

Hernán Cortés: The Man Behind the Mystique

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Have you ever thought you knew someone just by his or her title — like rock star, fashion model or, in Hernán Cortés' case, conquistador? The most famous of all the conquistadors, Hernán Cortés was responsible for the conquest of the Aztec empire, was captain-general of New Spain, and was the Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca. These facts have been documented throughout history but what do we know about his real character, his influence on the people around him and of his legacy? In this paper, we have investigated the man behind the mystique, and have found that the title conquistador is quite limiting for Cortés. We think you might be surprised to learn how little the title conquistador portrays the man.

Early Life

Cortés was born in 1485 to Martín Cortés de Monroy and Doña Catalina Pizarro Altamirano — names of ancient lineages in the town on Medellín, Spain. According to Gómara, Cortés' biographer, "They had little wealth but much honor, a thing that rarely occurs except among those of virtuous life" (Gómara, p. 7). It may seem surprising that Cortés was a small, sickly and colicky infant who was suckled by a wet nurse because his mother felt breastfeeding led to excessive breast enhancement. The town of Medellín contained a small abandoned castle, which was used in the war against the Moors. Cortés and his friends used this as their personal playground and he learned much from these experiences, which he would utilize later in his life (Marks, p. 4).

Not much is known of his early childhood, but at age 14, his father

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston

Volume 3, 2004: pp. 192-204

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gathered enough money to send him to Salamanca to live with his father's sister, Inéz de Paz, and to attend the university there to study law and grammar. He found his studies fascinating but excelled more in the areas of horseback riding, shooting, swordplay and the use of the lance. Perhaps due to a lack of funds, adolescent amorousness, recurring illness, or some combination of these, he returned home after two years without a degree, much to his parents' disappointment. At this time, his parents hoped his being a lawyer would provide him a better place in society than their own (Marks, pp.12-14).

After returning home, he became some trouble to himself and his parents. He was restless, haughty, disrespectful and mischievous, not unlike many other teenagers who have experienced freedom and then move back with their families. At this time, King Ferdinand I of Spain ordered the outfitting of two major expeditions to Naples and the West Indies. Cortés chose to go on the Indies expedition because his father knew Nicolás de Ovando, who was appointed Governor, and he had also seen the gold being brought back on the ships from that area. However, when Ovando was arranging for his ships' departure, Cortés was caught by a jealous husband outside his house and was nearly killed by him. Due to this amorous adventure, he failed to sail with Ovando (Gómara, p. 8).

When healed, he set out for Valencia to join the Naples' venture but instead traveled around Spain for over a year, living from hand to mouth like other poor wandering students who had left their schools. He then returned to Medellín, resolved to travel to the Indies, which he finally did in 1506, with his parents' blessing and funding. In Moguer, near Huelva on the Tinto River, he found a trader who was taking five ships loaded with merchandise to the West Indies and booked passage for himself. He was 19 years old and had neither position nor any preconceptions of the New World, other than it being a place where he could become rich. He sailed to the island of Hispaniola where he renewed his familial relationship with Ovando, soon after his arrival there (Marks, p. 15).

Life on Hispaniola

Disembarking on Santo Domingo, he signed the registry of newly arrived residents, was granted some land for farming, given a plot in

town for a house, and given the assurance that he should soon be the lord of native Americans. He boasted of his legal training in Spain, which resulted in his being appointed notary for the town council in Azúa. For five or six years, he worked around the town as a farmer, “doing a little mining, a little trading, and a lot of gaming, wining, and as much fornicating as he could manage” (Marks, p. 20). Controversy surrounds the issue of whether or not he contracted syphilis at this time. Also, during this time he had planned to sail to Veragua with Diego de Nicuesa but developed an infirmity in his right leg, a circumstance that he owed his life because this expedition ended in a shipwreck (Gómara, p. 11). What brought an end to Cortés’ easygoing existence on Hispaniola was that Velázquez had obtained permission to conquer Cuba.

Adventures in Cuba

To conquer Cuba, the governor of the Indies supplied Velázquez with arms, men and provisions. Cortés had accompanied him as clerk of the treasurer, responsible for collecting the King’s Fifth, which was a tax on objects from gold to slaves sent back to the King of Spain. He was 26 when he became Velázquez’s secretary and was granted a large parcel of land. From this land, he extracted a great deal of gold with the help of the native Americans, accumulated some wealth, established a hacienda and had a daughter, Catalina, by an Indian girl, christened Leonor Pizarro. Governor Velázquez was the child’s godfather (Thomas, p. 133).

In 1514, Cortés had his first disagreement with Velázquez while leading a group of discontent settlers who did not agree with Velázquez’s distribution of land and native Americans. Under the cloak of darkness, Cortés attempted to dispatch their written complaints to the *Audiencia* but was discovered and arrested. In the end, Velázquez pardoned him and gave way under pressure to some of the demands of the settlers (DeMadariaga, p. 63).

The following year, Juan Xuárez arrived from Santo Domingo with his widowed mother and four sisters. With few marriageable white women on the island, the Xuárez sisters were in great demand. Cortés courted the oldest sister Catalina while having sexual relations with another sister. He had promised to marry Catalina but then became

reluctant to go through with the marriage. Velázquez implored him to marry Catalina, but he refused, so she sued him for breaking his promise. After a public scolding, Velázquez arrested him, put him in stocks from which he escaped several times. After holding out for nearly a year, the two friends reunited and he finally married Catalina but was not reinstated as secretary to Velázquez. He and Catalina had no children and it was said later by Cortés that Catalina was often ill, had a bad heart, and had been lazy. They moved to Santiago de Cuba, which became the capital city of the island, and Cortés re-established himself in the favors of Velázquez and became the chief magistrate (Thomas, pp.134-135).

Having shown little interest in the early exploratory voyages of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba or Juan de Grijalva to the Yucatan Peninsula, Cortés was nevertheless chosen to lead an expedition to find de Grijalva, Velázquez's nephew, in late 1518. With Velázquez's pledged to pay for half of the expenses and Cortés's appointment confirmed, he utilized all of the money he had and pledged his *encomienda* to borrow more, with which he bought ships, arms and provisions for his exhibition. By the time Cortés was ready, de Grijalva had returned, Velázquez had withdrawn his financial support, and Cortés had learned that Velázquez was in the process of revoking his appointment. Swiftly, Cortés set sail from Baracoa with more than 300 Spaniards and six ships on November 18, 1518, on what was to be a mission of trade and exploration. He made several stops in other cities in Cuba for more provisions, men and financial backers and finally cleared Cuba on February 18, 1519 with approximately 600 men, 11 ships and 16 horses. Shortly thereafter, the expedition arrived at Cozumel on the Yucatan Peninsula (Gómara, p. 20)..

The Conquest of Mexico

While waiting in Cozumel for the repair of one of his vessels, Cortés met Gerónimo de Aguilar, a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked off the coast of the Yucatan and had been captured by the Maya. During his eight-year captivity, he became fluent in Chontal Maya and therefore was recognized as an asset by Cortés, who allowed him to accompany him on his expedition as his interpreter (MacNutt, p. 327).

After sailing westward, the expedition stopped in Potonchán, near the mouth of the Grijalva River. After initial hostilities, the native Americans presented gifts to Cortés, one of which was a slave girl who spoke both Maya and the native language of the Aztecs. Her Nahuatl name was Malinal (Carmack et al., p.136).

Many have labeled Malinal as a traitor, a “sellout” and the mother of Mexican mestizos (Spanish-American Indians). We found her to be an intelligent, resourceful and kind woman. She was born the daughter of the Lord of Paynala, on the southeastern border of the Aztec Empire. Her father was the *cacique* of his tribe but died when she was very young. When her mother remarried and had a son of noble birth, they sold her to itinerant traders who in turn passed her on to a Maya *cacique* in Tabasco (MacNutt, p. 317). Her mother feigned her death, and mourned over the body of a young slave child of a similar age who had conveniently turned up for the purpose. She remained with them until she was presented to Cortés. With Malinal and Aguilar, Cortés had the means to understand and communicate with the local people. He spoke Spanish to Aguilar, Aguilar relayed the message to Malinal in Maya and she relayed the message to the intended in Nahuatl. One might question the reliability of the translation, but this is the system they used (Lenchak, pp.1-2).

Malinal has had several names throughout history. Her original name was Malinal Tenepal, derived from Malinalli, a sign of the 12th day of the Mexican month. Her name at baptism was Marina but the native people could not pronounce the “r” so they changed it to an “l” and the added the tzin, which is the title for respect. She became Malintzin to the natives, which was changed into Malinche by the Spaniards (MacNutt, p. 328).

Malinche learned Spanish very quickly, which could be the result of her intimate relationship with Cortés. After this, Aguilar was no longer needed and Cortés relied more on her to handle negotiations with the native Americans. She remained loyal to Cortés and had one son by him named Don Martin, and at least one other child, possibly a daughter (MacNutt, p. 329).

Malinche was a very “Christian” woman in the sense that she showed great compassion by forgiving her mother and half-brother for the injustice she had suffered from their abandonment of her. Another

piece of evidence of her religious tendencies is a 1537 painting of her standing with Cortés, holding a rosary, over a man who was condemned to death. Cortés arranged for her marriage to Juan Jaramillo and she died in 1551 (MacNutt, p. 329).

Proceeding west from Potonchán, they arrived at San Juan de Ulúa and then to La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz on Good Friday, April 19, 1519, where Cortés declared himself governor of the new town, thus providing legitimacy for his expedition. He sent one ship to Spain with treasures he had acquired and a letter explaining his rationale for the expedition. It is in this town that several historians reported that he “burned” his ships to ensure his men could not return to Cuba and that he forced them to continue inland. According to Winston A. Reynolds, he did not actually “burn” his ships but scuttled or beached them, thus destroying them. This distinction is important because the erroneous belief that he burned his ships placed Cortés among heroic figures such as Caesar and other ancient heroes. Cortés’ deeds, one way or the other, remain a universal symbol of bold vision and heroic action (Reynolds, pp.317-318).

Cortés then set out to the Mexican interior on his march to Tenochtitlán, sometimes resorting to force, sometimes showing amity toward the local native Americans, but always careful to keep conflict to a minimum because his goal was the riches of the city. Since the nation of Tlaxcala was engaged in a chronic war with the Aztec Empire, its leaders realized it would be to their advantage to become allies of Cortés, thus providing him with several thousand warriors. By the time he entered the city of Tenochtitlán on November 8, 1519, he had a small force of Spanish soldiers and a contingent of Tlaxcalans. Motecuhzoma did not resist Cortés and thought that he might have been an incarnation of the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl. Cortés decided to take the city and with Malinche’s aide, persuaded Motecuhzoma to become his prisoner (MacNutt, p. 232).

It is during this time that he began writing the second of his five letters to King Charles V. The running theme of all five letters is that Cortés is a great man who will bring wealth and glory to Charles V, while overcoming amazing obstacles presented by the native Americans and Spaniards alike. Many of these letters start with phrases such as “Great and Powerful, Very Catholic Prince, and Most Invincible

Emperor” (Gomez pp. 160, 310). It is obvious Cortés is trying to impress the King and to rationalize his actions as the *de facto* Governor of New Spain. The second letter purports that the Muslims’ expulsion from the city of Granada in 1492 is similar to his own actions against the native Americans in New Spain (Gomez, p. 191). It also states that he is not betraying the orders of Velasquez in Cuba; he is spreading the Christian faith to the native Americans. The letters also include details of military capabilities such as how many horses it takes to cross a bridge, the height of temple walls, the ability of arrows to reach these walls and their ease of climbing over them. Also contained are a description of Motecuhzoma and the layout of the capital (MacNutt, p. 232).

Cortés remained in the city for five months and virtually governed the kingdom. In April, Cortés learned of a Spanish force landing on the Gulf Coast by Pánfilo de Narváez, who was sent by Velázquez to relieve Cortés of his command and bring him back to Cuba for trial. He left Pedro de Alvarado in charge, defeated Narváez, and returned with his soldiers, thus increasing the size of Cortés’s force. (Thomas, pp. 338-339). Upon his return, he found Motecuhzoma’s palace besieged by the Aztecs after Alvarado had massacred many leading Aztec chiefs during a festival. This action prompted retaliation by the Indians against the Spanish. It was during this time that members of the Aztec elite decided to replace Motecuhzoma with his brother, Cuitlahuac. In late June, Motecuhzoma was killed; it is still not known by whom. Angry and without food, on June 30, 1520, Cortés decided to leave the city under the cover of darkness, later to return. However, before his soldiers could complete their escape, the people of Tenochtitlán discovered their plot. As a result, many men on both sides lost their lives in the canals that surrounded the city that night. Cortés’ men had attempted to escape with gold in their pockets and were found drowned in the waters the following day. This night was later called the *Noche Triste*, The Night of Sorrows (Leon-Portilla, pp. 83-90).

Cortés and his men withdrew and rejoined their allies, the Tlaxcalans. Cortés returned in December with a better-prepared contingent, more reinforcements from Cuba and Jamaica, new ships, cannons, a layout of the city and a siege mentality. In the interim, an

epidemic of smallpox had broken out in the city and many people died, one of which was the ruler Cuitlahuac, who had been replaced by Cuauhtémoc. Upon Cortés' return, he cut off the water and food to the city, combined an assault by lake and land and fought for 3 months. The city finally fell with the surrender of Cuauhtémoc on August 13, 1521 (Carmack et al., pp. 144-147).

After the Conquest

Cortés wrote a quick note home in August of 1521 explaining that he had conquered the city, leaving a longer account for later. This note did not reach Spain until March 1522. Believing he had accomplished a triumph with no response, he felt ignored but not idle. During this period, he began the reconstruction of Tenochtitlán, a ruthless pursuit of gold, and the beginning of colonization of places beyond Tenochtitlán. What Cortés desired was royal recognition and to live the rest of his life as a duke. Unknown to Cortés, much of the gold and wealth of Mexico was in the hands of the *pochteca*, the long-distance merchants, and not in warehouses in Tenochtitlán, which they relentlessly pursued to no avail (Thomas, p. 540).

Since no great treasure or hoard had been discovered, Cortés put off a distribution of gold and directed his soldiers' attention to the mines and territories outside of the city. While he was consolidating his leadership of New Spain, many of his soldier's nursed grievances while other Spaniards were jealous and resentful and ready to betray him (DeMadariaga, p. 408).

Two serious incidents occurred before he received news of his official approval as Captain-General of New Spain in late 1522. His wife Catalina had arrived from Cuba with her brother, sister and mother to take her place as first lady of the land Cortés had conquered. At this time, his mistress Marina gave birth to his eldest son, christened Martin. Several months later, on All Saints Day, Cortés and his wife Catalina fought publicly during the festivities and she was found dead by Cortés in the middle of the night. No one knows how she died but Cortés was brought up on criminal charges, which were later dropped. Her mother continued with a civil suit and won. Nearly 100 years after her death, money was still being paid by Cortés's descendents to the great-grandchildren of his first mother-in-law. The second incident

was the mysterious death of the Governor Garay of Jamaica who died after dining with Cortés on Christmas Day. At this time, he was attempting to settle in Pánuco, near La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz. These deaths would provide more fodder for his enemies to use against him (Thomas, pp. 579-580).

Territorial Expansion

By 1526, Cortés had found a convenient overland passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. This became strategically important to Spanish expansion in the Pacific. Even today, as the Panama Canal becomes increasingly inadequate to accommodate inter-oceanic shipping, this road, which was first opened by Cortés, is still the focus of serious attention (Moorehead, p. 370).

Cortés embarked on further territorial expansion, sending Pedro de Alvarado to conquer Guatemala and Cristobal de Olid to conquer Honduras. Alvarado succeeded, but with little gain, and de Olid, with Velázquez's encouragement, betrayed Cortés, who then set off on his ill-fated expedition to Honduras. Royal authorities became disturbed with Cortés' willingness to take the law into his own hands, and while he was gone, his enemies seized his property back home and told everyone he was dead (Marks, pp. 280-301).

Upon his return, the King had sent Luis Ponce de Leon to Mexico City to conduct a formal inspection of Cortés' actions from 1522 forward. Ponce de Leon died after a feast provided by Cortés from unknown causes. Again, Cortés was placed under suspicion and was required to return to Spain and plead his case directly to the King. He placed his personal affairs in order, equipped two ships with gold, silver, jewels, various Indian crafts and animals unknown in Europe such as jaguars, opossums, pumas and armadillos, along with Indian albinos and dwarfs, and sailed to Spain in 1528 (Marks, p. 306).

Cortés Pleads His Case to the King and Returns to New Spain

The entourage arrived in Spain after forty-two days in early May 1528. Returning to his hometown, he found his father had died and took his mother with him to see the King, Charles V. He graciously received Cortés, validated his conquest, made him the Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, and re-confirmed him as Captain General of New

Spain but not as Governor. Charles gave Cortés a twelfth of the profits of all his conquests and accepted that he should have an *encomienda* of 23,000 vassals, thereby making him one of the richest men in Spain. He also blessed his new marriage to Juana, daughter of Carlos, the Count of Aguilar, whom he had met in Europe. With her, Cortés had one son and three daughters. During this time, Pope Clement VII legitimized three of his illegitimate children. He then returned to New Spain in the middle of 1531 with his mother, his new wife and 400 other passengers (Thomas, p. 598).

He was refused entrance to his house in Tenochtitlán because the investigation initiated by Ponce de Leon was still underway. His mother died in Texcoco on the trip to his property in Cuernavaca, where he built a palace. Much of his time was spent defending himself in the courts against charges of profiteering during the conquest, killing Indians unnecessarily and killing his wife Catalina, among other allegations. These proceedings lined the pockets of notaries and have provided priceless information for historians, with questionable results (Thomas, p. 599).

His time as Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca was spent in a semi-cordial relationship with the newly formed *Audiencia*. He agreed to go to the west coast to visit shipyards at Zihuatanejo, Acapulco and Tehuantepec and to pursue his exploration of the southern sea in accord with his agreement with the King. He did not really want to become embroiled again in the political fracas of the capital, and the *Audiencia* feared that his presence would endanger the system of regulations that the lawyers were trying to impose upon the fiercely individualistic Spanish settlers (Marks, pp. 324-325).

Pacific Expeditions

When a Viceroy was appointed to New Spain in 1535, Cortés lost a lot of his power. He became restless and embarked on several expeditions to the Pacific. He spent much of his own money, discovered California, naming the state after Queen Califia, who was a character in a Spanish romance novel he had read. He quarreled with the Viceroy over his actions and returned again to Spain in 1540 to plead his cause. The King grew tired of his demands, ignored him and with these events, Cortés realized he had passed his prime. He

lived out the remainder of his life in Seville, where his last years were passed in disillusion (Thomas, p. 600).

Final Years

After many years, Cortés decided to give up his pursuit of the King's recognition and prepared to return to New Spain. However, he became sick with a bout of fever, pleurisy and dysentery. Sensing this might be his last illness; he executed the will he had drafted with Gómara, his biographer. Cortés was 63 years old, worn out and after confessing his sins and receiving final absolution, died on December 2, 1547 (Marks, p. 333).

In his will, he made full provisions for his wife, left most of his property to his legitimate son, Don Martín, then 15 years old, ample amounts for his other legitimate and illegitimate children, and endowed three institutions — the Hospital de Jesús in Mexico City as the repository of his remains, a bilingual training school in Coyoacán for missionaries to work to convert native Americans to Christianity, and a nunnery in Coyoacán. After his death, his biography, written by Gómara, was published in 1552, which prompted Díaz to write his version of the Conquest in 1568, which was not published until 1632 (Marks, p. 333).

Díaz's version of the conquest was very different than Cortés's since he was an eyewitness without a hidden agenda. Cortés wrote to defend his actions; Díaz's stated reason was "as a gift to his children, since he had nothing else to offer them" (Cerwin, p. 5). Of special note is his claim that Cortés did not "burn" his ships but merely destroyed them, and giving the credit for making this decision to his men, not Cortés. He is also complimentary of the contributions made by Malinche, which Cortés hardly mentioned at all (Cerwin, p. 6).

Conclusion

We found the details of Hernán Cortés' life much more interesting than the mere title of conquistador. We discovered that he is quite a complicated and controversial figure in history, yet his legacy is still being debated nearly 500 years after his death. Much has been written about him by himself, his biographer, men who served with him, the people whom he conquered and historians throughout history.

According to Thomas, the one word that best describes Cortés's actions in his Conquest of Mexico is "audacity"; it contains a hint of imagination, impertinence, and a capacity to perform the unexpected, which differentiates it from mere valor. He was also decisive and flexible, but had few scruples (Thomas, p. 602). Some other words we might use to describe him are lucky, clever, strategic, energetic, a womanizer, a self-promoter, a ruthless murderer, and a father. Whatever the name or title you associate with his life, one thing that can definitely be said about the study of this man — if you limit yourself to just skimming his surface, you miss out on the most interesting and fascinating part of his story.

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