

CHAPTER
16**HISTORYMAKERS** **Montezuma II**
*Defeated Priest-King***Section 3**

"Throughout all time we have worshipped our own gods and thought that they were good. I do not doubt the goodness of the god whom you worship, but if he is good for Spain, our gods are equally good for Mexico, so do not trouble to speak to us any more about them at present."—Montezuma II, speaking to Hernando Cortés

The Aztecs were powerful people who ruled central Mexico for many decades. Underpinning this society was the people's devotion to their gods. The Aztec emperor not only ruled the empire but also forged this needed religious connection. Montezuma II became that emperor in 1502. He had a profound sense of his responsibility to the Aztecs and dedication to their religion. However, he was unable to meet their greatest challenge and died tragically at their hands.

Montezuma, born around 1480, was trained in both war and the priesthood, the pillars of Aztec society. He proved capable at both. He once captured six enemy soldiers in battle and was devoted to Huitzilopochtli, the war god. He was also appointed the high priest. In 1502, his uncle the emperor died, and Montezuma replaced him. One of the Spaniards who later invaded Mexico described him as "a man of medium stature, with a certain gravity and royal majesty, which showed clearly who he was even to those who did not know him."

Montezuma expanded the areas of Aztec control. He required neighboring peoples to pay heavy tribute to the Aztecs. He also enacted new laws that raised the power of traditional noble families and reduced that of the merchants and common people. He hoped to strengthen the government with these policies. However, they only caused internal and external resentment that would help end the empire.

Both the Aztecs and the deeply religious Montezuma probably looked with anxiety to 1519. That was the year that another god, the fair-skinned Quetzalcoatl, was supposed to return from the east and claim the Aztec Empire. In the ten years preceding this fateful time, several events occurred that offered evil omens for the Aztec people, such as a temple that burned and comets that crossed the sky. In addition, one legend says that when a huge stone was being taken to build a new sacrificial altar, it stopped itself, spoke of disaster to come, and then crashed through the bridge on which it rested.

In 1519, coincidentally, Hernando Cortés and his fellow Spaniards arrived on the coast of Mexico. Many Aztecs, perhaps including Montezuma, felt at first that Quetzalcoatl had indeed arrived. As a result, the emperor tried to prevent the Spaniards from reaching the Aztec capital. He sent gifts made of gold, but those only further convinced the Spaniards of Aztec wealth. Montezuma also attempted an ambush of the Spaniards, but Cortés was warned of the trap. He reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán on November 18, 1519.

Montezuma received the Spaniards as guests, but soon the situation soured. Cortés seized Montezuma as a hostage, so he could run the empire through him. Cortés hoped to convince him to adopt the Christian religion, but Montezuma refused. Meanwhile, other Aztecs felt that their emperor was responding too weakly to this foreign threat.

One day Cortés destroyed the face of a statue of Huitzilopochtli. After that, Montezuma joined in the plots against the Spaniards, but it was too late for him. He had lost his people's confidence. In the spring of 1520, while Cortés was away, the man in command ordered Spanish soldiers to attack some Aztecs during a religious ceremony. The massacre provoked a revolt. When Cortés returned, he found his men trapped. He took Montezuma to the walls of the citadel where the Spaniards were surrounded by the angry Aztecs. The emperor, now discredited, was unable to persuade his people to stop. He was struck by the sharp stones they were throwing and three days later died.

Questions

1. **Recognizing Effects** How did Montezuma's efforts to stop the Spaniards work against him?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did the Aztec people not listen to Montezuma?
3. **Making Inferences** What prompted Montezuma to object to Cortés's actions?