
PART TWO

The Documents

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Forebodings and Omens

For the indigenous peoples of Mexico the conquest brought the world they had created. In an attempt to decipher the future of the unfolding events of the conquest, Nahua account books record signs and omens that preceded the Spaniards' arrival.

Although these omens appear pre-Columbian and indigenous, a closer look raises some questions. There is evidence that the Nahua peoples were not alarmed by the arrival of the Spaniards and rather than viewing them as an almost supernatural force, they saw them as simply another group of powerful and dangerous people who needed to be controlled or accommodated. After the conquest, however, from the perspective of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, the impact of the Spanish conquest was the most profound. Supernatural explanations for the events of the conquest were the clearest. Nahua emperors recorded many miraculous omens — the usual number when the Nahua expected sets of anything — and on Moctezuma's bewilderment in the face of the Spanish invasion may be a postconquest interpretation by informants who wanted to please the Spaniards or who resented the failure of Moctezuma to repel the invaders.



Figure 3. Moctezuma observes a comet, an omen of death.
Source: From the *Codex Duran*, in Serge Gruzinski, *Painting the Cosmos* (Paris, 1992), frontispiece. Servicio de Reprografía de la Biblioteca Naciónal de México.

the warriors of Tenochtitlan to provide leadership. In the counts of the omens, the story of the return of Quetzalcoatl play an important role in explaining Moctezuma's behavior set of events, but that too may be a postconquest gloss on the story. Included here also are Nahua pictorial representations of strange events that preceded Cortés's arrival (see Figure 3).

Omens announcing a cataclysmic change were not unique to the Nahua version of events as we see from the second extract from the *Chronicles of Michoacán*, a postconquest text based on indigenous legends handed down from the Tarascan peoples, traditional enemies of the Aztecs. The Tarascans also believed that there were miraculous events that preceded the Spanish arrival. Finally, it became common for Spanish accounts to include such stories.

FRAY BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN

stories also made the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of] even more exotic to European readers.

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From the *Florentine Codex*

The following selection from James Lockhart's translation text provided by Sahagún's informants shows how miraculous signs and events were set out at the inception of the nations of momentous events to come. Sahagún's informants came from Tlatelolco, but similar stories were also included in those that came from other Nahua communities.

Twelfth book, which speaks of how war was waged here of Mexico.

First chapter, where it is said that before the Spaniards this land, and before the people who live here were known appeared and were seen signs and omens.

Ten years before the arrival of the Spaniards an omen in the sky, like a flame or tongue of fire, like the light appeared to be throwing off [sparks] and seemed to pierce wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. It looked as though the very middle of the sky, its very heart and center. It stood to the east. When it came out at midnight it appeared. When dawn came, then the sun on coming out effaced it. It showed itself (it was in [the year] Twelve House that) when it appeared there would be an outcry, and people hands against their mouths as they yelled. People were they lamented.

The second omen that happened here in Mexico v own accord the house of the devil Huitzilopochtli, wha

mountain, named Tlacatecçan, burned and flared up; no one just took fire itself. When the fire was seen, the wooden ready burning. Tongues and tassels of flame were coming very quickly they consumed all the building's beams. The outcry. They said, "O Mexica, let everyone come running out, [bring] your water jars!" But when they threw water extinguish it, it blew up all the more. It could not be put entirely.

The third omen was that a temple was struck by lightening thunderbolt. It was just a building of straw at the temple Xiuhteuctli, called Tzonmolco. The reason it was taken for that it was not raining hard, just drizzling. It was said that when the sun was shining, nor was thunder heard.

The fourth omen was that while the sun was still out it split into three parts. It began off to the west and headed in the direction of east, looking as if it were sprinkling glowing coals. It had which reached a great distance. When it was seen, there was a cry, like the sound of rattles.

The fifth omen was that the water [of the lake] boiled and caused the wind that caused it. It bubbled and made exploding high in the air. It reached the foundations of the houses; it and they collapsed. This is the great lake that extends around Mexico.

The sixth omen was that many times a woman would be seen along weeping and shouting. She cried out loudly at night, "Children, we are about to go forever." Sometimes she said, "Children, where am I to take you?"

The seventh omen was that once the water folk were hunting and caught an ash-colored bird, like a crane. Then they brought it to Tlillan calmecac to show it to Moteucçoma; the sun was still full day. On top of its head was something like a circular, seeming to be perforated, where the sky, the stars, the Fire Drill [constellation] could be seen. And Moteucçoma took it as a bad omen when he saw the stars and the Fire Drill. The sages looked at the bird's head he saw something like a multitude coming along, coming bunched, outfitted for war, carrying heads of deer. Then he called the soothsayers, the sages, and said, "You not know what I've seen, something like a multitude

FRAY MARTÍN DE JESÚS DE LA CORUÑA

The eighth omen was that many times people app people with two heads but one body; they took them to the cac and showed them to Moteucçoma. When he had se disappeared.

FRAY MARTÍN DE JESÚS DE LA COR *Popular Auguries and Prophetic Dre*

The Tarascan peoples who dwelled to the northwest of Tenoc a relationship of respectful hostility with the Mexica. They to the arrival of the Spaniards was previewed by strange events (called the Cazonci) had successfully resisted Mexica expa area, the present-day Mexican state of Michoacán. After i this region by the Spaniards, Franciscan missionaries soon between 1539 and 1541, one of them, Fray Martín de Jesús wrote a description of the province and its indigenous pe hagún's work it was based on interviews with indigeno although the author's own biases and commentaries appe the text.

These people say that during the four years before the S to the land, their temples were burned from top to bot closed them and they would be burned again, and that the as their temples were made of flagstones. They did not k of this except that they held it to be an augury. Likewise large comets in the sky and thought that their gods were destroy a village and that they were to do it for them. The tate parts of their dreams and do as much of what they dr can. They report their dreams to the chief priest who in tu information to the Cazonci. They say that the poor who and sacrifice their ears dream about their gods who are reing told them that they would be given food and that they

such and such Christian girls. If this were a kind of omen tell it to the Cazonci. A priest related that, before the Span had dreamed that people would come bringing strange turned out to be the horses which he had not known. In th people entered the houses of the chief priests and slept tl horses. They also brought many chickens that soiled th said he dreamed this two or three times in considerable not know what it was until the Spaniards came to this p the Spaniards reached the city, they lodged in the hous priests with their horses where they held their prayer vigil. Before the Spaniards arrived they all had smallpos from which large numbers of people died, along with n high families. All the Spaniards of the time are unanimous disease was general throughout New Spain, for which re given credence. The people are in accord in that measles were unknown until the Spaniards brought them to the la

*This is not the contradiction it appears to be. The argument of th one. The Tarascan Indians maintained that these diseases came to Mich Spanish, which would make the Spanish statement true as far as it go point out that they were brought to Michoacán by Tarascans who, wher Mexico City, contacted Spaniards and Aztecs with the diseases and tl back home with them. The *Relación*, as well as other sources, supports t the Tarascans sent people to Mexico City in response to a plea from while there, they saw a great amount of death and destruction from war

DIEGO DURÁN

From *The History of the Indies of New*

Soon after the conquest when European authors began to : peoples of Mesoamerica, they incorporated aspects of indige number of Spanish authors, seeking to give their works a fea tivity while admitting the possible divine hand of God in t cluded the indigenous accounts of omens. Diego Durán (152 one of those writers. Born in Seville, Spain, he came to Ne ico) as a child. He lived in Texcoco, a center of indigenoi

*learned to speak Nahuatl fluently. He became a priest of the .
der and eventually produced learned books on Nahua religi
His works were not published in his lifetime but they circu
manuscript form. Many other contemporary authors used
here is an example of the appropriation of omens into a St
tion of indigenous actions which also touches on the impo
graphic representation as a historical method.*

Moteczoma was so disturbed that he was half desirous to which had been predicted take place immediately. In this preoccupation he called the chieftains of the wards, asking if anyone had dreamed anything regarding the arrival of the strange thing he so feared. He told them to reveal these dreams even if they might be contrary to his desires, since he wished to know more about this much-talked-of matter.

The heads of the wards told him that they had dreamed what had they seen or heard anything about this affair. He answered, "I beg you, my friends, to tell all the old men and women of the city to inform me of whatever dreams they may have had, be they good or bad. Also, tell the priests to reveal any visions they may have seen as ghosts or other phantoms that appear at night in the various places. Let them ask these apparitions about things to come. It would be good to give this advice to those who wander about in the streets at night if they encounter the woman who roams the streets weeping, let them ask her why she weeps and moans."

Soon Moteczoma was notified that certain old people had dreamed strange things and they were brought before him. Said one of them, "Powerful lord, we do not wish to offend your ears or fill you with anxiety to make you ill. However, we are forced to obey your command and describe our dreams to you. Know then, that these last nights of Sleep have shown us the temple of Huitzilopochtli burning in full flames, the stones falling one by one until it was totally destroyed. We also saw Huitzilopochtli himself fallen, cast down upon the earth. This is what we have dreamed!"

Moteczoma then asked the old women and received the answer, "My son, do not be troubled in your heart for what we have told you, although it has frightened us much. In our dreams we

reach the temple and this too was demolished. We saw t
tains and lords filled with fright, abandoning the city and
the hills. This is what we have dreamed!"

Moteczoma listened attentively to what the old men a
described. When he saw that it was not in his favor but th
the earlier ill omens he ordered that the dreamers be ca
they were to be given food in small measures until they st
After this no one wished to tell his dreams to Moteczoma

Moteczoma also consulted the people of the provinc
dreams and as they refused to reveal anything they were j
of the old men who had been incarcerated exclaimed, "I
know in one word what is to become of him. Those whc
the injuries and toils with which he has afflicted us are a
way. I say no more."

When the sovereign heard this prediction he said to
"Go there and question him again! Ask him what kind of
who are coming, what road they will follow and what tl
are!" However, when the messengers tried to comply with
they found that all the prisoners had disappeared from tl
ers, fearful of the wrath of the king, prostrated themsel
sovereign, telling him of their innocence. They claimed
been responsible for the escape but that it had been ack
the prisoners' own magic. Moteczoma ordered the jailers
to the towns of all those who had prophesied evil thing
their houses," he cried out, "kill their wives and children
places where the houses had been, until you reach water
sessions are to be destroyed. And if any one of them is
temple he is to be stoned and his body thrown to the wilc

All of this was done and the wives and children of the
ropes about their necks, were dragged through the city, t
cerers and magicians were never seen again.

From that day on the heart of Moteczoma was filled
ness and affliction that he was never seen with a smiling
He fled from all contact with others and locked himself t
chambers with Texiptla to whom he communicated all tha
and magicians had told him.

... Moteczoma became even more worried and attemp
what kind of people had come to his land, their place of

wished to have a painting made of them. He wished the drawn in his presence but said that it must be done secre

Teotlamacazqui answered that he was willing to have made, whereupon he ordered that the best artist of Mexico be brought. Moteczoma told this man that he should not reveal that might happen, under pain of death. The painter was claiming that he was not a man to uncover secrets of such a mighty lord. His paints were brought to him and Teotlamacazqui told him what he should depict. The artist drew a picture of the way it had been seen, showing the Spaniards with their red and white faces. He painted their clothing in different colors upon their heads and their swords in their belts. When Moteczoma saw this he marveled and gazed upon the painting for a long time. He looked, he said to Teotlamacazqui, "Were these things ever been painted here?" The answer was, "Yes, O lord, they are true; they have not lied or added anything!"

Moteczoma paid the artist for his work, saying, "Brother, answer me this question: by any chance do you know about what you have painted? Did your ancestors leave you a description of these men who were to arrive in this land?" I answered, "Powerful lord, I will not lie to you or deceive you. I am not an image of the god. Therefore I will tell you that I and my ancestors were occupied with any arts save those of painting pictorial symbols. My ancestors were merely the artists of past kings. They pictured what they were ordered. Therefore, I know nothing about what you ask me; if I tried to answer your question my answer would be false."

Moteczoma then ordered him to question the other painters of books, asking if they possessed some picture coming from their ancestors regarding those who might come to this land. The artist agreed to do so and for several days he questioned the painter. The painter was unable to find out anything certain and turned to Moteczoma and told him that he had discovered nothing regarding these things.

Seeing that his attempts had been ineffectual, Moteczoma sent for the oldest painters of books from Malinalco, the hot country of the south, together with those of Chalco. When they arrived, he sent them to tell him if they knew anything about strangers who were to arrive in the land, asking them what kind of men might come.

When these things had been asked of them, the Malir picture and showed it to him. It portrayed men with a single foreheads like cyclops. They said that their forebears had these were the ones who were to come to this country. Other men in this picture were one-legged. The painters of the south displayed a drawing in which there appeared a fish from the waist down, explaining to Moteczoma that these ones who were to come to this land. Others showed them which were half man, half snake. But in the end, none were sent anything that looked like the painting of the Spaniard.

Having gotten rid of those painters, Moteczoma sent for Cuatlahuac and Mizquic, reminding them that they were of the Toltecs, great wise men, and that they should be able to answer his questions. These men informed him, through their ancestors, that their ancestors had left a tradition that the sons of Quetzalcoatl were to come to these lands and that they were to possess the lands that which had been theirs in ancient times. They were again reminded that which they had hidden in the hills, in the woods and mountains. They showed the monarch what kind of men they did not look like those in his painting and therefore he bad them thank them for what they had told him and described.

Moteczoma was about to call the painters of books from the noble Tillancalqui Teoctlamacazqui said to him, 'do not tire yourself or waste time in questioning so many of them will be able to tell you what you desire to know as concerning a certain man from Xochimilco whom I know well. His name is Quilaztli and he is well informed in all matters which concern ancient painted books. If you wish I will bring him to you; I will tell you what you wish to know and he will produce his antique paintings.' Moteczoma thanked him, commanding him to bring the old man immediately. When the latter appeared he brought with him his painted manuscripts. Moteczoma, Angry Lord, who received him with honor, found that he was a venerable old man and of fine appearance.

Said Quilaztli to the sovereign, "O mighty lord, if because of the truth I am to die, nevertheless I am here in your presence to do what you wish to me!" Before showing him the paper on which mounted men would come to this land in a great number, he said, "This structure was to lodge many men, serving them as .

would wear round coverings. Other human beings were them, mounted on beasts similar to deer and others on would fly like the wind. These men were to possess the co all its cities, multiply in great numbers and be owners of g precious stones.

"So that you may see," continued Quilaztli, "that wh truth, behold it drawn here! This painting was bequeathed ancestors." He then took out an ancient picture on which the ship and the men dressed in the same manner as th king already knew through his painting. There he also s mounted on horses or on flying eagles, all of them dress colors, wearing their hats and swords.

Moteczoma, seeing the similarity between what the scribed and what appeared upon his painting, almost lost began to weep and to show anguish. Uncovering his che he cried out, "O brother Quilaztli, I now see that your ance illy wise and well informed. Only a few days ago the men shown me on your painting arrived in this land from the ea in the wooden house that you have described, dressed in ors and manner that appear in your drawing. I will shou dered that they be painted: behold them here! However, soles me; I have sent them a present and begged them peace. They have obeyed me, departed, and I doubt if the

"It is possible, O mighty prince," exclaimed Quilaztli, "I and went away again! Listen to the words I will say to you, willing to have you annihilate me, my children and my de hold, before two years have passed, or at the most three, will return to these lands. Their coming was meant only t nient way to return. Even though they said to you that the ing to their native country, do not believe them! They will but will turn back when they have gone half way!"

Three years later, when Moteczoma had almost fo things, news came from the sea that a hill was moving to the waters again.