

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

CORTES AND MONTEZUMA

A BOOK REVIEW SUBMITTED TO

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Book Review

Collis, Maurice. *Cortes and Montezuma*. A New Directions Classic. New York: New Directions Books, 1999. 251 pages.

When Cortes landed in Mexico in 1519, he changed the world forever. He came with the “simple” mission to conquer Mexico in order to take their gold, spread Christianity, and establish a new colony for King Charles V of Spain, but he never expected to be welcomed in the manner that he was. The Mexicans welcomed him warmly because they believed that Cortes was the god, Quetzalcoatl, or the “Feathered Serpent” who had pledged to return in a One Reed year, of which 1519 was one, to conquer Mexico for their refusal to give up human sacrifice, which the Mexicans believed to be necessary in order to appease the other gods.”¹ Montezuma, the King of Mexico, believed that because of the date, year, black attire, white skin color, black beard, the easterly direction Cortes’ ships came from, and the actions that he took that the dreaded moment that was prophesized had arrived.² Author Maurice Collis in his book *Cortes and Montezuma* expertly recounts Cortes’ fateful journey to meet Montezuma and the chaos that ensued as a result of it.

Montezuma was able to see the signs of the impending doom he feared. Reports of dreams were sent to him that spoke of Mexico’s downfall. After hearing these evil words, he tried to hide from what he believed was fate by putting these dreamers to death, hoping that it would eliminate bad omens.³ Montezuma also relied on a prediction of

¹ Maurice Collis, *Cortes and Montezuma*, A New Directions Classic. (New York: New Direction Books, 1999), 54.

² *Ibid.*, 55.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

disaster that another magician foretold and the visions of doom that Montezuma's sister saw in a dream that she had while she was in a four-day coma.⁴ The Mexican leader took these signs to mean that Quetzalcoatl could not be stopped from conquering Mexico. While one may be inclined to believe that Montezuma was being paranoid and worrying unnecessarily because dreams are not scientific evidence, these beliefs and signs were believed to be a science to the Mexicans. Yet, this uncanny coincidence in the timing of Cortes' arrival also makes one question whether their meeting really was destined?

Cortes benefited greatly from his mistaken identity because it allowed him to get into Mexico to meet with Montezuma without having to fight his way in with the small four hundred men army that he had. This was an extreme bit of luck for Cortes, but Collis explains further that Cortes' brilliance and demeanor played a large part in his success. On the battlefield, he used pre-emptive strikes to minimize his losses, and stayed cool when the odds were stacked against him. He maintained his temper and demonstrated a sense of humility towards the enemy that he defeated. By showing this sense of humility towards his enemies, Cortes was able to make friends with them, and then spread Christianity to their lands and have their services for future battles that he entered into.

Along the way to Mexico, Cortes bumped into the Totonacs. He threatened these people with death if they did not accept his religion, Christianity. These threats resulted in the Totonacs acquiescing to his demands because they believed that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl, and they did not want to anger a god. Collis explains that, "Had it not been that [the Totonacs] believed Cortes to be the returning god, they could hardly have

⁴ Ibid., 56.

accepted his religion the way they did.”⁵ The horses and cannons that Cortes had with him made it very easy for them to conclude that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl. This information was reported to Montezuma, who had spies everywhere, giving the First Speaker, Montezuma, a panic attack. The next major people that Cortes fought against were the Tlaxcalans. In the battle against them, Cortes was greatly outnumbered, but he still managed to win. This all but confirmed for Montezuma that Cortes was the god he feared was coming to conquer Mexico. After the Tlaxcalans, Cortes ran into the Cholulans. He was very aggressive in dealing with them because he feared that they would try to ambush him if he were not quick on the draw. In the end, this strategy paid off as it resulted in a Cortes victory. Just like a god, Cortes seemed to be unstoppable in his advancement towards Mexico City.⁶

Montezuma sent several envoys with presents of gold for Cortes, hoping that it would satisfy him and encourage him to turn around. Montezuma believed that Cortes, as a god, was looking for gold, whereas the other gods looked to human hearts in order to be content. However, the offered presents of gold most likely made Cortes and his men more eager to advance towards Mexico, not to turn around as Montezuma had intended and hoped.⁷ On reaching Mexico, Cortes proceeded with extreme caution, more so than during his trek through the other lands that he had been through, fearing that Montezuma with his powerful army could attack him at any point. Inside Mexico, he felt himself at the mercy of Montezuma. Cortes had a large army at his disposal from the Tlaxcalans, who offered their services, after they were defeated in battle, but he did not feel that it was proper to bring this large army into Mexico City when he had already told the envoys

⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁶ Ibid., 113.

that he had come in peace.⁸ So, he had them wait at the border and proceeded with a much smaller army. Collis calms the reader's nerves, though, by explaining that "for magical reasons, [Montezuma] had resolved never to use his troops" against Cortes since he believed him to be Quetzalcoatl. This bit of news, however, was not known by Cortes, who never fully grasped the impact that he had on Mexican society, although he came to realize that he was a man of great importance to them.⁹

Upon Cortes' arrival in Mexico, Montezuma welcomed him as the returning king of the Toltec Empire, which had preceded the establishment of Mexico. The god, Smoking Mirror, was believed to have driven Quetzalcoatl out of the empire and Montezuma believed that he had now returned. This history made Cortes/Quetzalcoatl the rightful ruler of Mexico in the eyes of the Mexicans because Quetzalcoatl had preceded Montezuma. After slowly testing his power, Cortes forced Montezuma and his entourage to move into the palace that Montezuma had given to him, because he wanted to keep an eye on him to make sure that he was not attacked.¹⁰ This clever move, however, began to weaken Montezuma's power, as he began to look like a puppet.

While Cortes allowed Montezuma to keep his independence and to move around freely, Montezuma was subservient to Cortes. But that did not stop Montezuma from showing some disobedience to Cortes, despite his beliefs that Cortes was his divine superior. This was evidenced when Cortes demanded from Montezuma that he stop sacrificing humans. This order Montezuma would not follow, as he believed it would turn the Mexican people against him for disregarding the needs of the other gods,

⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰ Ibid., 144.

especially Smoking Mirror, who demanded human hearts in order to keep the Mexican people safe. But Montezuma could not continually disobey Cortes on everything. As a result, his power and influence over the Mexican people continued to be weakened. Montezuma's power suffered irreparable harm after Cortes insisted that one of the Mexican temples be cleared out and that a cross and an image of the Virgin Mary be placed inside it.¹¹ This request incensed the priests of Mexico, who then claimed that they had spoken to Smoking Mirror, explaining that he had "ordered all the Spaniards to be killed."¹² Montezuma, hoping that Cortes would leave, offered him gold and more gold, but he would not leave and as a result, an organized resistance slowly developed against Montezuma.

It seems that in order for the Mexican priests to manipulate the state into doing their bidding, they used the names of various gods to get what they wanted. Basically, they had declared a crusade against the Spanish. This opposition group, as Collis points out, still believed that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl. Unlike Montezuma though, they believed that Quetzalcoatl could be defeated as he had been in the past.¹³ But unfortunately for Cortes, the fighting began, while he was in Vera Cruz, fighting against forces sent by Cuban governor Velasquez, who wanted revenge against him for declaring his independence from him, the man who had commissioned Cortes' voyage. Within a short time, however, Cortes overcame this obstacle and returned to Mexico, victorious and with a new larger army that he won over after defeating them in battle. Soon after he returned, however, the opposition group, which had already deposed Montezuma as their leader, now killed him in a rebellion. This forced Cortes and his men to flee from

¹¹ Ibid., 161.

¹² Ibid., 162.

Mexico. Half of Cortes' men were lost in the retreat, but after recuperating in Tlaxcala, Cortes was able to rebound with the large force that the Tlaxcalans had offered him earlier on, in conjunction with the smaller, diminished force that remained after he was forced out of Mexico. He was then able to successfully defeat the Mexicans and subsequently replace the Mexican culture with Spanish culture.

This book, *Cortes and Montezuma* that Maurice Collis has written is an invaluable resource for visualizing and understanding Mexican culture and society as it existed before the conquest. His sharp interpretive skills have enabled him to piece together accounts by Sahagun, Bernal Diaz, information from letters that Cortes wrote to Charles V of Spain, along with secondary sources, into an elegantly flowing narrative on the Mexican conquest. He makes sense of these resources and interprets them in layman's terms, comparing and contrasting them with interpretations from other historians, in an engaging manner that makes the reader sympathize and understand the mind frame of the characters whose story they are reading about. As such, historians and anyone interested in understanding how the Spanish managed to conquer the great Mexican Empire should read this book. Priced at thirteen dollars and ninety-five cents, *Cortez and Montezuma* by Maurice Collis is well worth the expense.

¹³ Ibid., 185.