

EUROPEANS AND AMERICAN INDIANS

Explorers, Conquerors, and Aztec Reactions

The encounter between European explorers and settlers and Native Americans was one of the most fascinating and, from the Indian standpoint, tragic, in world history. Europeans came with technologies, animals, diseases, and religious views for which the Indians had no prior preparation. Some Indians proved quite adaptable to the context that European arrival established, gaining skill with horses, learning new political forms, and so on. Overall, however, Europeans brought greater force, devastating diseases, and an attitude of superiority that would combine to severely restrict Indian life.

Comparisons in this chapter involve an unusual, highly significant case of encounter, but also the interactions that developed key features of the Columbian exchange. Early European arrivals, such as Columbus himself, often focused on the naïveté and timidity of the Indians they encountered, wondering at their nakedness and lack of metals and weapons but confident that they could proceed in friendship. Columbus's report on the 1492 voyage to the Caribbean islands shows this early openness, but also the menace that underlay it: "I have also established the greatest friendship with the king of that country, so much so that he took pride in calling me his brother, and treating me as such. Even should these people change their intentions towards us and become hostile, they do not know what arms are, but, as I have said, go naked, and are the most timid people in the world; so that the men I have left could, alone, destroy the whole country."

Later accounts changed, and terms like *deceitful* and *lazy*, as well as *pagan*, began to be applied to Indians. The following European accounts come from Diego Alvarez Chanca, a surgeon on Columbus's 1493 return to the Caribbean, who later published a somewhat "ethnographic," if hostile, account in his hometown of Seville, Spain; from Hernando Cortés, in letters to the Spanish government as he began the conquest of Mexico in 1519; and from the French explorer Champlain, in a diary kept as he traveled the coasts of Maine and Cape Code in the early seventeenth century.

The nature of the sources varies. Champlain and Chanca wrote accounts for general interest; Cortés was reporting to the Spanish royalty. Which kind of account is more accurate, less likely to exaggerate?

What of the Indian views implied in the European accounts? Why does their outlook toward different Europeans vary—or does it? Why did Europeans pick up different signals about Indian reactions to the first presentations of Christianity? There are few direct accounts of initial Indian responses, so it is important to speculate on the basis of European descriptions of varying behaviors. Also, is there any sign of a distinction, in dealing with Europeans, between the Indians of New England or the Caribbean islands, who combined agriculture and hunting, and the Indians in that part of Mexico long embraced in the elaborate civilizations of the Aztecs and Mayans, whom Cortés first encountered?

Finally, there is the reaction from the Indians themselves. The Aztec Empire, founded in the fourteenth century and building on earlier civilizations in the region, was the key political power in Mexico and much of Central America. A set of Aztec accounts provides an unusual insight into initial contacts from the Indian side—interestingly, the comments refer to the same first encounters that the Cortés account deals with. The ruler of the vast Aztec empire, Montezuma (Motecuhzoma in the Aztec account), sent a mission to contact Cortés, and the results are documented in this passage, along with later observations about some of the biological impact of the Spanish arrival. Aztec response reflected among other things an old belief in a beneficent civilizer-god, Quetzalcoatl, who would return from the east in a particular type of year in the Aztec calendar, which 1519 happened to be. With this document, one set of Indian perceptions of Europeans can be directly compared with European reactions to the Indians; the same document suggests the complex mix of factors that explain why the Indian response combined resistance with various kinds of accommodation.

Questions

1. What were the dominant attitudes of the Europeans? Why did they feel justified in killing Indians? Were there also “good” Indians, and how were they defined?
2. Why do the accounts of Cortés and Chanca differ? Who were their audiences, and how might this factor have affected their emphases?
3. Which of the three European accounts was most optimistic about possibilities of dealing with the Indians, and why?
4. What did the Europeans believe Indian reactions to their arrival were?
5. Which looms larger in the European accounts: religious motivations or greed? Do the European accounts suggest an early form of racism?

6. How did Cortés treat Indians in Mexico? What were his basic assumptions?
7. Why did some Indians fight and others not? Why did the Aztecs not simply resist European intrusion in every possible way?
8. What suggestions does the Aztec account offer as to why Spanish conquest succeeded?
9. How do the Aztec account and the comments of Cortés compare? How do the two groups evaluate the religious factor? Which side was more aggressive? Which side had more deeply rooted assumptions of superiority, and why?

For Further Discussion

1. Why were small numbers of Europeans able to conquer the numerous, often well-organized American peoples?
2. Were European incursions into the Americas one of the great tragedies of world history?
3. Why might hunting-and-gathering Indians be harder for Europeans to deal with than those in the civilizations of the Aztecs and the Incas?

SPANISH REACTIONS: CHANCA AND CORTÉS

Dr. Chanca's comments on Indians came from his experience with the second Columbus expedition of 1493, which visited various Caribbean islands. Dr. Chanca was interested in titillating his Spanish readership. Hernando Cortés (1485-1547) reported to the Spanish royal government from 1519 onward. He had been assigned an official expedition to Mexico and was able to converse with Indian representatives through his two interpreters, one a Spaniard previously abandoned in the Yucatan, one an Indian woman. Cortés used a combination of alliances with dissident Indian groups and outright fighting to defeat the Aztecs by 1521.

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DR. DIEGO ALVAREZ CHANCA ON THE CARIBE INDIANS

The way of life of these *caribe* people is bestial. There are three islands, this one is called *Turuqueira*, the other, which we saw first, is called *Ceyre*, and the third is called *Ayai*. They are all agreed, as if they were of one lineage, doing no harm to each other. All together they make war on all the other neighbouring islands, going 150 leagues by sea to make raids in the many canoes which they have, which are small 'fustas' made

From Peter Hulme and Noel Whitehead, eds., *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribes from Columbia to the Present Day* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 13-14.

of a single piece of wood. Their arms are arrows rather than iron weapons, because they do not possess any iron: they fix on points made of tortoise-shell, others from another island fix on fish bones which are jagged, being like that naturally, like very strong saws, a thing which, for an unarmed people, as they all are, can kill and do great injury, but for people of our nation are not arms greatly to be feared.

These people raid the other islands and carry off the women whom they can take, especially the young and beautiful ones, whom they keep to serve them and have them as concubines, and they carry off so many that in fifty houses nobody was found, and of the captives more than twenty were young girls. These women also say that they are treated with a cruelty which seems incredible, for sons whom they have from them are eaten and they only rear those whom they have from their native women. The men whom they are able to take, those who are alive they bring to their houses to butcher for meat, and those who are dead are eaten there and then. They say that men's flesh is so good that there is nothing like it in the world, and it certainly seems so for the bones which we found in these houses had been gnawed of everything they could gnaw, so that nothing was left on them except what was much too tough to be eaten. In one house there a man's neck was found cooking in a pot. They cut off the member of the boys they take prisoner and make use of them until they are men, and then when they want to make a feast, they kill and eat them, for they say that the flesh of boys and of women is not good to eat. Of these boys, three came fleeing to us, and all three had had their members cut off.

CORTÉS IN MEXICO

H. Cortés accordingly left Cuba and began his voyage with ten ships and four hundred fighting men, among whom were many knights and gentlemen, seventeen being mounted. The first land they touched was the Island of Cozumel, now called Santa Cruz, as we mentioned, and on landing at the part of San Juan de Portalatina the town was found entirely deserted, as if it had never been inhabited. Cortés wishing to know the cause of such a flight ordered the men to disembark and took up his abode in the town. It was not long before he learnt from three Indians captured in a canoe as they were making for the mainland of Yucatán that the chiefs of the Island at the sight of the Spanish ships approaching had left the town and retired with all the Indians to the woods and hills, being very afraid of the Spaniards as not knowing what their intentions might be. Cortés, replying by means of the native interpreter whom he had with him, informed them he was going to do them no harm but admonish them and bring them to the knowledge of our Holy Catholic Faith, that they might become vassals of

From Hernando Cortés, *Five Letters of Cortes to the Emperor*, trans. J. Bayard Morris (New York: Norton, 1991), 50–52, 92–94. Translation copyright © 1969 by J. Bayard Morris. Reprinted by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

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your Majesty and serve and obey him, as had all the Indians and peoples of those parts which are already peopled with Spanish subjects of your Majesties. On the Captain reassuring them in this manner they lost much of their former fear, and replied that they would willingly inform their chieftains who had taken refuge in the hills. The Captain thereupon gave them a letter by which the chiefs might approach in safety and they departed with it promising to return within the space of five days. After waiting for the reply some three or four days longer than the allotted time and seeing that they had not reappeared Cortés decided to search out the coast on either side of him, in order that the Island should not remain entirely deserted, and accordingly sent out two captains each with a hundred men, ordering them to proceed to either extremity of the Island and to hold conversations with any Indians they might meet, telling them that he was awaiting them in the port of San Juan de Portalatina in order to speak with them on behalf of your Majesty; such Indians they were to beg and urge as best they could to come to the said port but were to be careful not to do any harm to them, in their persons, their houses or their goods, lest the natives should be rendered more timid and deceitful than they were already. The two captains departed as they were commanded and returning within four days reported that all the towns which they had come across were desolate. They brought with them, however, ten or a dozen people whom they had managed to persuade, among whom was an Indian chieftain to whom Cortés spoke by means of his interpreter bidding him go and inform the chiefs that he would in no wise depart from the Island without seeing and speaking to them. The chieftain agreeing left with the second letter for the chiefs and two days later returned with the head chief to inform Cortés that he was the ruler of the Island and was come to see what he wanted. The Captain informed him that he wished them no harm, but that they should come to the knowledge of the true faith, and should know that we acknowledged as lords the greatest princes of the earth and that these in their turn obeyed a greater prince than he, wherefore what he desired of them was not otherwise than that the chiefs and Indians of that Island should likewise obey your Majesties, and that doing so they would be favoured, no-one being able to do them harm. The chief replied that he was content so to do and sent for all the other chieftains of the Island, who coming rejoiced greatly at all that the Captain Hernando Cortés had spoken to their chief, and were reassured in such manner that within a very few days the towns were as full of people as before, and the Indians went about among us with as little fear as if they had already had dealings with us for many years. . . .

Accordingly, as the Captain Hernando Cortés saw that stores were already beginning to run short and that the men would suffer much from hunger should he delay there any longer, and the true object of his voyage rest unattained, he decided, his men agreeing, to depart; and so hoisting sail they left that Island of Cozumel, now Santa Cruz, very peaceably inclined, so much so that if it were proposed to found a colony there the natives would be ready without coercion to serve their Spanish

masters. The chiefs in particular were left very contented and at ease with what the Captain had told them on behalf of your Majesties and with the numerous articles of finery which he had given them for their own persons. I think there can be no doubt that all Spaniards who may happen to come to this Island in the future will be as well received as if they were arriving in a land which had been a long time colonized. The Island of Cozumel is small, without so much as a single river or stream; all the water that the Indians drink is from wells. The soil is composed solely of rocks and stones, a certain portion of it being woody. The Indians' only produce is that obtained from bee-keeping, and our procurators are sending to your Majesties samples both of the land and of the honey for your Majesties' inspection.

Your Majesties must know that when the Captain told the chiefs in his first interview with them that they must live no longer in the pagan faith which they held they begged him to acquaint them with the law under which they were henceforth to live. The Captain accordingly informed them to the best of his ability in the Catholic Faith, leaving them a cross of wood which was fixed on a high building and an image of Our Lady the Virgin Mary, and gave them to understand very fully what they must do to be good Christians, all of which they manifestly received with very good will, and so we left them very happy and contented. . . .

On arriving at the first town we found the Indians in boats drawn up on the shore near the water. . . . Early next morning a few Indians approached us in a canoe bringing several chickens and enough maize to make a meal for a few men and bidding us accept these and depart from their land. The Captain however spoke to them through the interpreters giving them to understand that in no wise would he depart from that land before he had found out the secret of it in order to be able to send your Majesties a true account, and again begged them not to be offended at his project nor to deny him entrance for they also were subjects of your Majesties. However they still forbade us to make a landing and urged us to depart. On their return to the town the Captain decided to move, and ordered one of his captains to go with two hundred men by a path which had been discovered during the preceding night to lead to the village. He himself embarked with some eighty men on the brigs and boats and took up his position in front of the town ready to land if they would permit him to do so: even as he approached he found the Indians in war paint and armed with bows and arrows, lances and small round shields, yelling that if we would not leave their land and wanted war it should begin at once, for they were men to defend their own homes. Cortés attempted to speak with them four times (your Majesties' notary who accompanied him witnessed to the same to the effect that he did not desire war) but seeing that it was the determined will of the Indians to resist his landing and that they were beginning to shoot their arrows against us, ordered the guns which we carried to be fired and an attack to be made. Immediately after the discharge of our guns and in the landing which followed a few of our men were wounded, but finally the fury of our onslaught

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and the sudden attack of our comrades who had come up in the rear of the enemy forced them to fly and abandon the village, which we accordingly took and settled ourselves in what appeared to be the strongest part of it. In the evening of the following day two Indians arrived from their chiefs bringing a few very inferior gold ornaments of small value and told the Captain that they offered him these in order that in exchange he might leave the land as it was before and do them no hurt. Cortés replied saying that as to doing them no hurt it pleased him well, but as to leaving the land they should know that from henceforward they must acknowledge as lords the greatest princes of the earth and must be their subjects and serve them; by doing which they would obtain many favours from your Majesties who would help them and defend them from their enemies. On this they replied that they were content to do this, but nevertheless still begged him to leave their land, and so we arrived at friendly terms.

Having patched up this friendship the Captain pointed out that the Spanish troops who were with him in the village had nothing to eat and had brought nothing from their ships. He therefore asked them to bring us sufficient food so long as we remained on land, which they promised to do on the following day, and so departed. But the next day and another passed without any food arriving so that we were faced with extreme shortness of provisions, and on the third day a few Spanish soldiers asked leave of the Captain to visit some of the near-lying farms and see if they could obtain some food. . . . Proceeding in this order the vanguard came upon a large body of Indians who were advancing to attack our camp, so that had we not gone out to meet them that day it is very possible we should have been hard put to it. And again the captain of artillery made certain representations (as your notary can bear witness) to the Indians whom he met in full war paint, crying to them by means of the native heralds and interpreters that we wanted not war but peace with them: their only answer was given not in words but in arrows which began to fall very thickly. The leading party was thus already engaged with the Indians when the two officers in command of the rearguard came up, and it was not until two hours later that Cortés arrived in a part of the wood where the Indians were beginning to encircle the Spaniards in the rear, and there he continued fighting against the Indians for about an hour; moreover such was their number that neither those among the Spaniards who were fighting on foot perceived those on horseback nor knew in what part of the field they were, nor could those on horseback so much as perceive one another as they surged hither and thither among the Indians. However, as soon as the Spaniards perceived the horsemen they attacked still more briskly and almost immediately the Indians were put to flight, the pursuit lasting half a league. . . . And so having attended to the wounded and laid them upon stretchers, we regained our camp taking with us two Indians who were captured there. These Cortés ordered to be loosed, and sent them with letters to the chieftains telling them that if they were willing to come to where he

was he would pardon them the evil they had done and would be their friend. Accordingly the very same evening two Indians who purported to be chieftains arrived, declaring that they were very grieved at what had occurred and that the chieftains as a body begged him to pardon them and not punish them further for what was passed nor kill any more of their people, for over two hundred and twenty Indians had fallen; the past was past and henceforward they were willing to be subjects of that prince of whom he had spoken, and such they already held themselves to be, and bound themselves to do him service whenever anything in your Majesties' name should be desired of them.

In this wise they sat down and peace was made. The Captain then enquired of them by the interpreter what people it was who had fought in that battle, and they replied that tribes from eight provinces had joined together in that place and that according to the reckoning and lists which they possessed they would be about forty thousand men, for they could well reckon up to such a number. Thus your Majesties may truly believe that this battle was won rather by the will of God than by our own strength, for of what avail are four hundred (and we were no more) against forty thousand warriors?

FRENCH REACTIONS: CHAMPLAIN

Samuel de Champlain (1567–1635), was the chief French explorer in North America and a key founder of New France, in Canada. He made his first fur-trading expedition to the region in 1603 and subsequently participated in a number of other expeditions, sometimes joining in attacks on the Iroquois Indians by the Huron tribe. He wrote accounts of his travels in several editions, with a definitive edition completed in exile (during a period when the English had conquered New France) in 1632. In his later years, both before and after the English disruption, he served as virtual governor of New France, and he was buried in Quebec.

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FRENCH ENCOUNTERS IN NORTH AMERICA

Now I will drop this discussion to return to the savages who had conducted me to the falls of the river Norumbegue, who went to notify Bessabez, their chief, and other savages, who in turn proceeded to another little river to inform their own, named Cabahis, and give him notice of our arrival.

From *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604–1618*, ed. W. L. Grant (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1907), 49–50, 71–74, 97–100.

The 16th of the month there came to us some thirty savages on assurances given them by those who had served us as guides. There came also to us the same day the above-named Bessabez with six canoes. As soon as the savages who were on land saw him coming, they all began to sing, dance, and jump, until he had landed. Afterwards, they all seated themselves in a circle on the ground, as is their custom, when they wish to celebrate a festivity, or an harangue is to be made. Cabahis, the other chief, arrived also a little later with twenty or thirty of his companions, who withdrew to one side and greatly enjoyed seeing us, as it was the first time they had seen Christians. A little while after, I went on shore with two of my companions and two of our savages who served as interpreters. I directed the men in our barque to approach near the savages, and hold their arms in readiness to do their duty in case they noticed any movement of these people against us. Bessabez, seeing us on land, bade us sit down, and began to smoke with his companions, as they usually do before an address. They presented us with venison and game.

I directed our interpreter to say to our savages that they should cause Bessabez, Cabahis, and their companions to understand that Sieur de Monts had sent me to them to see them, and also their country, and that he desired to preserve friendship with them and to reconcile them with their enemies, the Souriquois and Canadians, and moreover that he desired to inhabit their country and show them how to cultivate it, in order that they might not continue to lead so miserable a life as they were doing, and some other words on the same subject. This our savages interpreted to them, at which they signified their great satisfaction, saying that no greater good could come to them than to have our friendship, and that they desired to live in peace with their enemies, and that we should dwell in their land, in order that they might in future more than ever before engage in hunting beavers, and give us a part of them in return for our providing them with things which they wanted. After he had finished his discourse, I presented them with hatchets, paternosters, caps, knives, and other little knickknacks, when we separated from each other. All the rest of this day and the following night, until break of day, they did nothing but dance, sing, and make merry, after which we traded for a certain number of beavers. Then each party returned, Bessabez with his companions on the one side, and we on the other, highly pleased at having made the acquaintance of this people. . . .

On the 23d of July, four or five seamen having gone on shore with some kettles to get fresh water, which was to be found in one of the sand-banks a short distance from our barque, some of the savages, coveting them, watched the time when our men went to the spring, and then seized one out of the hands of a sailor, who was the first to dip, and who had no weapons. One of his companions, starting to run after him, soon returned, as he could not catch him, since he ran much faster than himself. The other savages, of whom there were a large number, seeing our sailors running to our barque, and at the same time shouting to us to fire at them, took to flight. At the time there were some of them in our barque, who threw themselves

into the sea, only one of whom we were able to seize. Those on the land who had taken to flight, seeing them swimming, returned straight to the sailor from whom they had taken away the kettle, hurled several arrows at him from behind, and brought him down. Seeing this, they ran at once to him, and despatched him with their knives. Meanwhile, haste was made to go on shore, and muskets were fired from our barque: mine, bursting in my hands, came near killing me. The savages, hearing this discharge of fire-arms, took to flight, and with redoubled speed when they saw that we had landed, for they were afraid when they saw us running after them. There was no likelihood of our catching them, for they are as swift as horses. We brought in the murdered man, and he was buried some hours later. Meanwhile, we kept the prisoner bound by the feet and hands on board of our barque, fearing that he might escape. But *Sieur de Monts* resolved to let him go, being persuaded that he was not to blame, and that he had no previous knowledge of what had transpired, as also those who, at the time, were in and about our barque. Some hours later there came some savages to us, to excuse themselves, indicating by signs and demonstrations that it was not they who had committed this malicious act, but others farther off in the interior. We did not wish to harm them, although it was in our power to avenge ourselves.

All these savages from the *Island Cape* wear neither robes nor furs, except very rarely: moreover, their robes are made of grasses and hemp, scarcely covering the body, and coming down only to their thighs. They have only the sexual parts concealed with a small piece of leather; so likewise the women, with whom it comes down a little lower behind than with the men, all the rest of the body being naked. Whenever the women came to see us, they wore robes which were open in front. The men cut off the hair on the top of the head like those at the river *Choüacoet*. I saw, among other things, a girl with her hair very neatly dressed, with a skin colored red, and bordered on the upper part with little shellbeads. A part of her hair hung down behind, the rest being braided in various ways. These people paint the face red, black, and yellow. They have scarcely any beard, and tear it out as fast as it grows. Their bodies are well-proportioned. I cannot tell what government they have, but I think that in this respect they resemble their neighbors, who have none at all. They know not how to worship or pray; yet, like the other savages, they have some superstitions, which I shall describe in their place. As for weapons, they have only pikes, clubs, bows and arrows. It would seem from their appearance that they have a good disposition, better than those of the north, but they are all in fact of no great worth. Even a slight intercourse with them gives you at once a knowledge of them. They are great thieves and, if they cannot lay hold of any thing with their hands, they try to do so with their feet, as we have oftentimes learned by experience. I am of opinion that, if they had any thing to exchange with us, they would not give themselves to thieving. They bartered away to us their bows, arrows, and quivers, for pins and buttons; and if they had had any thing else better they would have done the same with it. It is necessary to be on one's guard

against this people, and live in a state of distrust of them, yet without letting them perceive it. They gave us a large quantity of tobacco, which they dry and then reduce to powder. When they eat Indian corn, they boil it in earthen pots, which they make in a way different from ours. They bray it also in wooden mortars and reduce it to flour, of which they then make cakes, like the Indians of Peru. . . .

Now, in view of what *Sieur de Pourtincourt* had seen, and the order which it had been told him they observed when they wished to play some bad trick, when we passed by some cabins, where there was a large number of women, we gave them some bracelets and rings to keep them quiet and free from fear, and to most of the old and distinguished men hatchets, knives, and other things which they desired. This pleased them greatly, and they repaid it all in dances, gambols, and harangues, which we did not understand at all. We went wherever we chose without their having the assurance to say anything to us. It pleased us greatly to see them show themselves so simple in appearance. . . .

The next day, in the morning, the 15th of October, the savages did not fail to come and see in what condition our men were, whom they found asleep, except one, who was near the fire. When they saw them in this condition, they came, to the number of four hundred, softly over a little hill, and sent them such a volley of arrows that to rise up was death. Fleeing the best they could towards our barque, shouting, "Help! they are killing us!" a part fell dead in the water; the others were all pierced with arrows, and one died in consequence a short time after. The savages made a desperate noise with roarings, which it was terrible to hear.

Upon the occurrence of this noise and that of our men, the sentinel, on our vessel, exclaimed, "To arms! They are killing our men!" Consequently, each one immediately seized his arms; and we embarked in the shallop, some fifteen or sixteen of us, in order to go ashore. But, being unable to get there on account of a sandbank between us and the land, we threw ourselves into the water, and waded from this bank to the shore, the distance of a musket-shot. As soon as we were there, the savages, seeing us within arrow range, fled into the interior. To pursue them was fruitless, for they are marvellously swift. All that we could do was to carry away the dead bodies and bury them near a cross, which had been set up the day before, and then to go here and there to see if we could get sight of any of them. But it was time wasted, therefore we came back. Three hours afterwards, they returned to us on the sea-shore. We discharged at them several shots from our little brass cannon; and, when they heard the noise, they crouched down on the ground to avoid the fire. In mockery of us, they beat down the cross and disinterred the dead, which displeased us greatly, and caused us to go for them a second time; but they fled, as they had done before. We set up again the cross, and reinterred the dead, whom they had thrown here and there amid the heath, where they kindled a fire to burn them. We returned without any result, as we had done before, well aware that there was scarcely hope of avenging ourselves this time, and that we should have to renew the undertaking when it should please God.

AZTEC REACTIONS: *THE BROKEN SPEARS*

The Broken Spears is a compilation of a number of Aztec and other Indian records from the sixteenth century, assembled in the 1960s by a Spanish scholar. The materials include codices originally written in the Nahuatl language (one of the Aztec-stem languages) that escaped the general Spanish destruction of native-language documents, plus later recollections written by Indians in Spanish. The reassembly of the materials in rough chronological order, by the book's editor, permits unique insight into one whole side of this fateful encounter.

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Then Motecuhzoma gave the messengers his final orders. He said to them: "Go now, without delay. Do reverence to our lord the god. Say to him: 'Your deputy, Motecuhzoma, has sent us to you. Here are the presents with which he welcomes you home to Mexico.'" . . .

One by one they did reverence to Cortes by touching the ground before him with their lips. They said to him: "If the god will deign to hear us, your deputy Motecuhzoma has sent us to render you homage. He has the City of Mexico in his care. He says: 'The god is weary.'"

Then they arrayed the Captain in the finery they had brought him as presents. With great care they fastened the turquoise mask in place, the mask of the god with its crossband of quetzal feathers. A golden earring hung down on either side of this mask. They dressed him in the decorated vest and the collar woven in the petatillo style—the collar of *chalchihuites*, with a disk of gold in the center.

Next they fastened the mirror to his hips, dressed him in the cloak known as "the ringing bell" and adorned his feet. . . . In his hand they placed the shield with its fringe and pendant of quetzal feathers, its ornaments of gold and mother-of-pearl. Finally they set before him the pair of black sandals. As for the other objects of divine finery, they only laid them out for him to see.

The Captain asked them: "And is this all? Is this your gift of welcome? Is this how you greet people?"

They replied: "This is all, our lord. This is what we have brought you."

Then the Captain gave orders, and the messengers were chained by the feet and by the neck. When this had been done, the great cannon was fired off. The messengers lost their senses and fainted away. They fell down side by side and lay where they had fallen. But the Spaniards quickly revived them: they lifted them up, gave them wine to drink and then offered them food.

From Miguel Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears* (expanded and updated edition, Boston: Beacon, 1992). © by Miguel Leon-Portilla. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.

The Captain said to them: "I have heard that the Mexicans are very great warriors, very brave and terrible. If a Mexican is fighting alone, he knows how to retreat, turn back, rush forward and conquer, even if his opponents are ten or even twenty. But my heart is not convinced. I want to see it for myself. I want to find out if you are truly that strong and brave."

Then he gave them swords, spears and leather shields. He said: "It will take place very early, at daybreak. We are going to fight each other in pairs, and in this way we will learn the truth. We will see who falls to the ground!"

They said to the Captain: "Our lord, we were not sent here for this by your deputy Motecuhzoma! We have come on an exclusive mission, to offer you rest and repose and to bring you presents. What the lord desires is not within our warrant. If we were to do this, it might anger Motecuhzoma, and he would surely put us to death." . . .

Then they left in great haste and continued to the City of Mexico. They entered the city at night, in the middle of the night.

The messengers went to the House of the Serpent, and Motecuhzoma arrived. The two captives 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, 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, 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. The smoke that comes out with it has a pestilent odor, like that of rotten mud. This odor penetrates even to the brain and causes the greatest discomfort. 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 and arms are all made of iron. They dress in iron and wear iron casques on their heads. Their swords are iron; their bows are iron; their shields are iron; their spears are iron. Their deer 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. They have yellow hair, though some of them have black. Their beards are long and yellow, and their moustaches are also yellow. Their hair is curly, with very fine strands.

"As for their food, it is like human food. It is large and white, and not heavy. It is something like straw, but with the taste of a cornstalk, of the pith of a cornstalk. It is

a little sweet, as if it were flavored with honey; it tastes of honey, it is sweet-tasting food. . . .

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.

While the Spaniards were in Tlaxcala, a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan [the Aztec capital, now Mexico City]. It began to spread during the thirteenth month and lasted for seventy days, striking everywhere in the city and killing a vast number of our people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot.

The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads. They could not lie face down or roll from one side to the other. If they did move their bodies, they screamed with pain.

A great many died from this plague, and many others died of hunger. They could not get up to search for food, and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved to death in their beds.

Some people came down with a milder form of the disease; they suffered less than the others and made a good recovery. But they could not escape entirely. Their looks were ravaged, for wherever a sore broke out, it gouged an ugly pockmark in the skin. And a few of the survivors were left completely blind.

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