

# Sources from the Past

## First Impressions of Spanish Forces

As the Spanish army made its way to Tenochtitlan, Motecuzoma dispatched a series of emissaries to communicate with Cortés and learn his intentions. The following document, based on indigenous accounts but filtered through imperial Spanish sensibilities, suggested that Motecuzoma reacted with fright when presented with reports that were less than reassuring, since they focused on fearsome weapons and animals of the Spanish. Given the martial response of the Aztecs to the Spanish invasion, it seems highly unlikely that Motecuzoma or the Aztecs would have expressed terror in such a humiliating fashion.

**And when [Motecuzoma] had heard** what the messengers reported, he was terrified, he was astounded. . . .

Especially did it cause him to faint away when he heard how the gun, at [the Spaniards'] command, discharged [the shot]; how it resounded as if it thundered when it went off. It indeed bereft one of strength; it shut off one's ears. And when it discharged, something like a round pebble came forth from within. Fire went showering forth; sparks went blazing forth. And its smoke smelled very foul; it had a fetid odor which verily wounded the head. And when [the shot] struck a mountain, it was as if it were destroyed, dissolved. And a tree was pulverized; it was as if it vanished; it was as if someone blew it away.

All iron was their war array. In iron they clothed themselves. With iron they covered their heads. Iron were their swords. Iron were their crossbows. Iron were their shields. Iron were their lances.

And those which bore them upon their backs, their deer [that is, horses], were as tall as roof terraces.

And their bodies were everywhere covered; only their faces appeared. They were very white; they had chalky faces; they had yellow hair, though the hair of some was black. Long were their beards; they also were yellow. They were yellow-headed [The black men's hair] was kinky, it was curly.

And their food was like fasting food—very large, white, not heavy like [tortillas]; like maize stalks, good-tasting as if of maize stalk flour; a little sweet, a little honeyed. It was honeyed to eat, it was sweet to eat.

And their dogs were very large. They had ears folded over, great dragging jowls. They had fiery eyes—blazing eyes; they had yellow eyes—fiery yellow eyes. They had thin flanks—flanks with ribs showing. They had gaunt stomachs. They were very tall. They were nervous; they went about panting, with tongues hanging out. They were spotted like ocelots; they were varicolored.

And when Motecuzoma heard all this, he was much terrified. It was as if he fainted away. His heart saddened; his heart failed him.

## For Further Reflection

- What did the Spanish and their indigenous allies hope to gain by presenting this image of Motecuzoma?

Source: Bernardino de Sahagún. *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, 13 vols. Trans. by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950–82, 13:19–20. (Translation slightly modified.)

an institution known as the *encomienda*, which gave Spanish *encomenderos* (“settlers”) the right to compel the Taíno to work in their mines or fields. In return for labor, *encomenderos* assumed responsibility to look after their workers’ health and welfare and to encourage their conversion to Christianity.

Conscription of Taíno labor was a brutal business. *Encomenderos* worked their charges hard and punished them severely when they did not deliver the expected quantities of gold or work sufficiently hard in the fields. The Taíno occasionally organized rebellions, but their bows, arrows, and slings had little effect against horse-mounted Spanish forces wielding steel swords and firearms. By about 1515, social disruption and physical abuse had brought decline to Taíno populations on the large Caribbean

islands—Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Cuba—favored by Spanish settlers.

**Smallpox** Serious demographic decline set in only after 1518, however, when **smallpox** reached the Caribbean region and touched off devastating epidemics among the peoples of the western hemisphere. To replace laborers lost to disease, *encomenderos* launched raiding parties to kidnap and enslave the Taíno and other peoples. This tactic exposed additional victims to introduced diseases and hastened the decline of indigenous populations.

Under pressure of **epidemic disease**, the native population of the Caribbean plummeted from about four million in 1492 to a few thousand in the 1540s. Native societies themselves all passed out of existence. Only a few Taíno cultural elements survived: *canoe*, *hammock*, *hurricane*, *barbecue*, *maize*, and *tobacco*. All derive from Taíno words, but the society that generated them had largely disappeared by the middle of the sixteenth century.

*encomienda* (ehn-KOH-mee-ehn-dah)

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## Captain James Cook on the Hawaiians

*Spanish mariners may well have been the first Europeans to visit the Hawaiian Islands, but Captain James Cook made the earliest surviving record of a European visit. His journal entries for the first few days of his visit depict a thriving society closely related to those of Tahiti and other Polynesian islands.*

**[Monday, 19 January 1778]** They had from three to six men in each [canoe] and we were agreeably surprised to find them of the same nation as the people of Otahiete [Tahiti] and the other [Polynesian] islands we had lately visited. It required but very little address to get them to come along side, but no entreaties could prevail upon any of them to come on board. I tied some brass medals to a rope, and gave them to those in one of the canoes, who, in return, tied some small mackerel to the rope, as an equivalent. This was repeated; and some small nails, or bits of iron, which they valued more than any other article, were given them. . . . As soon as we made sail, the canoes left us; but others came off, as we proceeded along the coast, bringing with them roasting-pigs, and some very fine potatoes, which they exchanged, as others as done, for whatever was offered to them. Several small pigs were purchased for a sixpenny nail, so that we again found ourselves in a land of plenty. . . .

**[Tuesday, 20 January 1778]** The next morning we stood in for the land and were met with several Canoes filled with people, some of whom took courage and ventured on board. In the course of my several voyages, I never before met with natives of any place so much astonished, as these people were, upon entering a ship. Their eyes were continually flying from object to object, the wildness of their looks and gestures fully expressed their surprise and astonishment about everything they saw, and strongly marking to us, that, till now, they had never been visited by Europeans. [They had not] been acquainted with any of our commodities, except iron; which, however, it was plain, they had only heard of, or had known it in some small quantity, brought to them at some distant period. . . .

northern Mariana Islands. Manila galleons called regularly at Guam, which lay directly on the route from Acapulco to Manila. For more than a century, they took on fresh provisions and engaged in mostly peaceful trade with the indigenous Chamorro people. During the 1670s and 1680s, Spanish authorities decided to consolidate their position in Guam and bring the Mariana Islands under the control of the viceroy of New Spain in Mexico. They dispatched military forces to the islands to impose Spanish rule and subject the Chamorro to the spiritual authority of the Roman

The order not to permit the crews of the boats to go on shore was issued, that I might do everything in my power to prevent the importation of a fatal disease into this island, which I knew some of our men now labored under. . . . With the same view, I ordered all female visitors to be excluded from the ships. . . . Whether these regulations, dictated by humanity, had the desired effect, or no, time can only discover. . . .

**[Wednesday, 21 January 1778]** Everything thus going on to my satisfaction, I . . . made an excursion into the country, up the valley, accompanied by Mr. Anderson and Mr. Webber. A numerous train of natives followed us; and one of them, who I had distinguished for his activity in keeping the rest in order, I made choice of as our guide. . . . Our road. . . . lay through the plantations. The interspaces were, in general, planted with Taro, which grows here with great length, as the fields are sunk below the common level, so as to contain the water necessary to nourish the roots. . . .

I found a crowd assembled at the beach; and a brisk trade for pigs, fowls and roots going on there, with the greatest good order; though I did not observe any particular person, who took the lead amongst the rest of his countrymen. . . . These people merited our best commendations, in this commercial intercourse, never once attempting to cheat us, either ashore or along side the ships. Some indeed at first betrayed a thievish disposition, or rather they thought they had a right to any thing they could lay their hand upon but this conduct they soon laid aside.

### For Further Reflection

- How does Cook's record of his first meeting with the Hawaiians compare and contrast with Christopher Columbus's account, presented earlier (in chapter 22), of his first encounter with indigenous American peoples?

Source: James Cook. *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*. London: W. and A. Strahan, 1784, pp. 191–205. (Translation slightly modified.)

Catholic church. The Chamorro stoutly opposed those efforts, but a smallpox epidemic in 1688 severely reduced their numbers and crippled their resistance. By 1695 the Chamorro population had declined from about fifty thousand at mid-century to five thousand, partly because of Spanish campaigns but mostly because of smallpox. By the end of the seventeenth century, Spanish forces had established garrisons throughout the Mariana Islands and relocated surviving Chamorro into communities supervised by Spanish authorities.