot ignore Montzuma's enormous responsibility for the collapse of the Aztec Empire.

NOTES

¹Hernan Cortez' *Letter to Charles V*, Francisco de Gomara's *Conquista de Mexico*, Bernal Diaz del Castillo's *True History of the Conquest of New Spain* are the best known Spanish chronicles of the conquest of Mexico.

²Available in an excellent English translation annotated and edited by Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas. (New York: Orion Press, 1964).

³An excellent English translation of the Nahuatl text has been made by Arthur J. V. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. These scholars have translated and annotated the entire twelve volumes of Sahagun's *General History*. The work was published by The School of American Research and the University of Utah, Santa Fe, New Mexico (1955).

A new paleographically accurate version of the Spanish portion of Book XII will appear in 1972. The edition contains an English translation and historical introduction by the late Howard Cline, Director of the Hispanic Foundation of the Library of Congress. The book will be published by the Academy of American Franciscan History, Washington, D.C.

