

# The Conquest of the Mainland

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1. 500 years ago today: Between September and December 1520, a smallpox epidemic devastated Tenochtitlán.

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'How was it that a motley bunch of Spanish adventurers, never numbering much more than four hundred or so, was able to defeat an Amerindian military power on its home ground in the space of two years? What was it about Spaniards, or about Indians, that made so awesomely implausible a victory possible? Inga Clenndinnen

2. TODAY'S LECTURE:

The **Conquest of the Mainland** Would take place between 1519 and 1540, in the sense that: "those 21 years saw the establishment of a Spanish presence throughout large areas of the continent, and an assertion of Spanish sovereignty, more effective in some regions than in others.' (J. Elliott). **THIS IS THE PERIOD I'LL BE FOCUSING ON TODAY.**

1. CONQUEST OF MEXICO AND PERU
  - a. The Expeditions of Hernán Cortés
  - b. The Expeditions of Francisco Pizarro
2. Explanations for success
  - a. Providence
  - b. Technology
  - c. Disease
  - d. Centralised indigenous government
  - e. Division and resistance
3. Writing the History of the Conquest:
  - a. MAIN QUESTIONS, THEMES, CHALLENGES.
  - b. OLD AND NEW APPROACHES IN THE FIELD.
  - c. HOW THE HISTORIOGRPHY OF THE CONQUEST AND OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ENCOUNTER AND ITS AFTERMATH HAVE EVOLVED.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- How did each side interpret the first meetings? What shaped their worldview?
  - How can we write a history that incorporates the view of the vanquished as well as that of the conquerors? What sources are available to us as historians? What problems do they present?
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## PART I: MEXICO

### 1. THE AZTEC EMPIRE IN 1519

- Empire continues to expand.
- In 1502, Moctezuma II inherits a huge empire centred on Tenochtitlán. There were some 1.5 million people living in the Valley of Mexico, with several hundred thousand residing in Tenochtitlán alone. **EMPIRE WAS EXPANDING. MOCTEZUMA II HAD TAKEN THE THRONE IN YEAR. INTERNAL OPPOSITION.**
- They HAD NOT INTEGRATED THE REGION WHEN SPANISH ARRIVED. RITUAL SACRIFICE OF WAR CAPTIVES – HEARTS REMOVED AND HEADS DISPLAYED ON RACKS– INCREASED IN SCALE OVER THE 14THC. THIS demand for sacrificial victims BUILDS RESENTMENT. TENOCHTITLAN CANNOT PROVIDE FOR ITSELF: COTTON, CHOCOLATE, COCHINEAL, FOOD STAPLES ESPECIALLY TLAXCALA. WILL BE A DECISIVE FACTOR IN THE SPANISH INVASION:
- The Spanish were able to exploit these tensions to their advantage.

### 2. THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO

**AS I MENTIONED IN WEEK 2, THERE WERE TWO WINGS OF CONQUEST FROM THE CARIBBEAN, ONE NORTH THE OTHER SOUTH.**

**THIS EXPLORATION NORTH BEGAN IN 1516-1518:** Reconnaissance missions from Cuba to the mainland, under the auspices of Diego Velázquez, Governor of Cuba. Yucatán.

1518: After news reaches Cortés of a thriving civilization, organizes expedition. Velázquez begins to suspect, with reason, that Cortés will try to bypass his authority, and tries but fails to stop the party.

IN FEBRUARY 2019, CORTES sets sail for the mainland with no more than 16 horsemen and 600-foot soldiers.

Unlike earlier expeditions, planned with aim at trade and exploration,

Cortés seems to have had the intention of conquering from the onset. His intentions were far more ambitious.

22 April 1519: Arrives in Mexico. And does exactly what Velázquez feared: grounds ships, founds Veracruz and pledges allegiance directly to Charles V.

SLIDE: BOOK 12 FROM THE FLORENTINE CODEX. Lack of colour reveals the context of production (war and plague have interrupted circulation/trade in pigments). WHAT IS DEPICTED: IN THE IMAGE: ANIMALS. DOGS. WEAPONS AND LA MALINCHE: We want to look beyond the figure of Cortés, at the impact and influence of go-betweens in forging an alliance against the Aztecs. Central in the indigenous accounts is the figure of a native woman, Doña Marina, La Malinche or Malintzin, who will act as his interpreter.

*MALINTZIN*: An important figure, as we'll see, that has taken on an even larger role in the Mexican imaginary.

HOW DID CORTES AND HIS MEN SURVIVE? They were lucky. They profited, and were able to successfully exploit the antagonism between different groups in the region. As he advanced inland, Cortes recruited allies from among the local Indians. Especially Tlaxcalans.

8 November 1519: Cortés arrives in Tenochtitlán. ENTERS THE CITY AS A GUEST OF MOCTEZUMA. THE EMPEROR SEEMS TO HAVE TRIED TO IMPRESS THEM WITH HOSPITALITY, TOURING THE MARKETS, GARDENS, AND PALACES. PRESENTING THEM WITH GIFTS, INTENDED AS MANIFESTATIONS OF HIS EMPIRE'S MIGHT, BUT MISUNDERSTOOD AS AN ACT OF SUBMISSION.

CORTES takes the Emperor captive, orders anyone who tries to attack the Spanish brutally murdered and displayed. BUT DID HE? Many historians have questioned the veracity of this account.

IN APRIL, news reaches Cortes that the governor of Cuba had sent a small force of Spaniards to arrest him, and he leaves Tenochtitlan in the hands of Pedro de Alvarado. (At this time he did have Moctezuma captive)

- ALVARADO left in Control, and on MAY 22<sup>nd</sup>: During a ceremonial feast. AMBUSH AND Massacre at the GREAT Temple. UNARMED AZTEC ELITES.
- MEANWHILE at the Coast, after a brief struggle, CORTES convinces most of the soldiers to join him and return to Tenochtitlán. Returns with a much larger army of Spanish and Tlaxcalans. This force included at least one person infected with smallpox.

- By the time he returned: CHAOS. Power has shifted in favour of the Aztecs. They have elected a new leader, CUITLAHUAC, and the Spanish are under siege.
- THEY SHOW MOCTEZUMA TO THE PEOPLE.
- ON THE NIGHT OF JUNE 30: **NOCHE TRISTE**. SPANISH ATTEMPT TO FLEE THE CITY UNDETECTED, BUT AZTEC WARRIORS WERE WAITING AND KILLED HALF THE SPANIARDS AND THOUSANDS OF TLAXCALANS AND OTHER NATIVE ALLIES. AZTECS victorious.
- Cortés REGROUPS IN TLAXCALA. AND RETURNS TO SIEGE TENOCHTITLAN. MEANWHILE, an epidemic of smallpox strikes the Aztec capital. Cuitláhuac dies of smallpox.

**FLORENTINE CODEX: Compiled mid-16thC by Bernardino de Sahagún with Aztec collaborators.** 'When the Spaniards left Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs thought they had departed for good and would never return. Then the eighth month arrived. And the Aztecs celebrated it as always.

While the Spaniards were in Tlaxcala a great plague broke out here in Tenochtitlan. It lasted for seventy days, striking everywhere in the city and killing a vast number of our people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot. The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads. If they did move their bodies, they screamed with pain.

- DESPITE PLAGUE AND WATER SHORTAGES, HANG ON FOR A YEAR.
- ON 13 August 1521: FINALLY ENTER THE DESTROYED CITY. BY THE END OF THE YEAR, AZTEC EMPIRE HAS COLLAPSED.

THE FOUNDATIONS, AND THE VEINS OF EMPIRE, HOWEVER, SURVIVE, AND WILL FACILITATE COLONISATION. THE SPANISH INSERT THEMSELVES INTO AN EXISTING STRUCTURE AND BUREAUCRACY. TAKE OVER TRIBUTE SYSTEMS AND TRADE NETWORKS.

## PART II: PERU

1. **INCA EMPIRE IN 1532: IN SUCCESSION CRISIS**
2. SMALLPOX reached the Inca Empire before the Spanish, killing the sun god Huayna Capac, and his eldest son and successor, Ninan Cuyoche. Within a few years, this would tear the empire apart, leading to civil war between Huayna Capac's other sons, Huascar and Atahualpa.
3. **WHAT** Pizarro found was a weakened, divided empire. Or a recently victorious Atahualpa, with a seasoned army? No consensus.

## THE EXPEDITION OF FRANCISCO PIZARRO

4. VASCO NUNEZ BALBOA will be the first European to view the PACIFIC FROM THE NEW WORLD.
5. 1513: PEDRARIAS DAVILA ESTABLISHES SETTLEMENT IN PANAMA. PANAMA, AND EXCURSIONS/EXPLORATIONS FROM HERE.
6. AMONG THESE EARLY SETTLERS: PIZARRO BROTHERS. WILL AID IN THE CAPTURE OF BALBOA (SUMMARILY EXECUTED BY PEDRARIAS DAVILA). AND IN THIS WAY GET FUNDING AND AUTHORISATION FOR AN EXPEDITION SOUTH.
7. 1522 FRANCISCO SETS SAIL FOR PIRU
8. TAKES ANOTHER DECADE" GETS TRANSLATORS, ARMS, A SMALL ARMY, AND HORSES. GOES TO SPAIN AND RETURNS WITH MORE FAMILY MEMBERS.
9. WILL ENCOUNTER ATAHUALPA IN 1532.

- **Battle of Cajamarca.** PIZARRO AND 168 MEN MEET ATAHUALPA AT CAJAMARCA. LEAVES LARGE ARMY BEHIND AND APPROACHES WITH SMALL RETINUE. STILL SEVERAL THOUSAND STRONG, BUT ONLY LIGHTLY ARMED SOLDIERS. Friar Vicente de VALVERDE. In this first encounter, Pizarro will commit a similar act of daring to Cortes, capturing the ruler.

- Atahualpa held in captivity: a ransom in gold. CAJAMARCA BECOMES SINONYMOUS WITH RICHES and will INSPIRE MORE CONQUISTADORES. Atahualpa is executed in 1533.
- Pizarro moves into Cuzco.
- **CONFLICT AND DEATH OF ALMAGRO AND PIZARRO**
- **NOT THE END OF THE INCA EMPIRE.**
- **MANCO INCA. A NEW INCA STATE. FROM VILCABAMBA.TUPAC AMARU. TO 1572.**

In the 16thC, the Conquistador Francisco de Jerez, Pizarro's Secretary wrote: 'When in ancient or modern times have such huge enterprises of so few succeeded against so many?'

## **PART III: Explanations for success NO CONSENSUS HERE. BUT EVERYONE SAME QUESTION. HOW DID THEY DO IT?**

CARLOS FUENTES tells the story of the Araucanian chieftain, Caupolicán, who was impaled by the Spanish during the Conquest of Chile. His last dying words were: I wish I had invaded and conquered Spain.

Countless historians have posed the question: **Why were Europeans able to conquer the Americas so quickly?**

**Traditional view:**

### **I. Providence**

UNTIL RECENTLY, THERE WAS A WIDELY HELD IDEA THAT ACROSS MESOAMERICA AND BEYOND, THERE WAS A MYTH CONCERNING A CIVILIZING GOD WHO DISSAPPEARED SUDDENLY AND MYSTERIOUSLY INTO THE EAST, PROMISING TO RETURN. In the Mexican Valley, this was Quetzalcoátl. And so the idea was that Cortés had been mistaken for the God upon his arrival (the Indians confused the Spanish for Gods), and this hastened their success. Recent studies have quite convincingly shown that this idea was formulated some time in the mid-16thC, well after the first encounters and conquest.

The Florentine Codex and other accounts produced in the 16thC emphasize an atmosphere filled with portents and prophecies in the period immediately preceding the arrival of Cortés, but these narratives were all written several decades after the fact, in the context of war and plague. This factor, at least, we can set aside.

### **II. Technology**

**Crosby and Jared Diamond:** Europeans had the horse, superior weapons, and above all, “biological allies”.

START WITH HORSE: It didn't take the Indians long to figure out how to deal with the animals, which weren't of too much use anyways in some terrain.

Steel swords, muskets, and cannon were important, no doubt. But the impact of this technical superiority was not quite as clear cut an unqualified as might appear at first sight. This was partly because the invaders were poorly equipped by the standards of 16thc Europe. Most of Cortes' men were armed with nothing more sophisticated than swords, pikes, and knives.

They had a mere 13 muskets, ten bronze cannon and four light cannon. Cannon that were dragged through jungle and mountains with difficulty, powder dampened in river crossing and torrential rains. Native bows in any case could be swung at far higher rate. (J. Elliott)

THE Indians had the great advantage of operating in a familiar environment, to which the Spaniards had still to become acclimatized. Superior technology served for little when you were combating effects of heat and altitude (Peru). STEEL ARMOUR was too hot, and could prove a liability in these climates. Spanish discarded it quickly for cotton.

THE POWER OF THE HARQUEBUS OR CANNON WAS MOSTLY PSYCHOLOGICAL.

**FOR ALL THIS:** Spanish steel was a more powerful weapon than anything made of stone and wood. Unmatched. In a pitched battle on open ground, then, despite vast numerical superiority, they stood little chance. They needed to catch the Spanish in small groups.

EUROPEANS ALSO HAD a vast store of technical expertise to draw on, and this was perhaps more important: THEIR USE OF THE SHIP. Construction of brigantines to dominate Lake Texcoco, really impressed Indians.

### III. The Role of Disease

- As people moved into new lands, they took their animals (pigs, horses, cattle) and plants, but also inadvertently carried bugs, weeds, parasites, and diseases. NOT ALL IMPORTS WERE INTENTIONAL. This biological exchange brought smallpox, measles, influenza and plague that together killed off hundreds of millions of people.
- Having remained isolated for millennia, AMERICAN POPULATIONS had not been exposed to Eurasian pathogens. So they crossed the Atlantic with devastating effects.

**QUOTE:** 'If the Black Death had been accompanied by the arrival of Genghis Khan's hordes, miraculously plague-proof, the story would have been very different. If, by the way, the plague and the Mongols had arrived in tandem, I think it is unlikely that I would be writing this preface in an Indo-European language.' ALFRED CROSBY

There is still no agreement among historians as to the number of people killed by the epidemics, and numbers vary from 15 to 100 million, with a possible decline of up to 90% of the population. There is no doubt, however, that the decline was massive. Contemporary Spanish sources attest to the severity of epidemic outbreaks, the catastrophic decline in the population, even if they weren't entirely sure of the cause. **The Indians**, in written sources composed after the Conquest, reveal their own consciousness of the extent of the catastrophe. WE get the sense, as Serge Gruzinski has expressed, of a population in the course of witnessing its own disappearance.

**The psychological toll would have been enormous: We can consider for ex:**

**Boccaccio:** "this sore affliction entered so deep into the minds of men and women that, in the horror thereof, brother was forsaken by brother, nephew by uncle, brother by sister and, oftentimes, husband by wife; nay, what is more and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children, untended, unvisited, to their fate, as if they had been strangers" *From Boccaccio, The Decameron*

QUOTE: 'Especially in densely-populated regions like Central Mexico, the part played by epidemics in sapping both the ability and the will to resist goes a long way towards explaining the suddenness and the completeness of the Spanish Success.' J. Elliott.

### ARGUMENTS AGAINST:

Plague did not stop them from resisting successfully.

Remember the largest part of the Spanish army was also native, and closer to the source!! Would also have affected them.

## IV. Centralised indigenous government

As I touched on in Week 2, the large Aztec and Inca empires would fall faster and more completely than many smaller and less organised indigenous groups. WHY?

Both the Aztec and the Inca empires were centralised systems, around an imperial ruler and imperial capital. Once the emperor fell, control of the empires was made much easier for the Spanish (6).

'It was precisely because they were centrally organized societies, heavily dependent on the authority of a single ruler, that the empires of Montezuma and of Atahualpa fell with relative ease into Spanish hands. Such vast areas of territory could never have been conquered so speedily if they had not already been dominated by a central power with an elaborate machinery for maintaining control of outlying regions.' (Elliott, 'Spanish Conquest', 185)

Perhaps even more than conquest, this factor also helped colonization.

## V. Division and resistance

1. WHY DID THEY SIDE AGAINST EACH OTHER?
2. One proposal: MICRONATIONALISM. They did not see each other as a collective group. THEY PERCEIVED IT AS A LOCAL CONFLICT (M. Restall).
3. SO HOW DID THE INDIANS EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED? THIS LEADS US TO THE PROBLEM / CHALLENGES OF WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE CONQUEST.



## PART IV: Writing the History of the Conquest

FIRST, the SOURCES:

- Letters of Hernán Cortés (1522-1525)
- Juan Ginés de Supúlveda (1540s)
- Fray Bernardino de Sahagún *Florentine Codex* (1585)
- Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (1576) - MERITOS Y SERVICIOS (HOW MANY?)
- Diego Durán's account, *The History of the Indies and New Spain* (1581)
  
- Francisco de Jerez, *Verdadera relación de la conquista de Perú*, 1534
- Miguel de Estete, *Noticia del Peru*, 1535
- Titu Cusi Yuquapanqui, *Relación de la conquista del Perú*, 1570
- Garcilasco de la Vega, *Comentarios reales de los Incas*, 1617
- Guaman Poma, *Nueva crónica de buen gobierno*, 1615

### Problems with writing the history of the conquest

- **Power:** the "voices of the victors".

'It is in the nature of Conquest itself that the voices of the victors resound more loudly than those of the vanquished.' John Elliott, *Spanish Conquest and Settlement of the Americas*, Cambridge History of Latin America, p.172

- WE KNOW NAMES DATES AGE ETC FOR THOUSANDS WHO CROSSED. PUBLISHED ACCOUNTS OF THE CONQUEST, AS IN RELACIONES DE MERITOS Y SERVICIOS. BIOGRAFIES. SLIDE PROBANCA GARRIDO. AND ONE MORE
- NOTHING LIKE THIS FOR NATIVES.
- IN SPANISH ACCOUNTS ALWAYS 'THE INDIANS'.
- **Most people in Europe, but especially the Americas, don't WRITE.** Written texts are left mainly by the most powerful (in each culture)
- Disproportionate influence of **go-betweens/ translators/ acculturated indigenous people.**
- **Demographic collapse:** who survived to tell the tale? In what context? And when? MOST NATIVE BOOKS WERE DESTROYED/BURNED. SLIDE.

Do we have a VOICE OF THE VANQUISHED?

JOHN ELLIOTT: 'Given the variety of the peoples, the relative paucity of the sources and the nature of the circumstances in which they were produced, it would be too much to say that the surviving records give us the 'Indian' view of the conquest. But they do provide a series of poignant recollections, filtered through the lens of defeat...

Historians have since sought out NEW WAYS OF APPROACHING THE EXTANT INDIGENOUS SOURCES

- Aims and audience of the person writing
- Apparent “translatability” but in fact total misunderstandings. Even perceiving these misunderstandings has required a new approach from historians...
- Final problem, or challenge: the contemporary RELEVANCE of all this: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL. This narrative matters.

Mexican writer Octavio Paz: “The hatred of Cortés is not hatred of Spain,” he said, “it is hatred of ourselves.”

Writer Carlos Fuentes took the matter further: “I want to see Hernán Cortés in a Mexico City plaza so that we rid ourselves of this complex. There is no reason to negate the father, the mother, or the brother. We accept all that we are. I want to see a statue. I would love to. We are children of the prostitute, of the Conquistador, of *la Malinche*.”

### 3. THE HISTORY OF THE CONQUEST: OLD AND NEW

- UNTIL THE early 20thC: “triumphalist narrative” “the traditional tale of conquistadors and friars” Restall, 2012 or “The Epic Spanish Conquest” and “The Spiritual Conquest” Susan Schroeder in Matthew, L and M.R.Oudjik, *Indian Conquistadors*, 2007. Remained dominant...
- Hernan Cortés
- Bernal Diaz del Castillo, 1576
- William H. Prescott, 1843
- Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest*, 1966

1970s and 1980s

James Lockhart, *The Men of Cajamarca*, (1972), Karen Spalding, *Huarochoiri*, (1984), Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, (1987)

1992: IMPORTANT DATE IN THIS: 500 YEARS.

James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, 1993

Since 2000 five core approaches:

- Revisiting (re-reading old sources, motivations etc.).

EXAMPLE: MALINTZIN: Traitor? Victim? Survivor? Different role in Spanish and Native Sources.

Only so much we can answer. She left nothing. There are blanks in this story that will remain this way. ‘Perhaps the most recent image is one of a woman following traditional local Native practices to preserve herself, and in time even increase her ability to maneuver.’ (C. Townsend).

- Paleography (learning to read sources left unread). Impenetrability of Mexica writing until very recently. WE HAD BEEN IGNORING THE IMAGES, FOR EXAMPLE, AND THEY TELL A DIFFERENT STORY FROM THE TEXT.
- Protagonists (forgotten Spaniards, women, settlers of African descent, indigenous people). **GONZALO GUERRERO. JUAN GARRIDO. ALONSO DE ILLESCAS**
- Indigenous perspectives (indigenous conquistadors, indigenous diaspora)
- Boundaries:
  - a. Of space away from centres of empire.
  - b. Of discipline-History, Anthropology, Ethno-History to Art History, Geography, Literature)
- VISUAL AND MATERIAL HISTORY. To approach the surviving evidence with a Native, rather than European lens. This has meant prioritizing images, and learning to “read” them.
- NEW THEMES: The “sounds” of the Conquest.

### Concluding thoughts:

The magnitude and implications of the Conquest: ‘To some 6 million subjects of the crown of Castile, and another million in the Crown of Aragon, they now added some 50 million (before disease took its toll)...’

J. Elliott

Can we create a single, coherent history of the 'Spanish conquest of America'?