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Cortés and Montezuma

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Like any document, the chronicles written by the conquistadores must be read with caution, since their authors were hardly objective observers. In the following excerpt, British historian John H. Elliott, an eminent authority on the relations between Spain and its New World colonies, seeks to find the truth of Cortés's own narrative by placing the conqueror in the context of his times.

There was no lack of resourcefulness in Cortés's approach to the conquest of Mexico, which was as much a political as a military operation, and one conducted simultaneously against the Aztec emperor and the governor of Cuba. The contemporary chronicler Fernández de Oviedo refers at one point to Cortés's capacity to "construct romances (*novelar*) and devise schemes appropriate to a resourceful, astute, and cunning captain." Recent work on Cortés . . . has helped to confirm his extraordinary skill in the constructing of romances and the devising of schemes. The first letter of relation . . . is a brilliant fictional reconstruction which draws heavily on the political and juridical ideas embedded in the *Siete Partidas*.¹ The governor, Velázquez, is painted in the darkest colors as a man consumed by greed and personal interest, whereas Cortés himself emerges as the faithful servant of the Spanish Crown and a staunch upholder of the common weal.

But it is in his account of the confrontation with Montezuma that Cortés's powers of imagination and invention are revealed at their best. Although the whole episode remains deeply mysterious, it at least seems clear that Cortés's account of what passed between the two men should not be taken, as it has long been taken, at face value. In all probability, two distinctive layers of legend now surround the relationship between Cortés and Montezuma. The outer layer, which forms the basis of modern interpretations of the conquest of Mexico, holds that Cortés was the unwitting beneficiary of an Aztec tradition that the priest-king Quetzalcóatl would one day return from out of the east and reclaim his own. No evidence has apparently been found, however, to prove the existence of any pre-conquest tradition of Quetzalcóatl leading

his followers to the land of Anáhuac. It is possible that the stories of a return from the east, like those of the omens which paralyzed Montezuma's powers of decision sprang up *after* the conquest; and the identification of Cortés with Quetzalcóatl (who is never mentioned in the writings of Cortés), may first have been made in the 1540's by the Franciscans Motolonia and Sahagún.

But wrapped within this legend lies another, for which Cortés himself may have been largely responsible—a legend similar in theme but less specific in its details. Cortés retails two speeches by Montezuma, both of them so improbable in content and tenor as to suggest that they were founded more on fantasy than facts. The two speeches are couched in tones quite alien to an Aztec but familiar enough to a Christian Spaniard; for they subtly combine the themes of the coming of a Messiah and the return of a natural lord to his vassals, in order to lead up to the grand climax of Montezuma's renunciation of his imperial heritage into the hands of Charles V. "We give thanks to our gods," says Montezuma, "that in our time that which was long expected has come to pass." [Eulalia] Guzmán has shrewdly pointed out how this whole passage echoes the strains of the *Nunc Dimittis*.² But the New Testament analogies do not end here. Montezuma ends his first speech of welcome with the dramatic gesture of lifting his clothes to show Cortés his body, saying: "you see that I am of flesh and bones like yourself and everyone else, mortal and tangible." Does not this contain overtones of Jesus's words to the disciples ("a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have") and of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra ("we also are men of like passions with you")?

It is hard to avoid the impression that Cortés was drawing on all his very considerable reserves of imagination in order to paint for Charles V a solemn and spectacular picture of a scene that may never have occurred. If the scene had a faintly Biblical setting, it would be all the more impressive, especially as Montezuma's forefathers were now in the process of being endowed with distant Christian origins; and, with a nice irony, Cortés introduces his account of Tenochtitlán with words that themselves have a Biblical ring: "I know that [these things] will seem so remarkable that they cannot be believed, for what we behold with our own eyes, we cannot with our understanding comprehend." But if Cortés drew on the Bible for his general setting, and on Castilian legal codes for the ideas of suzerainty and vassalage which he put into Montezuma's mouth, there still remains a third crucial element in the story—the myth of the ruler returning from the east. It has been suggested that Cortés heard some such story from the Indians in the Antilles, but it seems equally possible that he heard it on his march to Mexico, and stored it up for future use. According to Bernal Díaz, two *caciques* at Tlaxcala told Cortés of a prophecy that men would come from the region where the sun rises and would subju-

gate the land. If so, the prophecy may have related not to Quetzalcóatl but to Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, who appears in the writings both of Cortés and Bernal Díaz, under the guise of "Orchilobos." In a letter written by Don Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain, to his brother, it is specifically stated that the Aztecs welcomed Cortés thinking that he was "Orchilobos"—not Quetzalcóatl. Fernández de Oviedo, commenting on the letter, disbelieves the stories both of Orchilobos coming from the north-east, and of Cortés being mistaken for him; but this does not affect the possibility that Cortés picked up some local legend, which he then proceeded to embellish and turn to account with his customary skill.

Whatever the exact origins of the myth of the returning ruler, the whole Montezuma episode, as related to Charles V, bears witness to Cortés's remarkable fertility of invention. This creative ability, the capacity to build on a grand scale, often starting from the most slender foundations, is perhaps the most striking of all the characteristics of Cortés. It carried him through the delicate problems involved in the defiance of Velázquez; it carried him through the conquest of Mexico itself; and it inspired his approach to the work of reconstruction when the Aztec empire had fallen.

His plans for the New Spain to be established on the ruins of the old Mexico were deeply influenced by his experiences in the Antilles where he had seen the Indian population destroyed. A repetition of the Antilles experience must at all costs be avoided, and he wrote, like the great Renaissance builder he was, of the conservation of the Indian as being "the foundation on which all this work has to be built." But behind his schemes for the creation of an ordered society of Spaniards and Indians lay a vision which he had borrowed from the friars. It was in August 1523 that the first three Franciscan missionaries (all Flemings) arrived in Mexico, to be followed in May 1524 by the famous "twelve apostles" headed by Fray Martín de Valencia. In the fourth and fifth letters of relation, dated October 1524 and September 1526, there are clear signs of Franciscan influence on Cortés's thought. The Franciscans, the majority of whom seem to have been less influenced by Erasmus than by Italian apocalyptic traditions and the doctrines of Savonarola,³ arrived with a burning desire to establish, in a Mexico still uncorrupted by European vices, a replica of the church of the apostles. Cortés, in the first of his letters, had emphasized the importance of informing the pope of his discoveries, so that measures could be taken for the conversion of the natives. But now, in his fourth letter, he couples his pleas for assistance in the work of conversion, with an attack on the worldliness of the church and the pomp and avarice of ecclesiastical dignitaries. His diatribe, so typical of contemporary European protests against the wealth and corruption of the church, is clearly inspired by the friars, for whom

he requests exclusive rights in the conversion of Mexico. It is the Franciscans, too, who inspire the prophecy in the fifth letter that there would arise in Mexico a "new church, where God will be served and honored more than in any other region of the earth."

The Franciscans provided Cortés with an enlarged vision, not only of the new church and the new society to be built in Mexico, but also of his own special role in the providential order. He had already, in his first letter, been careful to insist that God had arranged the discovery of Mexico in order that Queen Juana and Charles V should obtain special merit by the conversion of its pagan inhabitants. It followed from this that he himself, as the conqueror of Mexico, enjoyed a special place in the divine plan. The attitude of the Franciscans was bound to encourage him in this belief, for to them he inevitably appeared as God's chosen agent at a vital moment in the ordering of world history—the moment at which the sudden possibility of converting untold millions to the Faith brought the long-awaited millennium almost within sight. It was, therefore, with the concurrence of the Franciscans that Cortés could now designate himself as the "agency" (*medio*) by which God had been pleased to bring the Indians to an understanding of Him.

Notes

1. Law code devised by King Alfonso X, king of Castile and León from 1252 to 1284. The *Siete Partidas* was a compilation of Spanish legal knowledge of the day, and it is often looked to as the supreme statement of the notion of "natural law," which sees God as the only infallible source of justice. *Ed.*
2. *Nunc Dimittis*: Luke 2:29–32: "This day, Master, thou givest thy servant his discharge in peace; now thy promise is fulfilled. For I have seen with my own eyes the deliverance which thou has made ready in full view of all the nations: a light that will be a revelation to the heathen, and glory to thy people Israel" (New English Bible). *Ed.*
3. Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498), Italian religious reformer. A Dominican friar, he preached heatedly against laxity in religious matters, defied Pope Alexander VI, and was hanged for heresy. *Ed.*