

How Did the “White”
God Come to Mexico?
Ce Acatl Topiltzin
Quetzalcoatl

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By

Stefan Heep

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PREFACE

The deity Quetzalcoatl, also called Ce Acatl Topiltzin, is one of the most enigmatic figures in American religion and history. Quetzalcoatl was a creator god, a rattle snake covered with feathers of the Quetzal bird. But it was also the human-looking wind god with shield and sickle-shaped weapon, who wore a bird mask and who was decorated with snakes and butterflies. The ominous morning star that smoked when calamities were near was also called Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. And finally, a historical ruler bore this name too. Aztec and Spanish sources describe him as a bearded white man who had come to Mexico from the east. He brought civilization and a morality similar to Christian ethics, became priest-king of Tollan and was expelled because of his abolition of human sacrifices. He disappeared to the east by crossing the sea, but had promised to come back.¹

Most American school books tell that the Aztec ruler Moctezuma confused the Spanish conquistador Cortés for this Quetzalcoatl. In the past the tale of Quetzalcoatl has inspired archaeologically interested adventurers such as Thor Heyerdahl, racist academicians such as Jacques de Mahieu and bestselling authors such as Graham Hancock to speculate about pre-Columbian invaders from the Old World. It was abused as another presumed proof of white supremacy. Sources describe Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl

¹ *Memoriales de Fray Toribio de Motolinía: manuscrito de la coleccion del Señor Don Joaquin García Icazbalceta*, ed. Luis García Pimentel (Guadalajara 1967), 9–13, 84; Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologética Historia sumaria*, ed. prep. por Edmundo O’Gorman, con un estudio preliminar, apéndices y un índice de materias, 2 vols (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1967), I, 644f; Fray Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, translated by Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 59; Eduard Seler, *Einige Kapitel aus dem Geschichtswerk des Fray Bernardino de Sahagun* (Stuttgart: Strecker und Schröder, 1927), 292, 460; *Florentine Codex*; Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, transl. by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, book 1–12 (Reprint), Santa Fe, School of American Research and the University of Utah Monographs of The School of American Research, 1970–1979; here *Florentine Codex* 4 (book 3, chap. 14), 38; and *Florentine Codex* 13 (book 12, chap. 2), 5.

as a mirror image of Jesus Christ. Missionaries of the 16th and 17th centuries thought he was Saint Thomas, the apostle, and that he had converted the Aztecs to Christianity in pre-Columbian times. Indigenous traditions saw a Mexican Messiah who played an important part in constructing the Mexican national identity. In Diego Rivera's mural paintings of the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City he symbolizes the golden age of the pre-Hispanic past. Spanish wikipedia introduces Ce Ácatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl as a historical person who was born in Amatlán de Quetzalcoatl. This village succeeded in being officially recognized as his birthplace. A figure of the god of the morning star and the academic works of Jiménez Moreno and Alfredo López Austin served as proofs. Wikipedia continues that this Quetzalcoatl founded a reign of peace, wisdom and art, introduced the belief in only one god (also called Quetzalcoatl) and abolished human sacrifices. But because of this cult revolution he was later compelled to leave the country. He is said to have emigrated to the Maya lowlands to initiate a new era of culture there. An oral tradition of Morelos intermingles Quetzalcoatl with Zapata. Felipe Alvarado, son of a colonel of the Zapatist army and traditional authority of Amatlán, gives testimony: "Zapata was the rebirth of Quetzalcóatl, because he shared his ideals".² Quetzalcoatl became the hope of the *campesinos* for a better life. Even the Neo-Zapatist army of Chiapas refers to Quetzalcoatl as a symbol of indigenous autonomy. In Oventic, a Neo-Zapatist village in the hills of Chiapas, Quetzalcoatl's representation in mural paintings is reborn. On the main wall of the hospital Quetzalcoatl and the *Virgen de Guadalupe* frame two groups of *Zapatistas*, the ancient ones who wear weapons, and the new ones whose only weapon is the word – they are as peaceful as the priest-king Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. Another mural painting shows Zapata with a maize plant and a green serpent twining around the butt of a shotgun. Its bullets are flowers – Quetzalcoatl as the god who loves peace, the ideal of a pacifist movement. In present-day Mexico the peaceful, benevolent priest-king and god of Tollan embodies the pre-Hispanic past. He is a symbol of the abolition of colonialism, the end of exploitation and the beginning of social justice.

² Francesco Taboada Tabone, "Emiliano Zapata en la tradición oral de Morelos y su vínculo con mitos de origen mesoamericano," *Estudios Mesoamericanos*, Nueva época 12 (2012): 87.

But this person never existed! He is a product of “fake news” uttered by the conquistador Hernán Cortés and willingly accepted by all for their own purposes. This book will deconstruct the legend and reconstruct the “real” Quetzalcoatl who was not a peaceful Messiah but a belligerent god who demanded human sacrifices.



Fig. P-1: Quetzalcoatl as feathered serpent (left above, Codex Telleriano-Remensis), as god of the dawn/morning star (left below, Codex Telleriano-Remensis), as wind god with buccal mask (right, Codex Borgia) and as human priest-king (below middle, Florentine Codex).

INTRODUCTION

The Aztec “Empire”

When the Spaniards arrived on the gulf coast, a confederation of three city-states, Tenochtitlan, Tezcuco and Tlacopan, controlled most parts of Mexico including some enclaves in Guatemala, meaning only that they were obliged to pay tribute. The three cities were situated at or even in Lake Texcoco within the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan were the most belligerent tribe and on the point of dominating this alliance. They called themselves “Mexica” and were the youngest of the tribes of hunters and gatherers that came from North-America and spoke “Nahuatl”, which belongs to the Uto-Aztec languages. They were ruled by the “Tlatoani”, the “one of excellent speech”. He was elected by the high nobility from the ruling family, called the “Tenochca dynasty”. The Tlatoani and his four counselors – also elected – formed a state council. When Hernán Cortés landed in Mexico the position of Tlatoani Moctezuma II (actually Moteuczuma) was that of a sacrosanct king.

The high nobility was a caste of warriors that demonstrated their superiority by the exclusive ownership of luxuries that were made from tribute goods. Special artisans created these luxuries. They were called “*toltecah*” (singular “*toltecatl*”). The name became a synonym for the civilization-founding ancestors – the Toltecs. Some sources call them Culhua. The noble warriors could earn privileges by taking war captives. In state ceremonies these captives were sacrificed to the sun by cardioectomy.

The solar calendar of 365 days, called “*Xiuhpohualli*”, organized the year and the state ceremonies. Eighteen periods of twenty days each (“*veintenas*”) were celebrated with sacral spectacles that brought to mind the mythic events of primordial history. Each spectacle ended with human sacrifices. The five remaining days were “evil days” (“*nemotemi*”). Besides the *Xiuhpohualli* the Aztecs knew a divinatory calendar, the so called “*Tonalpohualli*”. According to this the twenty day names were also numbered consecutively from one to thirteen, each 13-day period called a “*trecena*”. A date was composed by a combination of the two calendars. It took 52 years before a date repeated itself. This was called a calendar round, a “*Xiuhmolpilli*”. On this occasion the celebration of the new year, the “new fire ceremony”, was extremely expanded. The new fire was

drilled into the chest of a human sacrifice. It burnt the old time, represented by 52 sticks of reed. The Nahuatl word for reed is “acatl”.

The sources

One of the most important supporters of the “historical” person Quetzalcoatl and the pre-Hispanic belief in his return is Henry Bigger Nicholson. He regards Cortés’ second letter to Emperor Charles of 1520 as one of the principal sources on Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl although he is not mentioned by name.³ But it is indeed the earliest source of the presumed Aztec prehistory, its expectation of the returning leader and his identification with the Spaniards. The entire tradition of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is based on just a few sources. Nicholson called them the “earliest accounts of the basic Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan tale”: *Relación de genealogía y linaje* (a petition of Doña Isabel, daughter of Moctezuma, written by a Franciscan monk, in the following abbreviated as “*Linaje*”, around 1532), *Leyenda de los Soles* (around 1558) and *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* (between 1545 and 1570) – Nahuatl-sources, most probably due to the Tenochca-pupils of Sahagún⁴ – and Sahagún’s *Historia general* (between 1559 and 1577). The *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* (between 1529 and 1536) and the *Histoyre du Mechique* (edited 1543) preserved parts of a lost manuscript of Andrés de Olmos, Franciscan colleague of Sahagún – they will be used as references. These accounts can be regarded as first hand information of the beginnings of the process of syncretism which influenced all later writings.

The many hints that question the reliability of these sources have been long known: All sources about Quetzalcoatl were written after the conquest by Christians, who wrote with particular intentions. The missionaries (the editors of the earliest sources) were only interested in history and religion and they wanted to prove the demoniac nature of Aztec religion or to find Christian traces. The first hand sources – the pre-Hispanic codices – could only be read by specialists who already knew the illustrated stories, but they completely refused collaboration with the Spaniards.⁵ It was, rather, uninstructed young Christianized Aztecs who

³ Henry Bigger Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: The once and future Lord of the Toltecs* (Boulder: Univ. Press of Colorado, 2001), 86f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana: obra escrita a fines del Siglo XVI*, ed. Joaquín García Icazbalceta (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1971), 2, 80–86; Joaquín García Icazbalceta, “Relación de genealogía y linaje de los señores de la Nueva España,” in *Nueva colección de documentos inéditos para la historia*

found and interpreted the ancient books. The Codex Borgia demonstrates the difficulty of understanding the pictures without previous knowledge.⁶ Its interpretations differ considerably. *All* pre-Hispanic Aztec codices were destroyed by the Spaniards after “reading” them. And finally, there is not a single archaeological proof of the existence of a priest-king called Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. Even Nicholson had to admit that.⁷

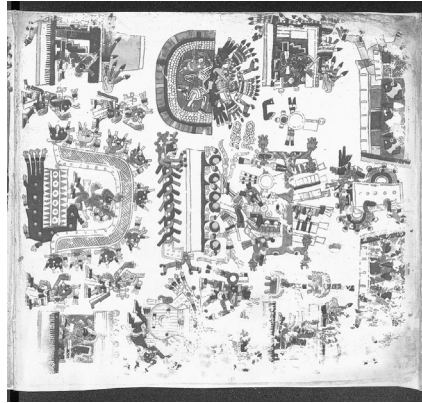


Fig. 1-1: Page 45 of Codex Borgia. For Seler it shows the rise of the morning star, for Nowotny seasonal ceremonies, for Boone a creation myth. Source: By Unknown – 1898 facsimile edition, online at FAMSI.org, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3975091>

de México (México/Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1891/1971), 263–281, here 264.

⁶ This pre-Hispanic codex from the region of Puebla contains a mythic part which has been, for example, interpreted as: 1) the underworld journey of the planet Venus – Eduard Seler, *Codex Borgia: Eine altmexikanische Bilderschrift der Bibliothek der Congragatio de Propaganda Fide*, 2 Vols (Berlin 1904/1906); 2) a description of the planet Mercury and astronomic events – Susan Milbrath, “Astronomical Cycles in the Imagery of Codex Borgia 29–46”, Internet resource: www.academia.edu/3251495/astronomical_cycles_in_imagery_of_codex_borgia_29-46; 3) a description of ceremonies – Karl Anton Nowotny, *Codex Borgia*, Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe, kommentiert von Karl Anton Nowotny (Graz 1976); or 4) a narration of creation myths – Elizabeth Spotswood Hill Boone, “Venerable Place of Beginnings: The aztec understanding of Teotihuacan,” in David Carrasco (ed.), *Mesoamerica’s classic heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2007), 371–396.

⁷ Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl*, 233–244.

State of Research

Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (“One Reed our Prince Feathered Serpent”) appears as a god with many faces. The Feathered Serpent is a god of fertility and associated with maize, but he is also a god who demands human sacrifices. He is involved in the creation of heaven and earth. The human-shaped wind god invents important cultural assets. As the morning star he is a belligerent deity and causes misfortune. The peaceful historical priest-king of Tollan is a human being. A lot of representations of the first three Quetzalcoatlts have been found whereas the famous priest-king is only testified to the above-mentioned historical accounts. Among ethnohistorians the opinion is still alive that these accounts preserve *some* valid historical information.⁸ The former attitude that *most* of it is historically reliable had to be given up – the existence of mythological parts and Christian influence is undeniable. But still ethnohistorians adhere to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl as a historical person.⁹ Also the belief in Quetzalcoatl’s return is said to have played a significant role in the conquest.¹⁰ But Stenzel has already proved that it arose after the conquest. He considers Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl to be a fusion of the wind god and the historical ruler.¹¹ Camilla Townsend also doubts the existence of a pre-Hispanic belief in Quetzalcoatl’s return.¹²

⁸ Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl*; Nigel Davies, *The Toltecs Until the Fall of Tula* (Norman: Uni of Oklahoma Press, 1977); Hanns-J. Prem, “Los Reyes de Tollan y Colhuacan,” *Estudios de cultura náhuatl* 30 (1999): 23–70.

⁹ Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl*, 255–267; David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982); Davies, *The Toltecs Until the Fall of Tula*; Paul Kirchhoff, “Quetzalcoatl, Huemac y el fin de Tula,” *Cuadernos Americanos* 14 (1955): 164–196; W. Jiménez Moreno, “Tula y los toltecas según las fuentes históricas,” *RMEA* 5 (1941): 79–83; Alfredo López Austin, *Hombre-dios: religión y política en el mundo náhuatl* (México: Univ. Nacional Autónoma de México, Inst. de Investigaciones Históricas, 1977); Werner Stenzel, “Quetzalcoatl von Tula. Die Mythogenese einer postkortesischen Legende,” *Zeitschrift für Lateinamerika* (1980): 5–91.

¹⁰ Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the irony of Empire*; Henry Bigger Nicholson, *The “Return of Quetzalcoatl”: did it play a role in the conquest of Mexico?* (Lancaster Calif.: Labyrinthos, 2001); Ulrich Köhler, *Vasallen des linkshändigen Kriegers im Kolibrigewand: über Weltbild, Religion und Staat der Azteken* (Berlin/Münster: Lit, 2009).

¹¹ Stenzel, “Quetzalcoatl von Tula.”

¹² Camilla Townsend, “Burying the White Gods: New perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 658–687, 658.

Nicholson and Florescano regard him as a product of a long process of conceptual syncretism with independent origins for the Feathered Serpent, morning star, wind god and human priest-king.¹³ Kirchhoff and Moreno calculated totally different datings for Quetzalcoatl's earthly reign although they referred to the same sources. Prem as a result comments that the dating-problem in the written sources cannot be solved. López Austin concludes that it was not a single person but many *caudillos* in the early postclassic era who gained reputations as semi-divine men (*hombres-dioses*) who were possessed by the gods. Their biographies lost their individuality after death and were enriched by myths, and the *hombres-dioses* became gods themselves. Carrasco follows this thesis – the human Quetzalcoatl as the representative of the god was one of these *hombres-dioses*, and Tollan the archetype of an ideal city. On the other hand there is a faction of scholars who explain the Topiltzin account as an astral myth.¹⁴ An intermediate viewpoint pronounced by Bandelier acknowledges only the god Quetzalcoatl and interprets the man Quetzalcoatl as an invention of colonial times.¹⁵ Piña Chan supports this opinion and stresses the identity of the Feathered Serpent and morning star.¹⁶ Gillespie states that the Aztecs created the myth of the human priest-king after the conquest by using the myths of the wind god and their own history.¹⁷ Recent studies explain the ethnohistorical sources in general as “forced answers” of the natives to the new cultural paradigm of the Spaniards,¹⁸ as strategies of survival, that produced a syncretism as an expression of their new ethnic consciousness¹⁹ in order to maintain power, privileges and land titles.²⁰

¹³ Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl*, 266; Enrique Florescano, *Quetzalcoatl y los Mitos fundadores de Mesoamerica* (México: Santillana Ed. Generales, 2004), 239.

¹⁴ Seler, *Codex Borgia*, Vol. 1, 85; Preuss in Eduard Seler, “Einiges über die natürlichen Grundlagen mexikanischer Mythen,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 39 (1907): 1–41.

¹⁵ A. F. Bandelier, *Report of an archeological tour in Mexico, in 1881* (Boston: Archaeological Institute of America, 1884).

¹⁶ Román Piña Chan, *Arqueología y tradición histórica: Un testimonio de los informantes indígenas de Sahagún*, anthropology doctoral thesis (México: Impresora de Pavia, 1970), 80.

¹⁷ Susan Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press 1989).

¹⁸ Miguel Leon Portilla, “Have We Really Translated the Mesoamerican ‘Ancient World’?” in *On the translation of Native American Literature*, ed. by Brian Swan (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 315f.

¹⁹ James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the conquest: a social and cultural history of the Indians of Central Mexico, sixteenth through eighteenth centuries* (Stanford: University Press, 1992).

Camilla Townsend also identifies “narrative as political intervention” and implies that Cortés’ famous letter was such an intervention, but that it still conveys some valid information about Aztec history. Restall points out more clearly that the purpose of Cortés’ letter was justification. In alliance with the Franciscans he interpreted his conquest as the fulfilment of salvation-history.²¹ Recently Townsend stated that Sahagún’s pupils transformed the pre-Hispanic god Quetzalcoatl into a human, Christian-looking priest-king.²² All of them ignored Victor Frankl’s analysis dating from 1962. He demonstrated how Cortés’ invention of Aztec prehistory legitimated Charles V as the Emperor of Mexico. This is the key to understanding the arising of the Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl tale after the conquest.²³ While interdisciplinary work arose in the past fifteen years between ethnohistory, archaeology, art history, ethnology and geography,²⁴ no systematic method of text interpretation was developed.

Graulich analyzes once more the sources using the structuralist method of Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss. His result: possible historical events are remodelled and transformed into myths after the conquest to create an indigenous “Bible”. According to him the history of Quetzalcoatl was the history of a sun becoming a “sun-moon” and Tollan the ideal empire of the past, the paradise of the union of opposites. He recognizes that the pre-Hispanic myths had come down very fragmented in the written sources.²⁵

The method of text-interpretation

Graulich’s remark of an indigenous Bible points in the right direction. So far the sources have been interpreted literally more or less. The same applies to the Christian Bible. Only the development of the hermeneutical

²⁰ Amber Brian, *Alva Ixtlilxochitl’s Native Archive and the Circulation of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press), 2016; Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 199f.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14f.

²² Townsend, *Annals of Native America*.

²³ Victor Frankl, “Die Begriffe des mexikanischen Kaisertums und der Weltmonarchie in den ‘Cartas de Relación’ des Hernando Cortés,” *Saeculum* 13 (1962): 1–34; Victor Frankl, “Hernando Cortés y la tradición de las Siete Partidas,” *Revista de Historia de América* 53–54 (1962): 9–74.

²⁴ Frances F. Berdan, “Mesoamerican Ethnohistory,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 20 (2009): 211–215, 214.

²⁵ Michel Graulich, *Quetzalcoatl y el espejismo de Tollan* (Antwerpen: Instituut voor Amerikanistiek, 1988), 40–44, 177, 261.

method – form criticism, redaction criticism, motif history, the distinction between informative and performative expressions and looking at the authors’ intentions – led us to a right understanding of the Bible. The Mesoamerican sources have to be interpreted in a similar, complex way:

1. The *whole* text has to be read critically and interpreted *by itself*. At this first stage of analysis only information should be used that is exclusively derived from the text. Is it a comprehensible narration? Is it what it pretends to be (historical accounts)? What is the intention of the text? What is the function of the Quetzalcoatl-account within this intention? The answers to these questions deliver motives for the possible re-interpretation of pre-Hispanic tales in colonial times.
2. The interpretation must refer to the contemporary history of the sources. The author’s intention will be revealed by relating the intention of the text with the contemporary history. The conquest, the new colonial organization of power and the European zeitgeist clearly promoted adaptations of the pre-Hispanic Weltanschauung.
3. The information obtained from the texts has to be compared with the Christian Bible and with ethnographic texts that are not influenced by the authors’ intentions and that are more likely to have preserved authentic pre-Hispanic material (e.g. descriptions of rites, calendar, environment; the semantic field of key-words). Information that is in contradiction with the supposed pre-Hispanic attitudes but that resembles episodes of the Christian Bible has evidently been influenced.
4. The sources in question have to be compared. Are there fixed combinations of motifs? Such combinations are important markers of authentic information. Gaps and rearrangements are made visible by comparing the particular motifs.
5. Reconstruction: After having identified the purposes of the text, the fragments of pre-Hispanic attitudes and its Christian influences, it is possible to eliminate the foreign influences, to reconstruct the original context of the fragments and to fill the gaps with ethnographic information. The comparative analysis of the sources reveals the Aztecs’ way of thinking. They lived in a world explained by myths but the mythical explanation of their most important institutions – war and human sacrifices – is very corrupted. It can be restored.

With this method it is possible to eliminate “all those aspects of the tale that smack of the miraculous or frankly supernatural... Cutting away this outer layer of the marvellous, we arrive at a core of events in his career that could have occurred”,²⁶ and this core consists of... nothing!

²⁶ Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl*, 256.

CHAPTER ONE

HERNAN CORTÉS' SECOND LETTER TO EMPEROR CHARLES V

When Hernán Cortés started on the conquest of Mexico against the express command of his immediate superior, the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, he justified his action in five letters addressed to his sovereign, Emperor Charles V. In his second letter, dated October 31, 1520, Cortés mentioned an account of Aztec prehistory according to which a leader brought the Aztecs from far away into the country. Moctezuma regarded Cortés as the envoy of their former leader and abdicated voluntarily. This letter first reached Spain in 1521 and immediately evoked great interest. Published in Spanish in 1522 and 1524 in Latin it became a “bestseller” and the official version of the conquest.

The Text

Your Highness should understand the affairs of this country, which is so great and important, since [...] it is no less worthy to warrant your assuming anew the title of Emperor, than is Germany, of which, by the grace of God, Your Sacred Majesty already possesses the title.²⁷

From what I have seen and understood concerning the similarity of this country and Spain [...], it seemed the most suitable name for this country would be New Spain.²⁸

²⁷ Fernando Cortes, *His five letters of Relation to the Emperor Charles V, translated and edited, with a biographical introduction and notes compiled from original sources by Francis Augustus MacNutt*, Vol 1 (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1908), 186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

After several attempts to keep the Spaniards away from Tenochtitlan – they were even caught in an ambush in the city of Cholula – Cortés and Moctezuma finally met.

Having passed this bridge, we were received by that lord, [Moctezuma], with about two hundred chiefs, all barefooted and dressed in a kind of livery, very rich [...] Moctezuma] came in the middle of the street, with two lords.

After having exchanged presents, Moctezuma spoke in the following manner:

“We have known for a long time, from the chronicles of our forefathers, that neither I, nor those who inhabit this country, are descendants from the aborigines of it, but from strangers who came to it from very distant parts; and we also hold, that our race was brought to these parts by a lord, whose vassals they all were, and who returned to his native country. After a long time he came back, but it was so long, that those who remained here [did not] receive him as their ruler, so he departed. And we have always held that those who descended from him would come to subjugate this country and us, as his vassals; and according to the direction from which you say you come, which is where the sun rises, and from what you tell us of your great lord, or king, who has sent you here, we believe, and hold for certain, that he is our rightful sovereign.”²⁹

Moctezuma repeated the whole story a second time in front of his noble men and concluded: “I hold it to be certain, and you must also hold it thus, that his [Cortés’] sovereign is the one we have been expecting [...] Since our predecessors did not act justly towards their sovereign lord, let us do so, and let us give thanks to our gods, because that which they looked for has come to pass in our times [...] henceforward you will regard and obey this great king, because he is your rightful sovereign [...] All together, and each one singly [...] did promise to comply with all that should be commanded them in the royal name of Your Majesty [...] All this passed before a notary public, who at my request recorded it in due form, in the presence of many Spaniards for witnesses.”³⁰

Unfortunately these documents got lost!

Cortés was impressed of the splendour of Tenochtitlan. He describes how the sacrosanct Moctezuma was enclosed in his palaces and paradise

²⁹ Ibid. 234f.

³⁰ Ibid. 251f.

gardens and lived a life of luxury. His enemies accused him of making himself a god. Cortés emphasized the abominable practices of Aztec religion, its blood offerings and human sacrifices, and the “demonic” polytheism, in which Cortés only identified the two main deities, the god of warfare, Huitzilopochtli, and the god of rain and agriculture, Tlaloc. The idols were regarded as sustainers of the world. When the Spaniards began to destroy the idols, Moctezuma reportedly answered

that they might err in some points of their belief, as it was long since they left their native land, whilst I [...] should know better than they what they should believe [...] and if I would tell them, and explain to them, they would do what I told them as being for the best.³¹

Cortés is trying to portray the conquest as a “Christianization” and “pacification”. In his letter he never mentions Quetzalcoatl, neither as a god nor as a priest-king.

Intrinsic analysis

This historical report states its purpose right at the beginning. Cortés asserts that the political affairs of Mexico and the Roman-German Empire are so much alike that Charles could call himself once again Emperor. He also claims that Mexico and Spain are so similar that the first may be called “New Spain”. These two statements are as impressive as they are unlikely. The Roman-German Empire was a result of a very specific historical constellation, and a good portion of imagination is necessary to see similarities between Mexico and Spain. Subtropical countryside and tropical rain forest, volcanism, great ethnic diversity and exotic customs would not have given the impression of being in Spain. On the other hand Cortés proves to be quite a good observer as we will see below. So why does Cortés insist on these unlikely statements? They are the framework for an even more unbelievable assertion. Moctezuma explains that the Aztecs came from far away across the ocean. They forgot their own religion but now they recognize the king of Spain as their rightful sovereign. In plain language: the Aztecs are descendants of Christian Spaniards. We may assume that there is no serious researcher who sees even a pinch of truth in it.

³¹ Ibid. 261.

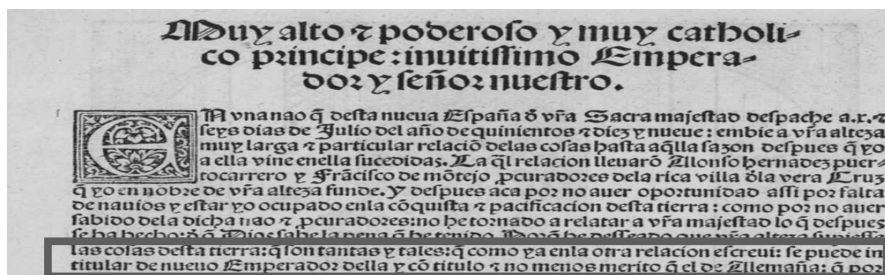


Fig 1-1: Cortés claims that things in Mexico are such that Charles V can call himself emperor again, and that this title is no less valuable than that of Germany.

Now let us consider the account of the Aztecs' migration in detail. They had come from Spain where they had been Christians. Their leader went back to his country and returned so much later that his people no longer wanted to obey him. And so he disappeared again. But since that time the Aztecs had been expecting his return and their subjugation. The strange double return is noticeable. Even Nicholson, who regards Cortés' letter as reliable and as one of the principal sources on Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, finds it incomprehensible. He explains the double return as a problem of translation.³² But we can find a better explanation if we include contemporary history.

Moctezuma denominates Charles V "the one we have been expecting", and he continues, "let us give thanks to our gods, because that which they looked for has come to pass in our times". This is a reference to Matthew 13:16f: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it." Charles V is meant to be the expected Messiah! He is (the descendant of) the Christian leader who disappeared, but who had promised to return. We can find the model for this in the Parousia of Jesus Christ. But it does not explain the double return.

The meaning of the double return is interwoven with the function of this account. This account explains why Moctezuma voluntarily abdicated and why the Aztecs recognized Charles V as their rightful sovereign. That is why "it is no less worthy to warrant your assuming anew the title of Emperor, than is Germany". With this unusual double return Cortés constructed a source of guilt on the part of the Aztecs which was to be

³² Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl*, 86f.

redeemed through Cortés' arrival – now the Aztec noblemen paid homage to the Emperor and swore their oath of allegiance. Cortés made Charles a legal member of the founder's dynasty, elected by the assembly of noblemen. This was how the Roman-German Emperor came to power – through inheritance and election.³³ Why did Cortés spend so much effort constructing such an unlikely invention?

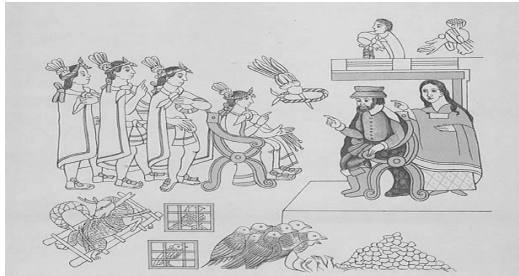


Fig. 1-2: Cortés and his translator Malinche meet Moctezuma. By unknown Tlaxcalan artists – http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/nativeamericans/lg25_1.html Bancroft Library, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5794374>.

The contemporary circumstances

In 1519 the Spanish king Charles I was elected Emperor of the “Holy Roman-German Empire”. The Spanish parliament, the Cortes, was very concerned about this accumulation of power, so Charles promised to take the Imperial Crown only to fulfil “higher” ambitions and not to make any conquests.³⁴ In this context Hernán Cortés began his conquest of Mexico, at his own risk and clearly against the orders of his superior, the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, and took his envoy prisoner. At this point he was in open rebellion. If Cortés wanted to avoid prison and the loss of his assets he needed a very good justification.

Cortés had studied law in Salamanca³⁵ and was well acquainted with

³³ The future emperor had to be a descendant of emperors and was elected by the “Council of Electors”. See also Frankl, “Die Begriffe des mexikanischen Kaisertums und der Weltmonarchie,” 7–15.

³⁴ Cortes, 1882, 294f.

³⁵ Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 5 vols (Madrid: Imp. De

the Siete Partidas of Alfons X, Augustin's *De Civitate Dei*³⁶ and the traditional view that Spain was to inherit the Roman-German Empire.³⁷ Even the idea of the *monarchia mundi* as the purpose of the Imperium Romanum was received in Spain,³⁸ so Cortés could have been familiar with the central conception of the Roman Empire.³⁹ Cortés implied in his account that the Aztecs had come from Spain where they had been Christians. So they had already been subjects of the Spanish Crown, even before the Tratado de Tordesillas, in which Pope Alexander VI had defined control over the newly conquered colonial world in 1494. If this had been true, the superior of Cortés would not have been the colonial official but the King of Spain himself. In this case Cortés' action could not be called a rebellion.

But his move was even better. The King of Spain was also the Roman-German Emperor. Cortés did not refer to the Spanish crown, which ruled centrally, directly and powerfully, but to an Empire, an equivalent of the European one. The Roman-German Emperor transferred his powers to the regent of the territory. By analogy, Cortés would become the real regent of Mexico. Quite an alternative to prison and poverty!

In order to make his juridical argumentation secure Cortés went one step further and turned his high-handed conquest into the fulfilment of salvation-history. Emperor Charles V is said to be the expected Messiah of the New World. Unlike how we would think these days, this was the most effective argument because according to medieval opinion the emperor was the representative of Jesus Christ and the empire the beginning of the Messianic empire. Charles was the last supporter of this medieval idea of imperial power.⁴⁰ This can already be seen in his title: *totius mundi ac*

Miguel Ginesta, 1875, 3), XXVII; Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista dela Nueva España* (Mexico: Nuevo Mundo, 1943–1944), chap. CCIV.

³⁶ Frankl, "Hernán Cortés y la tradición de las Siete Partidas," 9–74.

³⁷ Frankl, "Die Begriffe des mexikanischen Kaisertums und der Weltmonarchie," 6.

³⁸ Juan de Torquemada, *Opusculum ad honorem Romani imperii et dominorum Romanorum*, 1468, published in the article of H. Jedin, "Juan de Torquemada und das Imperium Romanum," *Archivum Fratrum Preadicatorum* 12 (1942): 267–278, English translation Thomas M Izbicki/Cary J. Nederman, *Three Tracts on Empire: Engelbert of Admont, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, and Juan de Torquemada* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 2000), 113–125; Ulcurrun, *Catholicum opus* – first published in 1525; speech of Pedro Ruiz de la Mota from 31 March 1520 – in Cortes 1882, 293–298; Antonio de Guevara began his work in 1518.

³⁹ Frankl, "Die Begriffe des mexikanischen Kaisertums und der Weltmonarchie," 21.

⁴⁰ Karl Brandi, *Kaiser Karl V., Werden und Schicksal einer Persönlichkeit und*