

Aztec Account of the Spanish, From the Messenger's Report (1519)

Columbus was not the only one reporting back to his superiors. When Hernando Cortés and members of his European fleet set foot at Vera Cruz, on the mainland of what is now called Mexico, there were watchers in the woods. Sent by Montezuma II of the Aztec empire, who reigned from 1502 to 1520, they acted as messengers, bearing gifts and words of welcome from their ruler. Cortés responded with a show of strength by displaying his weapons and marching his force of approximately 600 men into the interior. The messengers then reported back to Montezuma. A well-educated and religious man as well as a skillful warrior, Montezuma was not a coward, but he was cautious when he interpreted events as religious portents—as he did in this case. He perceived that change was coming and was apprehensive about it, but as he looked over Tenochtitlán, the capital city that served as an impressive example of the skills and might of the inhabitants, he could not have foreseen how quickly his empire would fall. An Aztec account of the conquest begins with the king's reaction to the messenger's report.

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[Montezuma] 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 of 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 [helmets] 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.

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"Their dogs are enormous, with flat ears and long, dangling tongues. The color of their eyes is a burning yellow; their eyes flash fire and shoot off sparks. Their bellies are hollow, their flanks long and narrow. They are tireless and very powerful. They bound here and there, panting, with their tongues hanging out. And they are spotted like an ocelot." When [Montezuma] 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.

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[From Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 30–31. [Editorial insertions appear in square brackets—Ed.]]