

HERNAN CORTES

In the spring of 1519 a Spanish expedition of eleven ships set sail from Cuba. On board were 508 soldiers, 16 horses, and several pieces of artillery. The first land they sighted was the coast of Yucatán, once the heart of the Mayan empire. The leader of this small Spanish band was a young adventurer named Hernán Cortés. Little did he realize that his arrival coincided precisely with the foreseen return of the Plumed Serpent. On Holy Thursday, Cortés moored his ships off the Mexican coast and founded the city of Veracruz in the name of the Emperor Charles.

Another emperor, named Moctezuma, received the news. "The gods have come back. Their lances spit fire. Their warriors have two heads and six legs, and they live in houses that float." The whole Aztec empire was filled with foreboding, as comets raced across the sky in broad daylight.

Cortés had not come to the New World to repeat the destiny of his father in the Old World. He had come to fashion his own destiny, a destiny of wealth and glory achieved not through inheritance, but through personal determination and a bit of luck. He became one of the great figures of the European Renaissance, the perfect Machiavellian blend of will power and good luck as he embarked on one of the great epic adventures of all times, the conquest of the Aztec empire.

There were constant skirmishes with the local tribes along the coast, but the chieftains quickly learned that these intruders could not be defeated in battle. Word reached the Aztecs in the interior that they were armed with lightning and dressed in armor made of silver and rock. To placate them, the Indians sent gifts of gold and other precious objects. Then one day, Cortés was presented with tribute of a different kind: a gift of 20 slave girls was delivered to the Spanish encampment. Out of these he chose one described by the chronicler as "outgoing, meddlesome, and beautiful," her name was "Malinsi," Cortés took her as his interpreter and lover.

The Spanish soldiers were divided between their desire for fame and wealth and their fear of defeat and death. "We're only 500," they told Cortés, and he answered, "Then our hearts must be doubly courageous." "We are dying of fevers and Indian attacks," others complained. "Then let us bury our dead at night so that our enemies will think that we are immortal."

"Let us go back to Cuba, let us sail back," others said in frank mutiny. "But there are no ships," Cortés answered, "I have sunk the ships, right here. There is no way but up, there is no retreat. We must go forward to Mexico and see if this great Moctezuma is as great as he proclaims himself to be." So, the soldiers cheered and acclaimed Cortés as their leader, and all cried "Forward, to Mexico, to Mexico!"

On a causeway leading to the city, one of the great encounters of history now took place. Exposed and outnumbered, Cortés could count on nothing but the courage and resolution

of his men. But to Moctezuma, he was a god, the Plumed Serpent who was returning to his people. "Welcome," he said, "we have been waiting for you. This is your home." Moctezuma was ruled by fate. Cortés was ruled by will. In the weeks that followed, the emperor found himself held as a hostage, while Aztec images were destroyed and Christian altars were erected in their place.

The Omens as Described by Sahagun's Informants

The first bad omen: Ten years before the Spaniards first came here, a bad omen appeared in the sky. It was like a flaming ear of corn, or a fiery signal, or the blaze of daybreak; it seemed to bleed fire, drop by drop, like a wound in the sky. It was wide at the base and narrow at the peak, and it shone in the very heart of the heavens.

This is how it appeared: it shone in the eastern sky in the middle of the night. It appeared at midnight and burned till the break of day, but it vanished at the rising of the sun. The time during which it appeared to us was a full year, beginning in the year 12-House.

When it first appeared, there was great outcry and confusion. The people clapped their hands against their mouths; they were amazed and frightened, and asked themselves what it could mean.

The second bad omen: The temple of Huitzilopochtli burst into flames. It is thought that no one set it afire, that it burned down of its own accord. The name of its divine site was Tlacateccan [House of Authority].

The flames swiftly destroyed all the woodwork of the temple. When the fire was first seen, the people shouted: "Mexicanos, come running! We can put it out! Bring your water jars ... !" But when they threw water on the blaze it only flamed higher. They could not put it out, and the temple burned to the ground.

The third bad omen: A temple was damaged by a lightning-bolt. This was the temple of Xiuhtecuhtli which was built of straw, in the place known as Tzonmolco. It was raining that day, but it was only a light rain or a drizzle, and no thunder was heard. Therefore the lightning-bolt was taken as an omen. The people said: "The temple was struck by a blow from the sun."

The fourth bad omen: Fire streamed through the sky while the sun was still shining. It was divided into three parts. It flashed out from where the sun sets and raced straight to where the sun rises, giving off a shower of sparks like a red-hot coal. When the people saw its long train streaming through the heavens, there was a great outcry and confusion, as if they were shaking a thousand little bells.

The fifth bad omen: The wind lashed the water until it boiled. It was as if it were boiling with rage, as if it were shattering itself in its frenzy. It began from far off, rose high in the

air and dashed against the walls of the houses. The flooded houses collapsed into the water. This was in the lake that is next to us.

The sixth bad omen: The people heard a weeping woman night after night. She passed by in the middle of the night, wailing and crying out in a loud voice: "My children, we must flee far away from this city!" At other times she cried: "My children, where shall I take you?"

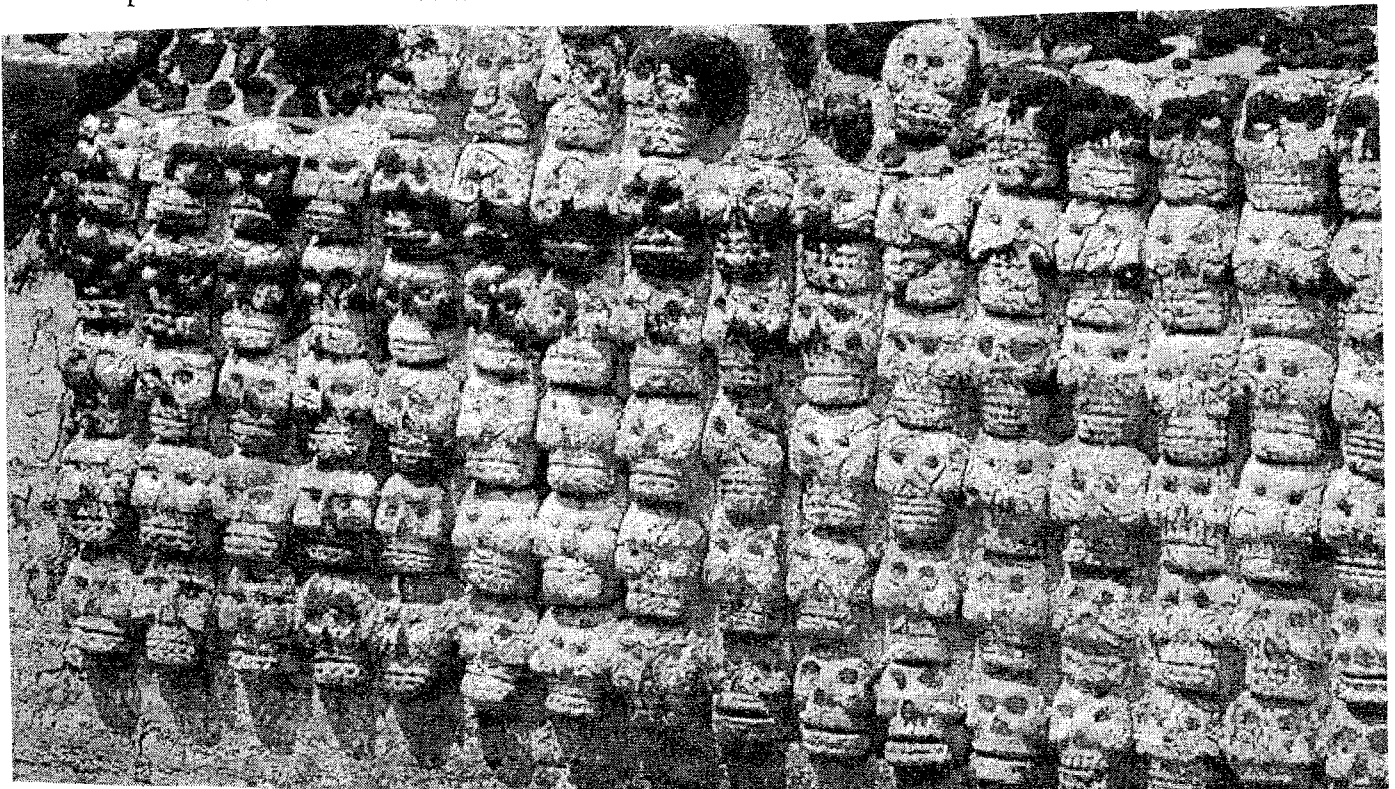
The seventh bad omen: Monstrous beings appeared in the streets of the city: deformed men with two heads but only one body. They were taken to the Black House and shown to Motecuhzoma, but the moment he saw them, they all vanished away.

Fifty-three Spaniards Are Sacrificed

The Aztecs took their prisoners to Yacacolco, hurrying them along the road under the strictest guard. Some of the captives were weeping, some were keening, and others were beating their palms against their mouths.

When they arrived in Yacacolco, they were lined up in long rows. One by one they were forced to climb to the temple platform, where they were sacrificed by the priests. The Spaniards went first, then their allies, and all were put to death.

As soon as the sacrifices were finished, the Aztecs ranged the Spaniards' heads in rows on pikes. They also lined up their horses' heads. They placed the horses' heads at the bottom and the heads of the Spaniards above, and arranged them all so that the faces were toward the sun. However, they did not display any of the allies' heads. All told, fifty-three Spaniards and four horses were sacrificed there in Yacacolco.



There were several forms to open the rib cage in order to gain access to the heart. It all depended on the geographical and cultural context, and perhaps on the kind of victim that was to be sacrificed.

Whatever the considerations, you should consider the following approaches:

1.- Midaxial thoracotomy. It consisted on cutting the skin and flesh along the breast bone, which then was fractured in halves longitudinally to its axis. It was done using a stone chisel and hammer, or, in the Maya regions, using serrated instruments carved from bone, obsidian, or other stones. Its advantage is that it provided a good, frontal access to the heart, but it took a long time to perform.

2.- Transversal thoracotomy. It was pretty similar to the previous method, but the difference is that on this case the wound was opened transversal to the body's axis, starting between the 2nd and 3rd ribs, running across the breastbone, which was fractured in half transversally to its axis, and ended between the 2nd and 3rd ribs of the opposite side. Its main advantage is that it provided a superb access to the heart, and since both pleural cavities were exposed, both lungs collapsed, causing the victim to faint, ceasing its struggles, and allowing the sacrificer to cut the arteries and ligaments while the heart was still beating. This approach would cause a gaping wound that looked as if a large semicircular section of the chest had been removed, especially if you saw the body from the side. This is consistent with the standard wounds pictured at the codices.

3.- Intercostal approach. It consisted of opening a wound between the 2nd and the 3rd left ribs, that ended at the edge of the breastbone. The sacrificer then inserted his hand and literally tore the heart from the chest.

If you look at a medical manual for heart surgery, you will find that those 3 methods are still handy when performing surgery, and that the preparations are very similar to those used by the aztec sacrificer, that is, the patient is placed on his back, on a supine position, with his arms extended over his head, with a pull downward that causes the chest to be in a hyperextended position.

There was another method used at least by the mayas to gain access to the heart, and that was cutting through the victim's belly, tearing the diaphragm, and cutting the heart ligaments from the inside. The disadvantage of this method is that the victim would literally disembowel himself during the procedure

With vastly superior numbers, the Aztec legions drove the Spaniards from the city and back across the causeway. But Cortés returned. He built ships to transport his men across the lake, putting his faith in gunpowder, horses, and steel.

Cortés finally vanquished the Aztec capital after a bloody siege in 1521. The last Aztec poet cried out in his despair: Where shall we go now, oh my friends? The smoke is rising, the fog is spreading, the waters on the lake are red. Cry, oh cry, for we have lost the Aztec nation."

When it was all over, when the Emperor Moctezuma had been silenced by his own people, who stoned him to death, when the conquistador himself, Hernán Cortés, had been silenced by the crown of Spain who denied him political power, perhaps only the voice of La Malinche, of this extraordinary woman, remained. She was the interpreter, she was also the lover, the woman of Cortés. Sex and language: she established the central fact of our multiracial civilization, which was that it is mestizo: that it is of mixed blood. She bore the child of the conqueror. She was the mother, symbolically, of the first Mexican, the first child of Indian and Spanish blood, the first child who was both European and American.

Name _____

Characteristics and Facts about Hernan Cortes:

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