

# Invasion and Conquest in Mexico

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The year 1492 set in motion a world-wide series of biological, military, religious, and economic invasions, encounters, and exchanges that are still being interpreted and debated by scholars today. Using this date as a beginning point, we can chronicle the dramatic history of how the cultures of Europe, Spain, and Africa joined together to create what came to be called New Spain, or Spanish colonial Mexico.

## Columbus and the New World

At the time Christopher Columbus sailed west on a voyage sponsored by Queen Isabela of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragón, the Iberian Peninsula had experienced centuries of invasion and conquest by outside groups. The Muslim occupation of Spain, which lasted from A.D. 711 to 1492, is particularly important for understanding how and why Queen Isabela and King Ferdinand undertook conquest and colonization of the Americas. The wars of the *reconquista* (reconquest) undertaken by Iberian Christians began almost immediately after the origi-

nal Muslim occupation in A.D. 711, and spanned eight hundred years of struggle between Christians and Muslims. The long duration of the reconquest meant that Spanish Catholicism was both militant and highly intolerant of other religions, with a strong focus on conversion. The process of reconquest created a cultural legacy that joined military and religious motivations for conquest and colonization. The Spanish carried these motivations with them to the New World.

Armed with the official permission of Isabela and Ferdinand, Columbus set forth with three ships, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María. From Columbus' log, we know that once he reached the Caribbean, he charted his course in search of gold, based on recommendations made by the Indians he encountered there. The term "Indian" is based on a misconception by Columbus, who thought he had found a new route to Cathay (China) and the Indies (at that time, Southeast Asia, India, and Japan). The diverse peoples and cultures of the Americas all came to be labeled Indian, a term that became increasingly neg-

ative when applied to the New World, denoting ignorance of Christianity and a lack of civility.

On March 15, 1493, Columbus returned to Spain, where he presented Isabela and Ferdinand with gold, spun cotton, and maize, as well as several Arawak natives (an indigenous group of the Caribbean). In addition, he promised the king and queen an unlimited supply of spices and cotton, and proposed an Indian slave trade.

### **Cortés and the Invasion of Mexico (paintings 1–8)**

Effective Spanish settlement of the New World began with the establishment of Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola (today divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic). With the emergence of permanent Spanish colonial cities in the Caribbean, the development of mining and agriculture quickly followed. In the Caribbean, this primarily meant the cultivation of sugar, an exceptionally labor-intensive crop. The first African slaves were brought to Hispaniola in 1510 to work on the sugar plantations, showing the importance of African slavery to Spanish colonialism from the very beginning.

The island of Hispaniola became a staging ground for further Spanish exploration, conquest, and settlement. The Spanish first

explored the surrounding islands, including Cuba. Later, they directed campaigns of conquest to the mainland and large urban centers, like Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire. The Spanish desire to expand their colonial empire derived from their reconquest experience, but stories of wealth that emerged from other expeditions also inspired further exploration. In 1517 and 1518, for example, two small Spanish expeditions sailed to the Yucatán and along the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Both expeditions came into contact with indigenous peoples there, from whom they heard rumors of gold and the existence of large, sophisticated cities in the Mexican interior.

In 1519 the Spanish governor of Cuba, Diego de Velázquez, received royal permission to put together an expeditionary force of eleven ships and five hundred men under the command of Hernán Cortés. Thirty-four years old, Cortés already had fifteen years experience in the Caribbean. Governor Velázquez and Cortés evidently had a troubled relationship, and Velázquez was not sure he could trust Cortés. According to the writings of Bernal Díaz, one of Cortés' foot soldiers, after he was appointed to head the expedition to Mexico, "[Cortés] began to adorn himself and be more careful of his appearance than before, and he wore a plume of feathers with a medal, and a gold chain, and a velvet cloak trimmed with knots of gold, in fact, he looked like

a gallant and courageous Captain.” Such behavior probably did not endear him to Velázquez.

Velázquez tried to remove Cortés as commander, but Cortés had already set sail. The expedition first made landfall on Cozumel, an island off the east coast of the Yucatán Peninsula, where Cortés and his men met two Spaniards who had survived a shipwreck eight years before. The more important of the two was Gerónimo de Aguilar, who had learned to speak Yucatec Maya during his years in Yucatán. Joining Cortés, Aguilar became an interpreter for the expedition.

The expedition continued sailing westward, and stopped again at a town near the mouth of the Grijalva river, in what is today the Mexican state of Tabasco (painting 1). After a skirmish, indigenous leaders offered Cortés lavish gifts, including several women. One, a woman named Malintzín (also known as Doña Marina or La Malinche), was a slave and native speaker of Nahuatl, the Mexica language, who also could speak Yucatec Maya. There is much debate about why Malintzín joined forces with the Spanish. Perhaps she saw it as a way out of slavery. Whatever her reason, she cooperated with Cortés, quickly learned Spanish, and along with Aguilar translated for the Spanish expedition. Malintzín is featured in the first three paintings of the Kislak Conquest of Mexico series (painting 1-3). It is

difficult to overestimate the importance of these translators, especially Malintzín, to the success of Cortés.

On April 19, 1519, Good Friday, Cortés landed near what is today the city of Veracruz (painting 2). We know this was his first encounter with representatives of Moctezuma. The king’s emissaries presented gifts to Cortés, which included costumes of important Mexica deities composed of headdresses of precious gold and feathers, masks of turquoise, and ornaments of gold, jade, and sea shells. Cortés legitimated himself as leader of the expedition by establishing a Spanish town in Mexico, Veracruz, with Spanish laws and city officials. In doing so, Cortés was able to claim autonomy from the authority of Governor Velázquez.

The expedition then began moving inland to confront the Mexica in their city of Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec empire. Using his interpreters to his best advantage, Cortés made alliances with people who were already enemies of the Mexica. His most important allies, from the city of Tlaxcala, provided Cortés with thousands of warriors and useful information on the Mexica. Cortés and his army, some 350 Spaniards and several thousand Tlaxcalans, entered the Valley of Mexico early November 1519. Only two years later, the Aztec empire and its capital city Tenochtitlan would lie in ruins.

Tenochtitlan is estimated to have had a population of about 200,000 residents. Central Mexico was roughly the size of France, and had a pre-conquest population of approximately twenty-five million. Tenochtitlan was an impressive city with ornate architecture, roads, aqueducts, temples, and a vast city market that rivaled anything at the time in Europe. Moctezuma and other Mexica elites initially welcomed the Spanish expedition as it approached Tenochtitlan (painting 3). The Mexica housed Cortés and his men in one of the royal palaces near the center of the city. Soon thereafter, Cortés, looking for tactical advantage, decided to kidnap Moctezuma and hold him prisoner in the Spanish quarters. This bold move set in motion the events that led to the defeat of the Mexica imperial city.

The question of why Cortés and his small army were able to defeat the Mexica and destroy Tenochtitlan is unresolved. The Mexica were sophisticated and experienced in warfare, and the Spanish were vastly outnumbered. Scholars generally offer four major theories in explaining the occurrence. The first is the military experience of Cortés and his men. Cortés and other members of his force had gained important experience in the conquest of Cuba and other places in the Caribbean. They exploited the tactical advantages of their horses, armor, and weapons. Cortés' military experience also made him sensitive to the importance of alliance building. Cooperating with enemies of the

Mexica gave him more soldiers and important information about the Mexica.

A second major advantage was the presence of the translators, Gerónimo Aguilar and Malintzín. Both, but especially Malintzín, acted not only as language translators but also cultural translators, giving the Spanish a crucial edge over the Mexica, who lacked translators of their own. Third, the Mexica ruler Moctezuma responded indecisively when faced with the new threat posed by Cortés and his men. Historians disagree about why Moctezuma did not act against the Spanish while he still had time, or how the Spanish were able to take him and hold him hostage. Moctezuma was ultimately killed, reportedly after being hit on the head with a stone during an episode of public unrest and violence in the months after he was taken hostage (painting 4).

The fourth major element in the Spanish defeat of the Mexica is disease. During the final battle of conquest, the Spanish lay siege to Tenochtitlan from December 1520 to August 1521. During that time, a smallpox epidemic devastated inhabitants of the capital, causing thousands of deaths in a population already weakened by the siege. This was one of a series of smallpox epidemics that decimated indigenous populations in the Americas, beginning in 1518-1519. When smallpox first appeared in the

town of Santo Domingo, in what is now the Dominican Republic, it quickly spread across the Caribbean to the Mexican mainland and on into North and South America. Combined, these four factors left much of the imperial capital in ruins.

### Spanish Histories of the Conquest

Spanish writers produced a number of different histories of the Conquest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While these works all tell the same general story, the manner in which the narrative unfolds and the characterization of those involved varies enormously from text to text. Cortés commissioned the learned priest López de Gómara to write a history of the Conquest, one of the earliest published narratives of this event. Gómara's *La istoria de las indias y conquista de Mexico* (1552) is an honorific history written in an elegant literary style. This book focuses chiefly on the glory of Cortés as a great leader and Spain as a great force in transmitting Christianity to the New World. Gómara, however, never set foot on Mexican soil, and thus had no personal knowledge of the events of the Conquest.

In contrast, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, author of *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1632), wrote from the perspective of an eyewitness, because he had been a soldier in

Cortés' army. His narrative provides unique, down-to-earth descriptions of the events from the point of view of a man of action, not of letters. Díaz's work, composed in the sixteenth century but not published until many years after his death, originally was intended to challenge what he considered Gómara's over-emphasis on Cortés. At the end of the seventeenth century, removed by over 150 years from the events he described, Antonio de Solís published *Historia de la Conquista de México* (1684). An experienced playwright and highly educated man, Solís artfully used language to give the story a dignity that Díaz's account lacked. This book was very popular throughout Europe and appeared in more than eighty editions between 1684 and 1800. As mentioned, in its dramatic treatment of the people and events of the Conquest, this work is closest in spirit to the Kislak paintings featured in this exhibit (cat. 21).

### The Establishment of Early Spanish Colonial Authority and Power

With the completion of major wars of conquest, the Spanish crown worked to consolidate royal authority and power politically, economically, and socially in its newly acquired territories in the Americas. This was difficult, given the distance and lack

of quick communication between Spain and its colonies. Colonial Spanish America included a vast amount of physical territory, densely settled communities, and rich deposits of mineral wealth, especially gold and silver. Furthermore, the interests of Spanish colonial settlers did not necessarily reflect those of the crown, contributing to the instability of early colonial rule.

The institution of the *encomienda*, first established in the Caribbean, was imported into Mexico, where it functioned as both an economic institution and an instrument of political and social control. A reward given to Spanish colonists for services rendered to the crown, the *encomienda* consisted of the right to labor and tribute from a group of indigenous people, usually linked to specific lands. The *encomienda* supplied Spaniards with the labor needed for mining, agriculture, the production of foodstuffs and products for export to Europe.

The Catholic Church was also a major institution of the Spanish colonial state. The initial priority of the Catholic Church in New Spain was the religious conversion of the indigenous population. As developed during the reconquest in Spain, the idea was to use religion to acculturate indigenous peoples to the Spanish way of life. By becoming “good Christians,” they were indoctrinated to the Spanish colonial system.

Priests accompanied Cortés in the conquest of Tenochtitlan. Afterward, missionary friars learned indigenous languages to convert the nobility first, and then used them as an example for the rest of the community (cat. 22). A major focus of the Catholic Church, especially in the years immediately after Conquest, was the promotion of marriage, including marriages of Spanish conquistadors to daughters of indigenous elites. Cortés himself provided the dowry for Isabel Moctezuma, daughter of the ruler (cat. 18). Although these intercultural marriages became increasingly less common, the mestizo children of these unions often enjoyed high social status. For example, Don Martín Cortés, the mestizo son of Hernán Cortés and Malintzín (Doña Marina), was a page to the prince who became King Philip II, and later become a knight of the Order of Santiago.

In the years that followed the Conquest, the Spanish colonial state began to institutionalize political, religious, and economic bureaucracies of rule. Even as royal authorities attempted to impose Iberian institutions and practices to maintain their authority and power over a racially diverse and geographically far-flung empire, indigenous and African peoples, drawing on their rich cultural traditions, also influenced and shaped colonial life in New Spain.

## A Colonial World

Spanish colonial political institutions became better established under the administration of the viceroys, who held the highest political power in the colonies. They were responsible for tax collection, public works, military defense, control of indigenous populations, and other matters. Local administration, such as that of Mexico City, was in the hands of the *cabildo* (town council), a group of elected Spanish councilmen. Spanish women and ethnic minorities, including a substantial African population, also played an important role in colonial life. Colonial art works and writings, including the Kislak Conquest of Mexico paintings and Antonio de Solís' 1684 *Historia de la Conquista de México* (cat. 21), focus on the heroic and largely male perspective of history. Yet these works tell only part of the story.

Recent scholarship has uncovered the critical role that Spanish women immigrants to the New World played in the establishment of colonial society. The Spanish crown encouraged women to immigrate to the Americas from the start. Spanish women came to the Americas beginning with Columbus' third voyage in 1493. From legal petitions written by Spanish women requesting licenses to immigrate to the Americas, scholars know that at least 16,400 Spanish women departed for Mexico between 1519 and 1600. The actual numbers were cer-

tainly higher, because this total reflects only those women who applied for a license.

Behind the crown's promotion of female immigration was the idea that the women would provide a Christian model to inhabitants of the Americas and thus play a vital role in establishing colonial authority and power. It was thought that having Spanish women in colonial Mexico would encourage the formation of families based on Iberian models, bring stability to male conquistadors and settlers, and reduce the number of children born to indigenous and African women via forced and consensual liaisons with Spanish men. Colonial authorities also believed that women would provide examples of proper female behavior to indigenous and African women, bringing Spanish culture, language, and religion into the colonial cities.

## Race and Ethnicity in New Spain

By 1560, more than 100,000 Spanish immigrants had traveled to the Americas, but they still remained a minority population. From the beginning, the major question was how Spain should administer and rule the large indigenous populations in Central Mexico. The Spanish crown needed to maintain social, political, and economic distinctions between the European colonizers

and subject native populations. The result was the Two Republics system, which divided the Spanish and indigenous populations politically, economically, and socially along racial lines. In part, the Two Republics system was designed to protect indigenous populations, because many Spanish worried about high rates of Indian mortality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, the system was also designed to aid the Spanish in collecting indigenous tribute and labor taxes.

Many colonial cities provide examples of how the Two Republics system worked in practice. Mexico City, for example, had at the center the *zócalo*, or town square, in which the Spanish located the institutions and bureaucracies of colonial authority and power, such as the cathedral, the office of the Inquisition, colonial courts, and the palace of the viceroy. Wealthy Spanish residents of the city lived as close as possible to this center to demonstrate their high social status. Indigenous neighborhoods, or *barrios*, surrounded the Spanish core. By law, non-Indians were not allowed to live there. Indigenous *barrios* had certain legal rights, including the right to self-rule through the *cabildo*, or neighborhood government, under direction of a parish priest or Spanish political official. They also had civic obligations, however, and had to pay tribute and labor taxes to the city government.

The Two Republics system began to break down almost immediately in the sixteenth century, a process that accelerated in the seventeenth century. During this period Mexico City became a multiethnic capital city, with a wide range of social and cultural diversity. In addition to the indigenous Mexicans, peoples of African ancestry, including slaves, free blacks and *mulatos* (individuals of mixed African and European ancestry), played an increasingly important role. A handful of black men took part in the Conquest of Mexico under Cortés, but a more substantial African influence began with the introduction of slavery and the forced migration of millions of people from the west African coast into the Americas from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. African slavery was introduced into Mexico almost immediately after the defeat of the Mexica. Historians estimate that approximately 200,000 Africans slaves were brought to Mexico during the colonial period.

By the end of the seventeenth century, *castas* (mixed race peoples) made up the largest percentage of the colonial population of Mexico. *Castas* did not fit into the Two Republics model, because they were neither purely indigenous, nor purely Spanish. *Castas* had an especially strong influence in urban areas like Mexico City. The population of seventeenth-century Mexico City was further shaped by the continued decline of indigenous populations after the conquest period. By 1607, the indigenous



population in central Mexico was less than ten percent of its pre-conquest number.

With the breakdown of the Two Republics system, Spanish colonial authorities looked for new ways to reform the social hierarchy to ensure divisions between Spanish elites and the rest of society. It is within this context that the *Sistema de Castas*, or Caste System, emerged. The *Sistema de Castas* organized colonial society into a ranked series of racial and ethnic categories and created status differences between various social groups, fostering a racial ideology and functioning as a form of social control. The ranked castes were the subject of painted images, known as castas paintings, which were produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The eight paintings depicting the Conquest of Mexico that form the centerpiece of this exhibition were created at a time when the population of Spanish America was becoming increasingly diverse. During the seventeenth century, the Spanish crown tried to reinforce racial, ethnic, and emerging class divisions within colonial society. As a result, descriptions of the Conquest in seventeenth-century art and literature are important sources of information about how the various different groups were perceived. In the Kislak series, we have heroic representations of the Spanish — the noble Cortés is accompanied

by the ever-faithful Malintzín, and his men wear splendid armor and sit on majestic horses. While Moctezuma is accorded a degree of respect, he and his retainers are scantily clad in feathers, sandals, and capes. To some degree, they are the savages who encounter civility and Christianity in the Spanish. The visual traditions for representing the peoples of the New World are the subject of the following essay.

SOURCES:

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|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Bakewell (1997)               | Delgado-Gomez (1992)   |
| Burkholder and Johnson (2001) | Lavrin (1989)          |
| Carmack et al (1995)          | Meyer et al (2003)     |
| Cook and Lovell (1991)        | Pagden (1982)          |
| Crosby (1973)                 | Palmer (1976)          |
| Díaz (1981)                   | Schroeder et al (1997) |



Painting 3. The Meeting of Cortés and Moctezuma / El Encuentro de Cortés y Moctezuma.