

THE GREATEST COINCIDENCE IN HISTORY?

A TEACHING RESOURCE FOR THE OCR B WORLD DEPTH STUDY 'Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest, 1519–1535'

These materials are intended to help teachers who are planning to teach the exciting new OCR B World Depth Study 'Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest, 1519–1535'. They address one of the key issues in both the 'Encounters' and 'Conquest, 1519-21' sections of the specification : why Moctezuma welcomed the invaders who went on to overthrow him and conquer his empire and, in particular, did he believe that Cortés was the returning Aztec god Quetzalcoatl ? This in turn is related to the bigger question why were the Spanish, about 500 men, able to conquer an empire of 10 million people in just two years?

They aim to help students understand :

- how and why Moctezuma and the Aztecs might have thought that Cortés was a god
- how this might help to explain the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs
- how new research can challenge long-established beliefs about the past

You could use this resource with your students:

- as they follow the narrative of Cortés' expedition and Moctezuma's reaction to it;
- or, more retrospectively, when they investigate the reasons for the Spanish conquest

This resource is presented in Word format so that you can adjust the layout, presentation and difficulty of the text to suit the learning needs of your students.

It consists of three parts: Parts 1 and 2 establish the 'facts' of the case which are then re-examined and challenged in Part 3.

1. Who was Quetzalcoatl ? :

This consists of a summary of the Aztec religious beliefs which are relevant to this investigation – namely the myth of Quetzalcoatl and the omens which were seen in Tenochtitlan shortly before 1519. Students will need to study this before they move on to Part 2

2. Cortés' arrival in Mexico

This provides students with a summary of events from Cortés' arrival in Mexico in April 1519 until his arrest of Moctezuma in November 1519. Note that your students may have already studied this



From Wikimedia Commons :
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hernando_Cortes_landing_in_Mexico,_16th_C_-_BL_Add_MS_37177.jpg
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in greater detail than is provided here; if so encourage them to draw upon their wider knowledge.

They should compare this summary with the information in Part 1. Ask them to:

- discuss why the Aztecs were expecting something terrible to happen at this time
- identify the main similarities between the legend of Quetzalcoatl (sheet 1) and Cortés' arrival in Mexico (sheet 2)
- list the main actions of Moctezuma which may have been influenced by the belief that Cortes was a god

3. Coincidence or hoax ?

If Moctezuma and the Aztecs did believe that Cortes was a god, then Cortes' arrival in Mexico in April 1519 must have been the greatest coincidence in History! Several recent historians, however, have questioned whether it is true and have re-examined the evidence which survives from the time. This is highly problematic given the high levels of destruction which accompanied and followed the conquest. There are no contemporary Aztec or native American accounts. In this part students are provided with information about, and brief extracts from, the most important written sources dating from this period ; you could present them to students on separate cards.

Students should study each source carefully, weighing up their strengths and weaknesses as evidence for this enquiry ; for example :

- neither Cortes nor Diaz mentions Quetzalcoatl ; Cortes, however, does refer in Moctezuma's speech to a mysterious 'prince' who could be Quetzalcoatl but the speech was almost certainly made up. If the belief was current at the time, why would Cortés not mention it ?
- it is referred to in the Codices produced by Spanish friars – but these were produced over **thirty years after** the conquest.

This raises at least the possibility that it was made up by the Spanish friars or the indigenous peoples whom they interviewed ; if your students have not discussed this possibility, raise it with them and ask what possible motives they might have had for making it up.

Then show them the findings of recent historians – and encourage them to reach their own overall conclusions ; where would they place (on the continuum below) the claim that Moctezuma and the Aztecs believed that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl ?

Definitely true	Probably true	Possibly true	Probably false	Definitely false
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Ask your students to record their conclusion, and their reasons, so they can include them in their preparation for the examination.

Further reading:

For a detailed examination of these issues see 'Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico' by Camilla Townsend in American Historical Review Vol 108 No 3 June 2003

http://www.cynthiaclarke.com/anth115/115_readings/Burying_the_white_gods.pdf

A shorter, more accessible article can be found at : <http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/ask-experts/why-did-moctezuma-think-that-cortes-looked-like-quetzalcoatl>

1. Who was Quetzalcoatl?

The Aztecs worshipped many gods. They believed that they controlled the world. One of the oldest and most important was Quetzalcoatl (pronounced 'ketsal ko-atl'), the god of the wind and learning. He is usually shown in Aztec art as a flying feathered reptile rather like a dragon (his name means 'plumed serpent') but sometimes he took human form as a white bearded male.



A 16th century Aztec drawing of Quetzalcoatl

According to legend Quetzalcoatl quarrelled with his brother, Tezcatlipoca, god of the sky and time. Quetzalcoatl was defeated and went into exile. He was last seen somewhere near modern Veracruz sailing out to sea towards the east on a boat made from snakes. The Aztecs believed that one day Quetzalcoatl would return to reclaim his power and that this would happen in a 1 Reed Year.

The Aztecs also strongly believed in omens (signs that something good or bad is about to happen). In the years just before Cortés' arrival it was said that :

- there were floods in Tenochtitlan when the lake around it boiled
- a fire destroyed one of the city's temples
- fiery comets and columns of fire were seen in the eastern sky
- the loud, ghostly sounds of a woman crying made it difficult for people to sleep

At this time, Moctezuma was said to be very worried and depressed about the unusual events in Tenochtitlan and the possible return of Quetzalcoatl. The next 1 Reed year was due in 1519 ...

THE AZTEC CALENDAR :

was based on a cycle of 52 years. Each year had a special name. The end of a 52 year cycle and the beginning of a new one were thought to be very dangerous times. Special religious ceremonies and sacrifices were held to please the gods and make sure that the world was not destroyed.

2. Cortés' arrival in Mexico

In April 1519 Hernán Cortés landed on the coast of Mexico. 1519 was a 1 Reed year in the Aztec calendar. He had 11 ships, about 500 men (equipped with armour, steel swords, guns and several cannon) and 16 horses. The Aztecs had never seen horses or cannon before ; they described horses when they first saw them as beasts with two heads and six legs.

Messengers quickly relayed the news to Tenochtitlan. Moctezuma sent representatives to meet the strangers.

Cortés defeated the local tribes and ordered the building of a new Spanish town to be called Veracruz (the true cross). Moctezuma's representatives arrived with gifts of food, gold and jewels but warned the Spanish not to approach Tenochtitlan. Cortés accepted the gifts and sent them back to Spain but he ignored the advice. Before heading inland towards the Aztec capital Cortés scuttled all of his ships – there was to be no turning back.

The march to Tenochtitlan lasted three months. There was fighting against some native tribes but Cortés was also able to make important alliances with other tribes which resented Aztec control, like the Tlascalans. They reached Tenochtitlan on 8 November 1519. Montezuma welcomed them to the city, gave them more gifts and allowed them to stay in a royal palace. Six days later, however, Cortés took Moctezuma prisoner



A late 16th century portrait of Cortés

A description of Cortés by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a soldier in Cortés' army ; written in the 1560s :

“He was a tall man, his face had little colour, his eyes were grave, though not without kindness. His hair and beard were black and rather thin. Both as a horseman and a swordsman he was very skilful.”

3. Coincidence or hoax?

It is stated in many textbooks, and on many websites about the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, that Moctezuma believed that Cortés was the returning god Quetzalcoatl. This has been used not just to explain Moctezuma's 'strange' behaviour towards Cortés and his men – sending them gifts and welcoming them into his capital – but also why this small group of Spanish invaders were able to conquer the Aztec Empire so quickly. If it is true it must be the greatest coincidence in History – **but is it?**

To find out if it is true we need to examine sources from the time. There are no Aztec accounts from the time of the Spanish conquest; they would have been destroyed by the Spanish. Our main sources are:

HERNAN CORTÉS

Cortés wrote a series of letters to the Emperor Charles V during the Spanish Conquest. He wanted to justify his actions and to impress the Emperor with his achievements.

In his second letter, written in 1519, he described his first meeting with Moctezuma and claimed that Moctezuma told him :

“a prince, conducted our people into these parts but then departed from the country, we have always heard that his descendants would come to conquer this land, and according to the direction from which you say you have come, namely where the sun rises, and from what you say of the great lord or king, who sent you, we believe and are assured that he is our natural sovereign. Therefore be assured that we will obey you for our sovereign in place of the great lord whom, you mention. You have the power in all this land, and all that we have is at your disposal. You are in your own proper land and your own house”

This speech, which does **not** name Quetzalcoatl, was almost certainly made up by Cortés who wanted people to believe that Moctezuma had voluntarily surrendered his power to Spain. Cortes died in 1547.

FRANCISCO LÓPEZ DE GÓMARA (1511-66)

Francisco López de Gómara was Cortés' personal priest and secretary in the 1540s. In 1552 he wrote an account of the conquest of Mexico in 'A General History of the Indies'. He glorified Cortés and was one of the first to claim that the Aztecs thought the Spanish were gods :

“Many Indians came to gape at the strange men and at their attire, arms and horses and they said ‘These men are gods’”.

He never travelled to the Americas but got information from Cortés and other Spanish soldiers. His book was widely criticised at the time for being inaccurate.

BERNAL DIAZ DEL CASTILLO (1496?-1584)

Bernal Diaz del Castillo was a soldier in Cortés' army. He wrote his memoirs, 'The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517-1521', in the 1560s. He wanted to show how much ordinary soldiers had contributed to the Spanish conquest.

Diaz wrote a very detailed account of what happened and thought that Moctezuma was a strong and intelligent ruler. He made **no mention** of the Aztecs thinking that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl.

SPANISH FRIARS

After the Spanish conquest many priests and friars went to Mexico to spread the Roman Catholic religion. The friars travelled around the country and some of them became interested in finding out about the Aztecs' traditional way of life which was disappearing fast. They interviewed native peoples and produced, from the 1540s onwards, several detailed books (called 'codices') with illustrations by native artists.

These codices, written over 30 years after the conquest, contained the first direct references to the omens in Tenochtitlan before 1519 and the belief that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl. For example the 12 books of the Florentine Codex, written by Bernardino de Sahagún from the 1540s to the 1560s, give a different version of the speech Moctezuma made to Cortés in 1519:

"You have graciously come on earth, you have graciously approached your water, you have come down to your throne, which I have briefly kept for you You have graciously arrived, you have known pain, you have known weariness, now come on earth, take your rest, enter into your palace."

RECENT HISTORIANS

Several recent historians who have looked again at this evidence now believe that the story that Moctezuma believed that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl is untrue. They argue that it first appeared over 30 years after the conquest in the writings of the Spanish friars. This might have been because the friars made mistakes when they translated from native American languages but it could also have been because it was deliberately made up; they suggest several possible reasons for this:

- some of the native peoples, whom the Spanish interviewed, might have wanted a scapegoat to blame for their defeat
- Spanish friars wanted the native peoples to believe that Aztec religious beliefs were inferior to Roman Catholicism
- The Spanish wanted to justify their conquest by making the Aztecs, and their leader, look inferior and weak-minded