

The Encounter: Perspectives of the Aztec and Spanish

Below are a few documents aimed at helping you better understand the perspectives from the encounter between the Aztecs and Spanish. We will work together and in small groups to read these documents to help us better understand how the Aztec and Spanish saw each other.

Aztecs

Where and when: Mexico, 1325- 1520

Government: monarchy

Accomplishment

Tenochtitlan- advanced capital city of the Aztec Empire.

Pyramid- site of worship

Writing system- history, medical books, astronomy and math

Chinampas- floating gardens for agriculture

Advanced science and math

Conquerors- conquered neighbors and made them pay tribute

Hernan Cortez is one of the most well-known Spanish conquistadors, he and his men landed in Mexico in 1519 and by 1520 they had conquered the Aztec.

TASK: As we read **highlight** any important events, people, and/or details. Highlight any unknown terms or **keywords**. Pay special attention to defined vocabulary. Use this information to complete the questions/tasks that follow each document.

Document # 1: Omens of Doom

Beginning in about the year 1502, rumors were heard in the Aztec Empire about the appearance of bearded white men with strange behavior. Because Montezuma II was a very superstitious leader, he consulted his advisors, but then punished them for their lack of knowledge. For years before the arrival of the Spanish, he became more and more concerned about omens of doom concerning his reign and the continuation of the Aztec Empire. Since the omens were not reported until after the Conquest, there are questions about whether they were true events, or only justifications for the Aztec defeat.

OMEN 1: According to legend, the Aztecs believed that the god Quetzalcoatl ([ket-sahl-koh-aht-l) **had sailed east to join the sun god, warning that he would return** on Quetzalcoatl's name day to reclaim his kingdom. This would be the end of the Aztec Emperor. The Aztecs believed that this would occur **in the year One Reed (which happened to be 1519)** and that **the god could take many forms, including that of a pale-skinned, bearded man.**

Aztec god identified with the wind and air and represented by a feathered serpent

OMEN 2: A comet streaked unexpectedly across the night, "like a spear plunged into the very heart of the heavens." The next morning, the sun destroyed this fire, but it reoccurred again at night for the better part of a year. The people worried that maybe the sun would not be able to destroy this fire forever...and the source of all life would not rise in the morning.

OMEN 3: The lake surrounding Tenochtitlan swirled and suddenly boiled up on a calm day and flooded many houses built next to the water.

OMEN 6: The temple of the god of fire was destroyed by a noiseless thunderbolt.

OMEN 7: Aztec fishermen brought an **ashen** bird like **a crane with a crest on its head like a mirror to Montezuma. When the king looked in the mirror, he saw the heavens and stars and warriors riding on deer [horses]*.** When Montezuma asked his advisors to examine the bird, it disappeared.

capital city of the Aztec Empire from the middle of the 1300s to the early 1500s. Mexico City was built upon some of the ruins of Tenochtitlan.

of the pale gray color of ash

Source: PBS Conquistadors,
<http://www.pbs.org/opb/conquistadors/mexico/adventure1/pop-omens.htm>.

*Horses did not exist in the New World before the Spanish, deer refers to the horses the Spanish rode.

1. How might these omens, whether or not they were actual events or gossip, affect the Aztec view of the Spanish?

The omens could have led the Aztecs to believe that the Spanish leader (Cortez) was the god Quetzalcoatl in the form of a white skinned, bearded man; and the Spanish Army are those he saw in the mirror as they rode horses as the omen claimed.

2. Since these omens did not come to light until after the conquest of the Aztecs, are these a valid source of information? Explain.

These omens could have been fabricated to help justify the fall of the Aztec at the hands of the Spanish. Since these omens were not heard of before the Spanish it's more likely they created them to explain why they fell, rather than the omens actually predicted the arrival of the Spanish.

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Document #2: Aztec Initial View of Conquistadors

Messengers sent to scout out the Spanish return with news for their king.

The messengers went to the House of the Serpent, and Motecuhzoma (Moctezuma) arrived. The **two captives** [ordered by Motecuhzoma to be brought from the prison] **were then sacrificed** before his eyes: their breasts were torn open, and the messengers were sprinkled with their blood. **This was done because the messengers had completed a difficult mission: they had seen the gods (the Spanish), their eyes had looked on their faces.** They had even conversed with the gods! When the sacrifice was finished, the messengers reported to the king. They told him how they had made the journey, and what they had seen, and what food the strangers ate. **Motecuhzoma was astonished and terrified by their report**, and the description of the strangers' food astonished him above all else. **He was also terrified to learn how the cannon roared**, how its noise **resounded** [echoed], how it caused one to faint and grow deaf. The messengers told him: "A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its entrails: it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire...If the cannon is aimed against a mountain, the mountain splits and cracks open. If it is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. This is a most unnatural sight, as if the tree had exploded from within."

The messengers also said: **"Their trappings [decorations] and arms [weapons] are all made of iron. They dress in iron...Their swords are iron; their bows are iron; their shields are iron; their spears are iron. Their deer [horses] carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go.** These deer, our lord, are as tall as the roof of a house. "The strangers' bodies are completely covered, so that only their faces can be seen. **Their skin is white**, as if it were made of lime...

When Motecuhzoma heard this report, he was filled with terror. It was as if his heart had fainted, as if it had shriveled. It was as if he were conquered by despair....

—Account of Aztec view of Conquistadors

Adapted from the *Cronica Mexicana*, accounts compiled by Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, the grandson of Motecuhzoma, ca. 1578. Source: National Humanities Center.

1. How does this document indicate (show) the Aztecs' lack of technology compared to the Spanish?

2. What is the tone (the general attitude) of the article? Explain.

3. Do you think the Aztecs would have viewed the Spanish in the same way if they had not heard the omens of doom? Explain.

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Document #3: MOCTEZUMA'S GREETING TO HERNAN CORTES

Close to the city there is a wooden bridge... After we had crossed this bridge, Moctezuma came to greet us and with him some two hundred lords, all barefoot and dressed in a different costume, but also very rich in their way and more so than the others...

Moctezuma came down the middle of this street with two chiefs, one on his right hand and the other on his left. When we met I dismounted and stepped forward to embrace him, but the two lords who were with him stopped me with their hands so that I should not touch him; and they likewise all performed the ceremony of kissing the earth. When at last I came to speak to Moctezuma himself I took off a necklace of pearls and cut glass that I was wearing and placed it round his neck;.. a servant of his came with two necklaces, wrapped in a cloth, made from red snails' shells, which they hold in great **esteem** [admire]; and from each necklace hung eight shrimps of refined gold almost a span in length. And after he had given me these things he sat on another throne which they placed there next to the one on which I was sitting, and **addressed** me in the following way: "For a long time we have known from the writings of our ancestors that neither I [Moctezuma], nor any of those who dwell in this land, are natives of it, but foreigners who came from very distant parts; and likewise we know that a chieftain [ruler], of whom they were all **vassals** [subjects], brought our people to this region. And he returned to his native land...And we have always held that those who descended from him would come and conquer this land and take us as their vassals. So because of the place from which you claim to come, namely, from where the sun rises, and the things you tell us of the great lord or king who sent you here, we believe and are certain that he is our natural lord...So be assured that we shall obey you and hold you as our lord in place of that great sovereign of whom you speak; and in this there shall be no offense or **betrayal** whatsoever. "

Cortés replied in his strange and savage tongue... "Tell Moctezuma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear. We have wanted to see him for a long time, and now we have seen his face and heard his words. Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented." Then he said to Moctezuma: "We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear."

Source: Hernan Cortes, *Letters from Mexico* , trans. Anthony Pagden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

<http://web.archive.org/web/20000304002237/http://www.humanities.ccny.cuny.edu/history/reader/cortez.htm>

to speak to

breaking of trust

How does King Moctezuma react to the arrival of the Europeans? Does he show fear?

How does he seem to explain the appearance of these strangers?

Closing: #Perspectives

TASK: Create a tweet for both the Aztecs and Spanish that shares each of their perspectives regarding the encounter between the two. You may use the spaces below to construct your 140 character tweet that represents the viewpoints of each or write in the blank space below.

Aztec

Spanish
