



Motecuhzoma II

(1467–1520)

EMPEROR OF PRE-SPANISH MEXICO

by Michael E. Smith

Motecuhzoma II was emperor of the Triple Alliance (Aztec Empire) at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Although a strong king with numerous accomplishments, Motecuhzoma II has been burdened with an undeserved reputation as a weak and ineffectual opponent to the conquering Spaniards.

When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés came to Mexico in 1519, Motecuhzoma II was the emperor of the Triple Alliance (Aztec Empire). Born in 1467 into the royal family of Tenochtitlán, the dominant city in the alliance that ruled the empire, Motecuhzoma II was called Motecuhzoma (Angry Lord) Xocoyotzin (the Younger) to distinguish him from his great-grandfather, the king Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (An Arrow Pierces the Sky), also known as Motecuhzoma I.

Succession in the Tenochtitlán dynasty passed among male members of the royal family as determined through election by a royal council upon death of a king. By 1502, when the emperor Ahuizotl died, his nephew Motecuhzoma II (grandson of the emperor Axayacatl) had distinguished himself in battle and was an obvious choice for the throne. Native historical accounts are unanimous in their praise of Motecuhzoma II's qualities. For example, the *Codex Mendoza* (a postconquest history written in the ancient style) describes his "bravery and leadership in war" and goes on to describe him as follows: "Motecuhzoma was by nature wise, an astrologer, a philosopher, and skilled in all the arts, civil as well as military. His subjects greatly respected him because of his gravity, demeanor, and power; none of his predecessors, in comparison, could approach his great

state and majesty" (Codex Mendoza, folio 14 verso; Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 4:34).

During his reign (1502–1520) Motecuhzoma II led wars of conquest to consolidate the distant provinces of the empire. He worked to concentrate power in the hands of the top nobility at the expense of commoners. Whereas Ahuizotl had permitted talented commoners to occupy important offices, Motecuhzoma stripped these commoners of their titles and decreed that only members of the top nobility could hold high office. Nigel Davies calls this "a definite step in the direction of an absolute monarchy" (Davies 1973, 216). He also carried out a series of religious and calendrical reforms to help claim supernatural support for his political agenda.

In 1519, Hernán Cortés and a band of several hundred Spaniards landed in Mexico. Motecuhzoma did little to fight the Spaniards, who were able to enter Tenochtitlán without opposition. Cortés took the king hostage, and he was soon killed. Native sources state that the Spaniards killed Motecuhzoma, whereas Spanish sources state that he was killed by an Aztec mob that was assaulting the palace where he was held.

One of the central "mysteries" of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs is Motecuhzoma's failure to oppose Cortés more vigorously. Why did the king not send his armies—with tens of thousands of experienced troops—to fight Cortés? One interpretation blames the Aztec king for indecisiveness and vacillation. According to this view, the king was frozen in uncertainty and therefore permitted Cortés to enter Tenochtitlán unopposed. This popular view of Motecuhzoma as an indecisive and weak leader, however, is contradicted by his history as emperor between 1502 and 1519.



Antonio Rodriguez, *Portrait of Motecuhzoma II* (c. 1680). Museo degli Argenti, Florence, Italy.

According to recent scholarship, indigenous nobles and Spanish Franciscan friars in the decades after the conquest conspired to invent reasons for Motecuhzoma's hesitation. One such reason was the dubious notion that Motecuhzoma believed Cortés to be the god Quetzalcoatl returning to reclaim his kingdom. A related reason was a series of omens throughout his reign that supposedly alerted Motecuhzoma to his impending doom. These stories "explained" Motecuhzoma's behavior and allowed the surviving colonial-period Aztec nobility to make sense of the conquest. These stories also helped the Spanish friars promote the notion that the conquest was preordained by God in order to bring Christianity to the New World. Many authors of works about the conquest of the Aztecs—particularly the influential books by Prescott (2000; first published in 1843) and Thomas (1993)—have accepted these stories at face value. Revisionist scholarship, however, indicates that these stories were myths invented in the sixteenth century, and identifies other factors that explain Motecuhzoma's actions in a more satisfactory fashion.

The actions of Motecuhzoma in fact indicate that he followed the advance of the Spaniards closely and attempted to have his subjects defeat them along the way (most notably at Cholula, where a planned ambush turned into a massacre of Aztec troops). He ultimately let the Spaniards into Tenochtitlán only as a last resort after recognizing their huge military and technological superiority. In Aztec diplomacy, a ruler who submitted peacefully to a conquering army secured a lower tribute quota and milder treatment for his people than a ruler who openly opposed the imperial troops. Motecuhzoma's failure to oppose Cortés more vigorously may have arisen from an attempt to secure better treatment for his subjects under the Spanish crown. Regardless of the actions of Motecuhzoma, however, the final Aztec defeat was assured by the introduction of smallpox and its devastating effects on the native population.

Michael E. SMITH
Arizona State University

See also Aztec Empire

Further Reading

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