

Clash of Cultures: Cortes Conquers Moctezuma and the Aztecs

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Titled "Entrance of Cortes into Mexico," this illustration shows Spain's Hernan Cortes (right) being welcomed by the Aztec leader Moctezuma (left). Library of Congress

Moctezuma was the unluckiest of kings. History elected him to oversee the ruin of the last great Central American empire. Other Aztec rulers had encountered setbacks in their conquests. For Moctezuma it was different. He confronted an alien empire from across the sea. In its leader, the Spaniard Hernan Cortes, he faced an opponent as astute and skillful as himself. In the end, Cortes and his army conquered the Aztecs.

In the wake of Christopher Columbus' historic voyage in 1492, expeditions, especially from Imperial Spain, swarmed into the Aztec territory in present-day Mexico. They came in search of gold and souls — gold to enrich the coffers of the Spanish king (and their own),

and heathen souls to rescue for Christianity. Within a generation, America's ancient civilizations were crushed. Both the Aztec and Inca Empires collapsed after campaigns lasting just a couple of years. How did they fall so fast? Historians suggest many causes.

Cannons against clubs

The Spanish army was considered the most ruthless fighting force on Earth. It had not suffered a single defeat for 150 years. The Spaniards possessed cannons and the arquebus (a primitive musket) which terrified the American tribes. Horses, which the Aztecs had never encountered, gave the Spaniards greater mobility. Above all there was the Spanish sword. It could kill with a single lightning thrust. Against all this, the Aztec's primary weapons were wooden clubs studded with obsidian glass.

Wars were religious rituals to the Aztecs. A prime objective was the capture of prisoners for sacrifice. During the siege of Tenochtitlan, the largest city in the pre-Columbian Americas, and now Mexico City, conquistadors watched from a distance as Aztecs dragged captives up the steps of the Great Temple and ripped out their hearts. The Spanish viewed the Aztecs as savages.

Aztec warriors had several opportunities to kill Cortes. Each time they tried to capture him alive — and each time he escaped. Spaniards killed Aztec leaders whenever they could. Prominent in their brightly feathered costumes, they often led the warrior ranks. With their deaths, ordinary soldiers became demoralized and fled.

Dissension and disease

The Aztec Empire was a loose confederation of allies and subject states. Many deeply resented Aztec rule, their dreaded tax collectors, and the massive tributes they paid. In the Spanish they saw their saviors. Cortes exploited this unrest with great skill. In his final assault on Tenochtitlan, his band of 900 Spanish soldiers was joined by perhaps 150,000 natives.

The Europeans brought with them diseases such as measles and smallpox against which the American tribes had no natural immunity. They spread like wildfire, killing rulers of both the Aztecs and Incas, along with millions of other people.

Finally, the personalities of Moctezuma and Cortes must be considered. Both were gifted generals and wily politicians. But while Cortes was a hardheaded realist, Moctezuma was mired in magic and superstition.

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Long before Cortes landed at Vera Cruz on Good Friday in 1519, portents of doom appeared. A comet "bright as to turn night into day" lit the sky. Dismayed soothsayers and astrologers maintained they did not see it. For this unhelpful approach, Moctezuma cast

them into cages where they starved to death. Then, an important temple burned. Lastly, hunters brought Moctezuma a bird with a mirror strapped to its head. In it he saw large numbers of people "advance as for war; they appeared to be half-men, half-deer."

How much of this is fact? How much is myth? By the time spies brought tales of mountains floating upon the sea (Spanish galleons), and men with "flesh very white ... a long beard and hair to their ears," Moctezuma's nerves were shattered. Was this the legendary feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl, who having vanished into the eastern ocean, now returned?

Moctezuma half-convinced himself Cortes was a god.

He sent Cortes the feathery costume of Quetzalcoatl with other gifts, including "20 ducks made of gold, very natural looking." Cortes took the bold move of marching on Tenochtitlan. With a force of 500 Spanish soldiers and whatever warriors he recruited along the way, he faced Moctezuma on the city's southern causeway on November 8, 1519. Moctezuma invited him in.

The ancient civilizations crumble

Was this a political blunder or a shrewd tactical move? Once inside the city, Cortes found himself isolated, at the mercy of the Aztec Empire. He quickly rectified matters. In another bold stroke, he kidnapped Moctezuma. With 30 seasoned soldiers, he entered the royal palace and gave the emperor a stark choice — come with us, or die. Moctezuma, fearful, puzzled, dejected, disorientated by these men-gods, submitted.

Months later, while trying to calm a rebellion against the interlopers, Moctezuma was killed in a firestorm of rocks and javelins. Cortes and his crew barely escaped with their lives.

Nine months later, he returned with a huge army of Spaniards and native recruits. First, they set siege to Tenochtitlan, denying it food and fresh water. On August 13, 1521, Tenochtitlan fell. A decade later, the Incas, who controlled the largest empire in pre-Columbian America, plagued by civil war and decimated by smallpox, faced Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro. The Incas suffered a similar fate, as Pizarro conquered the Incan Empire, claiming the Incan lands for Spain.

These great civilizations live on — in their legends, their art and architecture, reclaimed by archaeologists and historians. Their foods transformed Europe — tomatoes, corn, and potatoes became staple foods of much of the Old World's growing population. A new Atlantic world that incorporated elements of European, African and American cultures was taking shape.

Quiz

- 1 Which option accurately represents the relationship between two of the article's CENTRAL ideas?
- (A) Aztec Empire ruler Montezuma was an unlucky king. He became upset when portents of doom appeared, including dreams about a temple burning and a bird with a mirror on its head.
 - (B) After Columbus' historic voyage in 1492, expeditions from Spain sailed to Aztec territory looking for gold. One of these expeditions was led by a gifted general named Hernan Cortes.
 - (C) The Spanish army was a ruthless fighting force with stronger weaponry than the Aztecs. It killed Aztec leaders whenever it could, and eventually was able to bring down the Aztec Empire.
 - (D) Both Montezuma and Cortes were skillful leaders. Montezuma was skilled at creating an empire of states that strongly supported him, and Cortes was skilled at deceiving Montezuma.
- 2 Which paragraph from the section "The ancient civilizations crumble" BEST reflects a CENTRAL idea of the article?
- 3 Which option BEST describes the structure of the article?
- (A) The article begins with an overview of the demise of the Aztec and Inca Empires, then focuses on specific reasons for the collapse of the Aztec Empire, and ends by describing how the Aztec and Inca cultures live on.
 - (B) The article begins by introducing Montezuma, ruler of the Aztec Empire, then describes different ways that Montezuma fought the Spaniards, and ends by describing how Montezuma was killed.
 - (C) The article begins by comparing Montezuma with other Aztec rulers, then compares Montezuma with Cortes, leader of the Spanish army, and then compares the demise of the Incas with the demise of the Aztecs.
 - (D) The article starts by declaring that Cortes and his army vanquished the Aztec civilization, then describes how Cortes and his army achieved this feat, and ends by describing some effects of the disappearance of this civilization.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the article.

Aztec warriors had several opportunities to kill Cortes. Each time they tried to capture him alive — and each time he escaped. Spaniards killed Aztec leaders whenever they could. Prominent in their brightly feathered costumes, they often led the warrior ranks. With their deaths, ordinary soldiers became demoralized and fled.

How does this paragraph help develop a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) It illustrates that Cortes was a smart and wily leader.
- (B) It establishes that the Aztecs wanted to capture Cortes alive.
- (C) It describes an effect of killing Aztec leaders.
- (D) It explains a problem the Aztecs had with capturing Cortes.

Answer Key

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Paragraph 14:

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