

The World Since 1492 The Iberian Conquest of Mexico

Consider the following quotations regarding the conquest of Mexico, the first by a priest who was present during the conquest of Cuba, and the latter by a conquistador:

“And the Spaniards, on the morning of the day they arrived at the town, stopped to breakfast in a river bed that was dry but for a few shallow pools. The riverbed was full of whetstones, and all longed to sharpen their swords upon them... A Spaniard... suddenly drew his sword. Then the whole hundred drew theirs and begin to rip open the bellies, to cut and kill those lambs—men, women, children and old folk, all of whom were seated, off guard and frightened, watching the mares and the Spaniards. And within two credos [the time it takes to say two prayers], not a man of all of them there remains alive. The Spaniards enter the large house nearby... and in the same way, with cuts and stabs, began to kill as many as they found there, so that a stream of blood was running, as if a great number of cows had perished.”

-- Bartolomé de Las Casas

“The captain Alonso Lopez de Avila captured a young Indian woman of lovely and gracious appearance. She had promised her husband, fearful lest they should kill him in war, not to have relations with any other man but him, and so no persuasion was sufficient to prevent her from taking her own life to avoid being defiled by another man; and because of this [the captain] had her thrown to the dogs.”

-- Diego de Landa

Chronology of Cortez’s conquest of the Aztec state

1519: Governor of Cuba sends Cortez on expedition toward Aztec state.

Cortez leaves Cuba hastily, declaring that he, Cortez, serves the Castilian monarch directly, not the governor of Cuba (meanwhile, governor of Cuba has become suspicious that Cortez will betray him politically)

Cortez travels from coast of Meso-America inland to Valley of Mexico. Uses diplomacy and military force to win over people he encounters on the way. Biggest battle is with the Tlaxcaltecs; thereafter, the Tlaxcaltecs are strong allies of Cortez.

Cortez reaches Tenochtitlán, received there in friendly manner. Cortez manages to imprison the Aztec monarch, Moctezuma II, without provoking an open battle.

Cortez then learns that governor of Cuba has sent expedition after him. Cortez fights the governor’s force, wins, imprisons its commander, and convinces Iberian troops to join his own army.

Meanwhile, Cortez’s troops have massacred some Aztecs performing a religious ritual; open warfare in Tenochtitlán.

Cortez returns to Tenochtitlán, joins battle. At this point, in 1520, Moctezuma dies. Unclear how. Cuauhtémoc becomes new Aztec monarch. Aztecs drive Cortez into retreat, then kill more than half the conquistadors.

Cortez retreats further, to town of Tlaxcala, reorganizes, returns to besiege Tenochtitlán. Blockades city (which is surrounded by lakes). After several months, Aztec state collapses.

The conquest lasted a little less than two years, from 1519 to 1521.

Ask yourselves, why did Cortez succeed, when he was outnumbered in a land he knew so poorly? The conquistadors, and most historians, have attributed Cortez's victory to 4 factors:

1. Moctezuma's indecisiveness, esp. his failure to attack Cortez. Even after he was imprisoned and could still communicate with his troops, he chose not to order them to attack.
2. Social divisions within the Aztec empire.
3. Cortez's superiority in weapons and possession of horses, both of which the Aztecs lacked.
4. Ravages of illness.

Nevertheless, each of these theories is incomplete:

1. While Moctezuma was indecisive, Cortez won after his death and his successor; and Cuauhtemoc was more decisive.
2. While there were indeed social divisions amongst the Aztecs, this was also true of the Iberians.
3. Yes, they had guns, but not that many of them. Furthermore, they had trouble keeping their gunpowder dry.
4. Despite disease, the Aztecs still outnumbered the Iberians.

The Aztecs believed that defeat occurred because the oracles ceased to speak and the gods had become mute. We should try to understand what happened drawing from both the conquistadors and the Aztecs.

To understand the outcome of their interaction, one has to understand the different ways the Aztecs and the conquistadors responded to events and persons who are without precedent. One key to this process is understanding how each culture produced and interpreted messages, i.e. how each communicated.

For the **Aztecs**, we will remember that language was a divine gift and that communication followed a religious formula and was highly *ritualized*, not spontaneous and not personal. Furthermore, lying was sacrilegious and treated as a serious crime in Aztec society. Finally, humans were not considered the most important communicators. The gods were, and they spoke through omens and signs.

After Cortez sent his first message to Moctezuma the latter appeared mute, i.e. he was unable to respond because he had no formulaic response to this novel situation. What conquistadors and historians have viewed as indecisiveness was deeply-rooted religious belief. Rather than finding out information about these new people, he consulted oracles and noble-priests—he is totally unaware of things such as the arrival of the Cuban gov.'s forces. Meanwhile, the oracles and priests (and therefore the gods) lose clout with the Aztecs, heightening social divisions. Cortez even learns to exploit Moctezuma's faith and the people's lack thereof. Finally, Aztec warfare was highly civilized—no lying, no sneaking, no attacking leaders—these were not problems for the conquistadors.

For the **conquistadors**, there was no need for ritualized formula. Improvisation was not only permitted; it was valued—part of the Reconquista ethos. While the Aztecs and many in Christendom were big believers in omens, Cortez was not. Rather than studying signs, he studied the opposition. Finally, Cortez’s speech was highly *instrumental*, i.e. it served his goals and interests.

Let’s look at a couple of examples:

a. Shortly after their first meeting, Moctezuma takes Cortez to see an important temple. As they climb to its top, up 114 steps, Moctezuma suggests stopping for a rest. Cortez responds with a useful lie: he says that none of his kind are ever tired.

b. Cortez learns that the Amerindians believe horses are immortal, and to perpetuate this belief, which inspires fear, he issues an order to his troops to bury dead horses only at night and in secret.

c. Early in Cortez’s march through the Aztec empire, he reached the town of Cempoala. While Cortez is present, five agents of the Aztecs arrive to collect taxes. Cortez urges the local leader to defy the tax and arrest the agents. After nightfall, Cortez orders his soldiers to trick the Cempoalan guards and secretly bring him two of the Aztec prisoners; once they are before him, he pretends to have had nothing to do with their imprisonment, and offers to release them. The next morning, Cortez reacts to the discovery of the missing prisoners with shock and indignation at the carelessness of the Cempoalan guards. The Cempoalans, knowing that the escaped agents will tell Moctezuma of their defiance, commit themselves to an alliance with Cortez, while, unbeknownst to the Cempoalans, the released agents tell Moctezuma both of the Cempoalan betrayal and of their debt to Cortez. Moctezuma is thus encouraged to expect a friend, not an enemy, in Cortez.

d. Cortez’s cannons are of little use in battle, but he uses them instead to impress, to leave an impression of power. In the midst of negotiations with the Aztecs, he waits for a lull in the discussion and secretly orders his cannons fired.

One of the qualities that most clearly illustrate the conquistadors’ instrumental communication with others is that they lied. The Aztecs and other Americans found this quite unusual about the people from Christendom. Las Casas tells us that for the Indians, “liar” and “Christian” became synonyms: “Not once but many times a Spaniard would ask an Indian if he was a Christian, and the Indian would reply: ‘yes, sir, I am a bit Christian because I have learned to lie a bit; another day I will lie big, and I will be a big Christian’.”¹

In examining all of these factors it is clear that culture (learned, shared behavior) played a huge role in Iberian success over the Aztecs.

The culture of the conquistadors was an instrumental culture in which “anything goes” in pursuit of a goal. Brutality and torture were keys. Let’s return to the idea of human sacrifice, which the Aztecs pursued. These sacrifices took place in public rituals and expressed an acceptance of religious and political authority. In contrast, the conquistadors’ brutality was a spontaneous departure from social norms in pursuit of whatever one desired. Furthermore, it took place on the margins of their world. My point is not which is better. Obviously they are both terrible. What is significant for us is that their evil takes historically specific forms. Columbus did not really discover America, but Cortez discovered a *colonial space*, a place outside the conquistadors’ own social norms, in which anything goes in pursuit of their desires.

¹ Quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of the Americas*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 90.