

Essay Five — Cortés  
“Malevolent Heaven”

Russell J Lowke, January 12th, 2002.

Henry King's 1947 film, *Captain from Castile*, although portraying a highly realistic image of the conquistadors, fails to address the major issues regarding the conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés. The treatment of the Aztec natives is shallow, and Montezuma, their king, never makes an on-screen appearance. The frequent battles, resulting in the death of tens of thousands of Aztecs, are only alluded to, while the only evidence of Aztec sacrifices shown is blood seen on the temple steps. Instead, Director King creates a grand adventure of the Spanish conquest, and celebrates the triumph of European Christianity over the natives. He concludes his movie with "God bless this land... it will blossom forth under the cross of Christianity, a haven for the weak, a refuge for the strong, with all the good of the old world and none of its ills... [confident that] they have participated in the opening of a New World."<sup>1</sup>

The Aztec people of the early 16th century ruled a large empire in what is now central and southern Mexico. Their religion cultivated the idea of a malevolent heaven, where mankind was at the mercy of supernatural powers.<sup>2</sup> They worshipped the sun, believing it was their divine duty to provide it with *tlaxcaltiliztli* ("nourishment"), consisting of human blood and human hearts, torn out using a sharp flint razor. These were presented to the alter fresh, and still palpitating. It was believed that without *tlaxcaltiliztli*, the sun would fail to shine, and thus the survival of the universe depended upon their offerings of blood.<sup>3</sup> Annually, a *minimum* of twenty thousand people were slaughtered by the Aztecs in sacrifice to the gods.<sup>4</sup> At one instance, during the dedication of the great temple of Huitzilopotchli (1486), seventy thousand were killed in a ceremony that lasted several days, and involved a procession of victims nearly two miles long.<sup>5</sup> The Aztec hunger for human sacrifice, above all else, shocked the Spanish. Collis, in her book, *Cortés & Montezuma*, states Cortés's reaction that, "neither he nor any of his force could stand the human sacrifices a moment longer. So horror struck were they that even the risk of losing everything seemed preferable to winking at the practice."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry King, *Captain from Castile*, (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation:1947)

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Collis, *Cortés & Montezuma*, (U.S.A: 1954):51.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, (New York: 1843):47.

<sup>4</sup> The heads of the sacrificed were customarily preserved. In one building the companions of Cortés counted one hundred and thirty-six thousand heads. The rest of the body, the limbs in particular, were eaten, being served up at ceremonial banquets for the warriors. — Prescott, 48.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Prescott, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Collis, 84.

The Aztecs did not offer their own people for immolation. Hearts were acquired through war, which was waged principally to gather victims for sacrifice. A paradox resulted, as the goodwill of heaven was maintained through perpetual conflict.<sup>7</sup> The result was a fanatic culture, and a harsh administration, permanently organized for war. Cortés had to successfully subdue the Aztecs, a civilization of twenty million; this required other factors than just European technological superiority in arms.

The Aztecs believed that the gods were the heavenly bodies, and used astronomy to determine the exact day and hour to perform sacrifices. It was a matter of life and death that these offerings be timed at the most favorable moments. Thus, a calendar, more perfect than any yet devised, was worked out in immense detail. This provided knowledge of the intentions of the gods, and dictated times of celestial wars, which were marked on the calendar as ill-omened dates. One such day was the return of the god Quetzalcoatl, a principal god who had descended from heaven in mortal form and, as a priest king, preached against human sacrifice. For this he was expelled by the rival god Tezcatlipoca. On leaving, he uttered the prophecy, "I will return in a One Reed year and reestablish my rule."<sup>8</sup> The Aztecs looked confidently to the return of their benevolent deity, and a general feeling prevailed that his return was at hand, a feeling greatly encouraged by rumors of white men, resembling descriptions of Quetzalcoatl,<sup>9</sup> and bearing thunder and lightning.<sup>10</sup> Astronomy predicted that Quetzalcoatl would return on his own personal name day, a 9 Wind day.<sup>11</sup>

As chance would have it, Cortés did in fact land on the predicted day, confirming Montezuma's belief that he was the divine incarnation of Quetzalcoatl, returning to take away his kingdom for wrong done by his ancestors. To attack him, to destroy him, was unthinkable; the Aztecs were more terrified of a god dying than anything else, and Montezuma could never bring himself to give the order to destroy Cortés and his men.<sup>12</sup> When Cortés anchored off the mainland, he had no idea that he was seen as god in mortal form, whose second coming had been foretold.<sup>13</sup> With the Spaniards also arrived a more sinister threat, smallpox. Within a matter of years, smallpox

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Collis, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Collis, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Tradition was definite about Quetzalcoatl's looks. He would have a white skin and a full black beard, a very unusual appearance for those parts. — Collis, 55.

<sup>10</sup> William H. Prescott, 172.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Collis, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Collis, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Collis, 61.

would devastate the Native Mexicans, reducing them from 20 million to 1.6 million while leaving the Spanish unaffected.<sup>14</sup>

Surprisingly, Director King, alludes to the role played by prediction in the conquest. He features a hunchback astrologer by name of Potao who when asked why he joined Cortés, replies, “I signed on to give captain Cortés the divine wisdom of what the stars have in store for him...” Later, when asked what occurred during a battle, Potao exclaims, “Well I’ll tell you, the credit in history will go to Cortés, but I shiver to think what would have happened, had I not been there to guide him by the stars!” Unfortunately Director King makes no effort to portray the Aztecs miscalculation of Cortés as a God, nor does he linger in the complexities of their religion of sacrifice. The battle in question, the only one on the movie, is likewise omitted, save for Potao’s description.

The Aztecs perpetuated a self-fulfilling prophesy, which with some ill luck, came true. Their highly superstitious culture, reliant on prediction and human sacrifice, invented a day when a great god would come to abolish their practices. The appearance of the Spaniards agitated these predictions, and the very existence of this mythology allowed Cortés to accomplish what was foretold, aided by prophesy and smallpox. Director King idolizes the Cortés invasion, exploiting it as an exciting circumstance for a love story, while celebrating in the introduction of Christianity to the New World. However, he clearly fails to justify the conquest, or even to adequately depict the native inhabitants. The sacrificial habits of the Aztecs could perhaps have furnished the best defense for their conquest.

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<sup>14</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, (U.S.A: Norton, 1997):210.

## Bibliography

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