

## THE LETTERS OF HERNANDO CORTÉS

**F**irst Letter sent to the Emperor Charles V on the 10th of July, 1519.

We have good reason to believe that your Majesties have been informed by the letters of Diego Velasquez, Admiral Deputy in the Island of Cuba, of the new land that was discovered some two or more years ago in these parts... We shall therefore deal with this land from its first discovery up to its present state, that your Majesties may know what land it is, the people which possess it, their manner of living, rites and ceremonies, religious beliefs, what fruit your Majesties may hope to receive from it.

The natives who inhabit the island of Cozumel and the land of Yucatan are of middle height, and well proportioned, except that in our district they disfigure their faces in various ways, some piercing the ears, introducing large and extremely ugly ornaments, others the lower part of the nose and upper lip in which they insert large circular stones having the appearance of mirrors. They wear as clothes a kind of highly decorated shawl, the men wear breech clouts, and on the top half of the body cloaks finely worked and painted.

In addition they have their mosques, and in them are the idols which they worship. And always on the day before they are to begin some important enterprise they burn incense in these temples and sometimes even sacrifice their own persons, some cutting out their tongues, others their ears, still others slicing their bodies with knives in order to offer to their idols the blood which flows from their wounds. One horrible and abominable custom they have which should certainly be punished and which we have seen in no other part and that is that whenever they wish to beg anything of their idols, they take large numbers of boys and girls and even of grown men and women and tear out their heart and bowels while still alive, burning them in the presence of those idols. Your Majesties may therefore perceive whether it will be pleasing

to God if by means of and under the protection of your royal Majesties these peoples are introduced into and instructed in the holy Catholic Faith.

*The Second Despatch of Hernando Cortés to the Emperor on the 30th of October, 1520.*

And while speaking to Montezuma I took off a necklace of pearls and crystals which I was wearing and threw it round his neck; whereupon having proceeded some little way up the street a servant of his came back to me with two necklaces wrapped up in a napkin made from the shells of sea snails, which are much prized by them; and from each necklace hung eight prawns fashioned very beautifully in gold some six inches in length.

I considered it essential both from my observation of the city and the rest of the land that its ruler should be in my power and no longer entirely free; to the end that he might in no way change his will and intent to serve your Majesty, more especially as we Spaniards are somewhat intolerant and stiff-necked and should he get across with us he would be powerful enough to do us great damage.

When I recognized the very real desire that he had to serve your Majesty, I requested him, that I might give our Majesty a more minute account of this land, to show me the mine from which he drew his gold, which he declared himself very ready and willing to do. Some days after this formal acknowledgment of service to your Majesty I was speaking to Montezuma and told him that your Majesty was in need of gold for certain works which he had in hand; I asked to send some of his own men, to whom I would add an equal number of Spaniards, to the estates and house of those nobles who had publicly offered themselves vassals of your Majesty.

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