

## A Mind-Boggling Victory

Why were the Spanish Conquistadors able to defeat the Aztec Empire? How was such a powerful empire defeated by a group of foreigners whom they vastly outnumbered?

The following statements are possible answers that historians have developed as possible explanations for the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs.

1. The Spanish were successful because they surprised the Aztecs; the Aztecs did not know of the Spanish arrival in Mexico.
2. Motecuhzuma, the Aztec chief, was overconfident and anxious to fight the Spanish and he attacked them too soon, before the Aztecs were really ready to fight.
3. The Aztec's religious beliefs and customs and their non-secular society led them to make mistakes in their dealings with the Spanish.
4. The political and geographic structure of the Aztec's Empire made them vulnerable to the Spanish conquerors.
5. The Spanish had superior weapons and technology that shocked and overwhelmed the Aztecs.
6. The Spanish destroyed many Aztecs with the diseases they brought from Europe.
7. Motecuhzuma was an ineffective leader and did not put together an army and an effective defense.

Now that you have heard the possible reasons to explain the defeat of the Aztec Empire, listen to the story of the conquest as told by the teacher. See if you can confirm or refute any of the possible reasons with the details of the account.

## Data Source #1

**Omens Foretelling the Arrival of the Spanish and the First Reports of the Spanish Arrival**

Fray Bernardino de Sahagun helped Natives write accounts of the conquest. According to these accounts, eight omens appeared to the people of Tenochtitlan foretelling the arrival of the Spanish.

The Indians wrote that:

1. A great column of fire burned in the night over Tenochtitlan.
2. One of the temples to a god burned down mysteriously.
3. Another temple was struck by lightning.
4. Fire, in three parts, streamed from the sky during the day.
5. Lake Texcoco boiled and flooded, destroying the residences around the water.
6. A weeping woman was heard during the night, crying for the Aztecs to leave the city.
7. A strange bird appeared and Motecuhzuma could see strange looking men fighting in a mirror on the bird's head.
8. A large, deformed man with two heads ran through the streets.

Another account from the natives tells about reports of the Spanish arrival and Motecuhzuma's reaction.

"A few days later a common man came to the city from the Gulf Coast. He went directly to the palace of Motecuhzuma and said to him, 'Our lord and king, forgive my boldness. When I went to the shores of the great sea, there was a mountain range or a small mountain floating in the midst of the water, and moving here and there without touching the shore'."

"Motecuhzuma sent an emissary to the officials in a coastal village to see if the strange things he had heard were true". Listen to the account of what occurred when they returned:

"When they reached the city, they went directly to the king's palace and spoke to him with all due reverence and humility, 'Our lord and king, it is true that strange people have come to the shores of the great sea. They were fishing from a small boat, some with rods and others with a net. They fished until late and then they went back to their great towers and climbed up into them. They have very light skin, much lighter than ours. They have long beards, and their hair comes only to their ears.' Motecuhzuma was downcast when he heard this report, and would not speak a word". (Leon-Portilla, 1992, p.17)



**Data Source #2****Messengers Are Sent**

When the Aztecs learned of the arrival of the strangers, they looked for an explanation for the event. The Aztecs' strong belief in omens and warnings from the gods led to the belief that the Spanish may be one of their greatest gods, Quetzalcoatl and other deities returning from across the sea. Legend had it that the god had sailed away from Mexico with the promise to return. Motecuhzuma consulted magicians and priests about the situation and appeared to believe that the strangers may have been the returning gods. He sent messengers to receive the "gods".

Sahagun's informants describe how Motecuhzuma gave instructions and sent messengers to the coast to receive the Spanish. One account reads:

"The reports of their coming was brought to Motecuhzuma, who immediately sent out messengers. It was as if he thought the new arrival was our prince Quetzalcoatl. This is what he felt in his heart, 'He has appeared! He has come back! He will come here, to the place of his throne and canopy, for that is what he promised when he departed! Motecuhzuma sent five messengers to greet the strangers and to bring them gifts. Motecuhzuma also said to the messengers, 'Here is what you are to bring to our lord. This is the treasure of Quetzalcoatl.' The treasure was gods finery: a serpent mask inlaid with turquoise, a decoration for the breast made of quetzal feathers, a collar woven in petatillo style with a gold disk in the center, and a shield decorated with gold and mother-of-pearl and bordered with feathers with a pendant of the same feathers." (Leon-Portilla, 1992, pp.22-23)

Another Aztec account reads:

"Then Motecuhzuma gave the messengers his final orders. He said to them, 'Go now, without delay. Do reverence to our lord the god. Say to him: Your deputy, Motecuhzuma, has sent us to you. Here are the presents with which he welcomes you home to Mexico.'" (Leon-Portilla, 1992, p. 25)

## Data Source #3

**The Messengers Report and the Reaction**

When the messengers return to the capital, they relate the unsettling events that happened in their contact with Cortes and the Spanish. They relate that they did give the gifts and finery to Cortes and welcomed him. But, they say that the captain responded by chaining the messengers. Then the Spanish fire one of their cannons, at which one of the messengers fainted. Cortes asked the messengers to take up weapons and fight with the Spanish. The messengers protest and then flee from the Spanish.

The native documents reveal Motecuhzuma's reaction to the disturbing reports of the encounter:

"Motecuhzuma 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 with it has a pestilent odor, like 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.' The messengers also said, 'They dress in iron and wear iron casques on their heads. Their swords are iron, their bows are iron, their shield are iron; their spears are iron. Their deer carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go. These deer my lord, are as tall as the roof of a house. Their dogs are enormous, with flat ears and long, dangling tongues.'" (Leon-Portilla, 1992, pp. 30-31)

Motecuhzuma was terrified at the report of the messengers. He sent out his magicians and warlocks to harm the Spaniards with their magic and prevent them from approaching Tenochtitlan. He was still uncertain as to whether they were gods or not so he sent captives to be sacrificed in front of them. For the Aztecs, their gods needed a constant supply of human sacrifice to keep them happy, so their Chief believed that the sacrifice would honor and please the "gods". Sahaguns informants tell of the Spanish reaction and Motecuhzuma's anxiety.

"Motecuhzuma also sent captives to be sacrificed, because he thought the strangers might want to drink their blood. The envoys sacrificed these captives in the presence of the strangers, but when the white men saw what they had done, they were filled with disgust and loathing. They spat on the ground, or wiped away their tears, or closed their eyes and shook their heads in abhorrence. They refused to eat the food that was sprinkled with blood." (Leon-Portilla, 1992, p. 33)

It began to be apparent that the "gods" were unfriendly and meant harm to the Aztecs because of the hostilities of Cortes. Motecuhzuma has sent the magicians to see if they could work some charm against the Spaniards, but they failed. The Spaniards began to march toward the city. This failure caused Motecuhzuma great anxiety." (Leon-Portilla, 1992, pp. 35-36)



**Data Source #4****The Spanish March Toward the City**

The natives tell of the Spanish marching toward the city. The account tells of a battle between the Spaniards and one of the outlying tribes of the empire. They tell of how the Spanish with their swords and crossbows easily defeated this tribe. When another tribe, the Tlaxcaltecas, heard the news, they decided to make friends with the Spanish and offered to help them defeat the Aztecs. So that when the Spanish approached the next state, Choluca, the natives write:

“...they marched against Choluca. They were guided and accompanied by the Tlaxcaltecas, and they all marched in battle array.” (Leon-Portilla, 1992, p. 40)

The Spanish defeated the Cholucas with the help of the other natives, and then they marched toward Tezcoco. Here, the natives write that the Prince of Tezcoco persuaded his people to join forces with the Spanish because they were resentful of the Aztec domination.

One scholar writes about the relationship between the Aztecs and their neighbors that made up their empire. He says that Tenochtitlan could have overwhelmed Tlaxcala or Tezcoco but they did not probably because it wanted a nearby source of victims for human sacrifices. Therefore, they had a rather hateful relationship with some of their neighbors. These tribes allied with the strangers in hopes that they could finally defeat their oppressors.

Now the Spanish with numerous allies (about 7,000) were marching toward Tenochtitlan. Motecuhzuma heard of the news and decided to receive the Spanish in peace.

**Data Source #5****The Spanish Arrive in the City**

Motecuhzuma went out to meet Cortes in friendship. The texts then describe the stay of the Spanish in Tenochtitlan and their greed for the gold objects stored in the treasure houses. Cortes took Motecuhzuma prisoner. He sent messengers to all of the surrounding communities to collect all of their gold and silver.

Also during this time, tensions increased between the two sides and when Cortes left the city to fight a Spaniard who was sent to arrest him, Cortes' deputy that he left in charge treacherously murdered many Aztecs as the celebrated a religious feast. The natives also wrote:

"They attacked all of the celebrants, stabbing them, spearing them, striking them with their swords. They attacked some of them from behind, and these fell instantly to the ground. Others they beheaded."

"The Mexicans were enraged because the attack on the celebrants has been to treacherous; their warriors had been killed without the slightest warning." (Leon-Portilla, 1992, pp.71-72)

A scholar of Aztec warfare writes, "A war or battle always commenced with a certain ritual: a declaration of war with the exchange of shields and weapons. This explains the Aztec's surprise when the Spaniards, their guests, suddenly turned on them without any apparent motive and – more important – without the customary ritual warning."



**Data Source #6****The Night of Sorrows**

After the massacre in the temple, the native accounts show that the people of the city began to fight the Spanish. The Spanish began to abandon the city. The Aztecs attacked the Spanish as they fled down a causeway out of the city. The rout was so disastrous that the Spanish called it the "la noche triste", the night of sorrows. The Aztecs inflicted much damage on the Spanish. They came also to capture Tlaxcaltecas for their sacrifices.

The Aztec emperor, Motecuhzuma was killed. Some accounts say that the Spanish killed him, while others say that his people turned against him and stoned him.

One scholar writes about the Aztec warriors. He says that the Aztec had a religious concept of warfare. The Aztec warriors never forgot their first duty in battle was to take captives to be sacrificed. "On several occasions the Aztecs could have probably wiped out the Spanish – their best chance of all was on the Night of Sorrows – but the ceremonial elements in their attitude toward war prevented them from taking full advantage of their opportunities." (Leon-Portilla, 1992, p. xliii)

## Data Source #7

**The Siege of Tenochtitlan**

The Aztecs had driven out the Spanish and were convinced that they would never return. Life began to go back to normal for them, until a terrible plague spread throughout the city. Scholars write that the plague seemed to be an epidemic of smallpox, which was previously unknown to the Indians. The native storytellers write:

“While the Spaniards were Tlaxcala, a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan. It began to spread during the thirteenth month and lasted for seventy days, striking everywhere in the city and killing a vast number of people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies, we were covered in agonizing sores from head to foot. The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move. If they did move, they screamed in pain. A great many died from this plague, and many others from hunger.” (Leon-Portilla, 1992, pp. 92-93)

To make matters worse for the Aztecs, the Spanish returned. They had received reinforcements from the Spanish at Vera Cruz. With his army of 600 Spanish soldiers and between 110,000 and 150,000 Mexican warriors, Cortes intended to take the capital city. At the same time the epidemic had killed many Aztec warriors, including the new leader, a nephew of Motecuhzuma who was a fierce warrior.

The army systematically conquered most of the Aztec-inhabited towns around the city. Cortes gained an additional 200 Spanish soldiers and 50,000 Tlascalans.

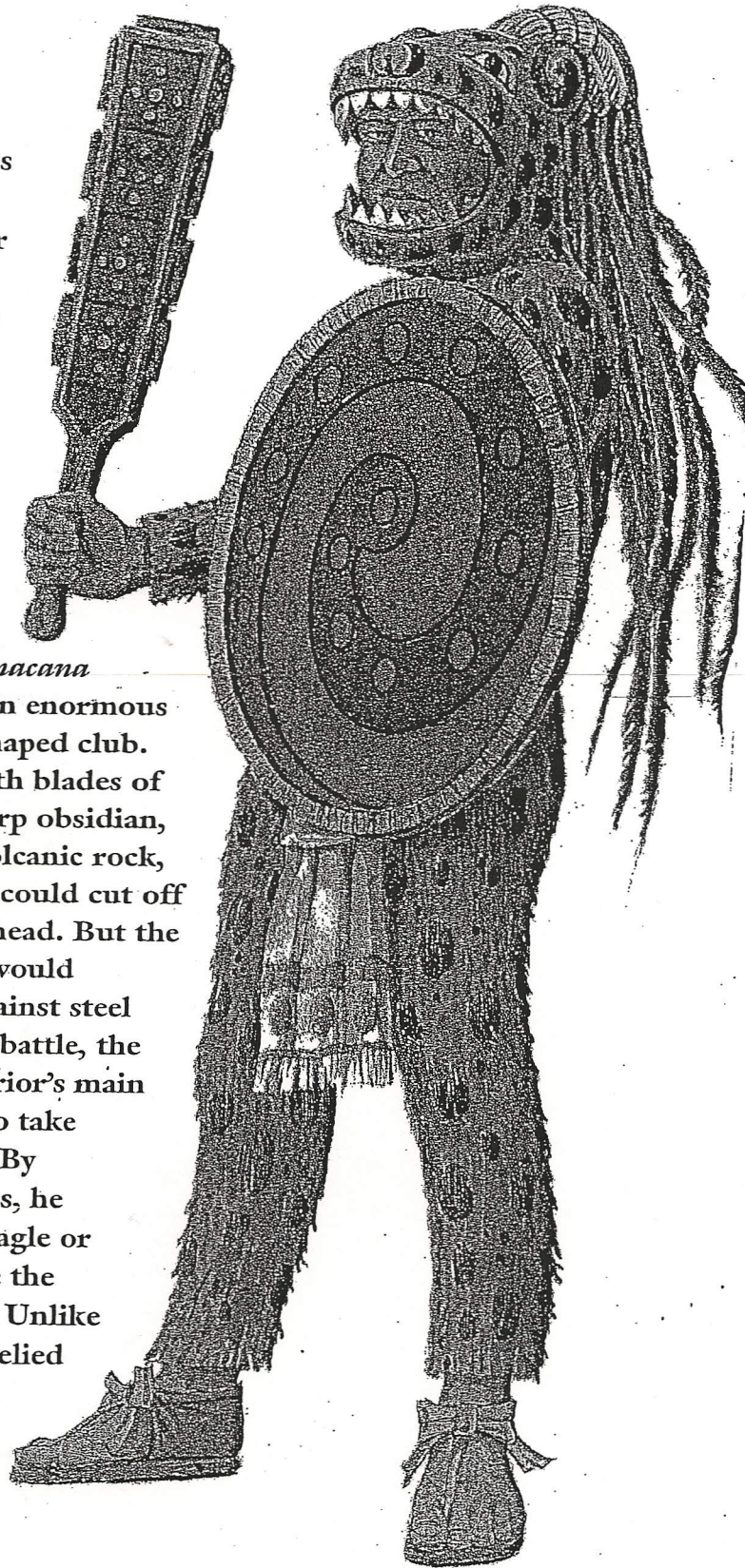
The native accounts of the siege tell us that the Spaniards launched their brigantines (ships) into the lake that surrounded the city. The ships began to fire their cannons and blockaded the causeways so that the Aztecs could not escape. The cannons proved to be very effective against the Aztec army whose main weapons were a sharp-ended wooden club, spear throwers and bows and arrows. Scholars write that the defensive weapons mainly consisted of shields made of wood and fibers.

After many days the Spanish finally took the city in a final battle on August 13, 1521. The conquerors banished the Aztecs from their city and began to clear it. According to Prescott, a scholar of the conquest, between 120,000 and 240,000 Aztecs may have lain dead in the streets. (Prescott, 1988, p. 127)




## A LONE WARRIOR

**T**he Aztecs had no horses or steel. They used spears and bows and carried flimsy shields (below) which featured the warrior's symbol. Their main weapon was the *macana* (above) an enormous paddle-shaped club. Fitted with blades of razor-sharp obsidian, a black volcanic rock, a *macana* could cut off a horse's head. But the obsidian would shatter against steel armor. In battle, the Aztec warrior's main goal was to take prisoners. By capturing prisoners, he could become an eagle or jaguar warrior like the figure at the right. Unlike the Spanish, who relied on teamwork, each Aztec warrior fought alone.





## A TEAM PLAYER



**A**lthough the army that Cortés had with him was very small — just 600 Spaniards — it was powerful. Spanish soldiers had steel armor and helmets for protection, swords and crossbows, guns and horses. More important, they fought as an organized unit. Soldiers equipped with long spears could hold off the enemy. Other soldiers using guns and crossbows could break up an enemy charge. After that, soldiers on horses could charge their opponents, and send them fleeing.



**Why were the Spanish Conquistadors able to defeat the Aztec Empire?**

<b>Theory:</b>	<b>The Spanish surprised the Aztecs</b>	<b>Montezuma attacked the Spanish too early</b>	<b>Aztec religious beliefs and customs</b>	<b>Aztec political and geographic structure</b>	<b>Spanish superior weapons and technology</b>	<b>Spanish brought diseases</b>	<b>Montezuma was an ineffective leader</b>
<b>Evidence that Supports this theory:</b>							
<b>Evidence that Negates this theory:</b>							



AUGUST 14, 1521

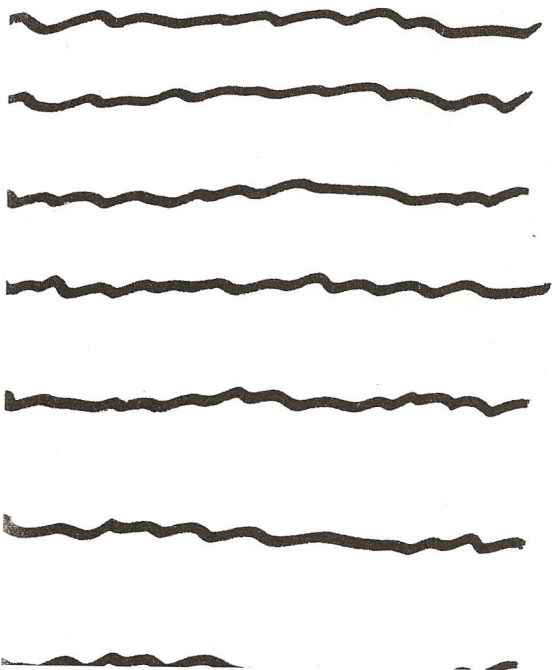
# THE AZTEC SUN

EARLY EDITION

3 skulls

THE END  
IS  
HERE!!

EVILS FROM  
SPAIN SACK OUR  
BELOVED CAPITAL



(PICTURE)