

THE SCIENTIFIC
REVOLUTION

Lawrence M. Principe

SCOTLAND Rab Houston

SEXUALITY Véronique Mottier

SHAKESPEARE Germaine Greer

SIKHISM Eleanor Nesbitt

SLEEP Steven W. Lockley

and Russell G. Foster

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL

ANTHROPOLOGY

John Monaghan and Peter Just

SOCIALISM Michael Newman

SOCIOLOGY Steve Bruce

SOCRATES C. C. W. Taylor

THE SOVIET UNION Stephen Lovell

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Helen Graham

SPANISH LITERATURE Jo Labanyi

SPINOZA Roger Scruton

STATISTICS David J. Hand

STUART BRITAIN John Morrill

SUPERCONDUCTIVITY

Stephen Blundell

TERRORISM Charles Townshend

THEOLOGY David F. Ford

THOMAS AQUINAS Fergus Kerr

TOCQUEVILLE Harvey C. Mansfield

TRAGEDY Adrian Poole

THE TUDORS John Guy

TWENTIETH-CENTURY

BRITAIN Kenneth O. Morgan

THE UNITED NATIONS

Jussi M. Hanhimäki

THE U.S. CONGRESS Donald A. Ritchie

UTOPIANISM Lyman Tower Sargent

THE VIKINGS Julian Richards

VIRUSES Dorothy H. Crawford

WITCHCRAFT Malcolm Gaskill

WITTGENSTEIN A. C. Grayling

WORLD MUSIC Philip Bohlman

THE WORLD TRADE

ORGANIZATION Amrita Narlikar

WRITING AND SCRIPT

Andrew Robinson

Available soon:

CHINESE LITERATURE Sabina Knight

ITALIAN LITERATURE

Peter Hainsworth and David Robey

HISTORY OF MATHEMATICS

Jacqueline Stedall

ANAESTHESIA Aidan O'Donnell

RUSSIAN HISTORY Geoffrey Hosking

For more information visit our web site

www.oup.co.uk/general/vsi/

Matthew Restall and Felipe Fernández-Armesto

THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The idea that the Spaniards enjoyed superior morale is more attractive. An image early colonial writers invented to support it—that of native peoples cowed by their own doom-fraught oracles, abandoning resistance under the influence of omens of their undoing, or in the conviction that their enemies were gods—has helped to convince subsequent generations that the Aztecs, and perhaps other Native Americans too, were victims of their own corroded morale. Even the great present-day historian of the early modern Atlantic world, J. H. Elliott, in his youth asserted that Spanish conquests were made possible by military superiority and “the greater self-confidence of the civilization that produced the conquistadors.”

The supposed basis for the assumption is mythical. It is simply nonsensical that the Aztecs or Inca could have mistaken the Spaniards for divine beings. There is no evidence for such a view traceable to native sources. Other cases of the occurrence of myths of returning gods or “gods from the sea” or of the advent

of beings “from beyond the horizon” occur among coastal and island peoples, not inland, highland imperialists, though the latter did tend, in Mesoamerica, to honor heroes and visiting dignitaries with divine forms of address. The behavior of native hosts toward the Spaniards was always—within native traditions—commensurate and appropriate for human guests.

Likewise, the omens that supposedly preceded the fall of the Aztecs’ city of Tenochtitlán are a pure deception. All the alleged omens were drawn, sometimes with slight modifications, from three works with no indigenous pedigree: Plutarch’s *Lives*, Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, and the *History of the Jews* by Josephus. These texts were all part of the classical curriculum, taught in early colonial Mexico in the Franciscan College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, where the story of the omens first appeared in the 1540s. All tell of the fates of Rome and Jerusalem. For the young scions of Nahua nobility educated in the college, Tenochtitlán was their Rome and their Jerusalem. Naturally they lamented its fall with images drawn from the literature they studied. Their teachers treated these reconstructions of the past as if they were genuine memories.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that the Aztecs were particularly prone to subversion by superstition. Every fifty-two years they rekindled the sacred fire that nourished the cosmos and without which the world would supposedly end. But in every society, such rites outlive the beliefs they embody. Aztec success in dealing with the natural world—in agriculture, in building, in organizing for war—suggests rationally informed competence, not magically inhibited minds. In any case, the fire-kindling ceremony had last been completed in 1507, only a decade before the conquistadors arrived. So if the natives were disposed to believe in the imminent end of the world, they would have to acknowledge that it was still many years off.