



Hernán Cortés left Cuba in 1519 seeking riches in the islands to the west. Instead, he discovered, and ultimately destroyed, a hitherto unknown civilization. Join Michael Wood as he retraces this fateful expedition. Read Spanish eyewitness accounts that describe the conquistadors' awe at the Aztec achievements and their lust for native treasure. Learn the Aztecs' side of the story by scrolling through pictographs that tell of the agonizing fall of the empire.

1517-1519

First Contact

In the decade before the Spanish arrived in Mexico, Aztec Emperor Montezuma II and his people were filled with a sense of foreboding. A series of evil omens had foretold of calamities to come. A fiery comet crossed the sky. The temple of Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, burst into flames. The Lake of Mexico boiled and rose, flooding into houses. A weeping woman passed by in the middle of the night, crying "My children, we must flee far away from this city!" Fishermen discovered a bird that wore a strange mirror in the crown of its head. Montezuma looked into the mirror and saw a distant plain, with people making war against each other and riding on the backs of animals resembling deer.

An agitated Montezuma demanded that his soothsayers explain the meaning of these dire signs and was told that they prophesied the destruction of his kingdom. In fact, Montezuma had reason to be fearful - the Spanish had settled in Hispaniola and Cuba and were making their way toward his empire.

The Spanish had made several expeditions to the nearby Yucatan in 1517 and had returned with wondrous tales of a high-cultured Mayan civilization and gold riches. The news of these discoveries made an electrifying impression on the Spanish colonists in Cuba. Among these was Hernán Cortés, Chief Magistrate of Santiago. The Spanish governor of Cuba, Diego de Velásquez, told Cortés that he would provide two or three ships if Cortés would find the rest of the money, and lead the army. Cortés agreed and on October 23, 1518, Velásquez appointed him "captain-general" of a new expedition to the Yucatan.

The Spanish colonies of the sixteenth century had gold fever and in hardly a fortnight Cortés had two ships, a brigantine and 300 men. Velásquez became concerned about the scale of Cortés' preparations and feared losing control over the expedition and sent orders to relieve Cortés of his command. But Cortés' brother-in-law killed the messenger and took the governor's papers to Cortés. Alerted to Velásquez' plans, Cortés now moved fast. Having seized all the meat supplies in Santiago, he decided to set sail at daybreak on February 18, 1519. Velásquez hurried down just as Cortés was pulling away in a small boat. Cortés ignored his protestations and gave orders to sail.

The crossing from Cuba to the Yucatan is only 120 miles, and Cortés coasted down to Cozumel, where, for the first time, he saw the Mayan pyramids, with their thatched sanctuaries on top. Almost immediately, he had an incredible stroke of luck. The people of the island told him that in the next-door land, known as "Yucatan," there were two Christians who had been carried there a long time ago in a boat, and held as captives. One of those men was Geronimo de Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked near Jamaica in 1511. Thanks to Aguilar's survival, Cortés now had a translator who could speak the local Mayan tongue.

Cortés continued round the tip of the Yucatan and disembarked at Potonchan, where the natives gave him small offerings of food and a gold mask, but then asked the Spanish to go: "We wish neither war nor trade," they told Cortés. "We have no more gold - you will be killed if you do not leave." Ultimately, the conversation ended in a battle in which 400 Indian warriors were driven off with heavy losses. The Indians submitted and gave the Spanish gifts, including 20 women to cook tortillas and serve them. Cortés discovered that one of these women, named Malinali, or Malinche as she is generally known, spoke both Mayan and Nahuatl, the Aztec language. Cortés had stumbled upon the key to his ambitions - through Geronimo de Aguilar, he would be able to talk to Malinche in Mayan, and then through her speak with the Mexicans in Nahuatl

April 20, 1519

A Display of Force

From Potonchan, the fleet pressed on to the Isle of Sacrifices where Juan de Grijalva had landed the year before. Cortés was received warmly there by the Totonac people. The Totonacs remembered Grijalva, who had been careful to be kind to them, and thought that the Spanish might become allies in their war of liberation against the Mexicans.

Several days later, the steward of the great king of Mexico, Montezuma, arrived. The steward's name was Teudile, and, like all functionaries of great kings, he was very aware of his own high status, gorgeously turned out in a parrot-feather cloak. Montezuma had instructed his steward to supply and feed his guests, and to offer them gifts of precious stones, and featherware. As he conveyed Montezuma's will, Teudile put a damp finger to the earth and raised it to his lips ("to eat dirt" was a gesture of respect in Aztec diplomacy), then he lit incense, and, to the Spaniards' surprise, bled himself and offered them his blood on straws.

Cortés presented himself as the ambassador of a king who ruled "the greater part of the world." Cortés asked after Montezuma. Teudile replied he would send a message to Montezuma to find out his wishes. Cortés then gave the Aztecs a demonstration of his guns and horses. His cavalry charged along the beach at full tilt with swords flashing and bells tinkling. If that were not intimidating enough, the big cannon were fired, at which Teudile and his men literally fell to the ground in fear.

Cortés Burns His Boats

Montezuma's messengers returned to the emperor with the terrifying reports of their encounter with the Spaniards: their guns, horses, dogs and their lust for gold. Montezuma was paralyzed by their tales, and by the possibility that Cortés was the returning Quetzalcoatl, "the feathered serpent," an exiled deity who vowed to return one day to claim his kingdom

Cortés, meanwhile, weighed his options. He had not yet seen the magical city of Tenochtitlán, but he knew it was there, 200 miles away. He faced imprisonment or death for defying the governor if he returned to Cuba. His only alternative was to conquer and settle part of the land. To do this, he prompted his supporters to install a municipal and resigned from the post conferred on him by Velásquez. The legally-constituted "town council of Villa Rica" then offered him the post of captain-general. He accepted the post and severed his connection with Velásquez. Those of his men still loyal to the Governor of Cuba conspired to seize a ship and escape to Cuba,

but Cortés moved swiftly to quash their plans. To make sure such a mutiny did not happen again, he decided to sink his ships, on the pretext that they were not seaworthy.

His ships sunk, Cortés marched into the interior, to the territory of the Tlaxcalans. They were resolute enemies of Mexico and Cortés thought they might join him in a military alliance against the Aztecs. After a long debate, the Tlaxcalans decided to fight Cortés instead, and they suffered terrible losses. Eventually they sued for peace and agreed to go with Cortés to Mexico. Cortés marched on with the Tlaxcalan warriors to Cholula, 20 miles from Tlaxcala. A story spread from the Tlaxcalans to Malinche that the Cholulans were planning to trap Cortés inside the city and massacre his army. When the Cholulan leadership and many of their warriors gathered, unarmed, in a great enclosure by the pyramid temple of Quetzalcoatl, the Spanish and the Tlaxcalans killed them. The massacre had a chilling effect, provoking other kingdoms and cities in Montezuma's empire to submit to Cortés' demands.

November 1519

The Most Beautiful Thing in the World

When Cortés and his men reached Tenochtitlán they were stunned. This, indeed, was a City of Dreams.

On November 8, 1519, the Spaniards marched along the causeway leading into the city. The towers, temples and canoes were thick with crowds who gathered to gape at the men and their horses.

The two processions met at the entrance to Tenochtitlán. Montezuma was in a litter draped with fine cotton mantles and borne on the shoulders of the lords. He emerged from the litter and placed necklaces of gold and precious stones round Cortés' neck. Cortés placed a necklace of pearls and cut glass around the neck of Montezuma, but was held back by two lords when he tried to embrace the emperor.

The Aztecs led the Spaniards into the heart of the city where Montezuma showered them with more gifts and then quartered them in sumptuous apartments. The Aztecs knew about the massacre in Cholula and believed that the Spaniards could be irrationally and unpredictably cruel. It was as Tenochtitlán had given shelter to a monster. An Aztec account relates how the people of Tenochtitlán felt:

"as if everyone had eaten stupefying mushrooms..., as if they had seen something astonishing. Terror dominated everyone, as if all the world were being disembowelled.... People fell into a fearful slumber...."

In the days that followed, Cortés and his men marvelled at the treasures of Tenochtitlán - the strange foods, the "wondrous artefacts" - and were horrified by the Aztec religious rites of human sacrifice.

Cortés was also uneasy. The Spaniards were vastly outnumbered and he feared that Montezuma could be plotting to destroy them. Thus, on November 16, Cortés detained Montezuma. He placed the Aztec emperor under house arrest and attempted to rule the Aztecs through the emperor. However, the power of the Aztec king was dwindling in the eyes of his people. The Aztecs grew ever more resentful of the Spaniards' attacks on their religion and their relentless demands for gold.

When resistance broke out among the people of a powerful lakeside ruler, Cortés held a ceremony to formalize Montezuma's submission to the King of Spain. He next installed Christian images on the great pyramid, and set in motion the first attempts to destroy the Mexican idols. Still trying to be reasonable, Montezuma suggested an astonishing compromise: the placing of his gods on one side, the Christians on the other.

April 1520

Velasquez Sends an Arrest Party

Cortés was scrambling to subdue the increasingly agitated Aztecs when he received news that a large Spanish force had arrived. It was an arrest party sent by the governor of Cuba. Cortés left Tenochtitlán in the hands of Alvarado. And, with Montezuma in chains, he rushed out to meet the forces of Panphilo de Narvaez. Cortés surprised Narvaez on the coast at Zempoala, attacking him at night. For Cortés, the outcome was better than he could have hoped. Thanks to Narvaez, defeated, his surviving troops reinforced Cortés who returned to Tenochtitlán in formidable numbers.

June 1520

Massacre at Tenochtitlán

While Cortés was fighting Narvaez, Alvarado imprisoned two important leaders and killed several others. The tensions exploded when Alvarado ordered a massacre during the great Aztec spring festival of Huizilopochtli. Cortés returned on June 25, 1520 and by June 30 the situation was desperate. The causeways were cut, the bridges taken away, and the net closed. The Spanish had no food supplies and there was an acute shortage of drinking water. Cortés forced Montezuma to try and pacify the people from the rooftop, but the emperor was forced to retreat under a hail of stones and arrows.

The Spanish later claimed that Montezuma was wounded and died of his injuries. But, hurt or not, when he was taken back to the palace, it seems clear that the "great speaker" was now understood by Cortés to have lost all his power, and was, therefore, of no further use to the Spanish. Nor were the other nobles.

News of the killing of Montezuma and the other great lords spread, and soon there was an uproar in the city. The Spaniards tried to flee unnoticed, but they were caught. A call went out and canoes began to close in on all sides. The Spanish column tried to press forward, and in the confusion, hundreds of men fell into the canal.

More than 600 Spanish conquistadors were killed (some estimates ran to over 1,000), many no doubt weighed down by the gold they were carrying; several thousand Tlaxcalans were probably lost, too. Cortés retreated in a wide circle through the north of the valley and over the mountains back to Tlaxcala. The elemental horror of that night was never forgotten. It is still called "the night of tears" (*noche triste*).

December 1520

Siege, Starvation & Smallpox

At Tlaxcala Cortés pacified his wavering Indian allies and rebuilt his military force. The key to victory, he believed, was the lake and he set out to build a fleet of prefabricated boats. It was at this time that Cortés wrote his long second letter to the King of Spain, outlining his actions since his arrival in Mexico-Tenochtitlán. Meanwhile, the Aztecs thought the Spaniards were gone for good. They elected a new king, Cuauemoc, "The Fallen Eagle." He was in his mid-20s, the son of Montezuma's uncle, Ahuitzotl and was an experienced leader.

The Aztecs cleaned the temple courtyards and again celebrated their fiestas in the traditional way. But by the end of September, people started to die of a mysterious and alien illness that had horrifying symptoms of "racking coughs and painful burning sores." The pestilence, smallpox, spread soon crossed the causeways into Tenochtitlán. It lasted 70 days, until late November, and killed a vast number of people.

At the end of December 1520, Cortés' army moved toward Tenochtitlán; the boats followed later, transported in pieces overland by 8,000 native carriers. The early stage of the siege saw the surrender of towns all around the lake. It must have been plain that Tenochtitlán was doomed. The Aztec leadership was divided, and the annals of Tlatelolco note that the Mexicans were already fighting among themselves. Soon still the Aztecs would not surrender, even when only the city on the island was left.

The Last Stand: An Aztec Iliad

Cortés and his allies landed their forces in the south of the island and fought their way through the city, street by street, and house by house. Though better armed, the Spanish still suffered reverses. Gradually, the whole southern part of the island, the original city of Tenochtitlán, fell to the Spanish. The defenders, who were estimated at 300,000, became concentrated in the northern part of island, where they fought for 80 days.

When a guiding omen confirmed that defeat was inevitable, the Aztec leaders gathered to discuss what to do, how best to surrender, and "what tribute to pay." Cuatemoc was led to Cortés. "Cortés stared at him for a moment and then patted him on the head." The meaning of this apparently demeaning gesture seems to be revealed in the account of Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a descendant of one of the allied kings who fought for Cortés. "Cortés received him with all the respect due to a king. Cuatemoc then asked Cortés to kill him: 'For you have already destroyed my city and killed my people.'" The same day as the surrender, the Spanish looted the city while their native allies ran amok, taking revenge against their ancient tormentors. Many people fled to the mainland by canoe in daytime, most by night, "crashing into each other in their haste."