

Hernan Cortez and the Conquistador of Mexico

Between 1519 and 1521 the [Spanish](#), under the leadership of conquistador [Hernan Cortés](#), conquered the Aztec Empire.



Conquistadors by Margaret Duncan Coxhead

Bad Omens

During the reign of King Montezuma II, the Aztecs had seen several bad omens. According to [Aztec religion](#), these omens meant that something bad was going to happen. There were eight bad omens that were recorded later by a Spanish missionary.

- Fire in the sky
- The temple of Huitzilopochtli burned down
- A lightning bolt struck one of their temples
- They saw fire across the waters
- A lake appeared to be boiling
- They heard the sound of a weeping woman at night
- A strange animal was caught by some fishermen
- A two headed man was seen

Arrival of Hernan Cortés in Mesoamerica

Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortés and his men landed on the Mexican coast on April of 1519. Montezuma II sent Cortés gifts of gold and chocolate to welcome the Spanish. Although Montezuma II did not trust Cortés, he also was worried that Cortés was the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. Aztec mythology said that Quetzalcoatl would come to Earth as a man and Cortés had arrived on Quetzalcoatl's birthday.

Cortés arrived with around 500 men, 16 horses, and some cannon. He founded a small settlement that would eventually become the city of Veracruz. He also began to get to know the natives. He brought along an American Indian woman named Dona Marina who worked as his interpreter. Cortez created alliances with some of the local tribes including the Totonac and the Tlaxcalans.

Cortés Travels to Tenochtitlan

Cortés began to march inland towards the city of Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztec Empire. He conquered some cities along the way and made alliances with others. The Tlaxcalans became his closest allies. They hated the Aztecs because they had raided their cities for people to sacrifice to their gods.

Montezuma II tried to keep Cortés from getting all the way to Tenochtitlan, but Cortés continued his march. He destroyed the Aztec religious city of Cholula along the way.

Cortés Arrives at Tenochtitlan

When Cortés finally arrived in Tenochtitlan he was welcomed with gifts and invited inside. Montezuma was still concerned that Cortés might be a god. Eventually tensions mounted between the two sides and a fight broke out. Cortés and his men took King Montezuma captive.



Cortés meets Montezuma II by unknown Tlaxcalan artists

Montezuma II is Killed

At some point during his captivity, Montezuma II was killed. Historians still aren't sure how he was killed or why, but after he died the Spanish soldiers tried to flee from Tenochtitlan. They were attacked by the Aztecs as they fled and nearly two-thirds of the soldiers were killed.

Cortés Conquers the Aztecs

Cortés managed to escape with some of his men from Tenochtitlan. He gathered a large force of natives including the Tlaxcalans to fight the Aztecs. He returned to Tenochtitlan and laid siege to the city. After three months of fighting, he finally took control of the city and completed his conquest of the Aztec Empire.

Interesting Facts about the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs

- Cortés became worried that some of his crew would steal his ships and desert him so he sunk his fleet before marching to Tenochtitlan.
- After Montezuma II was killed the Aztecs elected Cuauhtemoc as their new king. Cortés eventually had him executed.
- The Aztecs were severely weakened by diseases that the Spanish brought such as smallpox, influenza, and malaria. Over time, around 80 percent of the people living in the Valley of Mexico died from these diseases.
- Cortés founded Mexico City on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. Today it is the capital of Mexico and one of the largest cities in the world.
- The night that Cortés and his men escaped from Tenochtitlan is often referred to as "La Noche Triste" or "The Sad Night".