

Document One: The Aztec Account of the Meeting with Montezuma, 1519

Aztecs in Tenochtitlan claim that in 1519, when Montezuma heard of the arrival of Spanish ships along the coast, he believed that an ancient Toltec prophecy had come to pass. Quetzalcoatl, the god of wisdom who had departed long ago, promising to return by sea, had finally done so. According to one Aztec codex, or manuscript, Montezuma sent messengers carrying gifts to greet Cortez.

When [the messengers] came up to the ships, the strangers asked them: "Who are you? Where are you from?"

"We have come from the City of Mexico."

The strangers said: "You may have come from there, or you may not have. Perhaps you are only inventing it. Perhaps you are mocking us." But their hearts were convinced; they were satisfied in their hearts. They lowered a hook from the bow of the ship, then a ladder, and the messengers came aboard.

One by one they did reverence to Cortez by touching the ground before him with their lips. They said to him: "If the god will deign to hear us, your deputy Montezuma has sent us to render you homage. He has the City of Mexico in his care." He says: "The god is weary."

Then they arrayed the Captain in the finery they had brought him as presents. With great care fastened the turquoise mask in place, the mask of the god with its cross band of quetzal feathers.

A golden earring hung down on either side of this mask....Next they fastened [a] mirror to his hand and dressed him in the cloak known as "the ringing bell." ...In his hand they placed [a] shield with its fringe and pendant of quetzal feathers, its ornaments of gold and mother-of pearl.

Finally they set before him [a] pair of black sandals. As for the objects of divine finery, they only laid them out for him to see.

The Captain asked them: "And is this all? Is this your gift of welcome? Is this how you greet people?"

They replied: "This is all, our lord. This is what we have brought you."

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. They also brought garlands of flowers, ornaments for the breast, necklaces of gold, and necklaces hung with rich stones.

Thus Montezuma went out to meet them.... He presented many gifts to the Captain and his commanders, those who had come to make war. He showered gifts upon them and hung flowers around their necks; he gave them necklaces of flowers and bands of flowers to adorn their breasts; he set garlands of flowers upon their heads. Then he hung gold necklaces around their necks and gave them presents of every sort as gifts of welcome.

When Montezuma had given necklaces to each one, Cortez asked him: "Are you Montezuma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Montezuma?"

And the king said: "Yes, I am Montezuma." Then he stood up to welcome Cortez; 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 Montezuma had finished, La Malinche [Cortez's Mesoamerican mistress] translated his address into Spanish so that the Captain could understand it. Cortez replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first to La Malinche: "Tell Montezuma 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 Montezuma: "We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear."

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

Source: Jill Lepore, *Encounters in the New World: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 62-65.

Document Two: Cortez's Account of the Meeting with Montezuma, 1519

This is Cortez's account of the same meeting that the Aztec Codex described, from a letter he later wrote to King Carlos V.

Here as many as a thousand men came out to see and speak with me, important persons from that city, all dressed very richly after their own fashion. When they reached me, each one performed a ceremony which they practice among themselves — each placed his hand on the ground and kissed it. And so I stood there waiting for nearly an hour until everyone had performed his ceremony. Close to the city there is a wooden bridge ten paces wide....

After we had crossed this bridge, Montezuma came to greet us and with him some two hundred lords, all barefoot and dressed in a different costume, but also very rich in their way and more so than the others. They came in two columns, pressed very close to the walls of the street, which is very wide and beautiful and so straight that you can see from one end to the other. It is two-thirds of a league long and has on both sides very good and big houses, both dwellings and temples.

...And they were all dressed alike except that Montezuma wore sandals whereas the others went barefoot and they held his arm on either side. When we met I dismounted and stepped forward to embrace him, but the two lords who were with him stopped me with their hands so that I should not touch him; and they likewise all performed the ceremony of kissing the earth....

[Montezuma] wore beads round his neck; after we had walked a little way up the street a servant of his came with two necklaces, wrapped in a cloth, made from red snails' shells, which they hold in great esteem; and from each necklace hung eight shrimps of refined gold almost a span [about nine inches] in length. When they had been brought he turned to me and placed them about my neck, and then continued up the street in the manner already described until we reached a very large and beautiful house which had been well prepared to accommodate us.

There he took me by the hand and led me to a great room facing the courtyard through which we entered. And he bade me sit on a very rich throne, which he had had built for him and then left saying that I should wait for him. After a short while, when all those of my company had been quartered, he returned with many and various treasures of gold and silver and featherwork, and as many as five or six thousand cotton garments, all very rich and woven and embroidered in various ways. And after he had given me these things he sat on another throne which they placed there next to the one on which I was sitting and addressed me in the following way:

"For a long time we have known from the writings of our ancestors that neither I, nor any of those who dwell in this land, are natives of it, but foreigners who came from very distant parts and likewise we know that a chieftain, of whom they were all vassals, brought our people to this region. And he returned to his native land and after many years came again, by which time all those who had remained were married to native women and had built villages and raised children. And when he wished to lead them away again they would not go nor even admit him as their chief, and so he departed. And we have always held that those who descended from him would come and conquer this land and take us as their vassals. So because of the place from which you claim to come, namely, from where the sun rises, and the things you tell us of the great lord or king who sent you here, we believe and are certain that he is our natural lord, especially as you say that he has known of us for some time. So be assured that we shall obey you and hold you as our lord in place of that great sovereign of whom you speak."

Source: Jill Lepore, *Encounters in the New World: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 65-67.