

Hernán Cortés, marqués del Valle de Oaxaca

SPANISH CONQUISTADOR

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Hernán Cortés, marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, also called Hernando Cortés or Fernando Cortés, Cortés also spelled Cortéz (born 1485, Medellín, near Mérida, Extremadura, Castile [Spain]—died December 2, 1547, Castilleja de la Cuesta, near Sevilla), Spanish conquistador who overthrew the Aztec empire (1519–21) and won Mexico for the crown of Spain.

Cortés was the son of Martín Cortés de Monroy and of Doña Catalina Pizarro Altamarino—names of ancient lineage. “They had little wealth, but much honour,” according to Cortés’s secretary, Francisco López de Gómara, who tells how, at age 14, the young Hernán was sent to study at Salamanca, in west-central Spain, “because he was very intelligent and clever in everything he did.”

Gómara went on to describe him as ruthless, haughty, mischievous, and quarrelsome, “a source of trouble to his parents.” Certainly he was “much given to women,” frustrated by provincial life, and excited by stories of the Indies Columbus had just discovered. He set out for the east coast port of Valencia with the idea of serving in the Italian wars, but instead he “wandered idly about for nearly a year.” Clearly Spain’s southern ports, with ships coming in full of the wealth and colour of the Indies, proved a greater attraction. He finally sailed for the island of Hispaniola (now Santo Domingo) in 1504.

Years In Hispaniola And Cuba

In Hispaniola he became a farmer and notary to a town council; for the first six years or so, he seems to have been content to establish his position. He contracted syphilis and, as a result, missed the ill-fated expeditions of Diego de Nicuesa and Alonso de Ojeda, which sailed for the South American mainland in 1509. By 1511 he had recovered, and he sailed with Diego Velázquez to conquer Cuba. There Velázquez was appointed governor, and Cortés clerk to the treasurer. Cortés received a repartimiento (gift of land and Indian slaves) and the first house in the new capital of Santiago. He was now in a position of some power and the man to whom dissident elements in the colony began to turn for leadership.

Cortés was twice elected alcalde (“mayor”) of the town of Santiago and was a man who “in all he did, in his presence, bearing, conversation, manner of eating and of dressing, gave signs of being a great lord.” It was therefore to Cortés that Velázquez turned when, after news had come of the progress of Juan de Grijalba’s efforts to establish a colony on the mainland, it was

decided to send him help. An agreement appointing Cortés captain general of a new expedition was signed in October 1518. Experience of the rough-and-tumble of New World politics advised Cortés to move fast, before Velázquez changed his mind. His sense of the dramatic, his long experience as an administrator, the knowledge gained

from so many failed expeditions, above all his ability as a speaker gathered to him six ships and 300 men, all in less than a month. The reaction of Velázquez was predictable; his jealousy aroused, he resolved to place leadership of the expedition in other hands. Cortés, however, put hastily to sea to raise more men and ships in other Cuban ports.

The Expedition To Mexico

When Cortés finally sailed for the coast of Yucatán on February 18, 1519, he had 11 ships, 508 soldiers, about 100 sailors, and—most

important—16 horses. In March 1519 he landed at Tabasco, where he stayed for a time in order to gain intelligence from the local Indians. He won them over and received presents from them, including 20 women, one of whom, Marina (“Malinche”), became his mistress and interpreter and bore him a son, Martín. Cortés sailed to another spot on the southeastern Mexican coast and founded Veracruz, mainly to have himself elected captain general and chief justice by his soldiers as citizens, thus shaking off the authority of Velázquez. On the mainland Cortés did what no other expedition leader had done: he exercised and disciplined his army, welding it into a cohesive force. But the ultimate expression of his determination to deal with disaffection occurred when he sank his ships. By that single action he committed himself and his entire force to survival by conquest.

Cortés then set out for the Mexican interior, relying sometimes on force, sometimes on amity toward the local Indian peoples, but always careful to keep conflict with them to a strict minimum. The key to Cortés’s subsequent conquests lay in the political crisis within the Aztec empire; the Aztecs were bitterly resented by many of the subject peoples who had to pay tribute to them. The ability of Cortés as a leader is nowhere more apparent than in his quick grasp of the situation—a grasp that was ultimately to give him more than 200,000 Indian allies. The nation of Tlaxcala, for instance, which was in a state of chronic war with Montezuma II, ruler of the Aztec empire of Mexico, resisted Cortés at first but became his most faithful ally. Rejecting all of Montezuma’s threats and blandishments to keep him away from Tenochtitlán or Mexico, the



capital (rebuilt as Mexico City after 1521), Cortés entered the city on November 8, 1519, with his small Spanish force and only 1,000 Tlaxcaltecs. In accordance with the diplomatic customs of Mexico, Montezuma received him with great honour. Cortés soon decided to seize Montezuma in order to hold the country through its monarch and achieve not only its political conquest but its religious conversion.

Spanish politics and envy were to bedevil Cortés throughout his meteoric career. Cortés soon heard of the arrival of a Spanish force from Cuba, led by Pánfilo Narváez, to deprive Cortés of his command at a time (mid-1520) when he was holding the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán by little more than the force of his personality. Leaving a garrison in Tenochtitlán of 80 Spaniards and a few hundred Tlaxcaltecs commanded by his most reckless captain, Pedro de Alvarado, Cortés marched against Narváez, defeated him, and enlisted his army in his own forces. On his return, he found the Spanish garrison in Tenochtitlán besieged by the Aztecs after Alvarado had massacred many leading Aztec chiefs during a festival. Hard pressed and lacking food, Cortés decided to leave the city by night. The Spaniards' retreat from the capital was performed, but with a heavy loss in lives and most of the treasure they had accumulated. After six days of retreat Cortés won the battle of Otumba over the Aztecs sent in pursuit (July 7, 1520).

Cortés eventually rejoined his Tlaxcalan allies and reorganized his forces before again marching on Tenochtitlán in December 1520. After subduing the neighbouring territories he laid siege to the city itself, conquering it street by street until its capture was completed on August 13, 1521. This victory marked the fall of the Aztec empire. Cortés had become the absolute ruler of a huge territory extending from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean.

In the meantime, Velázquez was mounting an insidious political attack on Cortés in Spain through Bishop Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca and the Council of the Indies. Fully conscious of the vulnerability of a successful conqueror whose field of operations was 5,000 miles (8,000 km) from the centre of political power, Cortés countered with lengthy and detailed dispatches—five remarkable letters to the Spanish king Charles V. His acceptance by the Indians and even his popularity as a relatively benign ruler was such that he could have established Mexico as an independent kingdom. Indeed, this is what the Council of the Indies feared. But his upbringing in a feudal world in which the king commanded absolute allegiance was against it.

Later Years

In 1524 his restless urge to explore and conquer took him south to the jungles of Honduras. The two arduous years he spent on this disastrous expedition damaged his health and his position. His property was seized by the

officials he had left in charge, and reports of the cruelty of their administration and the chaos it created aroused concern in Spain. Cortés's fifth letter to the Spanish king attempts to justify his reckless behaviour and concludes with a bitter attack on "various and powerful rivals and enemies" who have "obscured the eyes of your Majesty." But it was his misfortune that he was not dealing simply with a king of Spain but with an emperor who ruled most of Europe and who had little time for distant colonies, except insofar as they contributed to his treasury. The Spanish bureaucrats sent out a commission of inquiry under Luis Ponce de León, and, when he died almost immediately, Cortés was accused of poisoning him and was forced to retire to his estate.

In 1528 Cortés sailed for Spain to plead his cause in person with the king. He brought with him a great wealth of treasure and a magnificent entourage. He was received by Charles at his court at Toledo, confirmed as captain general (but not as governor), and created *marqués del Valle*. He also remarried, into a ducal family. He returned to New Spain in 1530 to find the country in a state of anarchy and so many accusations made against him—even that he had murdered his first wife, Catalina, who had died that year—that, after reasserting his position and reestablishing some sort of order, he retired to his estates at Cuernavaca, about 30 miles (48 km) south of Mexico City. There he concentrated on the building of his palace and on Pacific exploration.

Finally a viceroy was appointed, after which, in 1540, Cortés returned to Spain. By then he had become thoroughly disillusioned, his life made miserable by litigation. All the rest is anticlimax. "I am old, poor and in debt... again and again I have begged your Majesty..." In the end he was permitted to return to Mexico, but he died before he had even reached Sevilla (Seville).