

CHAPTER
20

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Broken Spears*

In 1519 Spanish conquistadors led by Hernando Cortés first entered the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán. The Aztec emperor, Montezuma II, who is called Motecuhzoma in this excerpt, believed that the Spaniards were powerful gods whose arrival had been foretold by Aztec priests. The following account, written by Aztec historians, describes the meeting of Motecuhzoma and Cortés—accompanied by his translator Malinche—at Huitzillan. How did Motecuhzoma and Cortés react to one another?

Motecuhzoma Goes Out to Meet Cortes

The Spaniards arrived in Xoloco, near the entrance to Tenochtitlan. That was the end of the march, for they had reached their goal.

Motecuhzoma now arrayed himself in his finery, preparing to go out to meet them. The other great princes also adorned their persons, as did the nobles and their chieftains and knights. They all went out together to meet the strangers.

They brought trays heaped with the finest flowers—the flower that resembles a shield; the flower shaped like a heart; in the center, the flower with the sweetest aroma; and the fragrant yellow flower, the most precious of all. . . .

Thus Motecuhzoma went out to meet them, there in Huitzillan. He presented many gifts to the Captain and his commanders, those who had come to make war. . . . Then he hung the gold necklaces around their necks and gave them presents of every sort as gifts of welcome.

When Motecuhzoma had given necklaces to each one, Cortes asked him: “Are you Motecuhzoma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Motecuhzoma?”

And the king said: “Yes, I am Motecuhzoma.” Then he stood up to welcome Cortes; he came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him in these words: “Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy.

“The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming. . . . The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields.

“Do the kings know the destiny of those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see!

“No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams. . . . I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

“This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords!”

When Motecuhzoma had finished, La Malinche translated his address into Spanish so that the Captain could understand it. Cortes replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first to La Malinche: “Tell Motecuhzoma 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 Motecuhzoma: “We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear.”

La Malinche translated this speech and the Spaniards grasped Motecuhzoma’s hands and patted his back to show their affection for him.

from Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed., The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 62–65.

Discussion Questions

1. **Clarifying** What gifts did Motecuhzoma present to Cortés and his men?
2. **Making Inferences** Why did Motecuhzoma say to Cortés “now you have arrived on the earth”?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** What can you conclude from this passage about the advantages Cortés had in his attempt to conquer the Aztecs?