

On the eve of the Spanish conquest, how did the Aztecs discover there would be bad times ahead for them? Explore the signs that foretold the coming of Cortés's armada...



The arrival of the Spanish. Book XII of the Florentine Codex.

The following pages, based upon the Florentine Codex, recount the omens and bad signs that occurred just before the conquest, warning the Aztecs and their emperor Moctezuma of the impending upheaval their nation would soon undergo.

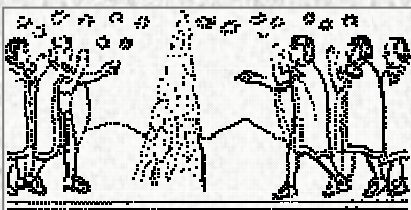
The Florentine Codex was compiled by the Franciscan friar, Bernadino de Sahagún. He and his group of native 'writers' or *tlacuilos* put together a vast amount of information by listening to old Nahuas (Aztecs) who remembered the days before the Spanish had arrived. They spoke of their past customs, religion, astronomy, economy, social order and, among many other subjects, the conquest.

" First chapter of the signs and bad omens that appeared before the Spanish came to these lands or there was news of them."

"Inic ce capítulo oncã mitoa in nez, inmozac in machiotl yoã in tetzavitl in aiamo valhui españoles, in nican tlalli ipan in aiamono iximachoa in nicã chaneque."

1 (Ce). The Triangle of Flame

This omen appeared ten years before the arrival of the Spanish. A huge flame rose up into the sky in the east. It was jagged on top and wide on the bottom, and it was both marvellous and terrible to behold. Although it only appeared after midnight, it shone with the strength of the sun, its tip reaching the middle of the sky, whilst the base sat on the horizon. At dawn, it would disappear without trace. People who saw the flame, would feel great unrest because it was considered to mean great evil. This flame appeared every night during one year and started in the year 12 House (or *mahtlactli omome calli*).



The first omen, BookXII, Florentine Codex.



The burning of temples during the conquest. Book XII, Florentine Codex.

2 (Ome). The Fire in the Temple

The second sign took place in the top of one of the god Huitzilopochtli's temples that was called *Tlacateccan*. The temple suddenly burst into flames, fire springing from within the wood in the temple's columns, reducing everything to ashes in no time at all. Whilst it burned, the temple's priests shouted out for the Aztecs to come quickly and put out the flames with pitchers of water. When the cool liquid was thrown on the fire the blaze was not smothered, but flared up even more angrily. The temple was reduced to smouldering coals.



Left, the second omen, Book XII, Florentine Codex. Far right, Huitzilopochtli in the Florentine Codex. Right, pitcher of water in the Borbonic Codex.



3 (Eyi). Lightning Strikes

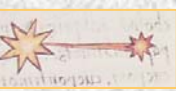
The effect of the third omen was similar to the second. A bolt of lightning hit the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli's temple (called Tzummulco). This temple was made of straw and even though it was raining lightly, not the right type of rain for lightning, it burned down. The Aztecs were shocked by this event because they could not hear the lightning strike, and declared that the sun had 'touched' the temple.

Right, the Mayan Chac Xiutel in the Dresden Codex. For the Aztecs, he was Xiuhtecuhtli, fire god. Lower left, shooting stars in the Florentine Codex. Below, Chalciuhtlicue, Codex Féjérvary Mayer.



4 (Nahui). Shooting stars

One day, while the sun was in the sky, a fire burst out of the west divided into three shooting stars. These stars moved towards the east, sparks flying from their long tails. Those who witnessed this caused great uproar for it was an unlucky sign.



5 (Macuilli). Lake Tetzaco

The fifth sign brought tremendous disturbance in Lake Tetzaco. According to the Aztecs, it looked like the water was boiling and broken into little pieces even though there was not enough wind to cause the slightest ripple. The waves were so large that they came into peoples' houses and swept them over, ruining their foundations and flooding everything nearby.



The day-sign for wind, ehécatl, taken from the Codex Laud.

7 (Chicome). Moctezuma and the Mirror

In the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan it was the custom to hunt birds that lived on the surrounding Lake Tetzaco. An ash coloured crane was caught one day and taken before the emperor Moctezuma, who was in his palace hall. It was midday and the sun was high in the sky.

The reason this bird was shown to the Aztec leader was because it had a special marking: a round mirror on its head that displayed the sky and the stars. As Moctezuma peered at its reflection he became fearful, averting his gaze. When he looked a second time, he saw a great multitude of men, moving hastily forwards, fighting with other men along the way.



The seventh omen, Florentine Codex.

6 (Chicuace). The Wailing Woman

The mark of the sixth sign was the voice of a woman carried by the wind at night. She called out, "Oh my children, now we must move far away", Sometimes she said, "Oh my children, where will I take you?".

Moctezuma called together his wise men and seers,

8 (Chicueyi). Now they're here, now they're not...

One day many deformed and monstrous bodies started to appear. Some even had two heads. The Aztecs took them to Moctezuma's palace and the second he looked at them, they would disappear.



asking "what is it that I saw?", "many people were fighting each other". When the wise men tried to look into the mirror the bird disappeared, leaving them unable to answer him.

The Spanish Conquest according to the Codex Azcatitlan.

Find out more about omens in Meso-america...

Karl Taube, in his book "The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya", tells us that omens and symbolic signs were extremely important throughout all the cultural areas of Mesoamerica. Special occurrences sent to the earth could be interpreted as messages from those that lived in the heavens.

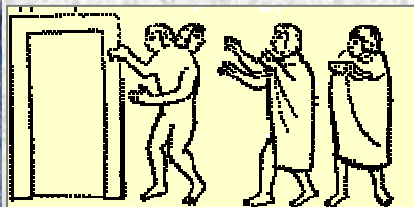


The fourth omen, Florentine Codex

Birds were especially known as carriers of warnings, perhaps because of their proximity to the sky and, therefore, the gods. So, it is not surprising that the seventh omen in our story tells of a crane with a mirror on its head, bearing images of what appears to be the Spanish marching towards Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital.

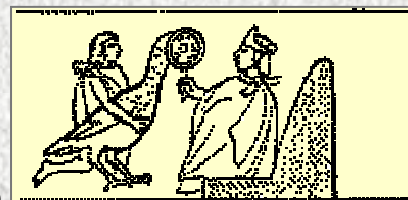
Other elements linked to the heavens include lightning bolts and comets, both of which feature in signs three and four. According to Taube the Tarascos, an indigenous people of Michoacán in mid western Mexico, witnessed similar signs before the Spanish arrived. They claim that during a period their temples kept on burning down. Even after they had been rebuilt, they would ignite again, their walls eventually reducing to cinders.

The sixth of the omens involved a woman calling out on the night wind to her children. According to experts, the Aztecs linked her to the goddess Cihua-coatl or Serpent Lady, who called out at night. She was related to fertility, the earth and the unconscious. However, the wind on which her voice was carried came from the heavens.



The eighth omen, Florentine Codex

This story has made its way through the centuries and into contemporary Mexico. Nowadays, the woman in the tale can be identified as La Llorona, 'she who cries'.



Muñoz Camargo, writing the History of Tlaxcala, tells us that there were two main signs of bad augury for his people, the Tlaxcaltecs, before the Spanish arrived. First, a clear haze appeared in the east in the mornings, three hours before the sun rose and, second, a huge dust cloud came up over a mountain that is now called 'Sierra la Malinche'. The cloud's comings and goings lasted for about a year. In appearance both the haze and the cloud of dust connected the sky to the earth.

Miguel León Portilla, in a comparison between the Aztec omens in the History of Tlaxcala and the Florentine Codex, suggests that it is not their similarity, but their value as interpretations of history that validates their importance as historical material.

Sources:

León Portilla, Miguel, "La visión de los vencidos", UNAM, DGSCA, Coordinación de Publicaciones Digitales, 2003, Mexico City, Mexico.

Miller, Mary and Karl Taube, "The Gods and Symbols of Ancient México and the Maya: an illustrated dictionary of Mesoamerican religion", 1st edition, Thames and Hudson, 1993, London, UK.

Sahagún, Fray Bernadino de, "Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España", comments by Ángel María Garibay, 6th ed., Editorial Porrúa, 1985, Mexico City, Mexico.

Images and information used from the following codices: Codex Azcatitlan, Codex Dresden, Codex Féjervary Mayer, Florentine Codex, Codex Laúd, Codex Magliabecchiano.