

European Account:

Selections from Hernando Cortez' first letter to King Charles I of Spain, July 10, 1519.

. . . According to my judgment, it is believable that there is much gold and riches in this land, but, as we have been here so short a time, we have not been able to see more than 5 miles inland and 10 or 12 miles of the coast on each side – which we have explored since we landed (although as we saw from the ships, it is a much larger land).

The people who inhabit this country, from the Land of Cozumel, and the Cape of Yucatan to the place where we are now, are a people of middle size, with strong bodies. The people of each region have differing customs – yet all include displaying gold and jewelry in some form. The clothing they wear is very uncivilized – similar to other native peoples we have seen. Their food is maize and grain, as in the other Islands, and potuyuca, as they eat in the Island of Cuba. They eat it broiled, since they do not make bread of it; and they have their fishing, and hunting, and they roast many chickens, like those of the Tierra Firma, which are as large as peacocks.

There are some large towns well laid out, the houses being of stone, and mortar when they have it. The apartments are small, low, and when they can't find stone, they make them out of adobes and the roof is straw. Each Chief's home is equipped with a prayer place, where they worship idols – some made of gold and jewels. It is common for there to be sacrifices made during their worship services. It is very disgusting and uncivilized. Clearly, these are souls that need to be saved. With Your Majesty's permission, we shall instruct them in the one True faith and they shall believe or we shall eliminate them.

Aztec Account:

The Spaniards came to the palace at Tlayacac. When the Captain (Cortez) arrived, Montezuma sent his servants to greet him and to bring him two suns as gifts. One of these was made of the yellow metal and the other of the white. The servants also brought him a mirror to be hung on his person, a gold collar, a great gold pitcher, fans, ornaments of quetzal feathers and a shield with mother-of-pearl.

When the servants returned, they reported to the king. They told him how they made the journey, what they had seen, and what food the strangers ate. Montezuma was astonished and terrified by their report, and the description of their food astonished him above all else.

He was also terrified to learn how the iron animal roared, how its noise resounded, how it caused one to faint and grow deaf. The servants told him: "A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its insides – it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire. The smoke that comes out with it has an odor, like that of rotten mud. This odor penetrates even to the brain and causes the greatest discomfort.

If the beast is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. This is a most unnatural sight, as if the tree had exploded from within.”

The servants also said: “Their equipment and weapons are all made of iron. They dress in iron and wear iron helmets. Their swords are iron; their bows are iron, their shields are iron; their spears are iron. Their deer carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go. These deer, our lord, are as tall as the roof of a house.

“The strangers’ bodies are completely covered, so that only their faces can be seen. Their skin is white, as if it were made of lime. They have yellow hair, though some have black. Their beards are long and yellow. Their hair is curly, with very fine strands.

“As for their food, it is like human food. It is large and white, and not heavy. It is something like straw, but with the taste of a cornstalk. It is a little sweet, as if it were flavored with honey.

Their dogs are enormous, with flat ears and long, dangling tongues. The color of their eyes is a burning yellow: their eyes flash fire and shoot off sparks. Their bellies are hollow, their flanks long and narrow. They are tireless and very powerful.”

When Montezuma heard this report, he was filled with terror. It was as if his heart had fainted, as if it had shriveled. It was as if he were conquered by despair.