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Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico

CAMILLA TOWNSEND

IN 1552, FRANCISCO LÓPEZ DE GÓMARA, who had been chaplain and secretary to Hernando Cortés while he lived out his old age in Spain, published an account of the conquest of Mexico. López de Gómara himself had never been to the New World, but he could envision it nonetheless. “Many [Indians] came to gape at the strange men, now so famous, and at their attire, arms and horses, and they said, ‘These men are gods!’”¹ The chaplain was one of the first to claim in print that the Mexicans had believed the conquistadors to be divine. Among the welter of statements made in the Old World about inhabitants of the New, this one found particular resonance. It was repeated with enthusiasm, and soon a specific version gained credence: the Mexicans had apparently believed in a god named Quetzalcoatl, who long ago had disappeared in the east, promising to return from that direction on a certain date. In an extraordinary coincidence, Cortés appeared off the coast in that very year and was mistaken for Quetzalcoatl by the devout Indians. Today, most educated persons in the United States, Europe, and Latin America are fully versed in this account, as readers of this piece can undoubtedly affirm. In fact, however, there is little evidence that the indigenous people ever seriously believed the newcomers were gods, and there is no meaningful evidence that any story about Quetzalcoatl’s returning from the east ever existed before the conquest. A number of scholars of early Mexico are aware of this, but few others are. The cherished narrative is alive and well, and in urgent need of critical attention.²

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¹ Lesley Byrd Simpson, trans. and ed., *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary* (Berkeley, Calif., 1965), excerpted from Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de la conquista de México* (Zaragoza, 1552), 137. (Although all research was conducted in the Spanish originals, in the interest of communication I have here cited published English translations wherever there exists an edition that is generally considered definitive. Where there is none, I have provided translations myself.)

² Several scholars have recently alluded to the unlikelyhood of the commonly accepted scenario, among them Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson, Ariz., 1989); James Lockhart, ed. and trans., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); and Ross Hassig, *Time, History and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* (Austin, Tex., 2001). None have made it the focus of any work. This stands in contrast to South Pacific history, at least as written by anthropologists. Gananath Obeyesekere set out to challenge the “fact” that Captain Cook was received as the god Lono in Hawai’i in 1779 in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), thereby earning for himself several awards but also the anger of Marshall Sahlins in *How “Natives” Think: About*

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