

## The Spanish Conquest of Mexico

### *Cortes and Moctezuma Meet*—Bernal Diaz del Castillo

The Great Moctezuma had sent these great Caciques in advance to receive us, and when they came before Cortes they bade us welcome in their language, and as a sign of peace, they touched their hands against the ground....

When we arrived near to [Tenochtitlan],... the Great Moctezuma got down from his litter, and those great Caciques [aristocrats] supported him with their arms beneath a marvelously rich canopy of green coloured feathers with much gold and silver embroidery... which was wonderful to look at. The Great Moctezuma was richly attired according to his usage, and he was shod with sandals, the soles were of gold and the upper part adorned with precious stones....

Many other Lords walked before the Great Moctezuma, sweeping the ground where he would tread and spreading cloths on it, so that he should not tread on the earth. Not one of these chieftains dared even to think of looking ahim in the face, but kept their eyes lowered with great reverence....

When Cortes was told the the Great Moctezuma was approaching, and he saw him coming, he dismounted from his horse, and when he was near Moctezuma, they simultaneously paid great reverence to one another. Moctezuma bade him welcome and our Cortes replied through Dona Marina [Malinali, also called Malinche, Cortes's Indian interpreter who bore him a child] wishing him very good health.... And then Cortes brought out a necklace which he had ready at hand, made of glass stones,... which have within them many patterns of diverse colours, these were strung on a cord of gold and with musk so that it should have a sweet

scent, and he placed it round the neck of the Great Moctezuma....

Then Cortes through the mouth of Dona Marina told him that now his heart rejoiced having seen such a great Prince, and that he took it as a great honour that he had come in person to meet him....

Thus space was made for us to enter the streets of Mexico, without being so much crowded. But who could now count the multitude of men and women and boys who were in the streets and in canoes on the canals, who had come out to see us. It was indeed wonderful.... Coming to think it over it seems to be a great mercy that our Lord Jesus Christ was pleased to give us grace and courage to dare to enter into such a city; and for the many times He has saved me from danger of death... I give Him sincere thanks....

They took us to lodge in some large houses, where there were apartments for all of us, for they had belonged to the father of the Great Moctezuma, who was named Axayaca....

Cortes thanked Moctezuma through our interpreters, and Moctezuma replied, "Malinche, you and your brethren are in your own house, rest awhile," and then he went to his palaces, which were not far away, and we divided our lodging by companies, and placed the artillery pointing in convenient direction, and the order which we had to keep was clearly explained to us, and that we were to be much on the alert, both the cavalry and all of us soldiers. A sumptuous dinner was provided for us according to their use and custom, and we ate it at once. So this was our lucky and daring entry into the great city of Tenochtitlan Mexico on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November the year of our Saviour Jesus Christ, 1519.

*Aztec Elders Describe the Behavior of Moctezuma*—Friar Bernardino de Sahagun

Moctezuma enjoyed no sleep, no food, no one spoke to him. Whatsoever he did, it was as if he were in torment. Ofttimes it was as if he sighed, became weak, felt weak.... Wherefore he said, “What will now befall us? Who indeed stands [in charge]? Alas, until now, I, in great torment is my heart; as if it were washed in chili water it indeed burns.” And when he had so heard what the messengers reported, he was terrified, he was astounded.... Especially did it cause him to faint away when he heard how the gun, at [the Spaniards’] command, discharge: how it resounded as if it thundered when it went off. It indeed bereft one of the strength; it shut off one’s ears. And when it discharged, something like a round pebble came forth from within. Fire went showering forth; sparks went blazing forth. And its smoke smelled very foul; it had a fetid odor which verily wounded the head. And when [the shot] struck a mountain, it was as if it were destroyed, dissolved... as if someone blew it away.

All iron was their war array. In iron they clothed themselves. With iron they covered their heads. Iron were their swords. Iron

were their crossbows. Iron were their shields. Iron were their lances. And those which bore them upon their backs, their deer [horses], were as tall as roof terraces.

And their bodies were everywhere covered; only their faces appeared. They were very white; they had chalky faces; they had yellow hair, though the hair of some was black.... And when Moctezuma so heard, he was much terrified. It was as if he fainted away. His heart saddened; his heart failed him... [but] he made himself resolute; he put forth great effort; he quieted, he controlled his heart; he submitted himself entirely to whatsoever he was to see, at which he was to marvel.... [he then greeted Cortes, as described above.]

And when [the Spaniards] were well settled, they thereupon inquired of Moctezuma as to all the city’s treasure... the devices, the shields. Much did they importune him; with great zeal they sought gold.... Thereupon were brought forth all the brilliant things; the shields, the golden discs, the devils’ necklaces, the golden nose crescents, the golden leg bands, the golden arm bands, the golden forehead bands.

### Questions for Analysis

1. Both Diaz’s account and that of the Aztec elders were written retrospect, and both reflect their authors’ awareness of the impending conquest. Compare the tone of these accounts. How does each reflect the author’s knowledge of what is to come?
2. Why does Moctezuma pay “great reverence” to Cortes? Why does Cortes return the Honor? What is the strategy of each leader?
3. What is Diaz’s explanation for the easy entry of the Spanish into the city? What explanation is suggested by the elder’s account?