Introduction

The Lost Words of Bernal Díaz

It has been a shock for us to learn that we do not perceive the world just as it is, and that our knowledge of the world is inescapably framed by the concepts and language of our culture.

—Behan McCullagh (1998)

Historians today are priests of a cult of truth, called to the service of a god whose existence they are doomed to doubt.

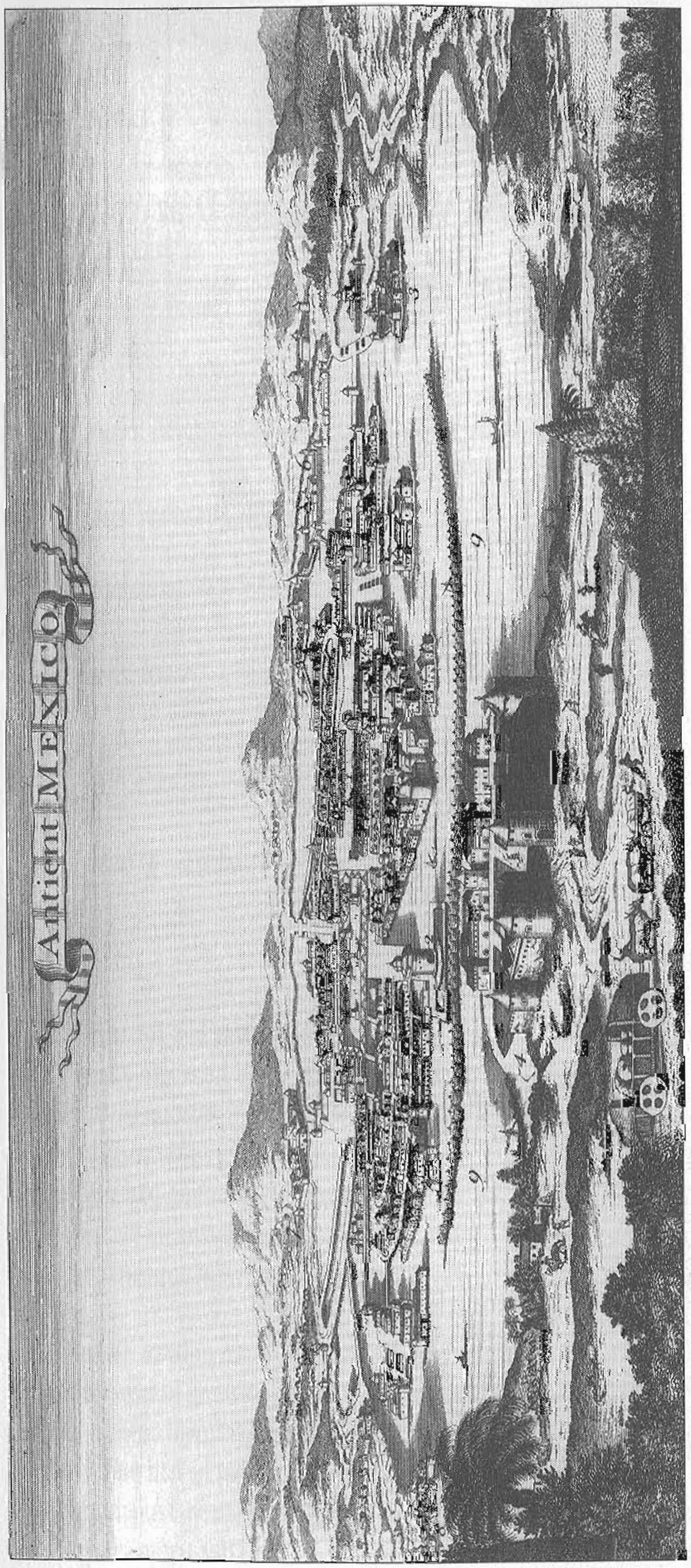
—Felipe Fernández-Armesto (1999)

Let the curious reader consider whether there is not much to ponder in this that I am writing. What men have there been in the world who have shown such daring?

—Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1570)

When Bernal Díaz first saw the Aztec capital he was lost for words. Years later, the words would come, many of them, when he wrote a lengthy account of his experiences as a member of the Spanish expedition led by Hernán Cortés against the Aztec empire. But on that November afternoon in 1519, as Díaz and his fellow conquistadors came over the mountain pass and looked down upon the Valley of Mexico for the first time, "gazing on such wonderful sights, we did not know what to say, or whether what appeared before us was real."[1]

Díaz's struggle to describe what he saw—the metropolis of Tenochtitlán, studded with pyramids, crisscrossed with canals, seeming to hover on a lake that was "crowded with canoes" and edged with other "great cities"—derived from his shock at realizing that the world was not what he had perceived it to be. Just as artists would for centuries draw pre-Conquest Tenochtitlán with distinctly European features (see Figure 1), so did Díaz try to compare the valley to European cityscapes of his experience, but could not. In the end, he resorted to a reference to medieval fiction, so that the Aztec cities "seemed



Facing page: *Fig. 1. Tenochtitlán, or "Antient Mexico," portrayed as more of a European city than a Mesoamerican one, complete with medieval towers and Old World oxen; from John Harris's* Voyages and Travels *(1744 [1705]).*

like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis."[2] Cortés was likewise daunted by the challenge of finding a comparable city in the "old" world, likening Tenochtitlán to Córdoba, Seville, and Salamanca all in the same few pages.[3] But whether the Aztec capital was deemed to be more like Venice, Seville, or the fictional Amadis, the accounts by Díaz, Cortés, and the other Spaniards of what they saw and did in the Americas were inescapably framed by the concepts and language of their own culture.

As a result, a set of interrelated perspectives soon developed into a fairly coherent vision and interpretation of the Conquest—the sum of Spanish conquest activity in the Americas from 1492 to about 1700. While many aspects of the Conquest and its interpretation have long been debated—from the arguments of sixteenth-century Spanish ecclesiastics to those of professional historians today—most of the fundamental characteristics of that vision, and a surprising number of its details, have survived.

Cortés would be most gratified by the credit given to him for the fall of the Aztec Empire in many a website and textbook. The seven myths of the Conquest can all be found in the Cortés legend, in which his military genius, his use of superior Spanish technology, and his manipulation of credulous "Indians" and a superstitious Aztec emperor enable him to lead a few hundred Spanish soldiers to a daring conquest of an empire of millions —and thereby set an example that permits the rest of the Spanish conquests in the Americas. In the sixteenth century Cortés became the archetypal conquistador, and he remains so today.

At the same time, our understanding of the Conquest has become far more complex and sophisticated, owing not least to the increased availability of source documents written by Spaniards and Native Americans in the colonial period (that lasted from the sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries). It is true that in recent years historians have become increasingly concerned with the problem of subjectivity and our inability to escape it. Truth itself has been discredited as a concept relevant to historical investigation.[4] But the impossibility of being completely objective need not be so discouraging. In the realm of subjectivity things can get really interesting. The concepts of a particular culture, the way they are expressed, and the relationship between those words and reality, can lead to genuine insight into an historical phenomenon such as the Spanish Conquest—and a better understanding of how such a phenomenon has been understood over the centuries.

For example, Cortés becomes more interesting and more believable when his myth is explored and broken down. The realization that conquistadors

before and after Cortés behaved like him leads to other, equally fascinating stories. Awareness of the decisive role played by West Africans and native allies of the Spaniards enriches Conquest history and helps explain its outcome. The revelations that most conquistadors were not soldiers, and Native Americans did not believe Spanish invaders were gods, prompts investigation into the tangle of sources that both produced such misconceptions and permit alternative arguments.

This book is about the pictures painted by men like Díaz of the Spanish conquests in the Americas, and the pictures painted by historians and others who in the past five centuries have followed Díaz across the Atlantic and into Tenochtitlán and other places of wonder in the "new" world. The book's sources range from documents written by Spaniards, Native Americans, and West Africans who experienced the Conquest and its aftermath, to the tomes of academics produced in colonial and modern times, to Hollywood movies.

Each of the seven chapters articulates a myth about the Conquest, dissects it, and places it in the context of alternative sources of evidence. At its most basic level, the book juxtaposes false and accurate descriptions of the Conquest.[5] But the book is also more than that. In presenting historical interpretations of the Conquest as myths rooted in the cultural conceptions, misconceptions, and political agendas of their time, I am aware that I too am inescapably influenced by the concepts and language of my own culture. Beyond simply contrasting myth and reality, my analysis recognizes that myths can be real to their progenitors and that a supposed reality built by researching archival sources can also generate its own myths. This is therefore not just a book about what happened, but a book that compares two forms of what is said to have happened. One form is created at the time of the historical moment itself. The other form is germinated in archives and libraries, when historians write historical accounts that strive to achieve objectivity (even if it must always remain just out of reach).[6]

The term "myth" is used here not in the sense of folklore, of popular narratives and beliefs featuring religious systems and supernatural characters. Rather it is used to mean something fictitious that is commonly taken to be true, partially or absolutely.[7] Both of these meanings of "myth" have an ambiguous connection to "history." Ever since Plato set about exploding the myths of his day, Western thought has viewed history and myth as standing in opposition to each other; one is true, being the reconstruction of actual events and people who really lived, the other is fiction, being a construction of invented events and imagined people. However, this polarity is not always so clear. Plato sought to replace the "lies" of old myths with historical "truths" that were laced with new myths invented by him.[8] Historian Paul Veyne has argued that ancient Greek myths were "neither true nor fictitious because [they were] external to but nobler than the real world." Scholars of Mesoamerica, a civilizational area covering most of Mexico and Central America,

assert that native people did not recognize such a distinction between myth and history. Instead Mesoamericans viewed the past in a way we would characterize as combining elements of myth and history. The great surviving text of the Quiché Mayas, the *Popol Vuh*, seamlessly blends mythic and historical components into one epic narrative, called "mythistory" by anthropologist Dennis Tedlock.[9]

Does this ambiguous relationship between myth and history, or their fusing into mythistory, undermine the quest to find truths about the past? In pursuing that quest, do we run the risk of following in Plato's footsteps and replacing old myths with invented truths or new myths? Are our truths really convenient fictions?[10] They may often be just that, but we can still examine the context and purpose of such fictions. We can compare the truths of the conquistadors to our truths about them, and as a result achieve a better understanding of the Conquest—even if that understanding does not pretend to be *the truth* in an absolute sense. Historical conclusions are not infallible, but when they are well evidenced and carefully argued they deserve to be taken as telling us something true about the world. We can question the truth claims of an historical narrative without going so far as to relegate it to merely one fiction among others.[11] There are always multiple narratives of any historical moment, but that does not mean that as interpretations they cannot tell us something true.

The Spanish writer Valle Inclán's famous aphorism "things are not how we see them but how we remember them" prompts us to be skeptical of eyewitness accounts like Díaz's.[12] But—more importantly—we are also reminded that within those memories history persists, myth is engendered, and truths of some kind await our discovery.

The moment in Bernal Díaz's narrative when he writes that he and his comrades were lost for words at the first sight of Tenochtitlán is a moment pregnant with interpretive possibilities. Perhaps the moment was created by Díaz in his old age, a product of his imagination. Perhaps it was a deliberate dramatization of an incredulity really experienced—but at a later date, when he was less exhausted, or his view of the valley was clearer. Perhaps the sensation of seeing something so new that it seemed unreal forced Díaz, in that moment of stunned silence, to open his mind to a larger vision of the world. Or perhaps he was simply terrified, as he hints later in his story, at the prospect of being one of a few strangers in a vast and potentially hostile city.

Although Díaz's silent awe does not last for long, he never completely fills in the moment, nor should we expect him to. The silences in Díaz's narrative include not only his own thoughts then and decades later, but also those of his Spanish comrades, the Africans they brought with them, and the central Mexican natives whom the Spaniards were forcing to take sides in a bloody civil war. And then there are the reactions of Díaz's readers, from his own

time to today, reactions that fill silences throughout narratives such as his and thereby become part of the process of historical production.

The fact that there are so many phrases we can insert into Díaz's silent moment does not render the exercise of its exploration and reconstruction impossibly nebulous. Amidst the uncertainty and multiplicity of narratives, in such a moment and its interpretations, something true about the world can surely be discovered.

This book begins that endeavor with a critique of the idea that the Conquest was made possible only through the audacity and achievements of "great men"—the unique few to show such daring, to paraphrase Bernal Díaz. I argue in Chapter 1 that we can view the Conquest more clearly through the patterns created by the biographies of many Spaniards, rather than the lives of the supposedly exceptional few. The Spaniards who invaded the Americas followed procedures developed and standardized by generations of settlers. Their destinies were not determined by the bold genius of a handful of adventurers (to paraphrase the nineteenth-century historian William Prescott).[13] Chapter 2 tackles the myth that the conquistadors were soldiers sent to the Americas by the king of Spain. In fact, the conquistadors were far more varied in their identities, occupations, and motivations—and far more interesting—than that.

The myths of Chapters 3 and 4 are rooted in the accounts of the Conquest written by the conquistadors themselves. They were generated by specific political circumstances and cultural contexts, and yet, as with all Conquest myths, they have shown remarkable longevity. These are the notions that conquest was achieved and colonialism rapidly imposed, first, when native armies were defeated and Spanish cities founded, and second, by surprisingly small groups of Spaniards acting alone. Such narratives disguise the protracted and incomplete nature of the Conquest, as well as the crucial roles played by Native American "allies" and free and enslaved West Africans.

Chapter 5 navigates the reader through the rough waters of what I have termed the "myth of (mis)communication." This chapter argues that just as the Spaniards themselves fabricated the myth that they were able to communicate with native leaders, so have modern historians swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction and generated a countermyth that emphasizes Spanish-native miscommunication. A middle ground between the two extremes allows a better understanding of how Spaniards and natives came to view each other's intentions. The topic of native roles leads us to that of native reactions. In Chapter 6 I take issue with the widespread misconception that the Conquest reduced the Native American world to a void.[14] In diverse and profound ways native cultures displayed resilience, adaptability, ongoing vitality, a heterogeneity of response to outside interference, and even a capacity to invert the impact of conquest and turn calamity into opportunity.

The final chapter discusses the ultimate myth, the foundational concept that has served for five centuries as the simplest—and most facile—explanation for the Conquest. This is the myth of Spanish superiority, a subset of the larger myth of European superiority and the nexus of racist ideologies that underpinned colonial expansion from the late fifteenth to early twentieth centuries.

The Epilogue is framed by the 1525 encounter of Cortés, Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, and Paxbolonacha, the ruler of a small Maya kingdom. This episode, which has received little attention from historians, is presented here as illustrative of all the themes of the Conquest discussed in the book—viewed both through the seven myths and through their counterpoints. The myths surrounding Cuauhtémoc's death, which is the climax of the episode, function as metaphors for the larger myths of the Spanish Conquest.

Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest

1

A Handful of Adventurers

The Myth of Exceptional Men

Mr. Christopher Columbus,
sailed the seas without a compass.
Well, when his men began a rumpus,
up spoke Christopher Columbus.
He said, 'There is land somewhere,
so until we get there,
we will not go wrong,
if we sing a swing song.
Since the world is round,
we'll be safe and sound.
Till our goal is found,
we'll just keep a-rhythm bound.'
Soon the crew was makin' merry.
Then came a yell,
'Let's drink to Isabel-la!
Bring on the rum!'
That music ended all the rumpus.
Wise old Christopher Columbus.

—Andy Razaf (1936)

The Conquest of Mexico and the conversion of the peoples of New Spain can and should be included among the histories of the world, not only because it was well done but because it was very great. . . . Long live, then, the name and memory of him [Cortés] who conquered so vast a land, converted such a multitude of men, cast down so many idols, and put an end to so much sacrifice and the eating of human flesh!

—Francisco López de Gómara (1552)

When in ancient or modern times have such huge enterprises of so few succeeded against so many? . . . And who has equaled those of Spain? Certainly not the Jews nor the Greeks nor Romans, about whom most is written.

—Francisco de Jerez (1534)

To such lengths of blind partiality will men be carried, who care less for the truth of history than for the fame of its creatures.

—Aaron Goodrich (1874)

One of the great themes of historical literature over the past five centuries has been the assessment of the European discovery of the Americas as one of the two greatest events in human history. Perhaps the earliest such judgement made in print was the claim by the Paduan philosopher Lazzaro Buonamico in 1539 that nothing had brought more honor to mankind "than the invention of the printing press and the discovery of the new world; two things which I always thought could be compared, not only to Antiquity, but to immortality." A similar, better-known pronouncement was penned by Francisco López de Gómara, Hernán Cortés's private secretary and official biographer, in 1552. "The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it)," wrote Gómara, "is the discovery of the Indies [i.e., the Americas]."[1]

By the eighteenth century, the "discovery" had come to share its number one position with a related European achievement.[2] "No event," wrote the French philosopher Abbé Raynal in 1770, "has been so interesting to mankind in general . . . as the discovery of the new world, and the passage to India by the Cape of Good Hope." Six years later the economist Adam Smith issued a bolder version of this assessment, stating that "the discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind."[3]

In the theme's most recent incarnation, the Discovery has acquired a distinctly modern companion. Writing near the dawn of the space age, in 1959, the intellectual historian Lewis Hanke focused not so much on the Discovery as the subsequent debate over Native Americans. "No matter how far rockets may reach into outer space," he asked, "will any more significant problems be discovered than those which agitated many Spaniards during the conquest of America?" In a similar vein, more than a decade after men walked on the moon, the semiotician Tzvetan Todorov declared that the voyages of the astronauts were of secondary significance because they led to "no encounter at all." In contrast, "the discovery of America, or of the Americans, is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history."[4]

The connection between seafaring and spacefaring is made particularly explicit in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. In an exhibit titled *Where Next, Columbus?* the exploratory achievements of mankind are placed within a trajectory beginning with Columbus's transatlantic voyages, running through the European settlement of the North American West, and climaxing in space travel. One graphic from the exhibit even shows Columbus and the moon afloat in the same constellation.[5]

That image illustrates a second theme that has run parallel to the "greatest event" theme ever since the days of Columbus himself. This is the characterization of the European discovery and conquest of the Americas as the achievement of a few great men. This theme can also be summed up in a phrase that has appeared in print over and over—a handful of adventurers.

The roots of this interpretation run deep into the Conquest period itself, and versions of the phrase go back at least to the eighteenth century. Denis Diderot, for example, described the conquistadors as a mere "handful of men."[6] The version I have chosen as emblematic of the theme appears to have been coined in 1843 by the great nineteenth-century historian William Prescott. The Conquest of Mexico, wrote Prescott, was "the subversion of a great empire by a handful of adventurers."[7] Since then the phrase and variations upon it have become inescapable in the historical literature. The Conquest is the tale of "how a handful of Spaniards won two empires;" Cortés and Francisco Pizarro overthrew empires "leading only small bands of adventurers" with "no more than a handful of men"; the Conquest of Peru is achieved by "illiterate adventurers," or "by a mere handful of men," and that of Mexico by "a small contingent of Spanish adventurers" or "a motley bunch of Spanish adventurers."[8]

These two themes have inevitably given rise to a third. If history's greatest event—the European discovery and conquest of the Americas—was achieved by a mere "handful of adventurers," how did they do it? In the words of Francisco de Jerez, a conquistador of Peru who in 1534 published an account of the initial Spanish invasion of the Inca empire, "When in ancient or modern times have such huge enterprises of so few succeeded against so many?"[9] Historians writing today continue to repeat Jerez's question. "What . . . made so awesomely implausible a victory possible?" "How were small bands of conquistadores successful against powerful and populous polities?" "How could empires as powerful as those of the Aztecs or the Incas be destroyed so rapidly by a few hundred Spaniards?"[10]

The question represents "one of the most puzzling problems to have vexed historians."[11] Indeed, it is at the heart of this book, not only because the answers to it written before so often contain elements of all seven of the myths anatomized in these pages. It is also because the very posing of the question itself is profoundly misleading; it is the lid to the Pandora's Box of Conquest myths. Viewed within the circular confines of these three themes, the question of "how" answers itself. How could so few accomplish something so great? Because they themselves were exceptionally great men. This is the myth that is the focus of this first chapter.

In 1856 the Mexican artist José María Obregón completed a painting titled *The Inspiration of Christopher Columbus* (see Figure 2).[12] The painting captures the two principal elements of the Columbus myth—his brilliant use of the technology of the day, and, more importantly, the genius of his vision. The source of his inspiration is the ocean itself and what he somehow knows

lies beyond it. Columbus gazes at the Atlantic horizon, seeing it not as a linear boundary but as a curved gateway to a new world.

This painting in fact tells us much more about the nineteenth century and views of Columbus in Obregón's day than it does about Columbus himself. In fact, the most exceptional thing about Columbus's geographical vision was that it was wrong. His achievements were the result of historical accident and his role in an historical process that was far larger than he was. Similarly, the Spaniards who subsequently crossed the Atlantic were part of a process peopled by many would-be conquerors. They and the people they encountered—not a mere handful of supposedly remarkable and great men—were responsible for the events that followed.

Among those Spaniards, Cortés and Pizarro are the best known. Indeed, the myth of exceptional men is centered on three monumental figures who still enjoy extraordinary name recognition almost half a millennium after their deaths. In a sense, the reputations of Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro are justified. One discovered the Americas for early-modern Europeans, the other two led the initial expeditions that discovered and partially destroyed the two major empires that existed in the Americas in the early sixteenth century (the Mexica, or Aztec, and the Inca). As Columbus remarks in Sir Ridley Scott's feature film *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, summarizing his life's accomplishments: "I did it; you didn't."[13] Thus the Spanish empire in the Americas was made possible by the deeds of these three in the simplest sense; Spaniards needed to find the Americas and its major population centers in order to construct that empire.

Although using Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro as larger than life characters that more or less explain the entire Conquest is clearly too facile, the simplicity of the model helps explain its incessant appeal. There seems to be a human impulse to personalize the past, to render complex processes intelligible and accessible by reducing them to emblematic characters and a narrative of their actions. The additional appeal of this reduction is that it gives the reducers a chance to shape the story and its protagonists. We shall see in a moment how this has occurred with respect to the examples of Columbus and Cortés.

My purpose is not to denigrate this technique of historical writing completely; after all, I use it myself in this book. Nor do I mean to create a narrative in which individual action is utterly subordinated to the larger structural forces and causes of social change. But in its absolute form the "great men" approach ignores the roles played by larger processes of social change. It fails to recognize the significance of context and the degree to which the great men are obliged to react to—rather than fashion—events, forces, and the many other human beings around them. The focus on a prominent few marginalizes the many other individuals whose lives were similar to those of the great save for the historical circumstances—that can often be described as historical accidents—that placed them in a different place and time. It likewise

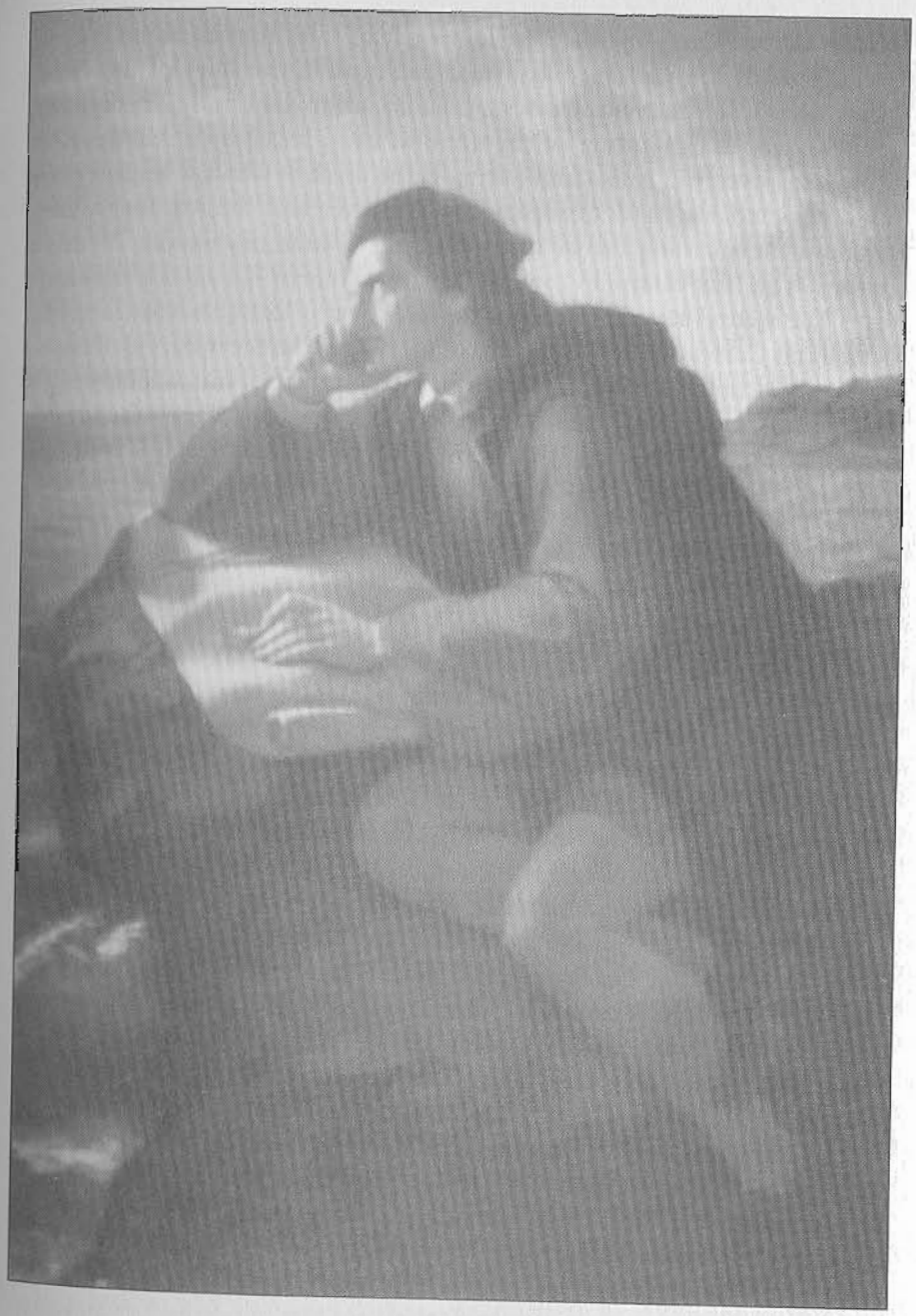


Fig. 2. José María Obregón, The Inspiration of Christopher Columbus, *1856.*

renders virtually invisible the Native Americans and Africans who played crucial roles in these events and whose inclusion in the story of the Conquest makes it so much more interesting and, ultimately, more intelligible.

The complete explication of the myth of exceptional men will develop through all seven chapters, culminating in the myth to which it is most profoundly related, the myth of superiority. However, this chapter goes a long way toward explaining the myth through the related discussions of three sections. The first examines the role of Columbus in the myth's development. The second section traces the development of conquistador legends, focusing on Cortés as the most lauded of them all, from the myth's sixteenth-century roots to the present. The third and final section of the chapter details the seven principal elements of conquistador patterns of action—the procedures that were not exclusive to the visionary or brilliant few, but were the standard practices of all the Conquest's Spanish protagonists.

The Obregón painting of Columbus would probably be seen by most viewers today not as a true historical portrait, but as an allegory. One could argue that while Columbus may not have spent much time staring at the Atlantic (except perhaps when he was crossing it), he was surely inspired by its possibilities. Likewise, the Berry/Razaf song is on one level a witty ditty of the swing era and not to be taken too seriously. On the other hand, its humor only makes sense if the listener can be depended upon already to have a perception of Columbus as sagacious and visionary. The lyrics are a parody of that sagacity, for his hitting upon the idea that a mutiny can be averted by throwing a party (hardly an original or visionary notion) is only funny if one knows that he is "wise old Christopher Columbus" for more historically significant reasons.[14]

One of these reasons is what historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto has called "the infamous canard," namely Columbus's allegedly exceptional knowledge of the world's sphericity. As he sings in the song, "Since the world is round, we'll be safe and sound."[15] This legend is similarly the reference point to the opening scene of Scott's *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, in which Columbus, in a pose reminiscent of the Obregón painting, is sitting on the rocks looking out to sea. One of his sons is with him, a young boy whom Columbus instructs to watch a ship disappear over the horizon. His father, meanwhile, is peeling an orange. Again, whether the viewer takes the scene as accurate historical depiction or dramatic allegory, it only works because of the filmmakers' reasonable assumption that the viewer anticipates the significance of the orange. Sure enough, when the fruit is peeled and the ship disappears, Columbus spells out his brilliant connection between the shape of the orange and that of the world—"What did I tell you? It's round. Like this. Round!"[16]

One historian, Jeffrey Burton Russell, has written an entire book about this aspect of the Columbus myth, tracing it back to Washington Irving's 1828 account of the *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Irving vividly described a 1486 debate in Salamanca between Columbus and a gathering of the wise men of Spain, professors, friars, and other senior churchmen who cited ancient authorities in support of their contention that the earth was flat. Columbus, bold visionary, risked condemnation as a heretic to defend his position on the earth's roundness. This scene was repeated in various forms by historians for the next hundred years.

The problem was, it was largely fiction. The Salamanca meeting, which occurred either in 1486 or 1487—and only two of whose wise men can be identified for certain—actually concerned the size of the ocean to the west, with Columbus erroneously arguing that the distance from Spain to Asia was shorter than the authorities claimed. "All agreed that what the Admiral was saying could not possibly be true," one of the professors present later testified. They were right in this, and in their belief that the earth was round, a belief shared by all educated Europeans of the day. Although Samuel Eliot Morison pointed out in his widely read 1942 biography of Columbus that the flat-earth Salamanca debate was "pure moonshine," the myth had caught hold and still resists being uprooted today.[17]

As Umberto Eco recently observed, most people, when asked "what Christopher Columbus wanted to prove," will answer that "Columbus believed the earth was round, whereas the Salamanca sages believed it was flat and hence thought that, after sailing a short distance, the three caravels would plunge into the cosmic abyss."[18] But although the men of Salamanca were right (about the earth's size), they were also wrong (about what lay to the west). And although Columbus was wrong (about the earth's size), he was also right (that sailing west led to land). In the end, it was not the vision and genius granted to Columbus by later myth makers that allowed him to stick doggedly to his error and still turn out to be right, it was rather (in Eco's phrase) "thanks to serendipity."[19]

It may have been serendipity, yes, but also historical process. In order to understand how Columbus fits into the myth of exceptional men, he must be placed in the dual context of two distinct historical processes. The first of these is the fifteenth-century process of Portuguese expansion into the Atlantic. The second is the nineteenth-century process whereby the modern myth of Columbus was constructed in the English-speaking world.

Columbus had profound Portuguese connections. Although he was Genoese and the sponsor of his voyages across the Atlantic was Queen Isabella of Castile, Columbus spent much of his life from the 1470s on in Portugal. In the late 1470s he married the daughter of a Portuguese Atlantic colonist, and he repeatedly sought royal Portuguese patronage before and after first approaching the Castilian monarch.

These Portuguese connections have tended to be ignored in popular representations of Columbus for various reasons. One is the obvious fact that Columbus's eventual contract with Isabella led to conquests in the sixteenth-century Americas that were far more Spanish than Portuguese. Another is the cliché-ridden history taught in schools, one rooted in the nineteenth-century development of the Columbus myth.[20] But Columbus himself is also to blame. His years spent as a foreigner peddling erroneous ideas about the size of the world fostered a sense of individual distinction tinged with paranoia, one he did not hesitate to promote on paper. "The image of the lonely man of destiny," as Fernández-Armesto has written, "struggling against prevailing orthodoxy to realize a dream that was ahead of its time, derives from his own self-image as a friendless outsider, derided by a scientific and social establishment that was reluctant to accept him."[21] As a result, Columbus's own writings have provided fodder for the formation of legends and myths about him—including the omission of the Portuguese context.

This context is so important because it is by looking at Portugal before and during Columbus's years there that one can see the degree to which the transplanted Genoese navigator had neither a unique plan nor a unique vision nor a unique pattern of previous experience.[22] Many others created and contributed to the expansion process of which Columbus became a part. Beginning 200 years before Columbus crossed the Atlantic, southern European shipping broke out of the Mediterranean into the Atlantic. The Vivaldi brothers, most notably, set off from Genoa in 1291 on what turned out to be a one-way voyage west across the Atlantic. Then, in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries a new zone of navigation was created that was bordered by the Azores in the north, the Canary Islands in the south, and the Iberian-African coasts in the east.[23]

Finally, from the 1420s on, a further stretch of exploration and navigation into the mid- and west Atlantic was created and charted. In the 1450s and 1460s, Flores, Corvo, the Cape Verde Islands, and the islands of the Gulf of Guinea were explored. The Madeiras and Canaries were settled and turned into sugar-plantation colonies and by 1478 the former was the largest sugar producer in the Western world. Maps of the time show how important and extensive was the discovery of Atlantic space; speculation about the lands and features of the ocean was the most noteworthy feature of fifteenth-century cartography.[24]

Although men from Italian city-states were involved from the start, and Castilians increasingly participated in the process (especially, from the late-fourteenth century on, in hostile competition for control of the Canaries), it was Portugal that dominated this expansion. Italian navigators were systematically and most effectively co-opted by the Portuguese monarchy (later joined by the Flemish), permitting the new Portuguese empire to control Atlantic settlement (except for the Canaries) and the agenda of expansion.[25]

This agenda featured a steady mapping of the African coastline with a view to rounding the foot of the continent and charting a route to the East Indies. By 1486 the Portuguese were so confident of imminent success that their ambassador to the Vatican, Vasco Fernandes de Lucena, pitched their endeavors to Pope Innocent VII during his coronation as something worthy of immediate blessing. Portuguese exploration to date allowed the ambassador "to perceive how many and how large accumulations of fortunes and honors and glory will befall not only all of Christendom but also . . . this most sacred See of Peter." The pitch worked, and the following year the pope issued one of his so-called expansion bulls condoning Portuguese imperial ambitions.[26]

Columbus tried to become part of this process with growing desperation in the 1480s and 1490s. He failed for so long because he lacked the connections and persuasive ideas of other navigators. Even after he succeeded in crossing the Atlantic and returning, the extent of his success was questioned and questionable within the context of the time. The islands he had found (in the Caribbean) fell within the zone assigned to the Portuguese by the 1486 papal bull. And although in 1494 the papacy brokered a Portuguese-Castilian treaty that redefined these zones, it became increasingly apparent during the 1490s that Columbus had not found the much-sought sea route to the East Indies—but had been lying about it to Queen Isabella. Then, in 1499, Vasco da Gama returned from his successful voyage around the Cape and it became clear that the Portuguese had won the competition after all.

Columbus's career was irreversibly damaged. His claim to have found islands off the coast of Asia, and thus the coveted sea route to that continent, rang hollow in the face of mounting evidence that these were new lands entirely. Columbus seemed to be lying for the sake of his contractual rewards. Perceiving the extent of his failure and his duplicity, the Castilian crown dispatched an agent to the Caribbean to arrest Columbus and bring him back to Spain in chains. Although he was later permitted to cross the Atlantic, he was forbidden to revisit the Caribbean and was stripped of the titles of Admiral and Viceroy of the Indies—titles he had fought to be included in his original contract and arguably the chief goal of his career. Meanwhile, those titles were conferred by the Portuguese crown upon da Gama.[27]

The fact that it was Columbus's voyages, not da Gama's, that would lead to the changing of world history was not to the Genoese's credit. His discoveries were an accidental geographical byproduct of Portuguese expansion two centuries old, of Portuguese-Castilian competition for Atlantic control a century old, and of Portuguese-Castilian competition for a sea route to India older than Columbus himself. Furthermore, had Columbus not reached the Americas, any one of numerous other navigators would have done so within a decade.[28] Most obviously, the Portuguese Pedro Álvares Cabral explored the Brazilian coast in 1500, likewise arriving there in an attempt to

reach Asia (by rounding the Cape). In 1499 Alonso de Ojeda had sailed to the Venezuelan coast, accompanied by the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci, who also crossed the Atlantic under Portuguese license two or three times in 1501–1503 (and in 1508 became the chief pilot of Castile). Because Vespucci's letters made for much better reading than Columbus's and were published and sold well in the years immediately following his voyages, it was his name that a German cartographer assigned to Brazil in a map of 1507—a name that caught on and was applied to all the "Americas."[29]

The "unfairness" of this naming, and the irony of the phrase "Columbus discovered America," has not been lost on historians.[30] But it is an important reflection of the fact that in his lifetime—and for decades, to some extent centuries, afterward—Columbus was correctly perceived as a briefly fortunate but unexceptional participant in a process involving many southern Europeans.

Indeed the image of Vespucci taking the credit for Columbus's achievements should be tempered by the fact that the Florentine's fame came after the Genoese's death. Columbus did not live to see "America" named. The two explorers were friends, in fact, colleagues in the large Iberian community of navigators who were collectively responsible for the two seafaring feats that would one day be hailed by the likes of Abbé Raynal and Adam Smith as history's greatest events. Amidst the self-pity of his final years, Columbus lamented the lack of approbation heaped upon himself and his friend Vespucci, for whom he wrote that "Fortune has been adverse . . . as for so many others. His labors have not brought him the benefits they deserve."[31]

The decline of Columbus's fortunes after 1499 was not only the result of his losing the race to the East Indies, but also a product of his marginal status as a Genoese and a man of the sea in an ethnocentric Castilian world where Italians and sailors tended to be derided. He was also hampered as a "Spanish" settler and administrator by notions of colonial procedure that were derived more from Portuguese models than Castilian ones; the Portuguese emphasized trading posts, the Castilians permanent settlements. As a result, he was fated to be pushed aside by colonial-era historians just as he was by royal officials during his lifetime. When Gómara eulogized the conquest of the Americas as mankind's greatest moment since the coming of Christ, he not only had in mind Cortés, rather than Columbus, as the personification of that achievement, but he even denied the Genoese his role as first discoverer.[32] Toward the end of the sixteenth century Columbus began to appear in Italian epic poetry, and in the following century there emerged two complementary images of him, both rooted in his own writings but now given the romantic veneer characteristic of legend formation. One such image saw Columbus as an instrument of providence, the other portrayed him as an unappreciated visionary, an unjustly mocked heroic dreamer—as in Lope de Vega's 1614 play, *El Nuevo Mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón* (The New World discovered by Christopher Columbus). Nevertheless, the Genoese remained a distant second, if that, to Cortés as the principal symbolic hero of the Discovery and Conquest.[33]

All of that began to change with the tricentennial of Columbus's first landfall in the Americas. Significantly, it was not in Spain or Latin America, but in the young United States, that this rehabilitation and reconstruction of the navigator took place. Certainly the new republics of Latin America did not ignore Columbus as a symbol ready for appropriation—one of these nations was named after him, and two Caribbean colonies fought over his remains.[34] But it was in Boston, Baltimore, and New York that celebrations were held on 12 October 1792. It was North American historians, such as Washington Irving, who generated interest in Columbus among English-speaking readers of the nineteenth century. And it was Italian and Irish immigrants and their descendants in the United States who in the late nineteenth century created solidarity organizations centered on an image of Columbus as an emblematic Catholic immigrant.[35]

Academic and popular interest in Columbus gathered pace in both North America and Europe as the four hundredth anniversary of his first voyage approached. These culminated in two colossal celebrations of the quadricentennial in Madrid in 1892 and Chicago in 1893. Years of preparation, millions of pesetas and dollars spent, hundreds of related events, millions of visitors and participants, all had the effect of so thoroughly creating a Columbus in the popular mind on both sides of the Atlantic that he survives to this day. In 1912 Columbus Day became an official holiday, and by 1992 it generated a public controversy almost as great as the celebrations of a century earlier. Yet whether the Genoese explorer is vilified or celebrated as hero, our Columbus—the one of present-day myth, history, and debate—is not a fifteenth-century man, but a nineteenth-century one, with a twentieth-century veneer.[36]

If Columbus is the principal icon of the Discovery, Cortés is the principal icon of the Conquest. How did Cortés—and to a lesser extent Francisco Pizarro and other conquistadors—become elevated to icons by history?

The Mexican historian Enrique Florescano has observed that the Conquest gave rise to "a new protagonist of historical action and narration: the conquistador" and with him "a new historical discourse" that featured "a new manner of seeing and representing the past."[37] The historical discourse of the conquistadors may have been new in the sense of its application to the Americas, but it was actually based on a genre of document developed by Iberians before they reached the New World. This genre was the report that

conquerors sent to the crown upon completion of their activities of exploration, conquest, and settlement. Such reports had a dual purpose. One purpose was to inform the monarch of events and newly acquired lands, especially if those lands contained the two elements most sought as the basis for colonization—settled native populations, and precious metals. The other purpose was to petition for rewards in the form of offices, titles, and pensions. Hence the Spanish name for the genre, *probanza de mérito* (proof of merit).[38]

The very nature and purpose of *probanzas* obliged those who wrote them to promote their own deeds and downplay or ignore those of others—to eliminate process and pattern in favor or individual action and achievement. Most of Conquest mythology can be found in these reports—the Spaniards as superior beings blessed by divine providence, the invisibility of Africans and native allies, the Conquest's rapid rush to completion, and above all the Conquest as the accomplishment of bold and self-sacrificing individuals.

Probanzas are also important because so many were written. Literally thousands sit in the great imperial archives in Seville, and still more are in Madrid, Mexico City, Lima, and elsewhere. In addition to documents declaring themselves to be *probanzas* and conforming strictly to its conventions, there were also other types of reports that featured most of the characteristics of *probanzas*, including *relaciones* (reports or accounts), *cartas* (letters), and *cartas de relación*. Typically *probanzas* and *relaciones* were addressed to the king, although sometimes other royal officials were approached directly as intermediaries.

Only the best-connected petitioners had a hope of the king himself reading their letters. Most such reports were brief—a page or two—wooden, formulaic in style, given scant attention by royal officials, then shelved until their rediscovery by twentieth-century historians. Many, no doubt, have never been read. But an influential minority were widely read either through publication as conquest accounts, or by being worked into colonial-period histories. For example, the famous letters by Cortés to the king, which were in effect a series of *probanzas*, were published shortly after reaching Spain. They so efficiently promoted the Conquest as Cortés's achievement, and sold so well in at least five languages, that the crown banned the *cartas* lest the conqueror's cult status become a political threat. The letters continued to circulate, however, and later admirers traveled like pilgrims to Cortés's residence in Spain. The Cortés cult was further stimulated by Gómara's hagiography of 1552—that the crown attempted to suppress too.[39]

There was plenty of precedent to the publication of *probanza*-like letters and to crown intervention in their distribution or suppression. Within months of Columbus's return to Spain from his first Atlantic crossing, a "letter" putatively written by him but actually crafted by royal officials based on a document by Columbus was published in Spanish, Italian (prose and verse versions), and Latin. It promoted the "discovery" as a Spanish achievement that cast favorable light on the Spanish monarchs and on Columbus as their agent.[40] Significantly, it also made the letter originally written by Columbus, who as a Genoese would have been less familiar with the Iberian genres, look more like a Spanish *probanza*.

Probably the best known of Conquest accounts, Bernal Díaz's narrative of the Conquest of Mexico, is seldom recognized for what it was—a monumental *probanza* whose absurd length (over 600 pages when later printed) counterproductively assured it would not be read by the king, as indeed it almost certainly was not. Perhaps Díaz had lost hope in the efficacy of the more conventional *probanza*, having penned a number of them earlier in his life. Requesting a pension in 1552, for example, he declared that he wrote to "your majesty as a loyal servant, the best I can, because for thirty-eight years I have served you." And six years later, he asked "to give account of who I am so that your majesty might deign to do me fuller favors." But despite coming from a family of good social standing, Díaz's connections proved to be a barrier rather than a conduit to those "fuller favors." As a relation of Diego Velázquez (early patron and then great enemy of Cortés), he was denied due reward in Mexico in the 1520s by Cortés, and suffered almost as much as a marginalized settler in Guatemala in the decades that followed.[41]

Perhaps Díaz's age at the time of his book's completion was such that he cared less about official royal reaction and more for the satisfaction of the creative process and the opportunity to pen countless jabs at Gómara, whose account Díaz judged with damning simplicity to be "very contrary to what happened."[42] In this sense, his account is more akin to a modern history book. Yet the structure, tone, and thrust of Díaz's text remain profoundly rooted in the conventions of the *probanza*. As one Díaz scholar, Ramón Iglesia, has commented, "his book is an unrestrained list of merits and services."[43]

Why did Díaz feel the need to list such "merits and services?" His dissatisfaction with his lot, his paltry share of the spoils of the conquests of Tenochtitlán and highland Guatemala, and his desire to set the record straight for posterity are only part of the answer. The larger context to his expectations and his choice of format for expressing himself is the culture of patronage in sixteenth-century Spain—a system of social, political, and economic networks that underlay almost all Spanish activities in the Americas and that nurtured the written culture of the *probanza*.

Royal patronage not only helps explain the first stage in the development of the great men myth—the *probanza*—but also the second, which is the body of literature comprising the chronicles or histories written in the colonial period. The dividing line between the two is blurred, but this is central to my point: the *probanza* evolved into the chronicle, *probanzas* were used as the basis of histories, and historical works adopted the conventions of the *probanza*. The most notable of those conventions was the way in which individuals were treated, especially the heroes to whom the Conquest could be attributed.

This treatment of individuals was in effect promoted by the crown. But, paradoxically, the crown also sought to suppress it. Official chronicler positions, created in 1532 and 1571, were intended to control the dissemination of information about the Conquest.[44] Such efforts were in vain. Part of the problem was that the Spanish crown lacked the centralized control and bureaucratic reach of the modern state—precisely the reason that attempts were repeatedly made to control the production of historical literature. More significantly, perhaps, was the fact that the culture of the *probanza*—its way of portraying the Conquest and its protagonists—became in the sixteenth century the dominant historical discourse, the conventional way in which Spaniards viewed and represented the Conquest.

The ultimate purpose of that representation was justification. The eyewitness accounts, such as Cortés's letters or Jerez's narrative of the massacre at Cajamarca, framed the justification of personal actions and roles within a larger context of imperial justification. The later writings of the chroniclers further developed the theme of justification into an ideology of imperialism that represented the Conquest as a dual mission, bringing both civilization and Christianity to the Americas. In the great sixteenth-century histories by Gómara, Antonio de Herrera, and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo the succession of discoveries and conquests are part of a providential plan to bring the true faith to the whole world. The Spaniards are obviously the agents of that divine plan, and the most prominent conquistadors are thus presented as God's principal agents.[45]

Cortés emerged in the sixteenth century as the most recognizable of God's agents for several reasons. One was the impressive nature of the Mexica empire and the subsequent importance of central Mexico to the Spanish empire. Another was the rapid publication and wide circulation (despite royal attempts at censorship) of Cortés's letters to the king, which argued unambiguously that God had directed the Conquest of Mexico as a favor to the Spanish monarchy. The blessed status of Cortés himself was heavily implied; in one letter he uses the Spanish term *medio* (medium or agent), to describe his providential role.[46] A third was the supportive spin placed on Cortés and the Conquest by the Franciscans.

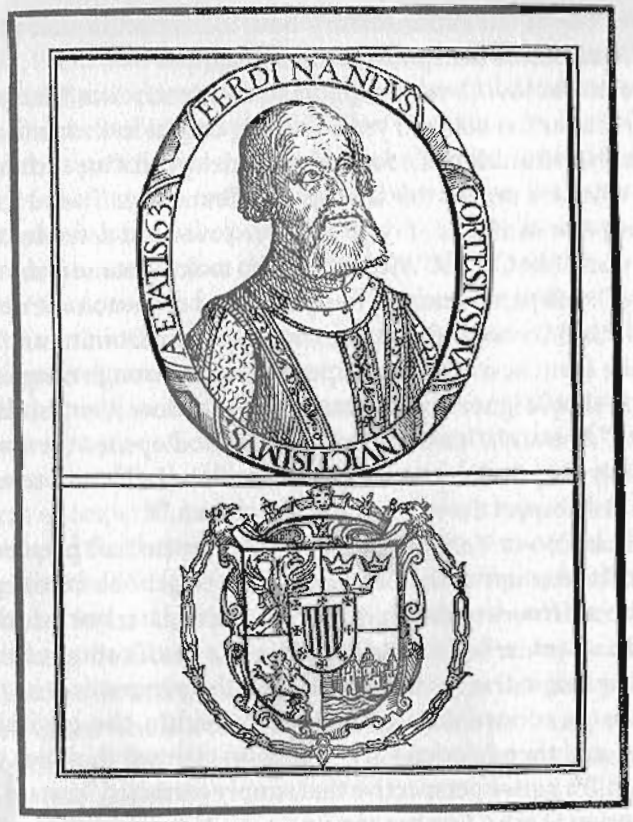
Friars of the Order of St. Francis were the first Spanish priests into the Mesoamerican regions that would become the colonies of New Spain. In competition with the Dominicans, to a lesser extent other orders, and later the secular clergy (priests who were not members of an order), the Franciscans remained central to the activities of the church throughout colonial Spanish America. In central Mexico, Yucatan, and other parts of New Spain, sixteenth-century Franciscans were the driving force behind efforts to convert native peoples and build a colonial church. The roles that natives themselves played in that process, and the writings generated as a result by both friars and

natives, gave rise to an extraordinary body of literature that was foundational to the academic discipline of ethnography.[47]

The Franciscans saw Cortés's support of their entry into Mexico and their activities in the earliest colonial years as being crucial to their mission, and as a result contributed much to the formation of his legend. One such friar, Toribio Motolinía, who was one of the famous first Franciscan Twelve into Mexico, asked the emperor in a letter of 1555, "Who has loved and defended the Indians of this new world like Cortés?" Motolinía (who took his name from the Nahuatl for "poverty") was partly reacting to the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, who had attacked Cortés and who, significantly, was a Dominican. The likes of Las Casas, the Franciscan told the emperor, sought through exaggerations, errors, lies, and simple ignorance to obscure "the services [Cortés] did God and your majesty." Above all, "through this captain, God opened the door for us to preach his holy gospel, and it was he who caused the Indians to revere the holy sacraments and respect the ministers of the church."[48]

Even Bernardino de Sahagún, the Franciscan who had preserved an important Mexica account of the Conquest as the final book of his epic twelve-volume *General History of the Things of New Spain*, later rewrote the account into "a paean of praise to Hernán Cortés and a justification of the Spanish victory."[49] The original 1579 version reflected the perspectives of the Mexica of Tlatelolco (a subordinate municipality within the capital that was Tenochtitlán and then Mexico City). Sahagún claimed that his 1585 revised version was still a native perspective that simply corrected "certain mistakes." But the historian Sarah Cline has convincingly shown how the revisions promoted the attitudes of Sahagún and the other early Franciscans toward the providential role of Cortés in leading the Spaniards into Mexico in 1519 and inviting the Franciscans in 1524. The 1585 version thus had a political purpose, at a time when the early Franciscan agenda was under attack from other Spaniards, and it reveals to us how the Cortés legend continued to be perpetuated long after his death.[50]

The Franciscans saw the Conquest as a great leap toward the conversion of all mankind and the subsequent second coming of Christ. This millennial vision influenced Cortés himself, inspiring him to make further expeditions in the 1520s north to Baja California and south into Honduras. It also contributed to his legendary status among humanists and other intellectuals who frequently gathered at his house in Spain in his final years. These included Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, whose extreme negative views on "the Indians" pitted him against Las Casas and would bring him infamy in twentieth-century academic circles. In 1543 Sepúlveda depicted the Conquest as epitomized by "a noble, valiant Cortés" and "a timorous, cowardly Montezuma." Also included in the Madrid group was Cervantes de Salazar, whose 1546 ode to Cortés (the dedication to a dialogue on the dignity of man) compared him to Alexander, Julius Caesar, and St. Paul.[51]



Here and facing page: *Figs. 3 and 4. Frontispieces to Gabriel Lasso de la Vega's* Cortés valeroso, y Mexicana *(1588). The two images contrast the "invincible" man of arms at age 63, eyes heavenward, with the young ruff-collared man of letters, eyes on the reader; the Cortés coat of arms is complete with the icons of status, Lasso de la Vega's is a plain shield.*

Another member of the circle was Gómara, whose account of the Conquest took the form of a hagiography of Cortés, who emerges as an idealized figure to whom the entire Discovery and Conquest is subject; his narrative begins and ends with the birth and death of Cortés.[52] Although Bernal Díaz claimed that his own account was inspired in part by the errors he perceived in Gómara's book, he nevertheless portrayed Cortés as a flawed but larger than life figure—the flaws serving only to add a ruggedness to his heroism.[53] Although there were many accounts of the Conquest published during the colonial centuries, most giving the likes of "the great Cortés" the kind of adulatory treatment he received in Gabriel Lasso de la Vega's *Cortés valeroso, y Mexicana* (Valiant Cortés) of 1588 (see Figures 3 and 4), the three by Cortés, Gómara, and Díaz remained the most influential.[54] Their effect was to magnify Cortés as the emblematic conquistador, and to make the Conquest of Mexico a symbol and model of the entire Conquest, with Columbus and Pizarro placed partially in Cortés's shadow and other conquests and conquistadors almost entirely eclipsed.

For centuries, the standard sources on the Conquest and related topics were the reports of Columbus and Cortés, similar accounts by other conquistadors, and the colonial histories based on them.[55] These tended to conform to the conventions of Spanish imperial ideology, with many of the more controversial texts not being published until after the colonial period. The longer works of Las Casas, for example, the *Historia general de las Indias* (General History of the Indies)and *La Apologética historia sumaria* (The Apologetic History) saw print in 1875 and 1909 for the first time, and Motolinía's *Historia de las Indias* (History of the Indies) and his *Memoriales* (Memorials) were not published until 1848 and 1903, respectively.[56]

Yet the nineteenth century hardly unraveled the colonial-era development of the myth of Cortés and the other "great men" responsible for the Conquest. This was in large part due to the third chronological stage in the development of this chapter's myth—the success of the histories of the Conquests of Mexico and Peru by William Prescott. Like Gómara's account, Prescott's narrative of

the Mexican story ends not with the fall of Tenochtitlán, but later with the death of Cortés. As Prescott admitted, "The two pillars upon which the story of the conquest mainly rests are the Chronicles of Gómara and of Bernal Díaz." For Prescott, these two balanced each other, so that while Díaz "freely exposes [Cortés's] cunning or cupidity, and sometimes his cruelty, he does ample justice to his great and heroic qualities."[57]

Prescott's books repackaged the Conquest myths that were rooted in the *probanzas*, *relaciones*, and *cartas* of the conquistadors, and reworked them into an ideology of imperial justification by the colonial chroniclers. He presented them to an audience eager to read that a "handful" of Europeans, because of their inherently superior qualities, could triumph over numerous barbarous natives despite the odds and hardships.[58] This audience was well fed on a diet of the nineteenth-century European and North American versions of imperial and expansionist ideology. Prescott's Spanish Conquests were credible and comforting, while the Catholicism of the conquistadors allowed the Protestant author and readership alike a facile explanation for the occasional, unfortunate excess or act of cruelty.

Although Prescott wrote his histories of the Conquest a century and a half ago, they remain in print and are still read.[59] Furthermore, his influence is widely visible, combined as it is with the larger cultural impetus (one that influenced Prescott himself) toward depicting European conquests as achievements personalized by great leaders.[60] A fine example of the longevity of Prescottian perspectives on the Conquest is Hugh Thomas's *Conquest*, which has sold well in many languages since it was first published in 1995. Although Thomas uses some native sources and did some original archival research, his book is overwhelmingly based on Spanish sources and projects a traditional Spanish perspective on events. As suggested by the subtitle—*Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico*—the book reproduces Bernal Díaz's gripping narrative by similarly emphasizing the intrigues and decisive impact of the Spanish and native Mexican leaders, in particular the former.[61]

Thomas's book contains the chief elements of that Conquest perspective running back through Prescott and Gómara to Cortés himself and the *probanzas* of the conquerors. Those elements are the structuring of the Conquest into a clear narrative that leads inexorably to victory, an explanation of the Conquest that ultimately testifies to the civilizational superiority of the Spaniards, a glorification of Cortés, and an endorsement of the myth that a few great and exceptional men made the Conquest possible.[62]

Shortly after landing on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in 1519, in a move routinely hailed as bold and brilliant, Cortés burned his ships. Actually, he

did not. The ships were scuttled and at least one was merely grounded. But in 1546 Cervantes de Salazar referred in print to Cortés's ship-burning and the image took hold.[63]

The myth of the burning ships not only reflects the existence of numerous little legends within the larger myths, but also illustrates how every move of Cortés's has been taken as indicative of his exceptionality.[64] With respect to the destruction of ships, Francisco de Montejo did the same thing in 1527 on the coast of Yucatan.[65] Arguably this was in imitation of Cortés, and no doubt Cortés did influence other conquistadors through their common experience of the invasion of the Mexica empire or through reading the published editions of his letters to the king. However, too often, without any direct evidence, the actions of conquistadors after the 1519–21 invasion of Mexico are taken as deliberately imitating Cortés, while pre-1519 patterns are ignored.

The classic position is summed up well in this sentence written in 1966 by Charles Gibson, one of the most eminent colonial Latin American historians of his generation: "Although no other conquistador rivaled Cortés in military skill or in the capacity to control the conquest aftermath, all subsequent campaigns were in some measure modeled upon the conquest of the Aztec empire."[66] This image of Cortés as both exception and archetype has been articulated in various forms by numerous scholars, who see Cortés as "incomparable" in his particular combination of skills, as "a remarkably gifted man" who is "the first to have a political and even a historical consciousness of his actions." Without Cortés, "there might very well have been no Conquest," as he "was the one who created the dream of gold and new power which intoxicated all those who followed him."[67]

In fact, Cortés followed Conquest procedures that had Iberian roots predating the Conquest and were consolidated during the Caribbean phase of Conquest (1492–1521). These routines were further developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not because all conquistadors mimicked Cortés—although some may have imagined they were emulating him—but because Spaniards were concerned to justify their actions and give them a legalistic veneer by citing and following approved precedents. The Conquest pattern was a procedure followed by many, not the exceptional actions of a handful.[68]

The first aspect of Conquest procedure was the use of legalistic measures to lend a veneer of validity to an expedition. Such measures typically included the reading out of a legal document, such as a conquest license or the so-called Requirement—the request for submission that was rather absurdly to be read to native communities or armies before hostilities took place. Also included was the declaration of a formal territorial claim. Finally, typical legalistic measures included the founding of a town. Spaniards placed great emphasis on city-dwelling, equating it with civilization, social status, and security, and so the gesture was imbued with reassuring symbolism for the conquistadors. It

also permitted a given group of conquistadors to turn themselves into a *cabildo* (town council) and thereby acquire standing sufficient to make certain kinds of resolutions, laws, and other legally valid decisions.

The most famous instance of this is the founding of Vera Cruz on the Gulf of Mexico coast by Cortés and his fellow captains. The cabildo thereby created wrote immediately to the crown, stating that "to all of us it seemed better that a town with a court of justice should be founded and inhabited there in the name of your Royal Highnesses, so that in this land your Majesties might possess lordship as in your other kingdoms and domains."[69]

In fact, the purpose of the imaginary Vera Cruz was not to set about building a town but to create a new basis of authority to replace that given to Cortés by his patron, the governor of Cuba. This case is famous but not unique; conquistadors routinely "founded" towns and cities during the course of explorations and invasions, settlements that were not built at that moment, if ever, but that figuratively marked the countryside as legally claimed and possessed by the expedition leaders. Early Caribbean cities such as Santo Domingo and Havana were founded two or three times before becoming permanent settlements. Francisco de Montejo founded at least four settlements on the coast of Yucatan named after his home town of Salamanca; only one was ever actually built and none retained that name, but the putative foundings gave a legalistic veneer to Montejo's claims that his expeditions were going better than they actually were.[70]

The purpose of Vera Cruz as a town that existed in 1519 in name only leads us to the second aspect of Conquest procedure—the appeal to a higher authority, typically and ideally the king himself. In the passage quoted above, the Vera Cruz *cabildo*, obviously representing the interests of Cortés and his faction within the expedition, state that founding a town is "better" than carrying out the orders of Diego Velázquez, the governor of Cuba and patron to Cortés and his expedition. These orders were, in the rather snide words of the letter to the crown, "to acquire as much gold as possible and, having acquired it, return with it to the island of Fernandina [Cuba] in order that it might be enjoyed only by Diego Velázquez and the captain [Cortés]."[71] By supporting a different course of action, Cortés is thus portrayed as selflessly giving up this collaborative enjoyment with Velázquez, to the crown's benefit. In fact, Cortés needed the direct approval of the crown in order to claim governorship of whatever lands he was able to conquer. His strategies did not so much reflect his allegedly exceptional political skills, but rather the nature of his legal position. Simply put, Velázquez held the crown's license to explore (and was about to receive a license to conquer) and to become governor, Cortés needed that license. To that end, he betrayed Velázquez, wrote directly to the king, sent agents to argue his case at court, and scuttled the remaining ships to prevent Velázquez loyalists from slipping back to Cuba to warn him—all logical, predictable, standard conquistador responses to the situation.[72]

One of the agents sent to Spain was Francisco de Montejo. He likewise sought to circumvent the patronage of Cortés and acquire directly a license to conquer from the king. Thus while campaigning at court in the early 1520s on behalf of Cortés, Montejo also lobbied to have Yucatan defined as a territory separate from Mexico with himself the recipient of a license to conquer it—that he received in 1526.[73] Similarly, the roots of the Conquest of Peru can be found in expeditions of exploration under Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro sent out along the Pacific coast by Pedrarias de Avila, governor of Panama and Nicaragua. Voyages of 1524–28 along the northern Pacific coast of South America convinced Pizarro that the region contained enough wealth and native population to be worth making the arduous return voyage to Spain to acquire his own license to conquer. Pedrarias had died, but it was important to Pizarro that he shut out potential rival claims from the governor's successor, Pedro de los Ríos, and from Pizarro's own partner, Almagro.[74]

Returning from Spain in 1530 with a long list of titles and honors for himself, and none for Almagro, it was clear that Francisco Pizarro had stabbed his partner in the back. Although the two men remained partners with a fatally bitter competitiveness (Pizarro had Almagro executed in 1537 and four years later Almagro's son had Pizarro assassinated), Pizarro's apparent treachery should not been seen as an individual character trait. Nor should Almagro's attempts to take southern Peru from Pizarro be seen solely in terms of personal rancor. Both men were simply following standard procedures in order to attain the ultimate goal of every conquistador—royal confirmation of the governorship of an imperial province. As Francisco Pizarro wrote in a letter a few days before he was murdered, the governorship of Peru "is the most important thing to me and for which I have always clamored, since without it all my hardships and services will have been in vain."[75]

Another example of an appeal to the king as typical Conquest procedure took place when Gonzalo Pizarro (Francisco's brother) led a vast expedition east from Quito across the Andes and into Amazonia in 1540. The terrain got the better of the Spaniards and their African and native auxiliaries, and as the death toll mounted the expedition ground to a halt. One of the company's captains, Francisco de Orellana, was sent ahead by river to find food. He and his small party never returned, instead successfully navigating the Amazon all the way out to the Atlantic and eventually making it to the Caribbean and then Spain. Pizarro, meanwhile, waited for weeks before struggling back to Quito.

According to Orellana, the river's current made it impossible for him to return to Gonzalo Pizarro and the main body of expedition survivors. According to Pizarro, Orellana deliberately and treacherously abandoned him. Colonial chroniclers took Pizarro's side, and subsequent historians followed

their cue. Prescott, for example, accused Orellana of abandoning his "unfortunate comrades . . . in the wilderness;" the "glory of the discovery" of the Amazon was "barren [and] surely not balanced by the iniquitous circumstances which attended it." In the 1950s the English writer George Millar wrote an *apologia* for Orellana, whose reputation for centuries, complained Millar, had been that of "a cad if not a coward." Historians over the past half century have done little to build upon Millar's obscure efforts to undo Gonzalo Pizarro's labeling of Orellana as "the worst traitor that ever lived." Most have simply ignored him, and Michael Wood's sympathetic attention to him in his recent *Conquistadors* television series and book is unusual.[76]

Yet Orellana's actions were neither heroic nor treacherous. Regardless of whether he was or was not able to return upriver to Pizarro, his willingness to go ahead alone, his subsequent defense of his actions, and his acquisition in Spain of a conqueror's permit to return as *adelantado* (licensed conqueror) to the Amazon (where he soon died) all conformed to the well-established patterns of conquistador behavior.[77]

The purpose of Gonzalo Pizarro's expedition over the Andes was to locate the source of gold usually embodied in the legend of El Dorado (a mythical ruler or city of gold)—bringing us to the third routine aspect of Conquest procedure. This was the search for precious metals, preferably gold, with silver a close second. This aspect of Conquest procedure has probably least often been depicted as the exceptional or original strategy of Cortés or one of the other well-known conquistadors. On the contrary, it has been accurately seen as a concern of all members of Spanish expeditions. But it has certainly been misunderstood, to the extent that Spanish "thirst for gold" represents one of the many little legends or mini-myths of the Conquest. The conquistadors have been depicted as "driven by the lust for gold" or by a "greed" for it that "is strongly reminiscent of the collective psychosis that seized upon California gold diggers in the mid-nineteenth century." In the words of another scholar, "It never occurred [to Spanish colonists] to do anything but look for gold, and this frantic search for precious metals, jewels, and pearls prevented them from engaging in any productive economic activity."[78]

Such a perspective fails utterly to understand the nature of the early colonial economy and the role played in it by precious metals. The "most important thing" to Pizarro was not gold, but the governorship. However, he needed to find gold in order for there to be a governorship worth having. Put in the larger context, Spaniards had no interest at all in the metal per se, any more than we treasure credit cards as objects. The finely worked gold artifacts collected at Cajamarca and other places were melted down in the *fundición*, a routine that immediately followed all such acquisitions and that allowed shares to be paid out, debts settled, and further supplies and credit procured. It was the value and buying power of gold and silver that Spaniards cared for. They conceived of the precious metals as money—often referring to shipments of them as *dineros*—and as the basis of the credit system that supported so much conquistador activity.[79]

If Spaniards seem at times single-minded in their quest for these metals, this was because gold and silver were not just the preferred source of wealth, but the only items whose value in relation to their transportability made the entire Conquest and colonial endeavor possible. No other New World product even came close to being as valuably nonperishable, divisible, and compact. Rather than being a barrier to "productive economic activity," gold and silver from the Americas and its pursuit by Spaniards underwrote the Conquest and virtually all subsequent economic activity in the New World (let alone altering the economic and political history of Europe).

Almost as determinedly as they sought gold, Spaniards looked for native populations. One aspect of this complex process was the need to acquire native allies—the fourth standard Conquest procedure. This strategy was necessitated by the fact that Spanish expeditions were always outnumbered by the native peoples of the regions being invaded, and that Spaniards were often ignorant of both region and people. Allies were potential sources of invaluable information. They also provided crucial support in the way of provisions and porters to transport them. Above all, native allies provided military assistance, offsetting the potential imbalance of numbers during battle and allowing the Spaniards to pursue a classic divide-and-conquer strategy. This was by no means an original or exceptional strategy as pursued by Cortés or by Pizarro; every conquistador sought native allies, as many and as soon as possible.

The fifth routine aspect of the Conquest was the acquisition of a particular category of native ally—the interpreter. Much has been made of Cortés's use of a Nahua noblewoman as his interpreter—the famous Malinche—often giving the impression that she was an example of Cortés's superior strategic skills. Yet Cortés was only following procedure and had quite predictably been keeping his eyes out for a potential interpreter ever since first sighting the mainland. To that end, he had gone to some trouble to rescue Gerónimo de Aguilar, shipwrecked seven years earlier on the Yucatec coast, on the reasonable assumption that Aguilar had learned the mainland native language.[80] But Aguilar could only speak Yucatec Maya, not Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica empire, so Cortés continued to search. That Malinche could speak Maya and Nahuatl was pure luck, but she was soon taught Spanish anyway.

As with many of these patterns, the routine search for an interpreter can be traced back to the earliest days of the Conquest. Columbus seized and acquired native guides beginning with his first voyage, guides who were obliged to learn Spanish immediately and therefore could soon be called upon to act as interpreters. Seven Caribbean natives were brought back to Spain in 1493 to be instructed as interpreters. Five soon died, but the others returned with Columbus on his second voyage. After these two apparently died, the quest for interpreters continued. In 1502, for example, a Central

American native was captured, christened Juan Pérez, and trained specifically for this purpose.[81]

Examples abound from then on. Hernández de Córdoba, acting "in an entirely expected manner" (as historian Hugh Thomas observes), took two prisoners off the Yucatec coast in 1517, either nicknaming or baptizing them Melchor and Julián, and tried to make interpreters of them. Julián reluctantly cooperated and returned to the coasts of Yucatan with the Grijalva expedition of following year, but died soon after. Melchor resisted (that Gómara would later read as lack of couth). Although he too accompanied Grijalva, Melchor escaped at the first opportunity when brought along on Cortés's expedition. Other interpreters, some Spanish but the vast majority native, pop up periodically in the accounts of these expeditions. For example, there is the native Jamaican woman found on the Yucatec coast; a Nahuatl speaker captured by Grijalva, baptized Francisco, and used by Cortés; the Shakori native of South Carolina, interpreter for Vásquez de Ayllón, who called him Francisco de Chicora and took him to Spain; the Spanish page Orteguilla, assigned by Cortés to Moctezuma during the emperor's captivity, who soon became bilingual; and Gerónimo de Aguilar, the shipwrecked Spaniard rescued by Cortés after eight years among the Mayas.[82]

Many others followed in later decades. For example, the Conquest role of Martinillo, an Andean interpreter, allowed him to become don Martín Pizarro. Gaspar Antonio Chi enjoyed a long career in sixteenth-century Yucatan as both a Maya nobleman and the colony's Interpreter General.[83] The fates of native interpreters like Malinche, Martinillo, and Chi owed much to their own abilities, but they also reflected the fact that the quest for interpreters and their relative acceptance into colonial society was a fundamental and ubiquitous Conquest pattern.

The sixth aspect of Conquest procedure was the use of display violence, or the theatrical use of violence. Despite the assistance of native allies (and interpreters), and the use of African auxiliaries, Spanish-led forces often remained outnumbered and seriously threatened by the native peoples whose lands they were invading. Despite evidence of numerous massacres by Spaniards and the routine enslavement of the seminomadic peoples of the Caribbean and Central America, for the most part Spaniards did not seek to decimate or enslave native peoples but rather to subdue and exploit them as a more or less compliant labor force. A standard means of pursuing such subjugation was to employ dramatic displays of concentrated violence in order to terrorize a native group and convince them of the efficacy of cooperation with Spanish demands. Theatrical and terrorizing techniques appear again and again in the records of Conquest expeditions.[84]

These include the severing of the right hands (or sometimes the arms) of native prisoners, often by the hundreds;[85] the killing of women and, if necessary, sending the corpses home; and the mutilation or killing of select individuals, most typically by fire or by setting mastiffs on them, in front of native witnesses.[86] Another technique was the massacre of unarmed natives, whose effect was magnified if women, children, and the elderly were killed (as in the Cortés-led massacre in Cholula), or if the victims were celebrants in an important native festival or ritual (as in the Alvarado-led massacre in Tenochtitlán), or if the victims were confined by space or crowded tightly together (as in both of the above cases as well as the Pizarro-led massacre of Atahuallpa's entourage). As John Ogilby put it in 1670, Spanish expeditions advanced with "fear conquering more than slaughter."[87] If these examples use terror more than theater, more theatrical tactics and techniques were intended to confuse or impress. These included the attaching of bells to horses; the sounding of trumpets in conjunction with the firing of guns; and the use of cannons to blow apart trees or buildings.[88]

One particularly theatrical form of display violence was the public seizure of a native ruler (the seventh aspect of conquistador procedure). The move by Cortés that has been commonly judged his most bold, his "most startling decision," in Todorov's words, is the seizure of Moctezuma following the Mexica emperor's welcoming of the Spaniards into Tenochtitlán.[89] While the Spaniards were themselves prisoners of the Mexica within one of the palaces in the city center, they kept Moctezuma their prisoner in order to guarantee their safety. The ploy worked for a while, and then when Moctezuma was no longer useful to the Spaniards, they murdered him—later claiming that a stone thrown by one of the emperor's own people had dealt him a fatal blow on the head. Much has been made of the genius and even the supposed originality of this strategy, with Cortés being given all credit and Moctezuma denounced for allowing it to happen.

Such analysis, however, fails to recognize that Spaniards routinely took native rulers hostage. Pizarro's famous capture of Atahuallpa at Cajamarca in 1532 is either taken to be as exceptional and ingenious as Cortés's seizure of Moctezuma or assumed to be an imitation of the Mexican case.[90] In fact, the leaders at Cajamarca—Pizarro, Benalcázar, and Soto—were all 20-year veterans of the Conquest of Panama and Nicaragua, where they had been capturing native rulers long before any Spaniard even knew Mexico existed.[91] And shortly before the march to Cajamarca, Pizarro had captured and held hostage the native ruler of Puná Island, Tumbalá.[92]

What made Atahuallpa's capture unique was simply a matter of scale—the extent of Atahuallpa's empire, the size of his entourage, the quantity of gold and silver with which he was "ransomed" (the Spaniards executed him anyway). But his capture as a strategy was by no means original. Indeed, the practice was instinctive to Spaniards from the start of the Conquest. When, in 1493, the Haitian native lord Guacanagarí appeared to slip from Columbus's control, the Spaniards on the expedition demanded that they be allowed (in the words of Las Casas) "to take Guacanagarí prisoner, but the Admiral would

not do it."[93] However, Columbus's uncertainty as to how to control and treat the natives soon allowed standard Spanish practices to become dominant. A year later another Haitian lord, Caonabó, was publicly executed, and thereafter Spaniards routinely captured, ransomed, tortured, and executed native rulers throughout the Caribbean islands and later the adjacent mainland.[94]

Four decades after Columbus's first voyage, and shortly after Atahuallpa's capture at Cajamarca, one of the men present, Gaspar de Marquina, sent his father a letter attached to a gold bar acquired from the Inca ruler's ransom. Gaspar casually mentioned that the Spaniards had captured one of the local "great lords," and "with him prisoner, a man can go by himself 500 leagues without getting killed."[95] Thus, in a nutshell, Marquina unwittingly conveyed both the routine nature and causal efficacy of the capture of native leaders.

Just as prominent conquistadors such as Cortés and Pizarro were not original in their decisions and actions, nor were the Spaniards in their general conformity to the routine aspects of the Conquest employing unique tactics. Many of these aspects were part of the patterns both of Native American and western European imperial expansion and warfare. In the decades before the major Spanish invasions of the American mainland, Castilians and their neighbors had developed conquest practices and routines through the acquisition of a string of possessions in the southern Mediterranean, northern Africa, and the Caribbean.[96] During this same time, the Mexica and Inca had likewise developed standard procedures through the rapid creation of extensive empires, the former stretching from northern Mexico to the edge of the Maya area, the latter ranging from Ecuador to Chile.

Yet the larger contexts of conquistador activities have been overwhelmed by a view of the Conquest that has dominated our historical discourse on its events and protagonists, a view that gives primacy of cause and explanation to a handful of exceptional men. Collective achievement, of course, is less appealing both to the participants and to those later reading about it as the human impulse is to look for the heroes and villains. Explaining the Discovery and Conquest in terms of the vision of Columbus or the genius of Cortés would no doubt have delighted both men, but it has been a barrier to a fuller understanding of this "greatest event since the creation of the world." Fortune may have been "adverse" to Columbus, as he claimed was true of his friend Vespucci, but history has not—nor has it been to Cortés and Pizarro.

2

Neither Paid Nor Forced

The Myth of the King's Army

> If the Romans subjugated so many provinces, it was with greater or equal numbers of people, in known territories, provided with the usual sustenance, and with paid captains and armies. But our Spaniards . . . were never more than two or three hundred and even less. . . . And the many times they traveled, they were neither paid nor forced but went of their own will and at their own cost.
>
> —Francisco de Jerez (1534)

> Then a few days after [Governor Pedrarias] died, we got news of how Governor Francisco Pizarro was coming to be governor of this kingdom of New Castile. And so, hearing this news and having few prospects in Nicaragua, we came to this district, where there's more gold and silver than iron in Biscay.
>
> —Gaspar de Marquina (1533)

> I gave to the *adelantado* [my husband, Francisco de Montejo] a great quantity of money for the costs of the people and fleet that came to these provinces for their conquest and pacification, which assistance the *adelantado* took and thus carried out that conquest, as is common knowledge.
>
> —Doña Beatriz de Herrera (1554)

When Columbus returned on his second voyage to the Caribbean island that he had named Hispaniola, he was accompanied by a Spanish army. At least, this is the impression given by a dramatic scene in the 1992 movie *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, in which Spanish soldiers line up on the beach in disciplined ranks, in uniforms and with standard-issue weapons, banners waving, awaiting a drum roll before marching forward.[1]

This same impression is repeated in movies, illustrations, textbooks, and scholarly publications. According to this common portrait, the first Spanish invaders and settlers pursued careers "through the military" and constitute "forces" that "march" under the "command" of their captains, who plan and execute "military operations." All are part of "Spain's war machine." Most persistently, they are "soldiers." Cortés sets off with "three hundred foot soldiers."

He talks to "his soldiers," and he gives away his interpreter and lover, Malinche, "to one of his soldiers." In addition to the predominance of military terminology to describe Spanish expeditions and the ubiquitous use of the term "soldier" to describe the conquerors, the Spanish royal state is typically granted a monolithic, directive role in Spanish expansion.[2] The sum of all this is what I have called the "myth of the king's army."

In the eyewitness account by Francisco de Jerez of the 1532 events at Cajamarca—the Pizarro-Atahuallpa encounter and subsequent massacre of Andeans—the conquistador reminds his readers that the Spaniards did *not* constitute an army. Jerez's point of reference was not the Spanish army, for such a thing was still ill defined even in Europe in the 1530s, but the Roman army of ancient times. The triumph of the Pizarro-led Spaniards, in what Jerez most prematurely calls "the conquest of Peru," is thus presented as even more extraordinary and impressive precisely because it was not the achievement of "paid captains and armies."[3]

Other accounts by Spaniards who participated in Conquest campaigns confirm Jerez's assertion. For example, some modern historians who refer to the "soldiers" who invaded the Mexica empire quote the letters written by Cortés himself, thereby lending apparent authenticity to the use of the term. But the word always turns out to have been inserted by historians or by Cortés's English translators; where the Pagden edition has "three hundred foot soldiers," Cortés himself writes *trescientos peones*, "300 men on foot."[4] Cortés not only avoids the word "soldier" but reveals in his letters to the king, despite his efforts to portray himself as firmly in charge, that the men following him are as much a motley bunch of individuals as Jerez's compatriots at Cajamarca would be.

If the conquistadors themselves made it clear in the 1520s and 1530s that no armies were sent by the king of Spain to the Americas during these decades, what is the origin of the myth? Are we simply influenced by our own senses of what modern armies are like? No doubt this has much to do with the perpetuation of the myth. We are accustomed to legal, armed activity being the monopoly of highly institutionalized national forces. Understanding sixteenth-century Spanish expeditions requires a leap of imagination.

But the myth also has roots in military developments in Spain in the mid-to-late sixteenth century and the changes in terminology that accompanied those developments. The 1615 illustration of Atahuallpa's seizure at the top of Figure 5 seems to contradict Jerez's eyewitness description and show the men of Cajamarca as soldiers. In fact, tracking the use of *soldado*, the Spanish term for "soldier," is revealing. Cortés does not use it in the 1520s, nor does

Fig. 5. Title page to the sixth volume of Antonio de Herrera's Historia General de los Hechos de los Castellanos *(1615).*

Pedro de Alvarado writing of his invasion of Guatemala in the same decade, nor does it appear anywhere in the official 64-page report of the division of gold and silver among the men at Cajamarca in 1533 (or in a 1557 copy of that report).[5] In the account of the Conquest of Yucatan by the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa, the phrase *soldados españoles* appears just once. As the surviving version of the account is a compilation of excerpts and summaries made in the late seventeenth century, this could be a later addition. However, as Landa's original, long-lost manuscript was written around 1566, the single use of "soldiers" could also reflect the gradual shift in terminology and Spanish perceptions of who conquistadors were.[6] In one collection of letters written by conquistadors and other Spanish settlers in the Americas between 1520 and 1595, only one of the 36 documents uses the word "soldier." Significantly it was written relatively late and by a new arrival—in 1556 by a Spanish woman, doña Isabel de Guevara, in the recently founded town of Asunción, Paraguay.[7]

Bernal Díaz uses *soldado* often in his narrative of the Conquest of Mexico, but his book was drafted around 1570, finished in 1576, and edited for its first publication in 1632.[8] By this time, a century after Jerez had written of the events at Cajamarca, the conquistadors were well on the way to becoming soldiers. They certainly looked the part in Herrera's title-page illustrations (see Figure 5), and in the Conquest paintings that were fashionable in seventeenth-century Mexico. In Figure 6, for example, Cortés appears at the head of a fully armored and well-organized military force that includes galleons, cavalry, and artillery. Conquistadors were soldiers and nothing else when Ilarione da Bergamo heard of the Conquest from Spaniards in Mexico in the 1760s,[9] by which time engravings and paintings of Columbus and Spanish conquistadors routinely showed them in full armor, backed by uniformed soldiers.[10] In the nineteenth century the terminology of "soldier" and "army" was unquestioned (even though a close read of Prescott's histories, based as they were in large part on early colonial accounts, reveals a wealth of evidence as to the true nature of the conquerors). In the early twentieth century, books on the Conquest tended to include illustrations that further perpetuated the myth. For example, the 1923 frontispiece to Francisco de Icaza's "biographical dictionary" of the conquistadors depicts the first settlers coming ashore as a unit of professional soldiers with standard-issue dress and equipment.[11]

The gradual adoption of *soldado* in the late sixteenth century, and the assumption that soon followed that the early conquistadors were soldiers, related to broader shifts in the way Europeans waged war. Significantly it was the Spaniards—and close behind them their archenemies of the day, the French—who led the way in creating what historians have come to call the "military revolution." This revolution took many forms. For one, the size of military forces grew dramatically; whereas Ferdinand and Isabella had taken Granada in 1492 with 60,000 men, their grandson Charles V besieged the German city

Fig. 6. "Veracruz N2": The arrival of Cortés in Veracruz and the reception by Moctezuma's ambassadors. The second painting in the Strickland/Kislak Conquista de México *series, Mexican School, seventeenth century. Cortés, Bernal Díaz, and Marina (or Malinche) are identified by number.*

of Metz in 1552 with 150,000. By the end of the century, Spanish (and French) armies had again more than doubled in size.

Furthermore, developments in artillery meant that numbers of guns, tonnage of gunpowder used, and gunner numbers doubled three times over during the century. Artillery was just one aspect of the revolution in firearm technology and the tactics and strategy with which weapons were used. Finally, campaigns grew longer as well as larger and more complex, so that war became a permanent state of affairs; there were just nine years of peace in sixteenth-century Europe. Created by Castilian expansionism, Spain had only just become a loosely defined nation at the end of the fifteenth century. Yet within decades, Spain's Hapsburg rulers had acquired a European empire stretching from Italy to the Netherlands to the Canary Islands. Thus because Spain was not the only concern of its Hapsburg kings, they were obliged to maintain multiple, large forces—that were dedicated well into the seventeenth century to crushing French, Dutch, English, and German Protestant opposition to Hapsburg hegemony over Europe.

All of this might be taken to show that the conquistadors really were soldiers in a Spanish war machine. But this was not so. During the foundational decades of Spanish expansion, from the first Caribbean settlements of the 1490s

to the spread of conquest expeditions throughout much of the American mainland in the 1530s, the military revolution was still in its genesis. Most of the important technological changes—the invention of the musket, the use of volley-fire techniques; the building of faster, larger, and better-armed ships—would not occur until the second half of the century. And while the numbers of men at arms grew dramatically in the sixteenth century, that growth was even greater in the seventeenth. By 1710 there were 1.3 million Europeans at arms.

Perhaps most significantly, only in the seventeenth century were permanent, professional armies created of the kind that we associate with the term "army" today. Such armies were loyal to a state, rather than an individual leader. They evolved as nation-states came into being and concepts of citizenship took shape. It was thus not until long after the heyday of the conquistadors that the European states, Spain included, achieved the level of centralization and institutionalization to be able to field forces in which the majority of men were trained, salaried, permanent, veteran soldiers with uniforms and standard-issue weapons. Even then, this was an ideal by no means always realized.[12]

In addition, these changes were driven by wars in Europe and it was there that professional armies developed and changes were implemented. In the sixteenth century, Spain lacked the resources to dispatch large forces and significant quantities of weapons across the Atlantic. The formal fleet system linking Seville to the American colonies was not well established until the 1550s. It also lacked the motive to do so, as serious European competition in the Americas did not develop until the next century. Furthermore, Spain's involvement in European conflicts was increasingly complex and challenging during the sixteenth century. Spain's response to the tactical, logistical, and technological demands of these conflicts has been hailed by military historians as remarkable and revolutionary. But Spanish conquest endeavors in the Americas were peripheral to this process and cannot be attributed to Spain's admittedly foundational contributions to the military revolution in Europe.[13]

Finally, Spaniards soon learned that the New World required different military methods. In his 1599 book, *The Armed Forces and Description of the Indies*, the Spanish captain Bernardo de Vargas Machuca argued that in the Americas the patterns and practices of European warfare were irrelevant. Called by one prominent military historian "the first manual of guerrilla warfare ever published," the treatise proposed that linear formations, hierarchical units, and permanent garrisons be abandoned in favor of small, covert fighting units dedicated to search-and-destroy missions carried out over several years.[14]

Vargas Machuca seemed unaware that much of what he was advocating had already been common practice among Spaniards in the Americas for a century. Cortés's 500 men and the 168 at Cajamarca were relatively large companies of conquistadors. Beyond the central regions of Mesoamerica and Peru, most expeditions comprised less than 100 Spaniards (almost always outnumbered by African slaves and servants and by Native American "allies"). Their tactics included display violence and the treacherous treatment of native rulers. Search-and-destroy threats were usually made and often carried out. Furthermore, when Spanish imperial authorities did begin to establish a network of permanent garrisons and other features of a professional standing army in the seventeenth century, their purpose was not to enforce colonial rule over Native Americans but to defend the empire from English, French, and Dutch pirates. Nor did the descendents of conquistadors man such units, which were overwhelmingly black or *pardo* militias—that is, small companies of enslaved and free Africans and free "coloreds" (men of mixed Spanish-African descent).[15]

In short, the Spanish Conquest was not carried out by soldiers sent by the king, as the conquistadors themselves were well aware. But the military revolution that developed in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries altered subsequent Spanish perceptions of the early conquerors. Modern historians followed suit, likewise influenced by assumptions regarding the nature of men at arms. Thus the conquistadors, long after their deaths, all became soldiers.

If the conquistadors were armed and in some sense organized and experienced in military matters, is it not accurate enough to call them soldiers? One military historian has said as much, arguing that although "few of the men who fought . . . in the conquest of Peru were soldiers . . . militarily useful skills, values, and patterns of socialization were so deeply embedded and so widespread in early sixteenth-century Spanish society that the distinction is, from our standpoint, functionally unimportant."[16] To an extent, this was true. But arguably such skills and values were equally widespread among other Europeans, and, for that matter, among native groups such as the Mexica.

Furthermore, the conquistador acquired his martial skills not from formal training, but from conflict situations in the Americas. Expedition members tended to be recruited in recently founded colonies, creating a relay system of conquest that meant most participants already had some experience in the New World. For example, of the 101 Spaniards at Cajamarca whose pre-1532 experience is recorded, 64 had prior Conquest experience and 52 had spent at least five years in the Americas.[17] But none of this amounted to formal training.

The conquistadors' lack of formal training was paralleled by a lack of formal ranking. Spanish forces in Europe at this time were led by commanders from the high nobility and organized into various ranks (the names of some being the root of English terms of rank—*cabo de colonela* for "colonel," for example, and *sargento mayor* for "sergeant major").[18] In contrast, conquistador groups were headed by captains, the sole named rank and one that varied in number, with the other men divided only into those on horseback and those on foot—the latter rising to the former simply through the purchase of a horse. The record of the division of spoils at Cajamarca listed the men in two categories only, *gente de a cavallo* (people on horseback) and *gente de a pie* (people on foot).[19]

If conquistadors identified themselves not as soldiers, but as men on foot or on horseback, how else did they see themselves? How did they become conquistadors? And why did they end up fighting in the Americas?

The beginning of an answer to these questions is implied by Jerez's remark that the invaders of the Inca empire were "neither paid nor forced." A fuller answer is suggested by the words of one of Jerez's compatriots at Cajamarca, a young Basque Spaniard named Gaspar de Marquina, who sent the following letter to his father in Spain from Cajamarca in July 1533:

> Sir, I want to tell you the story of my life since I came to these parts. You already know how I went to Nicaragua with Governor Pedrarias as his page, and I was with him until God was pleased to take him from this world. He died very poor, and so all of us dependents [*criados*] of his were left poor too, as the carrier of this letter can very well tell you when he sees you. Then a few days after he died, we got news of how Governor Francisco Pizarro was coming to be governor of this kingdom of New Castile. And so, hearing this news and having few prospects in Nicaragua, we came to this district, where there's more gold and silver than iron in Biscay, and more sheep than in Soria, and great supplies of all kinds of food, and much fine clothing, and the best people that have been seen in the whole Indies, and many great lords among them. One of them, who rules over 500 leagues, we have prisoner in our power, and with him prisoner, a man can go by himself 500 leagues without getting killed; instead they give you whatever you need and carry you on their shoulders in a litter.[20]

The prisoner to whom Marquina rather casually refers is none other than the Inca, Atahuallpa, but Marquina is more concerned with conveying to his father the enormity of his own reversal of fortune. He skips over months of travel, hardship, uncertainty, and a great battle, in order to create the contrast within one paragraph between his low point after Pedrarias's death and his present high point. From his letter it is clear that Gaspar de Marquina is not a professional soldier, but a page, a fully literate, high-ranking servant, first of the governor of the colony of Nicaragua and then of the governor of Peru (that despite the events at Cajamarca, was not really conquered and certainly not colonized by 1533). He is in the "Indies" of his own free will, pursuing opportunity—in order, the rest of the letter reveals, to return to his father in Spain a wealthy man and, most likely, take up a career as a notary or merchant. He pursues that opportunity through his connection to important patrons, successfully attaching himself to another when one dies without apparent benefit to Marquina. (Incidentally, by the time his father received the letter, and the gold bar accompanying it, Gaspar had been killed in a skirmish with native Andeans.)[21]

Spaniards, then, joined conquest expeditions not in return for specified payments, but in the hope of acquiring wealth and status. They were, in the words of historian James Lockhart, "free agents, emigrants, settlers, unsalaried and ununiformed earners of *encomiendas* and shares of treasure."[22] An *encomienda* was a grant of native American labor. The holder, or *encomendero*, had the right to tax the natives of a given community or cluster of towns in goods and labor. Such grants allowed the recipient to enjoy high status and often a superior lifestyle among his fellow colonists. The first *encomenderos* were men who had fought to win their grants, but they were not soldiers. As there were never enough *encomiendas* to go round, the most lucrative grants went to those who had invested the most in the expedition. Lesser investors received lesser grants or simply a share of the spoils of war.[23] Had Gaspar de Marquina lived longer, he might have won for himself a modest *encomienda*. At the very least his future share of the spoils of conquest would have doubled due to the horse he purchased with his newly won wealth in Cajamarca (and upon which he was killed). To some extent, all participants were investors in commercial ventures that carried high risks but potentially the highest of returns. Spaniards called these ventures "companies." While powerful patrons played important investment roles, it was the captains who primarily funded companies and expected to reap the greatest rewards. As the governor of Panama, Pedrarias de Avila, told King Charles of early Conquest expeditions into Nicaragua and Colombia, "it was done without touching your majesty's royal treasury."[24] The spirit of commercialism thus infused conquest expeditions from start to finish, with participants selling services and trading goods with each other throughout the endeavor. The conquerors were, in other words, armed entrepreneurs.

Marquina refers to himself as a page (*paje*), and a dependent (*criado*). An Englishman of the day would have called him either a "servant" or a "creature," although no English word fully conveys the way in which a *criado* was both subordinate and a real member of the household. The identity of Marquina's patrons and other details of his life also give us a sense of his social status within the broad category of *criado*. Fully identifying a conquistador can thus take multiple sources of information. Conquistadors had various reasons to identify themselves in writing, but their self-identities did not necessarily match those given to them by others, and they shift according to circumstances. The circumstances under which the identities of each conquistador company were recorded were seldom the same. Still, these records help us to know the conquistadors better.

For example, following the founding of the city of Panama in 1519, the 98 Spanish conquistador-settlers were asked to contribute to such a record, to which 75 responded (see Table 1). Only two of them claimed to be professional soldiers whereas 60 percent claimed to be professional men and artisans, occupations from the middle ranks of society. A similar analysis of the conquerors of the New Kingdom of Granada (today's Colombia) is less precise as to occupations and probably exaggerates the numbers of middle-ranking men. Nevertheless, the data clearly show that men of some means or property, professionals, and entrepreneurs of some kind predominated.[25]

Comparable information on Peru's conquistadors is likewise patchy, but sufficiently revealing. Of the 47 of the 168 men at Cajamarca who gave their occupations, it is clear that these men were not professional soldiers, but professionals and artisans who had acquired various battle experience and martial skills. The 17 artisans included tailors, horseshoers, carpenters, trumpeters, a cooper, a swordsmith, a stonemason, a barber, and a piper/crier.[26] The same kinds of artisans had also accompanied Francisco de Montejo on

Table 1: The Occupations of the Conquistadors of Panama, Peru, and the New Kingdom of Granada (Colombia)

	Panama (1519–22)	Peru (1532–34)	Colombia (1536–43)
Low nobility	2 (3%)		10 (7%)
Merchants			4
Artisans	20	17	13
Aides, secretaries, and similar employees	15	2	10
Professionals	4	6	12
Ecclesiastics		1	
Notaries	2	4	9
Rentiers	2		2
Shipowners	1		5
Royal officials	1		7
Other leaders			31
Horse owners			44
Slave owners			2
(Middle ranking totals)	(45 [60%])	(43 [92%])	(139 [90%])
Farmers	16		1
Sailors	10	2	
Soldiers	2		3
Artillerymen		2	
(Plebeian totals)	(28 [37%])	(4 [8%])	(4 [3%])
TOTALS	75 (100%)	47 (100%)	153 (100%)

Source: Lockhart, *Cajamarca*, 1972: 38; Avellaneda, *Conquerors*, 1995: 91, 93.
Note: These numbers do not represent all members of these expeditions, only those for whom there is such information. The methods and circumstances in which the original information was gathered were not standardized, and the table should thus be viewed as giving an approximate impression.

his first expedition into Yucatan in 1527, along with the usual professional men—merchants, physicians, a couple of priests, and a pair of Flemish artillery engineers. An unspecified number of the artisans and professionals invested in the company were confident enough of its outcome to bring their wives (although, following customary practice, these Spanish women probably remained with the merchants at the last Caribbean port before Yucatan was reached).[27]

In addition, Conquest records often contain information on the age and birthplace of conquistadors. It is available, for example, for 1,210 members of the original expeditions to Panama (84 men), Mexico (743), Peru (131), and Colombia (252). The makeup of each expedition was similar, with an average of 30 percent from the southern Spanish kingdom of Andalusia, 19 percent from neighboring Extremadura, 24 percent from the core kingdoms of Old and New Castile, and the remainder from other regions of the Iberian peninsula. Other Europeans were rare, restricted to the odd Portuguese, Genoese, Flemish, or Greek man. In age, the conquerors ranged from teenagers to the occasional 60-year-old. The average age of the men who went to both Peru and Colombia was 27, with the vast majority in their twenties or early thirties.[28]

In terms of education, again the range was broad, from men who were completely illiterate and uneducated to the occasional man of considerable learning. Although the availability of and attention given to conquistador narratives certainly gives the impression that the conquerors were handy with a pen if not well read,[29] the fully literate were among the minority in Spain as among conquest expeditions. Literacy rates among the conquerors and early settlers were slightly higher than average rates in Spain, if only because few farmers and other plebeians were among the migrants. The classic eyewitness narratives—Bernal Díaz and Cortés on Mexico; Gonzalo Jiménez on Colombia; Francisco de Jerez and Pedro Pizarro on Peru—are classics in part because they are rare. Most conquistadors wrote or dictated "merit" reports in the standardized style of the *probanza*, and about a quarter of the conquerors of Peru and Colombia were unable to sign their names. Despite the myth that literacy gave Spaniards an advantage over Native Americans, members of conquistador companies could probably read and write no better than the most literate native societies, such as the Mayas. Most Europeans and Mayas were semiliterate, with minorities being fully literate and fully illiterate. The correlation between social status and literacy among conquistadors was not as close as might be expected. The colonial chronicler Juan Rodríguez Freyle, a Bogotá native, claimed that some city council members of the New Granada settlements used branding irons to sign documents.[30] Most famously, the chief early conquistador of Peru, Francisco Pizarro, remained illiterate all of his life.[31]

The excerpt from Marquina's letter pointed to networks of patronage that bound individuals and groups of families together, often from the same Spanish town or region, through social ties, political alliances, and economic activities. Central to such networks was the tension between inequality and codependency among its members. Patrons and dependents, senior and junior members, relied upon each other to represent their interests in ways appropriate to their means and standing in society. In the context of conquest companies, patrons organized and made major financial investments in expeditions, calling upon their dependents to man the companies and in turn to recruit additional participants, investment, and supplies. Simple recruitment—the persuasion of relative strangers that the risks of a conquest venture were worth the potential gains in wealth and social status—was thus subordinate to patronage-based recruitment.

An important dimension to the pattern of patronage-based recruitment was the way it perpetuated the chain of conquest. As Marquina's story illustrates, most conquests and newly founded colonies served as stepping stones to other conquest enterprises. Certainly, some expeditions were assembled in Spain, but most originated in one Spanish colony in order to conquer an adjacent territory. Even if a company was assembled in Spain, it was likely to be launched from a colonial site. Gonzalo Jiménez's 1536–38 expedition into Colombia, for example, comprised hundreds of young recruits brought from Spain, but it was in Santa Marta, on Colombia's Caribbean coast, that specific plans were made and veteran conquistadors added to the company—largely through the patronage networks of Jiménez himself and his patron, Santa Marta's governor, don Pedro Fernández de Lugo.[32]

The most vivid way to illustrate this pattern is to follow the links of patronage that made up the chains of the Spanish Conquest. One section of one of these chains began in the year 1518 on the island of Cuba, where Governor Diego Velázquez was deciding who should lead a third expedition of exploration to the mainland. This was not intended as a great enterprise of conquest. That was supposed to come later, led by Velázquez himself, when a license for such had come through from Spain—a license that (like Columbus's contract of 1492) would ensure Velázquez the governorship of the conquered mainland. This expedition would pave the way and required someone close to Velázquez, a man willing to finance most of the company and be bolder than the leaders of the first two voyages along the Yucatec and Mexican coasts. Velázquez's first choice, a nephew of his, turned him down. The expedition would be too expensive, he said. His second and third choices, both his cousins, likewise declined, unwilling to risk the comfort of their *encomiendas* on Cuba for a trip into the unknown.[33]

Governor Velázquez's fourth choice was his one-time secretary, a native of Medellín, Extremadura, who had fought alongside Velázquez during the Conquest of Cuba and received an *encomienda* from him, and who had asked Velázquez to be godfather to his illegitimate *mestiza* (mixed-race) daughter. In a letter of 1519, Velázquez described this man as *criado mío de mucho tiempo* (a long-time dependent of mine). His name was Hernán Cortés.[34]

The two conquistadors of Cuba had had their differences, but even these stemmed from their patronage-based relationship. Cortés had seduced one of the maids-in-waiting to Velázquez's wife, and the governor had forced Cortés against his will to marry her. Now, in the autumn of 1518, Cortés made such efficient use of his own and Velázquez's networks of patronage, as well as his persuasive powers of simple recruitment, that the governor tried to stop the expedition—fearing that Cortés would break his connection to his patron and appeal directly to the king.[35]

Velázquez's fears were well founded, not just because that was precisely what Cortés did, but because this was standard conquistador practice. Indeed, even before the climax of his two-year war of conquest against the Mexica empire (1519–21), Cortés was obliged to tolerate efforts by other leaders of the company under his patronage to make their own marks on the mainland. The nature of patronage relations and the relay system of conquest meant that it was inevitable that the *criados* of Cortés would before long seek to become their own men—or rather, more direct *criados* of the king. But there were different ways to do this. Cristóbal de Olid, one of Cortés's valued captains in the war against the Mexica, showed how not to do it; he so infuriated his patron that in 1525 Cortés traveled by land all the way from Mexico to Honduras in order to see Olid beheaded. Other captains from the original Cortés expedition succeeded in carving out their own colonies, namely Francisco de Montejo and Pedro de Alvarado.

Francisco de Montejo was one of the early settlers of Havana and a *criado* of Velázquez. He was recruited by Cortés to be a major investor and captain on the expedition, having played a similar role and provided a well-stocked ship on the ill-fated Grijalva expedition to the mainland coast earlier in 1518. It was Montejo's good fortune, however, to avoid almost all the fighting of 1519–21 and yet still receive a share of the spoils appropriate to his investment and status—an *encomienda* in the Valley of Mexico. This was because Montejo was chosen by Cortés to fight the political battle in Spain while Cortés himself set out against the Mexica empire. In July 1519 Montejo sailed from the Mexican coast across the Atlantic with a cargo that included letters and gold for Cortés's family and, most importantly, numerous "gifts" for the Spanish emperor and a letter predictably requesting Cortés's appointment as governor of everything he could conquer. Velázquez heard of Cortés's treachery and sent a ship on an unsuccessful transatlantic chase after Montejo.

Some sources suggest that Montejo, playing a double game, himself leaked the news to the Cuban governor.[36]

In fact, Montejo was playing a triple game. While he remained for a time prepared to switch sides back to Velázquez, should occasion require it, he also persisted in arguing Cortés's case in Spain for over three years. At last, in October 1522, the emperor ruled in Cortés's favor, granting him the governorship of New Spain, although Cortés did not receive word of this until the following September.[37] By this time, the Mexica empire was no more, Cortés had been the effective ruler of Mexico for over two years, and Montejo had been assigned in absentia the lucrative *encomienda* of Azcapotzalco. Meanwhile, Montejo was busy laying the groundwork for his own, independent conquest career. In 1526 these efforts paid off, and Montejo was given a conqueror's license for Yucatan, whose coast he had sailed twice, with Grijalva and Cortés, and that he hoped would turn out to contain another Tenochtitlán or something like it.

Comments by Diego de Landa, the bishop of Yucatan, on Montejo's activities in Spain are revealing, both for their defensive tone and for their insights into how conquistadors relied on personal enterprise, rather than royal backing, to finance expeditions. Wrote the Franciscan:

> During the time that Montejo was at court he negotiated for himself the conquest of Yucatan [i.e., the license that would grant him the governorship should he conquer the region], although he might have negotiated for other things, and received the title of *adelantado* [licensed conqueror]. . . . He then exchanged marriage vows with a lady of Seville, a rich widow, and was thus able to gather 500 men whom he embarked in three ships.[38]

Later, this rich widow, doña Beatriz de Herrera, came looking for Montejo in Mexico. According to Landa: "The *adelantado* had married doña Beatriz de Herrera secretly in Seville, and some say that he denied her, but don Antonio Mendoza, the viceroy of New Spain, intervened and as a result he [Montejo] received her.[39] Doña Beatriz de Herrera would write to the king in 1554, in one of a series of petitions for a royal pension, that she had been the principal investor in Montejo's company. She claimed to have been left "in extreme poverty" after giving him "a great quantity of money" to cover the costs of the company.[40]

Thus armed with a conqueror's license and his new wife's fortune, Montejo's hopes were high. But there was no Maya empire, and his first invasion of Yucatan proved to be a disaster. Only 18 months after reaching Cozumel in the autumn of 1527, he was forced to withdraw to Mexico with the bedraggled survivors of his company. He returned later in 1529 with more Spanish recruits, African slaves, and hundreds of armed Nahuas, native warriors from his Azcapotzalco *encomienda*. But by 1534 the Spaniards were still battling Mayas and controlled barely any territory. In putting together both his expeditions, Montejo had made use of his own network of patronage, as well as the related Cortés network. One such associate was Alonso de Ávila, who had been with Montejo back in the days of the 1518 Grijalva company and had then fought with Cortés against the Mexica. However, the principle of reciprocity and mutual interest was at the heart of the Spanish patronage system. During two invasions, stretching over seven years, Montejo had failed to deliver to his associates and dependents any investment returns. Therefore, when in 1534 word reached Yucatan of the events at Cajamarca of 1532 and the gold and silver acquired in Peru, Montejo's company fell apart. As he himself wrote to the king, "with the great news that came of Peru, all the [Spanish] men went away and depopulated all the [colonial] towns of the land."[41]

Some of these men, like Ávila, judging that they had missed the Peru boat, returned to Mexico.[42] Those who followed the third Montejo invasion of Yucatan, this one led by his son and nephew, would end up in the 1540s with *encomiendas* of Mayas. But many of the Yucatan veterans went to Peru, seeking new patrons and better opportunities. And some of them ended up in the company assembled for a 1534 invasion of Ecuador by Pedro de Alvarado—whose career took him to southern Mesoamerica and into South America.

Pedro de Alvarado had captained a vessel owned by Velázquez on the 1518 Grijalva expedition and that year apparently joined his fellow Extremaduran Cortés with much enthusiasm. Although he was not one of Cortés's original 11 captains, he rose to prominence during the many military encounters of the long trek from the coast to the Valley of Mexico. Alvarado was a loyal Cortés *criado* but had a reputation for impetuosity and belligerence. His assertion of independence in Tenochtitlán in 1520 proved fatal to many of his compatriots. During Cortés's temporary absence from the city, Alvarado had ended the Spanish-Mexica standoff and initiated a bloody massacre that led to weeks of hostilities climaxing with the desperate Spanish flight that the conquistadors dubbed *La Noche Triste* (The Tragic Night). Yet Alvarado served his patron and his compatriots well in the final months of siege and assault on Tenochtitlán, and in 1522 Cortés granted him the first major *encomienda* in the immediate environs of Tenochtitlán–Mexico City, the native Nahuas of Xochimilco.[43]

In accordance with Conquest patterns, the following year Alvarado led a major expedition down into Guatemala—either sent by Cortés or with his blessing, depending on one's perspective. In addition to Spanish recruits, many from the Mexican wars, African slaves, and Nahuas from his *encomienda*, Alvarado also took his three brothers, two of his cousins, and other members of a patronage circle he had cultivated as an *encomendero*.[44] Through a classic divide-and-conquer strategy, Alvarado played the two major native groups of the highlands off against each other, the Quiché Mayas and the Cakchiquel Mayas. Although Alvarado and his relatives achieved the rapid submission of these two groups, as well as the neighboring Tzutujil, in

just two months of fighting in 1524, the wars of conquest in highland Guatemala would drag on for a decade.[45] As was often the case, the quick Spanish victory was a myth that masked years of conflict among Spaniards and among natives as well as between them.

The prolonged hostilities had multiple causes: the fragmented and diverse nature of native polities in the highlands; excessive Spanish demands and actions that were frequently counterproductive to the imposition of colonial rule; and Alvarado's apparent view of Guatemala as little more than another stage in his Conquest career. Both loyal to Cortés and yet keen to replace him—typical of patronage patterns in the Conquest—Alvarado communicated by letter with his patron regularly. He set off to Chiapas in 1525 in a vain attempt to meet up with Cortés on the latter's Honduras trip, and the following year traveled to Honduras himself at Cortés's request. However, earlier in 1526 Alvarado had gone half way to Mexico on the strength of reports that Cortés had died and a faction of fellow veterans from the Mexican wars was ready to make Alvarado governor of Mexico.[46]

His uneven commitment to Guatemala, and the problems inherent to divided Spanish colonists attempting to "pacify" divided highland Mayas, helps to explain why Alvarado's response to early news of the lands and potential wealth of South America was to use his resources and status to form another large Conquest company. Despite his *encomiendas* in Mexico and Guatemala and his confirmation in 1530 as governor of the latter, Alvarado set his sights on Peru as early as 1531. But his ambitions should also be seen in the larger context. As free agents seeking opportunity both through patronage networks with compatriots and in competition with other Spaniards, the conquistadors were seldom committed to any one region. Just as they were not sent by the king to conquer as his soldiers, nor were they sent to settle as his colonists. Both king and conquerors talked much about settlement, but more as a means to the extraction of wealth than an end unto itself. Alvarado's apparent restlessness was entirely consistent with the logic of Conquest patterns.[47]

Alvarado's well-financed expedition brought veterans from the Conquest wars in Mexico, Yucatan, Guatemala, other parts of Mesoamerica, and even the Caribbean, to Peru. It did not represent the first links in the chain of conquest into South America, but through its personnel it further connected Andean events to conquests in the north. In view of Pizarro's success in 1532–33, the Guatemalan governor's purpose in 1534 seems to have been either to bypass Pizarro and sieze Cuzco or to carve out a separate colony in the northern territories of the Inca empire, the region of Quito (today's Ecuador). This never happened, for the simple reason that Diego de Almagro, one of Pizarro's captains, rushed north to meet Alvarado. Rather than fight, the two conquistadors made a deal. Although Alvarado was paid to disband his expedition and return to Guatemala, even richer than before, Almagro was permitted to recruit men from Alvarado's company. As Almagro was in the throes of breaking patronage ties to Pizarro and acquiring his own as-yet-unconquered governorship in the southern Andes, many of these men ended up fighting in Chile's conquest wars.[48]

Thus did two relay systems or chains of conquest—forged by the ties of patronage and the impetus of individual opportunity—begin as one in the Caribbean, run to Mexico, diverge into Yucatan and Guatemala, and then converge again in northern Peru, where they met another one, the Pizarro-Almagro chain that came from Panama and ran down the Andes into Chile.

The variety of identities, experiences, and life stories in the "Indies" renders the concept of the typical conquistador somewhat nonsensical. But if we were to create such a figure, constructed from the averages and patterns of conquistador biographies, he would be a young man in his late twenties, semiliterate, from southwestern Spain, trained in a particular trade or profession, seeking opportunity through patronage networks based on family and home-town ties. Armed as well as he could afford, and with some experience already of exploration and conquest in the Americas, he would be ready to invest what he had and risk his life if absolùtely necessary in order to be a member of the first company to conquer somewhere wealthy and well populated. He would not in any sense be a soldier in the armies of the king of Spain.

The armed Spanish entrepreneurs that our imagined typical conquistador represents were not, of course, the only members of conquistador expeditions, although their own accounts and those of so many historians since have given that impression that they were. It is thus to the other conquerors, largely invisible in such accounts, that we turn in the next chapter.

3

Invisible Warriors

The Myth of the White Conquistador

The Indian empire was in a manner conquered by Indians.

—William H. Prescott (1843)

The conquistadors say that the Tlaxcaltecs deserve that His Majesty grant them much favor, and that if it had not been for them, they [the Spaniards] would all have been dead, when the Mexica repulsed the Christians from Mexico, and that the Tlaxcaltecs offered them a haven.

—Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía (1540)

Napot Canche was governor of the *cah* [Maya town] here in Calkini; it was on his palace patio that the tribute was delivered to the captain, Montejo, when he and his soldiers arrived here. . . . Their swine and their Culhuas [Mexica] arrived first; the captain of the Culhuas was [a Mexica named] Gonzalo.

—The Title of Calkini (1579)

I . . . black resident [*de color negro vecino*] of this city . . . was present at all the invasions and conquests and pacifications which were carried out.

—Juan Garrido (1538)

About eight years ago . . . having in my possession as my slave one Juan Valiente, a Black, and wishing to treat him kindly and being confident that he would conduct himself properly, I granted him permission . . . to go to Guatemala and Peru and wherever else he might wish to go and earn . . . whatever might be his share, providing that he keep an accounting of it and bring it all back to me within four years.

—Alonso Valiente (1541)

The image is a familiar one. Thousands of native warriors swarm like bees upon the vastly outnumbered conquistadors, who against all odds fend them off and survive to fight another day. This familiarity is rooted in part in the larger context of the Western colonial experience, whose mythology is punctuated by tales of barbarian hordes miraculously repulsed (even if temporarily) or crushed—the Capture of Atahuallpa, the Siege of Vienna, the Alamo, Custer's Last Stand, Rorke's Drift.

But the image is also familiar specifically with respect to the Spanish Conquest. This is because it is so ubiquitous in the most widely read accounts of the invasion, particularly those of the Conquest of Mexico, from Bernal Díaz and Cortés to Prescott—the last a best-seller in the days when history still taught "that Europeans will triumph over natives, however formidable the apparent odds."[1] It is, of course, a corollary to the handful-of-adventurers image, and is thus equally central to the conquistadors' own portrait of the Conquest.[2]

This image tells us much about the Spaniards, but it leaves out critical aspects of the story. There is no doubt that the Spaniards were consistently outnumbered by native enemies on the battlefield. But what has so often been ignored or forgotten is the fact that Spaniards tended also to be outnumbered by their own native allies. Furthermore, the "invisible warriors" of this myth took an additional form, that of the Africans, free and enslaved, who accompanied Spanish invaders and in later campaigns equaled or exceeded them in number.[3]

In the 1760s an Italian friar of the Capuchin order named Ilarione da Bergamo traveled through Mexico, later writing up an account of his journey. Ilarione's brief references to the Conquest, based on his conversations with Spaniards in Mexico and his reading of the popular histories of the time, give us some sense of the state of Conquest myths in the late eighteenth century. Ilarione's understanding is that the greatly outnumbered conquistadors could only pull off their remarkable feat owing to their superior weaponry, the handicapping superstitions of the "wretched Indians," and the interventions of providence. The Capuchin friar's perspective reflects that of colonial Spaniards, a view encapsulated by Bernal Díaz's pithy explanation of one typical encounter—"The Indians were charging us in such numbers that only by a miracle of swordplay were we able to drive them back and reform our ranks." Notably still absent in Ilarione's day, as in Díaz's, are natives or Africans fighting alongside the Spaniards.[4]

Yet a careful search through the many sources on the Spanish invasion of Mexico reveals numerous casual references to the participation of native allies. For example, during his 1524 invasion of highland Guatemala, Alvarado wrote two letters to Cortés, the first making no reference to native allies, the second mentioning just once, in parentheses, that his force comprised 250 Spaniards "and about five or six thousand friendly Indians."[5] Even Prescott, influenced in so many ways by the sixteenth-century Spaniards upon whose accounts he relied, realized that "it would be unjust to the Aztecs [Mexica] themselves, at least to their military prowess, to regard the Conquest as directly achieved by the Spaniards alone."[6]

"You have arrived here in Tenochtitlan! Be strong, Tlaxcalans and Huejotzincans!" Thus begins one of the sixteenth-century songs written in the central Mexican language of Nahuatl and known as the *Cantares Mexicanos* or *Songs of the Aztecs*. It is an ambiguous celebration of the role played by warriors from Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo in the siege and capture of the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlán. In the first two cantos, these natives are aided by the Spaniards and their weapons in "destroying the city, destroying the Mexica." In the third canto the Mexica temporarily turn the tide of battle. But in the fourth, although they seize a captive for sacrifice, the Mexica "are surrounded," and in the fifth and final canto the Mexica ruler Cuauhtémoc is captured and cuckolded by Cortés.[7]

The disposition of the song is thus unclear. The historical fact of Tlaxcalan victory is certainly not avoided, but the Mexica seem to claim some kind of covert victory through the perpetuation of high status, as symbolized by Cuahtémoc's former child bride, doña Isabel, "who sits beside you, Captain General [Cortés]," and her half-Spanish child. As the Mexica, Tlaxcalans, and Huejotzincans were all Nahuas, the song's lyrics present the war as a kind of civil or local conflict, between rival city-states within the same ethnic and linguistic area. The Spaniards play important roles, but secondary ones as agents of native ambition whose eventual triumph really isn't a triumph—a "victory" whose flawed and partial nature is ripe for parody because the Spaniards seem unaware of its incompleteness. Symbolically, at the point of apparent Mexica defeat in canto four of the song, the Mexica capture and sacrifice a Spaniard named Guzmán "as much-valued tribute to Tenochtitlán."[8]

This spin on the Conquest as a native civil war resulting in an incomplete Spanish domination offers an alternative to the predictably hispanocentric perspective of the Spaniards, and is one that is readily found in native sources. It also reveals a dimension of the Spanish invasions so central to their outcome that without it the Conquest cannot be sensibly understood. The *Song of the Aztecs* evokes both aspects of this native dimension—the insertion of Spaniards into a native civil war, and the use by Spaniards of native allies in further expeditions outside the homeland of those natives.

The first of these is most obviously illustrated by the role of the Tlaxcalans. As the Mexica (or Aztec) empire expanded across central Mexico in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the small city-state of Tlaxcala managed to maintain a precarious independence, even after it became surrounded by towns subjugated to the Mexica. Located roughly halfway between the Gulf coast and Tenochtitlán, Tlaxcala represented both a major hurdle and a crucial opportunity for the Cortés-led expedition of 1519. At first the Tlaxcalan political faction hostile to the Spaniards dominated the response to the arrival of the foreigners, who suffered a series of violent confrontations. Had such hostilities persisted, Cortés would have been forced to retreat east and seek an alternative route or strategy.[9]

But Spanish survival and the impression made by their weapons allowed the Tlaxcalan faction in favor of making an anti-Mexica alliance with Cortés to come to the fore. As these Tlaxcalans rightly judged, with Spanish assistance they would be able to destroy the Mexica empire and its capital city (see Figure 7). As Prescott deftly puts it: "The first terrible encounter of the Spaniards with the Tlascalans, which had nearly proved their ruin, did in fact insure their success. It secured them a strong native support on which to retreat in the hour of trouble, and round which they could rally the kindred races of the land for one great and overwhelming assault." We cannot be sure how many native allies Cortés had, but by any estimate they outnumbered Spaniards many times over. Gómara stated that Cortés first arrived in Tenochtitlán with 6,000 such allies. According to prominent Conquest historian Ross Hassig, the final siege and assault on the Mexica capital was carried out with 200,000 native allies, "even though they went virtually unacknowledged and certainly unrewarded."[10]

Fig. 7. Spaniards with Tlaxcalan allies battle Mexicas, who are throwing stones; from fray Bernardino de Sahagún's General History of the Things of New Spain *or* Florentine Codex *(1579).*

Cortés, not surprisingly, claimed that the Tlaxcalan role resulted from a strategy of his own devising. Seeing the animosity between the Tlaxcalans and the Mexica, Cortés saw "the opportunity to subdue them more quickly, for, as the saying goes, 'divided they fall.'"[11] Historians of various kinds have followed Cortés's cue, up to the present. The semiotician Tzvetan Todorov, for example, characterizes the divide-and-conquer strategy as an "endeavor" in which the Spaniard "succeeds very well."[12] The point, of course, is not that Cortés did not attempt to exploit native rivalries and divisions—clearly he did—but that his endeavor must be properly contextualized.

Two contexts are particularly important. One is that of native politics. The Tlaxcalans and other Nahuas and native Mesoamericans endeavored as much as Cortés and often with equal success to exploit the situation in the pursuit of immediate political goals. Tlaxcala's neighbor, Huejotzingo, had long resisted incorporation into the Mexica empire and likewise assisted the Spaniards in the Conquest. Indeed the Huejotzincans later wrote to the king of Spain that they had never opposed the Spaniards and had been better allies than the Tlaxcalans, who "in many places ran away, and often fought badly." In contrast, they asserted "we helped not only in warfare, but also we gave them [the Spaniards] everything they needed."[13] The Huejotzincans, in other words, were not passive tools of Cortés's strategy; rather they sought to use the Spanish presence to promote their interests and pursue rivalries first against the Mexica and later against the Tlaxcalans.

The other context is that of Spanish actions elsewhere. The search for native allies was one of the standard procedures or routines of Spanish conquest activity throughout the Americas. Pedro de Alvarado entered highland Guatemala in 1524 not only with thousands of Nahua allies but also expecting to be able to take advantage of a Mexica-Tlaxcala type rivalry; the two major Maya groups of the region, the Cakchiquel and the Quiché, had both sent ambassadors to Mexico City a year or two earlier. As a result, for the rest of the decade, a brutal civil war ravaged the highlands as the Spaniards used these groups against each other and against smaller Maya groups, while periodically turning with violence upon these native "allies."[14] Conversely, Spaniards under the Montejos sought desperately to make sense of regional politics in Yucatan in order to exploit or establish a similar division, being forced in the end to make a series of often unreliable alliances with local dynasties such as the Pech and Xiu. These Maya noble families controlled relatively small portions of Yucatan, and the Spaniards never achieved control over the whole peninsula.[15]

The most obvious example of how Spaniards sought native allies, looked for native divisions, and benefited enormously from them is the Inca civil war. Smallpox spread into South America faster than Europeans did, so the disease had preceded Pizarro into the Andes, killing the Inca ruler Huayna Capac and his heir before Spaniards entered their empire. Two brothers,

Atahuallpa and Huascar, then took control of the northern and southern halves of the empire, respectively, in an uneasy peace that collapsed into civil war after two years. Had Pizarro arrived in northern Peru just a few months later, he most likely would have found a united Inca empire under Atahuallpa's rule. But Pizarro's timing was accidentally perfect, and he was able to insinuate himself into the conflict. Although seized by Pizarro, Atahuallpa sought to turn his captivity to his advantage by using the Spaniards against his brother Huascar. Alliances and betrayals proliferated and soon both Inca rulers were dead.[16]

Their successor, Manco Inca, was supposed to be a Spanish puppet, but he soon rebelled. However, four years of Inca disunity during the Pizarro-Almagro invasion had given the Spaniards a steady enough supply of native allies to permit Spanish survival in the region. Manco's great siege of Cuzco in 1536 would probably have resulted in the elimination of Pizarro's forces were it not for his Andean allies. These were initially less than 1,000 but grew to over 4,000 later in the siege as two of Manco's brothers and other nobles of the same Inca faction came over to Pizarro's side. These allies saved the Spaniards from starvation, rescued individual Spaniards, acted as spies, and fought along with Spanish horsemen in sorties against the besiegers.[17] Their assistance enabled Pizarro and his company to survive until Almagro's relief force arrived. Native support not only saved Pizarro in 1536, it also allowed the Spaniards to survive long enough to establish a permanent foothold in the Andes and to begin to build colonies.

As the Andean conquests fanned out from centers of the former Inca empire to the southern and northern regions of South America, native warriors and servants proved equally invaluable. The taking of native allies from one zone of conquest to the next was a practice established at the very onset of Spanish activity in the Americas. Caribbean islanders were routinely carried between islands as support personnel on conquest expeditions, and then brought to the mainland in the campaigns into Panama and Mexico. For example, Cortés brought 200 native Cubans with him to Mexico in 1519.[18]

When the Spaniards under Cortés left the Gulf coast and headed toward central Mexico, native Cempoalan warriors and porters accompanied them, and Tlaxcalans, Huejotzincans, and others later became part of a vast support force that greatly outnumbered the Spaniards. The Huejotzincans continued to fight alongside Spaniards and provide other services as the Conquest stretched out over the 1520s and 1530s. As Huejotzingo's rulers would inform the king in 1560, "we never abandoned or left them. And as they went to conquer Michoacan, Jalisco, and Colhuacan, and at Pánuco and Oaxaca and Tehuantepec and Guatemala, we were the only ones who went along while they conquered and made war here in New Spain until they had finished the conquest; we never abandoned them, in no way did we hold back their warmaking, though some of us were destroyed in it."[19]

In fact, the Huejotzincans were not the only Nahuas to fight in other regions of what became New Spain. Montejo brought hundreds of warriors from Azcapotzalco, in the Valley of Mexico, to Yucatan. One Maya account of the Spanish invasion offers a revealing commentary on their use as a vanguard force. Following a series of military encounters in the region, the Spaniards entered the important town of Calkini in 1541 to accept the nominal submission of the local Maya rulers. The description of that ritual by the rulers of Calkini remarks pointedly that the Nahuas—called Culhuas by the Maya after Culhuacan, the town that had once dominated the Valley of Mexico—arrived first. The Maya account also noted that the leader of the Culhuas had been baptized Gonzalo, that their force brought along a herd of pigs (an animal introduced by the Spaniards), and that they were the ones who gathered up the tribute goods offered to the Spaniards.[20]

There is no hint of racial solidarity between Nahuas and Mayas in this account, nor should any be expected. Spaniards lumped different native groups together as "Indians," but to the Mayas of Calkini, the Culhuas were as foreign as the Spaniards. They were invaders to be repulsed or accommodated, as circumstances allowed, just as if they had come alone as part of the Mexica imperial expansion into Yucatan that never happened but may have eventually occurred had the Spaniards not appeared.

Nor was there a sense of Maya ethnic solidarity in the sixteenth century. In time, Mayas from the Calkini region and other parts of Yucatan would accompany Spaniards into unconquered regions of the peninsula as porters, warriors, and auxiliaries of various kinds. Companies of archers were under permanent commission in the Maya towns of Tekax and Oxkutzcab, regularly called upon to man or assist in raids into the unconquered regions south of the colony of Yucatan. As late as the 1690s Mayas from over a dozen Yucatec towns—organized into companies under their own officers and armed with muskets, axes, machetes, and bows and arrows—fought other Mayas in support of Spanish Conquest endeavors in the Petén region that is now northern Guatemala.[21]

Ideally, these auxiliaries came more or less voluntarily (that is, they were not enslaved) and in large numbers, as was the case with Montejo's "Culhuas" in Yucatan. However, native groups who were not accustomed to providing tribute or organized labor services to lords, such as the semisedentary peoples of the Caribbean and southern Central America, resisted these arrangements. The Spanish response was to enslave such peoples. The enslaving of Native Americans was soon banned by the Spanish crown, who viewed native slavery as contributing to the extinction of most Caribbean native groups, as being made redundant by African slavery, and as being unnecessary among mainland sedentary societies (where organized labor systems already existed). But in the early decades of the Conquest, natives routinely accompanied Spaniards as slaves on expeditions to other regions, mostly, but not solely, in

the Caribbean. Native slaves from Nicaragua participated in the Conquest of Peru, for example. They fought and provided other services alongside other natives and Africans, both slaves and free servants. Natives tended to outnumber Africans, as most of the latter were costly slaves purchased from transatlantic traders. While the men fought and transported supplies, there were also native women who cooked and acted as female company and lovers for the Spaniards, had children by the Europeans, and settled with them as servants in their new colonial residences.

That Spaniards expected to have several native or black auxiliaries, and that they considered it a great hardship to go without them, is evidence enough of their important role in the Conquest. "Two years is long enough to go about begging without servants," wrote one conquistador, a member of the Pizarro company who almost starved on Gallo Island, off Ecuador, while awaiting reinforcements and supplies. "I will need [someone] for the practice of my trade, and also someone to serve me," he told his brother, "that is, a Black or a good Indian man and woman, because if I should buy them here it would cost a great deal."[22]

Whether as squads of Huejotzincan warriors helping to topple the Mexica empire, a Nahua from Azcapotzalco leading his men into a Maya village, or an enslaved native Nicaraguan woman serving a conquistador in Peru, native peoples are everywhere in the Conquest alongside the Spaniards. One symbolic illustration of their omnipresence is found in the first couple of conquest festivals performed in Mexico. The first took place in Coatzacoalcos, on the Gulf coast, late in 1524. The occasion was the entry into the town of the Cortés-led expedition en route to Honduras, and the festival was a welcome in the form of (in Bernal Díaz's words) "triumphal arches, and certain [mock] ambushes of Christians and Moors, and other grand entertainments and dramatized games." As an anticipatory celebration of Cortés's Honduran triumph, the festival was full of irony, as not only were almost all the celebrants natives, but in reality Cortés was leading an overwhelmingly native army against rebellious Spaniards under one of his old captains, Cristóbal de Olid.

The return of Cortés to Mexico City in 1526 occasioned the second such festival on record. Again the dances, games, and mock battles all featured native celebrants, supposedly commemorating Spanish triumphs but very clearly also representing their own complex roles in the incomplete Conquest. As Díaz dryly observed, during the festival the lake that then still surrounded Mexico City was "full of canoes and Indian warriors in them, according to the manner in which they were accustomed to fight against us in the time of Guatemuz [Cuauhtémoc]."[23]

Festivals of conquest and reconquest not only offer insights into the roles placed by native warriors on both sides of the Conquest wars, but also depict other oft-ignored participants—such as Africans. For example, the performance of the "Conquest of Rhodes" was staged in Mexico City in 1539, in response to news of an anti-Ottoman truce signed the year before by the Spanish and French monarchs. The play was an elaborate affair whose vast sets were constructed by "more than fifty thousand workmen" (Africans and local natives), according to Bernal Díaz. It anticipated imminent Mediterranean victories (that remained wishful thinking), but portrayed local historical events too—thousands of native Nahuas and possibly other Mesoamericans played both the attackers and defenders during the siege of Rhodes, with "Cortés" the leader of the Christian forces.

For the Spanish audience, this was the main event, but the native and black participants and audience must have seen the play that preceded the siege as equally significant. This opening spectacle featured three artificial forests stocked with real animals, who were "hunted" by bands of native warriors. The native actors reflected both the medieval European "wild men" tradition and the Mesoamerican tradition that juxtaposed "civilized" central Mexican Nahuas with "barbarous" Mesoamericans (the Chichimecs and others of the frontiers of the Mexica empire and then New Spain). The hunt soon became a battle between these two groups, a conflict that was made more complex but then resolved by the arrival of a cavalry of "more than fifty black men and women" (Díaz again), led by a black king and queen.

The presence and role of Africans was surely open to interpretation by the diverse population of early Mexico City. For Spaniards, African and native roles underscored the Conquest's reduction of non-Spaniards to armed agents of colonialism or to mere playactors in military conflict. For natives, the black role was bittersweet, being both a reminder of African military roles in the Spanish invasion and a parody of that invasion through its representation as entirely African—monarchy included. For Africans, their entrance into the play on horseback must have been a proud celebration of their military prowess, of a conquistador status so seldom permitted public recognition. All those present must also have been reminded that barely 18 months earlier, in the autumn of 1537, an unknown number of the 10,000 Africans already resident in Mexico City had allegedly plotted a slave revolt and crowned a rebel black king. This slave monarch, along with other black leaders, had then been publicly executed—and was surely resurrected, in the minds of the city's blacks, in the form of the festival's African king.[24]

Whatever their identity or perspective, none of the inhabitants of Mexico City in 1539 would have viewed a black presence in that year's festival of conquest as incongruous. All took for granted the fact that Africans too had participated in the real Conquest. Indeed, Africans were ubiquitous not only to the Conquest of Mexico but also to the entire endeavor of Spanish invasion and colonization in the Americas. Because the majority of such Africans arrived as slaves, and because of their subordinate status in the increasingly ethnocentric Castilian worldview, the widespread and central role of blacks was consistently ignored by Spaniards writing about the Conquest. As with so much else in the evolution of the Conquest into a collage of myths, subsequent historians and others consolidated this marginalization. Evidence of black roles is thus scattered and often opaque, but when the pieces are put together, it is incontrovertible.

Among the evidence that can be pieced together is the life story of one seemingly extraordinary black conquistador, Juan Valiente.[25] Although we have no direct information on Valiente's youth, he was almost certainly born in West Africa around 1505 and purchased as a very young man by Portuguese traders from African slavers on the coast. He then became part of the great wave of people and supplies that entered Mexico in the wake of the Spanish invasion and the fall of the Mexica empire. After being purchased by a Spaniard named Alonso Valiente, the young African was baptized and brought to his new master's house in the newly founded city of Puebla around 1530. Not surprisingly, Juan Valiente grew restless in his position as an enslaved domestic servant. Whether he pursued various strategies to stretch the bounds of his servitude we do not know, but in 1533 he was able to convince his owner to let him go and seek opportunity as a conquistador for a period of four years, "providing that he keep an account of [his earnings] and bring it all back me [his owner]." The African would have kept a notarized record of this agreement on his person at all times to avoid being arrested as a slave in flight.

Valiente arrived in Guatemala in time to join Pedro de Alvarado's expedition to Peru. Alvarado's extensive company of Spaniards, natives, and Africans was stopped in northern Peru by Diego de Almagro, then still Pizarro's partner, in 1534. Almagro bought out Alvarado, but those who had followed the latter had the option of joining the former. Valiente chose to switch companies, and by 1535 he was fighting down in Chile with Almagro. Mortality rates were high in the Conquest, but those who survived often saw their fortunes improve dramatically. This was true for Valiente, despite his technical status as a slave. By 1540 he was again (or still) in Chile, but now as a captain, a horseman, and a vested partner in Juan de Valdivia's company. Ongoing campaigns against Chile's native Araucanians during the 1540s brought further rewards—an estate outside Santiago, which city he helped Valdivia found, in 1546, and four years later an *encomienda*, a grant of tribute-paying natives. Meanwhile, Valiente had married a Juana de Valdivia, possibly a native servant but more likely a former African slave of the governor's.[26]

During these decades the black conquistador's owner, Alonso Valiente, still 4,000 miles away in the Mexican city of Puebla, had not given up on his

investment. Although Juan Valiente's permit of travel required him to return and turn over the spoils of conquest to his master after four years, an updated version was dispatched upon the expiration of the original agreement. It probably never reached the slave, as four more years later, in 1541, Alonso had yet to hear from or of Valiente. In that year he sent his nephew on a wild goose chase to find the slave and bring him back or negotiate a good price on his manumission.[27] Interestingly, Valiente had not forgotten the agreement with Alonso either. Despite his success as a conquistador and his ability to live as a free man in Chile, his technical status as a slave troubled him enough that he commissioned a royal official in 1550 to purchase for Valiente his legal freedom either in Lima or in Puebla. But the official absconded to Spain with the funds. Finally, five years later, Alonso Valiente received news of his slave's career, and made yet another attempt to recover a return on his investment. But by then the black conquistador and *encomendero* had been killed by Araucanians at the 1553 battle of Tucapel.

The life of Juan Valiente certainly seems extraordinary—the stuff, even, of fiction. But every aspect of it can be related to the larger patterns either of Spanish conquistador activity or of the African experience in early Spanish America. As a black West African brought against his will to the Americas in the sixteenth century, Valiente was hardly unique. The transportation of West Africans as slaves out of their homeland, which had been a part of trans-Saharan trade for centuries, became an increasingly important part of the new Atlantic economy in the late fifteenth century. The Discovery would take the slave trade in a new direction and serve to magnify it considerably, so that over the four centuries ending in 1850 some 12 million men and women from West and Central Africa would be loaded onto transatlantic slave ships. Although the Portuguese, and later the British, dominated this trade, Castilians were involved as early as the fifteenth century. The first black Africans brought to the Americas probably arrived by 1502, and in 1510 the king of Spain authorized the first large shipment of Africans slaves—250 destined for Hispaniola. By century's end, roughly 100,000 Africans had been shipped to the Spanish-American colonies.[28]

The obvious purpose of the Atlantic slave trade was to meet labor demands, and the most infamous of slave occupations in the New World was that of plantation worker. But while Spaniards did set up sugar and other plantations worked by African slaves, their colonies were primarily built in areas of heavy native settlement and relied upon native labor. Thus the black slaves of Spaniards in the colonies tended to function more as personal auxiliaries—as domestic servants, as assistants in commercial enterprises, as

symbols of social status—just as in the Conquest they were personal auxiliaries of individual Spanish conquistadors. They were servants who were, by necessity, armed; by fighting and surviving they usually earned their freedom and became conquistadors in their own right.

Juan Valiente arrived in the New World too late to be a part of this pattern in the Caribbean and Mexico, but other Africans were there alongside the first Spaniards. Juan Garrido, for example, born in West Africa about 1480, was in Lisbon and Seville in the late 1490s and arrived in the Caribbean in 1502 or 1503 (see Table 2). He later claimed to have crossed the Atlantic as a

Table 2: The Life of Juan Garrido, a Black Conquistador

ca. 1480?	Born in West Africa and probably sold as a slave to Portuguese traders
ca. 1495?	Becomes a Christian in Lisbon; later moves to Seville (may have gained freedom in Lisbon or Seville)
ca. 1503	Crosses Atlantic to Santo Domingo, probably as a servant or slave of a Spaniard named Pedro Garrido
1508–19	Participates in the Conquests of Puerto Rico and Cuba, in the supposed Conquests of Guadalupe and Dominica, and in the Discovery of Florida; is otherwise resident in Puerto Rico
1519–21	Member of the Conquest expedition into central Mexico, probably as a servant of Pedro Garrido and later Hernán Cortés (or, less likely, in the retinues of Juan Núñez Sedeño [1519] or Pánfilo de Narváez [1520])
1521	Builds a commemorative chapel on the Tacuba causeway near the site of the heavy Spanish and allied losses of 1520
1521–23	Resident, adjacent to his chapel, on the outskirts of Mexico City; plants the first three seeds of wheat to be grown in New Spain
1523–24	Member of the Antonio de Caravajal expedition to Michoacán and Zacatula
1524–28	Resident in Mexico City; on 10 February 1525, he is granted a house-plot within the rebuilt city; 1524–26 holds post of doorkeeper (*portero*) and for a time is also crier (*pregonero*) and guardian of the Chapultepec aqueduct
1528	Heads a gold mining expedition, complete with black slave gang, to Zacatula
1528–33	Resident in Mexico City
ca. 1533–36	Member of the Cortés expedition to Baja California, in charge of and co-owner of a squad of black and native slaves intended for mining
1536–ca. 47	Resident in Mexico City, where he dies; leaves a wife and three children (one of whom may have been the Juan Garrido resident in Cuernavaca in 1552)

Sources: AGI, *México* 204, fs. 1–9; Icaza, *Diccionario*, 1923, I: 98; Gerhard, "A Black Conquistador," 1978; Alegría, *Juan Garrido*, 1990; Altman, "Spanish Society," 1991: 439. Note: A version of this table first appeared in Restall, "Black Conquistadors," 2000: 177.

free man, although he more likely acquired his freedom in the Caribbean. Between 1508 and 1519 he fought in the Conquests of Puerto Rico and Cuba, in raids on other islands, and in the Discovery of Florida. Back in 1502 the governor of Hispaniola, Nicolás de Ovando, had brought Africans to act as auxiliary conquerors, but when they did the opposite and joined the native resistance on the island, he banned further importation of black slaves. The ban had little effect; Spaniards took as many Africans on expeditions as they could afford.[29] Garrido was by no means the only black conquistador to accompany Ponce de León into Puerto Rico, nor was he the only one to invade Cuba with Diego Velázquez—who in 1515 wrote to the king that "many black slaves" had participated in the Conquest there.[30]

Valiente and Garrido were typical of black conquistadors in a number of ways. They both appear to have been African born. Only a minority of blacks in the Conquest were born in Spain or Portugal (examples are Juan García and Miguel Ruíz—see Tables 3 and 4), and only much later in the Conquest were there American-born black soldiers. Both acquired freedom as a result of their military experiences, Garrido legally granted the status, Valiente effectively taking it and only denied its legal confirmation by the exigencies of long-distance communication in sixteenth-century Spanish America. Both were about 28 years old when their conquistador careers began, perhaps closer to 30 when they first actually fought in the New World. While Spanish conquistadors were on average in their late twenties, their black counterparts tended to be a few years older, probably because less Hispanized younger Africans were less likely to be trusted with armed roles by Spaniards and more likely to be placed in danger as "arrow fodder." Finally, both men were baptized Juan, the Christian name of more than half the black conquistadors on record, highlighting the Spaniards' lack of imagination in baptizing slaves.[31]

Where Valiente and Garrido differed was primarily in the timing of their arrival in the New World. Garrido's early arrival meant he participated in the major Caribbean and Mexican conquests. A generation later, Valiente reached Mexico and Peru right after the initial phases of conquest, and thus ended up fighting in a more peripheral region.

In 1519 Juan Garrido joined the Cortés expedition to the mainland, and in the 1520s was one of the founding residents of Mexico City. Garrido later wrote to the king that he "was the first to have the inspiration to sow wheat here in New Spain and to see if it took; I did this and experimented at my own expense."[32] Another first attributed to an African in Mexico was the bringing of smallpox to the mainland. Francisco de Eguía, one of the black slaves on the Narváez expedition of 1520, allegedly died of the disease soon after landing on the Mexican coast.[33]

Unlike later expeditions, Africans did not participate in the Conquest of Mexico in the hundreds, for as Bernal Díaz observed, "at that time Blacks and horses were worth their weight in gold."[34] But Garrido and Eguía were

probably among dozens of blacks among the Spaniards who invaded the Mexica empire. One was Juan Cortés, a slave named after his owner. Juan Sedeño also had his own African servant. The Ramírez brothers, who later followed Alvarado to Guatemala, each brought a horse and a black slave to Mexico.[35] Both Spanish and native sources make references to the black presence, albeit typically without providing specifics. The Dominican chronicler, Diego Durán, for example, mentions various "servants and blacks," while the native account compiled by Sahagún (known to us as the *Florentine Codex*) simply notes that with the Spaniards "came some blacks, who had crisply curled dark hair."[36] Two of the illustrations in Durán's account depict a black African beside Cortés (see Figure 8).[37] Such drawings are probably intended not to represent specific individuals but rather the presence of a number of black servants and slaves on the expedition, all of whom would have fought and, if they survived, emerged as veteran conquistadors like Garrido.

As the first major conquest on the mainland, the Conquest of Mexico helped to inspire and finance a flurry of Spanish expeditions through the Americas. All included African slaves and servants, many of whom, like Juan Garrido and Juan Valiente, became or continued to fight as conquistadors (see Table 3). These expeditions can be placed in two groups, one part of the chain or relay system of conquest that radiated out from central Mexico, the other part of the chain of conquest that ran into South America.

Illustrative of the first chain—that ran up into the Mexican far north and down into southern Mesoamerica as far as Honduras—is Garrido's continued

Fig. 8. Cortés, accompanied by a black servant or slave and various Spaniards, being received by Moctezuma, accompanied by two Mexica lords; Plate 58 in fray Diego de Durán's The History of the Indies of New Spain *(1581).*

experience of exploration and conquest in New Spain after the fall of Tenochtitlán. He participated in expeditions to the Mexican regions of Michoacán and Zacatula in the 1520s, and to Baja California with Cortés in the 1530s. By this time blacks on such expeditions had begun to number in the hundreds, sometimes outnumbering Spanish company members; Cortés took over 300 to Baja California.[38]

While Garrido periodically left central Mexico for the north, Valiente chose to go south, to Guatemala. Alvarado had taken Africans into the Maya highlands in 1524, and they continued to arrive steadily in the years that followed, most as slaves, many to join the sizeable black underclass in the Guatemalan capital, some to seek Conquest opportunity as did Valiente.[39] In 1533 the buzz in the colonies was all about Peru and the much-heralded Montejo expedition into Yucatan was in ruins. Had the timing of Spanish discoveries and fortunes been different, or had Valiente arrived in Guatemala before Peru's discovery or as late as 1540, he may have chosen to go to Yucatan instead. There he would have found dozens of Africans on the early Montejo campaigns, and perhaps over a hundred on the final invasion of the 1540s. These included an African baptized as Sebastián Toral, who won freedom for his efforts and raised a family as one of the first settlers of the colonial Yucatec capital of Mérida—whose black and Spanish populations were almost equal in number around 1550.[40]

When Juan Valiente joined Alvarado's vast but short-lived expedition to Peru in 1534, he traveled with 200 other African slaves, servants, and a small number of voluntary members like himself. In opting to stay in South America, he effectively jumped from one chain of conquest to another. The latter chain had begun in the Caribbean and the southern regions of Central America in the 1510s (see Table 3),[41] extended down into greater Peru in the 1530s, and then out into the margins of South America—as illustrated by Valiente's career in Chile from the late 1530s into the 1550s.

Juan Valiente's movements and motives thus made him an unexceptional member of the African diaspora that was part of Spanish expansion in the sixteenth century. This was as true of the South American portion of his life as it was of his earlier years in the Americas. Just as Garrido was not the only black conquistador of Mexico, nor was Valiente the only African in Peru and Chile in the 1530s. There were two blacks with Pizarro's company at Cajamarca, Juan García and Miguel Ruíz, both of whose biographies can be reconstructed in modest detail (see Tables 3 and 4). These two, however, were free mulattos who had voluntarily joined the expedition. There were unknown numbers of other blacks, mostly African-born slaves, who accompanied this and subsequent expeditions into the Andes. Indeed, the only casualty on the Spanish side during the capture of Atahuallpa was a black slave of Jerónimo de Aliaga's.[42]

Table 3: Life Patterns of Some Black Conquistadors

Name	Birth Place and Status	Places of Conquest Activity	Recompense for Fighting
Juan Garrido	Africa or Portugal, black slave	Mexico, Zacatula, and Baja California	Manumission; various minor posts; house site in Mexico City
Sebastián Toral	Africa(?), black slave	Yucatan	Manumission; tax exemption
Pedro Fulupo	Africa(?), black slave	Costa Rica	Unknown
Juan Bardales	Africa, black slave	Honduras and Panama	Manumission; 50-peso pension
Antonio Pérez	North Africa, free black	Venezuela	Horseman; made captain
Juan Portugués	Africa or Portugal, black	Venezuela	Unknown
Juan García	Spain, free mulatto	Peru	Footman's share of gold and silver at Cajamarca; a share at Cuzco
Miguel Ruíz	Spain, free mulatto	Peru	Horseman's share of gold and silver at Cajamarca, a posthumous share at Cuzco
Juan Valiente	Africa(?), black slave	Peru, Chile	Treated as free; horseman; made captain; an estate and *encomienda*
Juan Beltrán	Spanish America, free mulatto (black-native)	Chile	Confirmed as fort captain at Villarica; an *encomienda*

Sources: AGI, *México* 204, fs. 1–9; Icaza, *Diccionario*, 1923, I: 98; Gerhard, "A Black Conquistador," 1978; Alegría, *Juan Garrido*, 1990; AGI, *México* 2999, 2, f. 180; Meléndez and Duncan, *El Negro*, 1972: 25; Herrera, "People of Santiago," 1997: 254; Oviedo y Baños, *Historia*, 1967 [1723]: 347, 390, 394, 438–39; Cieza de León, *Peru*, 1998 [1550]: 243; Lockhart, *Cajamarca*, 1972: 6–15, 380–84, 421–22; Boyd-Bowman, "Negro Slaves," 1969: 150–51; Sater, "Black Experience," 1974: 16–17; Vásquez de Espinosa, *Compendium*, 1942 [1620]: 743–44.

Note: A version of this table originally appeared in Restall, "Black Conquistadors," 2000: 174.

The Conquest account by Pedro de Cieza de León, a young Spaniard who spent 15 years (1535–50) as a conquistador-chronicler in South America, is typical of how Spanish sources both ignore and reveal black roles. Cieza de León never provides the total number of blacks in any one company, nor does he name any of the Africans who fought or traveled with him, but on 19 occasions he mentions their presence. Thirteen of these references are to blacks in Peruvian expeditions; six in Chilean ones; seven are to Africans starving or freezing to death in the northern Andes or Chile. Valiente would certainly have been on at least one of these journeys and must have been lucky to survive.[43] The remainder of Cieza de León's references are to notable incidents that reveal the black presence, despite the chronicler's failure to otherwise record it. An African discovered fresh water for a company led by Alvarado's cousin, Diego, in the Ecuadorian interior; an African saved Almagro's life; native Andeans attempted to wash the color off a black slave; a mulatto messenger had a finger cut off by Manco Inca, the Inca ruler who succeeded Atahuallpa.

Other sources produce a similar litany of incidents that add up to overwhelming evidence of the black presence in the Peruvian Conquest. The first four non-natives to see the Inca capital of Cuzco in 1533 included a black man (he returned to Cajamarca leading a train of Andean porters carrying precious metals). During Manco Inca's 1536 siege of Cuzco, blacks labored to extinguish the fires on the roof of the royal palace as fast as attacking Andeans set them. A force sent from Hispaniola to relieve the defenders included 200 Africans with military experience—a veritable squadron of black conquistadors.[44]

Cieza de León also recorded the presence of blacks on a disastrous expedition into Colombia in the 1530s that the chronicler barely survived. Conquistadors eventually did manage to establish a colony there, which they named New Granada; one of their number was Pedro de Lerma, a mulatto who achieved full-fledged conquistador status. Scores of other blacks, most of them slaves, played various roles in all the Conquest expeditions into New Granada. When a group of them rebelled during one expedition, the governor, Luis de Lugo, ordered their genitals to be cut off. One died. Likewise there were Africans with the infamous Lope de Aguirre, with Diego de Ordaz on the Orinoco, and with Diego de Losada on the Conquest of Caracas (one of whom, Antonio Pérez, was a veteran captain).[45]

Just as Juan Garrido has been called Mexico's only black conquistador, so has Juan Valiente been called "the lone Negro conqueror of Chile."[46] Yet the evidence for Mexico, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and elsewhere shows that these men were by no means alone. And if the number of Africans on earlier expeditions was in the dozens or hundreds, there were soon thousands of black men and women in core colonies such as Peru—even while the Conquest continued. Between 1529 and 1537 the Pizarro brothers were granted 258 licenses to import African slaves to Peru, and in 1534 Alvarado brought 200 more Africans (many of whom, like Valiente, remained). But many more blacks arrived illegally, including 400 slaves shipped from Panama to Peru in just one six-month period in 1535. As the Conquest wars of the 1530s slid into the Spanish Peruvian civil war of the 1540s, the total number of blacks in Peru grew to some 2,000, and by the early 1550s to 3,000.[47]

In addition to there being so many other Africans in Peru and Chile, Valiente's experience in the military was shared by other blacks. The names of some of the many other blacks who fought in Chile have survived—an African named Felipe fought at Marihueni, a Juan Fernández fought at Cañete, and Juan Beltrán played so vital a role in the Conquest of Villarica that he was appointed its garrison commander.[48] Elsewhere in the Americas the written record offers brief insights into the hard years of frequent combat that must have characterized the lives of black conquistadors. Juan Bardales, for example, claimed that he took 106 arrow wounds in Honduras and saved the life of his Spanish captain (see Table 3).[49]

The king eventually granted Bardales a pension, as he did Toral, black conqueror in Yucatan, remarking that "he helped place that province under our command."[50] This seems like grudging recognition of services rendered, and Spaniards seldom acknowledged the importance of African combat roles; yet it is also clear that Spaniards tended to view Africans as "very good at fighting," as one official put it.[51] There are several reasons why this perception rose. Black slaves had served for centuries in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Iberian peninsula. Most black Africans were enslaved through warfare, and thus many already had combat experience. Finally, Africans in the Americas were motivated to develop martial skills not only to survive but also as a means to acquire freedom, which was a black conquistador's standard reward.[52]

Spaniards thought that two categories of Africans were especially pugnacious, Muslims in general and Wolofs in particular, who were consequently feared and distrusted on the one hand, and respected and valued on the other. For example, in royal legislation of 1532 Wolofs (who came from the Sénégal river region of West Africa) were called "arrogant, disobedient, rebellious, and incorrigible." Juan de Castellanos, a sixteenth-century Spanish poet who lived for a while in Puerto Rico, wrote that "The Wolofs are skillful and very warlike / With vain presumptions to be knights."[53] Black conquistadors who were deemed by Spaniards to be both militarily skillful and loyal were lauded as paragons. One such conqueror was Juan Beltrán, a mulatto of African and Native American descent, whose career in sixteenth-century Chile had become legendary by the time Vásquez de Espinosa wrote of him in 1620. This "valiant captain," wrote the Spanish traveler, "is worthy of eternal memory for his great deeds among those savages. He was very deferential toward the Spaniards, and very obedient and loyal to them. With the Indians he was fearless; they stood in awe of him and respected him, to such

a degree that the mere mention of his name was often enough to intimidate the Indians and put their forces to flight."[54]

Beltrán fought for many years in Chile until his Araucanian enemies managed to kill him, and Valiente likewise died in battle against the same Native Americans when in his late forties. Beltrán and Valiente were not typical of black conquistadors, in that they continued to play active roles in combat, whereas most black conquerors fought and then settled into positions in the new Mesoamerican and Andean colonies.

Spaniards associated a limited number of occupations with Africans and mulattos, stereotypical roles reinforced by repeated Spanish placing of blacks in these positions. The most common was that of street or town crier (*pregonero*), a post held by both Juan García (Table 4) and Juan Garrido; Lima's crier in the 1540s, Pedro de la Peña, was black too. Other functions typically assigned to blacks were those of constable, auctioneer (Pedro de la Peña was one too), executioner, piper (Juan García again), and master of weights and measures (García yet again). Perhaps the most typical position of all was that of doorkeeper or guard (*portero*), a position held by Garrido in Mexico City and Sebastián Toral, one of Yucatan's black conquistadors, in Mérida. The *portero* summoned the Spanish city councilors, set out tables and chairs, and stood guard at the door during meetings.[55]

It is not clear if Valiente ever held these positions, although it is likely that he would have, had he stayed in Peru or arrived early enough in Mexico or Guatemala to fight there. Because such posts were usually assigned in the wake of initial Conquest wars, and Chile's Conquest was an interminable affair, Valiente probably remained a conquistador, rather than a post-Conquest *pregonero* or *portero*. Furthermore, Valiente's survival on the frontier allowed him to rise to a social level denied men of African descent in core colonies such as Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru. Buying a horse and becoming a captain was not common for an African, but not unheard of. Being granted an estate and then an *encomienda* was rare on the frontier and simply never happened in core areas. Indeed, the only solid evidence of blacks being given *encomiendas* that I have found is from Chile, where in addition to Valiente, Juan Beltrán and two mulattos named Gómez de León and Leonor Galiano received them.[56]

More often, blacks were expected to live on the margins of the new Spanish towns and to fill marginal posts. Less common was the decision of Juan García, who took his share of the early spoils of the Conquest of Peru and returned to Spain, where he lived to be an old man. As a free Spanish-born mulatto and a member of the exceptionally profitable company that acquired gold and silver at Cajamarca in 1532–33 and at Cuzco in 1534, he had the luxury of that option. Yet as a black man, he was also escaping the murmurs of resentment that had begun to circulate in Lima over his parvenu status.[57] Certainly, Africans were valued in the Spanish Conquest, but only if they settled after the Conquest for

Table 4: The Life of Juan García, Black Conquistador

ca. 1495?	Born free, near Jaraicejo (near Trujillo, Extremadura, Spain), probably of mixed black-Spanish parentage though later referred to by other Spaniards as "black"
1530	Recruited in Trujillo to join the Pizarro expedition to Peru; leaves behind his wife and two daughters
1531–34	Footman member of the Pizarro Conquest expedition that leaves Panama in January 1531; holds the posts of crier (*pregonero*) and piper (*gaitero*) and is made responsible for weighing gold and silver at Cajamarca; present at the division of gold and silver at Coaque in 1531, at Cajamarca in 1533 (where he buys an enslaved native Nicaraguan woman from a fellow conquistador), and at Cuzco in 1534
1534–35	One of the founding citizens of Spanish Cuzco, where he then resides
1535–36	Travels to Lima, where he spends time preparing his return to Spain, then to Nombre de Dios (Panama) and back to Extremadura; takes with him his share of gold and silver and probably his illegitimate daughter and her native Andean mother, one of his servants
1536–45	Lives in the Jaraicejo-Trujillo area to at least 1545, calling himself Juan García Pizarro; date of death unknown

Sources: Lockhart, *Cajamarca*, 1972: 6–15, 380–84; Cieza de León, *Peru*, 1998 [1550]: 243.
Note: A version of this table first appeared in Restall, "Black Conquistadors," 2000: 186.

free but subordinate lives as gatekeepers, like Garrido and Toral, or fought willingly until their deaths, like Beltrán and Valiente.

The final chapter of Juan Beltrán's life serves to illustrate most evocatively the role played by black and native combatants in the Spanish Conquest. For "his sterling character and his bravery" in the conquest and founding of a Spanish town at Villarica, according to the colonial chronicler Vásquez de Espinosa, the new governor assigned Beltrán to oversee the construction of a fort outside the town and then named him its captain. He also "presented him with five hundred Indians," for whom "he was a valiant governor and captain . . . and they were very obedient to him. He made himself respected and feared in all the neighboring provinces, into which he made long *malocas* or raids, bringing back great prizes."[58] Vásquez de Espinosa's purpose was to eulogize Beltrán, but in doing so he revealed a "Spanish" Conquest in which a black captain led native warriors against other Native Americans. Whether in the heart of the Mexica empire or down on the Chilean frontier, the Spaniards were by no means the sole conquistadors.

4

Under the Lordship of the King

The Myth of Completion

By divine will I have placed under the lordship of the King and Queen, Our Lords, an other world, thanks to which Spain, once called poor, is now the richest [of nations].

—Christopher Columbus (1500)

It is in fact the conquest of America that heralds and establishes our present identity; even if every date that permits us to separate any two periods is arbitrary, none is more suitable, in order to mark the beginning of the modern era, than the year 1492, the year Columbus crosses the Atlantic ocean. We are all direct descendents of Columbus, it is with him that our genealogy begins, insofar as the word *beginning* has a meaning.

—Tzvetan Todorov (1984)

But many kingdoms and provinces were not totally or entirely conquered, and there were left among other provinces and kingdoms great portions of them unconquered, unreduced, unpacified, some of them not even yet discovered.

—Juan de Villagutierre Soto-Mayor (1701)

Some wars have two names. What Russians call the Great Patriotic War is known in the West as the Second World War. The Mexican-American War is, to those south of the border, the War of the North American Invasion. But the Conquest of Mexico has no other name. Nobody has ever called it, at least in print, the War of the Spanish Invasion, or the Spanish-Mexica War. The same is true for the Conquest of Peru, the Conquest of Yucatan, and so on.

These conventional titles to the components of the Conquest are taken for granted as simple, neutral descriptions. But they are hardly that. For in assigning "conquest" to the entire process of Spanish exploration, expansion, discovery, and invasion, that process is placed within a framework in which events move inexorably toward the inevitable climax of Spanish victory. Conquest history turns on symbolic Spanish accomplishments—such as a particular victory (or massacre) or the founding of a city. The years of those

events have consequently become the milestones that mark the transition from barbarism to civilization (in Spanish minds), the shift from pre-Columbian or pre-Conquest to colonial (in the academic terminology of today).

This vision of the Conquest originated with the conquistadors themselves and has survived more or less intact up to the present. Sixteenth-century Spaniards consistently presented their deeds and those of their compatriots in terms that prematurely anticipated the completion of Conquest campaigns and imbued Conquest chronicles with an air of inevitability. The phrase "Spanish Conquest" and all it implies has come down through history because the Spaniards were so concerned to depict their endeavors as conquests and pacifications, as contracts fulfilled, as providential intention, as faits accomplis. Such depictions are the roots of what I have called the "myth of completion." This chapter will examine two related reasons the Spaniards did this. The first of these was the Spanish system of patronage, contract, and reward—beginning with Columbus and his insistence until his death that he had fulfilled his contract by discovering a route to Asia. The second was the ideology of imperial justification that developed rapidly during the sixteenth century to portray the Conquest as divine intention and Spaniards as agents of providence. Despite these claims, the Conquest remained incomplete for centuries after the initial Spanish invasions; the chapter's second half presents seven aspects of this incompleteness.

"The New World is a disaster!" remarks Queen Isabella in the 1992 movie *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, to which Christopher Columbus replies, "And the old one an achievement?" Vital to the success of all conquistadors was their ability to portray their endeavors as anything but a disaster. While the Spanish monarchy neither dispatched would-be conquerors as members of a royal army nor did it conceive, organize, and finance Conquest expeditions, it did nonetheless exercise some control over the consequences of discoveries and conquests through the granting of licenses or contracts to explore or conquer. In return for the title of *adelantado* (captain-general or, more literally, invader) up front, and gubernatorial titles and privileges after a conquest, the recipient of the license had to bear most or all of the costs of the expedition, as well as plan and execute it. Such contracts were thus of great benefit to the crown in an era when centralized state power was a fraction of what it would become in modern times. They were a mechanism for the dispensing of royal patronage, both when the license was granted and when its terms were deemed to have been fulfilled—or not. Equally important, such agreements were also sources of revenue, as the monarchy often sold them and could claim contracts were unfulfilled if the crown's customary

quinto (fifth of all Conquest spoils and taxes) had not materialized. In time, the crown added to typical *adelantado* contract provisions various laws regarding Conquest procedure, making it easier to imprison conquistadors for contractual violations (as Sebastian de Benalcázar and Hernando Pizarro were imprisoned in the 1540s) or fine them (as Juan de Oñate was fined in 1614, to the tune of 6,000 Castilian ducats).[1]

The challenge for the leaders of Conquest companies was thus considerable. Not only did they need to avoid the disasters of shipwreck, disease, and capture or death at the hands of invaded natives, but their enterprises needed to meet royal definitions of colonial success. Simply finding and claiming lands was not enough. Putative colonies needed immediate economic viability, preferably in the form of gold and silver mines and sedentary native societies to locate and work the mines and provide other goods and labor. The point here is not that it was tough to be a conquistador, but that it was tough to convince the crown that one was a successful conquistador.

As a result, expedition leaders were quick to claim that regions were overflowing with precious metals and compliant native peoples. Such claims began with Columbus, who from the outset was keen to convince the crown that he had fulfilled the terms laid out in his contract (known as the *Capitulaciones de Santa Fe*, after the garrison town near Granada where the agreement was drawn up in April 1492). Early in 1493 Columbus explained to Ferdinand and Isabella that setting out on his voyage "I took the route to Your Highnesses' Canary Islands, which are in the said Ocean Sea, in order from there to take my course and sail so far that I would reach the Indies and give Your Highnesses' message to those princes and thus fulfill that which you had commanded me to do."[2]

These assertions of fulfillment or compliance were crucial to Columbus's being able to take his third of all trade revenues from the discovered lands, as well as to administer them as "Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor"—as guaranteed in the *Capitulaciones*. Columbus's insistence that he had both reached Asia and found new lands was disputed as soon as he returned to Spain from his first voyage. His claims were increasingly contested as further voyages by Columbus and others revealed more and more about the Atlantic and the Americas. Afraid of losing his contract-based privileges (as he eventually would), Columbus averred ever more stridently that "I have found and continue to find nothing less in any respect than what I wrote and said and affirmed to their Highnesses in days gone by."[3]

The Spaniards who crossed the Atlantic in growing numbers in the early sixteenth century developed a similar concern over contractual approval and fulfillment. The letters of Cortés to the king are the best-known series of contract-related documents, but they are unusual only in that Cortés wrote them in part as petitions for a license and in part on the assumption that he had been granted one. Like Cortés, Francisco de Orellana drew up a series of

documents during his treacherous journey of 1542 down the Amazon in anticipation of finding native lands that could be conquered (in which case, like Cortés, he would need a retroactive license in order to become governor). Orellana's letters to the king correctly anticipated accusations by his patron Gonzalo Pizarro that he had illegally abandoned Pizarro in Amazonia, just as Cortés's letters anticipated the anger of his own betrayed patron, Velázquez. Similarly, Juan de Oñate took considerable pains over his 1595 license to conquer New Mexico. He then submitted numerous petitions regarding contractual fulfillment in 1597, when the license was temporarily withdrawn, and between 1606 and 1624, when he underwent a protracted royal investigation, condemnation for use of excessive violence, and partial rehabilitation.[4]

The *adelantado* Francisco de Montejo wrote a series of letters to the king designed to reassure him that Yucatan was both worth conquering and conquerable. Indeed, these two themes of contract-related Spanish writing were so commonplace that the language of discovery and fulfillment came close to being formulaic. The following example, a description of Yucatan by Montejo in his letter to the king of 1529, could have come from any one of dozens of conquistadors: "The land is heavily peopled and has very large and beautiful cities and towns. All the towns are a [veritable] fruit orchard. . . . I have found many signs of gold. . . . I went over a great part of the land and I heard many reports of the gold and [precious] stones that are in it."[5]

This was one-half of the formula—the suitability of the region for colonization. The other half was the supposed degree of control over the region that Spaniards had already established. A decade before Montejo prematurely waxed lyrical over Yucatan, Cortés had written to the king that before setting out for central Mexico he had conquered a vast coastal region.

> I left all that province of Cempoala [*Cempoal*] and all the mountains surrounding the town, which contain as many as fifty thousand warriors and fifty towns and fortresses, very secure and peaceful; and all of these natives have been and still are faithful vassals of Your Majesty, for they were subjects of Moctezuma [*Mutezuma*] and, according to what I was told, had been subdued by force not long previously. When they heard through me of Your Highness and of Your very great Royal power, they said they wished to become vassals of Your Majesty and my allies and asked me to protect them from that great lord who held them by tyranny and by force, and took their children to sacrifice to his idols; and they made many other complaints about him. Because of this, they have been very loyal and true in the service of Your Highness, and I believe that they will always be so, as they are now free of his tyranny, and because they have always been honored and well treated by me.[6]

The reader needs virtually no additional or contextual information to see how the situation has been misrepresented in order to fit the requirements that fed the myth of completion during the sixteenth century. The claim to a completed conquest is too unlikely to stand on its own, so Cortés resorts to spinning one of the submyths of the myth of completion—that of willing

native submission. Here Cortés gives support to the assertion of willing submission using the tried and true juxtaposition of a benevolent and powerful king, and his honorable representative, with a cruel native tyrant. The physical implausibility of completion claims are overridden by the evocation of a process that is both physical and metaphysical, the triumph of civilization over barbarism.

Thus if the system of royal patronage encouraged rapid claims of success in exploration and conquest, conquistadors were soon able to draw upon an ideology of imperial justification that offered tools for making such claims plausible to their compatriots. The ideology of the Spanish empire was rooted in medieval jurisprudence and the mythology of the Christian *reconquista* (reconquest) of the Iberian peninsula, in Judeo-Christian concepts of time as progressive and providential, and in recycled Roman notions of universal empire.[7] From the 1490s on, an additional factor was added to this potent mix: the experience of the Discovery and Conquest. The result was an ideology of empire that made the Discovery and Conquest not only noble and justified endeavors but also the duty of the faithful. This ideology consisted not just of abstract ideas concocted for the benefit of the crown; it was supported by official statements that came both from the papacy and the Spanish monarchy. In the wake of Columbus's first voyage, the pope presided over a Castilian-Portuguese treaty that divided the Americas, still a largely imagined region, between the two kingdoms. Thus, in effect, Spaniards were the recipients of a divine grant of lands and peoples they had yet to find and see, let alone subdue. This permitted claims of possession to be seen as synonymous with possession itself. Through the simple acts of arrival and declaration, Spaniards placed lands "under the lordship" of the Spanish crown. Everything that followed, the entire business of Conquest and colonization, was the consolidation of that possession.[8]

By extension, native peoples were Spanish subjects waiting to be located and informed of their new status. As Queen Isabel stated in 1501, when the vast majority of Native Americans were still unknown to Europeans, these "Indians" were the queen's "subjects and vassals" and thus as soon as they were found were "to pay us our tributes and rights."[9] Such sentiments, repeated by the crown to Cortés in 1523, to Ponce de León in 1525, and to other conquistadors on many occasions, were at the heart of an assumption of rightful acquisition that made the Conquest seem half-complete before it had even begun. Furthermore, because native peoples were royal "subjects and vassals" before the fact, their resistance to conquest made them rebels. This category conveniently cast native resistance to invasion as the unjustifiably violent and illegal disruption of the *pax colonial* (colonial peace). Spanish military activities were then framed as campaigns of "pacification" rather than conquest, and resistance leaders could be tried and executed for treason. Long after the crown banned the enslaving of natives in the Americas, a persistent loophole regarding "rebels" permitted captured natives to be sold as slaves.

This pattern can be seen in the Yucatan as well as in virtually every region of Spanish America. Having founded a new colonial capital in 1542, named Mérida, the Spaniards in Yucatan declared the Conquest achieved and set about "pacifying" the peninsula. But as they controlled only a small corner of it, they were obliged to engage in major military hostilities with one Maya group after another, encountering particularly strong resistance in the northeast in the late 1540s. This was clearly an episode in a conquest war now in its third decade, but just as the Spaniards had already declared the Conquest complete so did they now classify this resistance as a rebellion—"the rebellion that took place in this recently conquered province," as one Spanish colonist put it.[10] This was used to justify the execution of captives, the use of display violence (notably the hanging of women), and the enslaving of 2,000 Mayas of the region.[11] Four centuries later, historians were still calling this "The Great Maya Revolt."[12]

By insisting on the completeness of the Conquest in the face of massive evidence to the contrary, Spanish colonists bequeathed an identity crisis to their Mexican descendents. In 1862 Lord Acton wrote that Mexican national identity was unattainable. Because Mexico was made up of "races divided by blood . . . fluid, shapeless, unconnected" it was "therefore neither possible to unite them nor convert them into the elements of an organized State."[13]

Time would seem to have proved the Englishman wrong, but nineteenth-century Mexicans were almost as pessimistic and divided themselves over how to interpret the Mexican past with a view to forging a national identity. The conservative position was simply to apply the term "nation" to the sixteenth-century Spanish view of the Conquest. Thus 1521 saw the providential dawn of civilization in Mexico, with Cortés as founding father, and the spiritual conquest symbolized by the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe a decade later. The political opponents of the conservatives placed more emphasis on the Virgin of Guadalupe and less on Cortés. Indeed, many liberals demonized the conqueror as a symbol of colonial tyranny and idolized as "national" heroes the last Mexica emperor, Cuauhtémoc, and early friars such as Las Casas and Motolinía, along with iconic Independence figures such as Hidalgo and Morelos.[14]

The evolution of Mexican nationalism, and the debate over it in the nineteenth century, was of course more complex. Anticlericalism and hispanophobia would wax and wane, a love-hate relationship would develop with the United States and its culture, and few of the (in)famous figures of the

Mexican past would be left undisputed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But one element remained constant throughout, one rooted in the sixteenth century and still showing remarkable vitality—the assumption that 1521 was a monumental turning point in Mexican history, the end of one era and the beginning of another. Had such assumptions been questioned, Mexicans might have found solutions to the riddle of national identity.

Similar debates over national and regional identity were waged in all the new republics of nineteenth-century Latin America. The debaters seldom questioned the accuracy or implications of using dates such as 1492, 1521, 1535 (the founding of Lima), 1541 (the founding of Santiago de Chile), or 1542 (the founding of Mérida) as milestones that marked the completion of the Conquest and the start of colonial rule. In doing so they perpetuated the perspectives of the conquistadors for their own political and practical reasons, and helped lead modern historians into the same traps.[15]

A classic statement along these lines is Prescott's comment that "the history of the Conquest of Mexico terminates with the surrender of the capital."[16] While such a statement conforms with the vast majority of what has been written on the Conquest, from the sixteenth century to the present, in the wake of the destruction of Tenochtitlán the Spaniards had not conquered Mexico; they had simply dismembered the Mexica empire. In a note appended to Cortés's second letter to the king, an official in Spain, despite his optimistic tone, revealed the precariousness of the situation in 1522: "They found little treasure . . . but the Spaniards, of whom there are at present fifteen hundred men on foot and five hundred men on horseback, are very well fortified in that city, and they have more than a hundred thousand Indian allies in the countryside."[17]

Here we have the conquistadors, a year after the supposed completion of the Conquest, still searching for war booty, needing to be fortified in the ruins of the city they had destroyed, and dependent upon vast numbers of native allies. Meanwhile, the Spanish presence in the rest of the region covered by the Mexica empire was minimal, and Spanish control over the larger area that would become modern Mexico was virtually nonexistent. Indeed, Spaniards had yet to even set foot in most of the regions of what would become colonial New Spain (roughly the civilizational area called Mesoamerica). In the early 1520s, Cortés apparently believed the Spanish assertion that Michoacán was conquered and under Spanish rule. Yet the native Tarascan government remained intact and the Tarascans viewed their empire as the region's dominant power.[18] Twenty years later the wars of conquest in northern Mexico were still sufficiently extensive to warrant the viceroy of New Spain himself leading Spanish-native forces into battle.[19] So while 1521 was the end of the two-year war against the Mexica empire, it was the beginning of the wars of conquest in most of greater Mexico and Mesoamerica, wars that would persist into the twentieth century.

The incompleteness of the military conquest of Mexico in 1522 is, of course, merely one piece of the puzzle. The full picture of incompleteness features seven dimensions, each one corresponding to one aspect of the myth of completion. The first dimension of incompleteness is that of the rapidity of the Conquest in the core areas of native and subsequent colonial settlement. In addition to the tenuous Spanish grip on central Mexico in 1521, Spanish control over Peru was almost nonexistent in 1532, despite Atahuallpa's capture and execution, and tenuous in 1536, after the lifting of the Inca siege of Cuzco. An independent Inca state persisted until its ruler, Túpac Amaru, was executed by the Spanish in 1572, and significant portions of the Andes remained outside direct colonial rule even after that.[20] Similarly, when the Spaniards founded Mérida in 1542, Mayas continued to rule the vast majority of the Yucatan peninsula. Independent Yucatec Maya polities still existed in 1880, when Bishop Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona asserted that "the conquest [of Yucatan] was completed entirely with the victory gained in the battle of San Bernabé of June 11, 1541, against the army of Cocom, king of Sotuta, who was the only one who had not offered obedience."[21]

The second dimension of incompleteness relates to the protracted nature of the military conquest of the so-called fringe or marginal regions of what gradually became Spanish America. Above all else Spaniards sought native settlements upon which to construct their colonies. But outside Mesoamerica and the Andes, they found sparse populations of semisedentary and nomadic natives who were not amenable to colony building. In such regions it took decades to establish toeholds and these remained unstable, poor, and attractive to few colonists. Writing in 1701, Juan de Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, author of the official account of the Spanish conquest of the Itzá Maya in the previous decade, admitted that Spanish expansion had left "great portions" of the Americas partially or entirely unconquered—and he recognized that this was due to the intractability of some natives and to the difficult terrain in some regions. But most of all, argued Villagutierre, it was because God was saving some natives for subsequent generations of Spaniards. So much for secular explanation![22] As Villagutierre predicted, the colonial frontiers of northern New Spain, Yucatan, Peru, and other regions would gradually expand, but that process included periodic contractions of frontiers and frequent military activity.

For example, early attempts at conquest and settlement at two ends of Spanish America—Florida and the River Plate basin—were disastrous. At least six expeditions to Florida failed dismally between 1513 and the 1560s, when a permanent Spanish settlement was finally established. The first founders of Buenos Aires in the late 1520s were reduced to cannibalism and the town was not permanently refounded until the 1580s, while lasting Iberian settlement on the northern bank of the River Plate (now Uruguay) did not come until a century later. New Mexico was conquered at the turn of the

seventeenth century, but was then lost to the Spanish empire in 1680 and had to be reconquered in the 1690s. The Sambos-Mosquitos were able to push back the colonial frontier in Nicaragua during the seventeenth century. The seventeenth-century subjugation of the Tule of Panamá was never consolidated and then reversed in a revolt in the 1720s, necessitating a protracted reconquest beginning in 1735. Chocó and Petén were not conquered at all until the 1680s and 1690s, respectively, but the Spanish presence in Petén declined rather than grew in the early eighteenth century.[23]

Looking at Spanish America in its entirety, the Conquest as a series of armed expeditions and military actions against Native Americans never ended. Florida's Seminoles were still fighting Spaniards when the colony was taken over by the United States (to whom they have never formally surrendered either). The Araucanians of Chile—who fought for decades and eventually killed the black conquistador Juan Valiente—resisted conquest into the nineteenth century, when they continued to fight the Chilean republic in the name of the monarchy they had previously defied. The Charrúa of Uruguay were not finally subdued until the new nation's president organized their massacre in the 1830s.[24] Argentines also faced—and eventually slaughtered with machine guns—unconquered native peoples in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Guatusos-Malekus of Central America were enslaved and slaughtered in the late nineteenth century. Yaqui resistance in northern Mexico also lasted into the modern period, while at Mexico's southern end, the Maya of Yucatan pushed the colonial frontier back in 1847 to its sixteenth-century limits, and a string of Maya polities persisted there into the early twentieth century.[25]

The third aspect of the myth of completion is that of the *pax colonial*, the peace among natives and between them and the Spanish colonists that supposedly came in the Conquest's wake. The flip side to this—the corresponding dimension of incompleteness—is the fact that Spanish America was rife with native revolts against colonial rule. As one prominent historian has observed, "then and now the colonial era has typically been thought of as a peaceful time," despite "apparent endemic violence."[26]

There is a pair of possible reasons for this. One is the localized nature of colonial revolts, which made them relatively easy to put down and therefore appeared to colonial and modern observers insignificant compared to the kinds of wars that swept Europe during the same centuries and would ravage much of modern Latin America. The other relates more closely to the myth of completion. Despite periodic Spanish hysteria over real or imagined revolts by natives and enslaved Africans, Spaniards believed that their empire was God's way of civilizing natives and Africans in the Americas. Colonial rule was thus seen as peaceful and benevolent, an interpretation that relied upon the Conquest's being complete. Ironically, although the native perception was almost the opposite—that the Spanish presence was a protracted invasion that required

a mixed response of accommodation and resistance—it also contributed to the illusion that the *pax colonial* was real. The willingness on the part of native leaders to compromise, to find a middle course between overt confrontation and complete capitulation, helped give the impression of a colonial peace.

The impression of a colonial peace overlooks the ubiquity of everyday forms of resistance—the fourth dimension of incompleteness. Historians tend to look for dramatic revolts and miss less obvious patterns of resistance, even if they are more pervasive and often as violent.[27] Everyday resistance manifested itself in numerous ways, ranging from individual acts of violence by natives against Spaniards to workplace ploys such as footdragging, sabotage of equipment, and theft. The ongoing existence of unconquered regions—often referred to by the Spaniards as *despoblados* (uninhabited areas)—and shifting colonial frontiers gave natives a further option. As individuals, families, or entire communities, they could resist Spanish rule by temporarily fleeing or permanently migrating out of the empire.

The fifth dimension of the Conquest's incompleteness was the degree to which native peoples maintained a degree of autonomy within the Spanish empire. This was in part an autonomy permitted and sanctioned by Spanish officials, and it was nurtured by native leaders through illegal means and legal negotiations. As a general rule, Spaniards did not seek to rule natives directly and take over their lands. Rather they hoped to preserve native communities as self-governing sources of labor and producers of agricultural products. This practice had precedent in Islamic-Iberian custom, as it developed in the eighth-century Muslim invasion of the Iberian peninsula and during the subsequent centuries of the *reconquista*.[28] But it was also a practical response to Spanish-American realities. The new settlers were not farmers, but artisans and professionals dependent upon the work and food provided by native peoples who greatly outnumbered them.

This colonial system worked best where organized, sedentary agricultural communities already existed—that is, well-fed city-states—and it was in such areas, primarily in Mesoamerica and the Andes, that Spaniards concentrated their conquest and colonization efforts. Although it is unlikely that any native community escaped the ravages of epidemic diseases brought across the Atlantic, native regions unevenly experienced direct conquest violence. For centuries after the arrival of Spaniards, the majority of natives subject to colonial rule continued to live in their own communities, speak their own languages, work their own fields, and be judged and ruled by their own elders. These elders wrote their own languages alphabetically (or, in the Andes, learned to write Spanish) and engaged the colonial legal system in defense of community interests skillfully and often successfully. The native town, or municipal community, continued to be called the *altepetl* by the Nahuas of central Mexico, the *ñuu* by the Mixtecs, the *cah* by the Yucatec Mayas, and the *ayllu* by Quechua-speaking Andeans.[29]

Only very gradually did community autonomy erode under demographic and political pressures from non-native populations. From the native perspective, therefore, the Conquest was not a dramatic singular event, symbolized by any one incident or moment, as it was for Spaniards. Rather, the Spanish invasion and colonial rule were part of a larger, protracted process of negotiation and accommodation. From such a perspective, as long as the *altepetl* and *ayllu* still existed, the Conquest could never be complete.

The sixth dimension of incompleteness is that of the spiritual conquest. Amidst the complex sixteenth-century debates among Spanish priests and friars regarding the efficacy of different conversion methods and the spiritual state of native peoples, there emerged a myth regarding their Christianization. This myth held that while native people remained superstitious and prone to recidivism, they had essentially been converted in the early days of evangelization. As the vanguards of that process, the Franciscans were the greatest proponents of its myth; their perspective fared well over the centuries and was given renewed vigor in the early twentieth century by Robert Ricard, whose *La Conquête Spirituelle du Mexique* (The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico) was a widely read paean to the success of Franciscan conversion campaigns.[30]

In recent decades, scholars have painted a more complex picture of native reaction to Christianity. While some have argued that native religion survived behind a veneer of Christianity, and others have proposed that native and European religions blended into a set of unique regional American variants on Catholicism, the most sophisticated interpretations recognize that a combination of both processes occurred. With variations right down to the level of the individual Andean, Chibcha, Muisca, Maya, and Nahua, natives accommodated and understood Christianity and its place in their world in ways that we are only just beginning to grasp.[31]

Franciscans and other Spanish friars and clergy hoped to utterly destroy all traces of native religions, to wipe the slate clean and establish a new church free of the pagan accretions of both sides of the Atlantic. They certainly succeeded in bringing Catholicism to native America, but if the purpose of the spiritual conquest was to install a Christianity free of local cultural variation, that conquest was not completed in the sixteenth century. In 1598 the Archbishop of New Granada (colonial Colombia) lamented in a letter to the king that six decades of Christianization efforts had left the native Muisca as "idolatrous" as ever.[32] Nobody would accuse Latin Americans of being idolatrous today, but few would disagree that the spiritual conquest, as conceived almost five centuries ago, remains very much incomplete.

The final dimension of incompleteness concerns the persistence of native cultures. The aspect of native culture of greatest concern to Spaniards was religion, as Christianization provided the empire with a rationale and justification that transcended and was supposed to disguise the mundanely self-

serving realities of colonial expansion. Other aspects of native culture were of secondary importance. There was no campaign to force natives to learn Spanish, for example. In fact, Spanish priests were encouraged and periodically required to preach in native tongues, while the church generated an extensive religious literature in local languages. And although the lack of a preconquest writing tradition in the Andes meant that Quechua-speaking lords and other local Andean rulers learned to write legal documents in Spanish, Mesoamerica community leaders learned to write their own languages alphabetically.[33]

Another example of native cultural persistence is dress. Where native clothing was deemed overly scant by the church, a change was imposed. Men's loincloths were replaced by loose cotton trousers, for example. But by and large, native dress remained unaltered by the Conquest, changing only gradually over the centuries. Some of the more practical styles of native dress were even adopted by Spaniards, especially at home. Like other aspects of native culture, native dress survived, not in any "pure" form, but by very gradually absorbing European influences, and to some extent influencing the evolving culture of the colonists.

Beyond aspects of culture with religious implications, Spaniards were not concerned with the wholesale Hispanization of native peoples. Not until the nineteenth century did such issues become a major governmental concern and the subject of debates among the dominant classes. This underscores once more that the cultural conquest, if we can talk of such a thing, was so incomplete that three centuries after the Spanish invasion the descendents of the conquistadors, from Mexico to Argentina, were debating ways in which their nations's "Indians" could be made into true citizens of the republics—that is, less "Indian" and more European.[34]

Thus the Conquest of the core areas of the Andes and Mesoamerica was more protracted than Spaniards initially claimed and later believed, and when warfare did end in these areas it was simply displaced out to the ever-widening and never-peaceful frontiers of Spanish America. Conquest violence was also displaced internally, taking on myriad forms of domination and repression, but met continually by an equally diverse set of methods of native resistance. The spiritual and cultural conquests were equally complex and protracted, defying completion to the point of rendering the very concept of completion irrelevant.

Spaniards insisted on the Conquest's completion not only for reasons of political expediency or because it conformed to a developing imperial ideology to which they were increasingly exposed; they also presumed that events

were unfolding in a way that was familiar to them within their own traditions. They doggedly insisted the Conquest was complete until it looked to them as though it was. And they were unaware of native perspectives that blurred the division between conquest and colonization, seeing the two as a single, interminable negotiation and likewise presuming to find familiar forms and concepts.

Historian James Lockhart has called the process of cultural interaction in colonial Mexico one of Double Mistaken Identity. According to his interpretation of this process, "each side of the cultural exchange presumes that a given form or concept is functioning in the way familiar within its own tradition and is unaware of or unimpressed by the other side's interpretation."[35] Lockhart's focus is the Nahuas of central Mexico, but Double Mistaken Identity as an analytical tool is broadly applicable to the Conquest and its aftermath in the Spanish colonies—and specifically relevant to the myth of completion. Spaniards thought natives were all firmly "under the lordship of the king." Natives saw themselves as much subject to their own lords as any distant Spaniards. In their own ways, they were both correct and both mistaken.

5

The Lost Words of La Malinche

The Myth of (Mis)Communication

When the friar reached [Atahuallpa], he told him . . . that he was a priest of God who preached His law and strove wherever possible for peace rather than war because that pleased God very much. While he was saying this, he held his breviary in his hands. Atahuallpa listened to this as something of a mockery. Through the interpreter he understood everything well.

—Pedro de Cieza de León (1550)

Sir, as I understand it, they are not contrary, nor do they behave badly on purpose, but it is because they cannot comprehend you, which they earnestly strive to do.

—The Calusa ruler in Florida,
to Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda (1575)

They were all groping in the darkness, because they did not understand what the Indians were saying.

—Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1559)

It was absurd, unwieldy, a translator's nightmare, an epistemological maze which we can only wonder at as we recall that each time Cortés said this, or Moctezuma said that, their words were conveyed through this trilingual chain of voices.

—Anna Lanyon (1999)

On the morning of 8 November 1519, on a causeway crossing Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico, a unique encounter in world history occurred. Moctezuma met Cortés.

For centuries this meeting has been taken as symbolic of the great encounter of continents that was now in its third decade. And with good reason. For the very first time, a Native American emperor greeted a representative of the Europeans who had come to conquer and settle in his lands. The meeting was friendly, with both sides keen to display an unswerving commitment to diplomacy. Yet a clash of cultures was also immediately apparent. Within