

*Seven  
Myths  
of the  
Spanish  
Conquest*



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# 7

## *Apes and Men* The Myth of Superiority

You would conquer this whole land, God giving us health, for Spaniards dare face the greatest peril, consider fighting their glory, and have the habit of winning.

—Hernán Cortés (1521)

The Spaniards are perfectly right to govern these barbarians of the New World and adjacent islands; they are in prudence, ingenuity, virtue, and humanity as inferior to the Spaniards as children are to adults and women are to men, there being as much difference between them as that between wild and cruel and very merciful persons, the prodigiously intemperate and the continent and tempered, and I daresay from apes to men.

—Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1547)

Conquistador, there is no time, I must pay my respects.  
And though I came to jeer at you, I leave now with regret.

—Procol Harum (1972)

Cortez: "Wild and untaught are Terms which we alone  
Invent, for fashions differing from our own:  
For all their customs are by Nature wrought,  
But we, by Art, unteach what Nature taught."

—from John Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards* (1672)

Why is Conquest history so ridden with myths? According to the anthropologist Samuel Wilson, we seek to distance ourselves from the history of the Contact and Conquest because of the tragedy it contains. "It is politically safer and emotionally less taxing," suggests Wilson, "to blur history into myth and thereby confine it." This argument helps to explain not only the modern perpetuation of Conquest myths, but also their development in the Conquest period itself. That these myths can be found alive and well in both the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries should not surprise us; after all, as Wilson points out, we are still living in "the contact period."<sup>1</sup>

In colonial times, Spaniards sought to confine history by harnessing it to what may be the simplest trope ever invented to explain human behavior, differences between peoples, and the outcome of historical events—the trope of superiority. Colonial chroniclers and the modern historians who followed them found a satisfying simplicity and safety in the following circular argument: Spaniards conquered natives because they were superior, and they were superior because they conquered natives.

In its most extreme form, indigenous inferiority was expressed in terms that denied Native Americans their humanity. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's comment is often cited because it suggests this image so candidly. The Spanish jurist and philosopher openly stated that natives "hardly deserve the name of human beings." Even full conversion and subjection to the Spanish empire could only partially turn these "barbarians" into "civilized men."<sup>2</sup> While much opprobrium has been heaped upon Sepúlveda for his views, he merely articulated more vividly and directly what most Spaniards and other Europeans assumed at the time to be the case. Two centuries later, for example, the French anticolonialist and Enlightenment figure Denis Diderot characterized the Spanish explorers as "a handful of men surrounded by an innumerable multitude of natives." When anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot quotes this sentence, he italicizes *men* and *natives* to emphasize their juxtaposition.<sup>3</sup>

This opposition of man and native, the civilized and the barbarous, the advanced and the primitive, is seen everywhere, not only in colonial and early modern sources. The more extreme views on the relative merits of the civilization that produced the Spanish Conquest were brought out by the public and highly politicized Quincentennial debate over Columbus and his legacy. Michael Berliner wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that "Western civilization stands for man at his best" and should be honored (through the celebration of Columbus's discovery) "because it is the objectively superior culture." Berliner's juxtaposition of a barbarous pre-Columbian Native America ("sparsely inhabited, unused, undeveloped" but racked with "endless, bloody wars") with a Western Europe that defined civilization's virtues ("reason, science, self-reliance, individualism, ambition, productive achievement") is a version of the trope that Europeans used for centuries to justify the exploitation of Native Americans and the enslavement of West Africans.<sup>4</sup>

Not long ago, professional historians expressed similar views.<sup>5</sup> Although the language of civilization versus barbarism is nowadays more subtle and disguised in academic media, the words "superior" and "superiority" often crop up in modern texts and discussions of the Conquest. This chapter approaches the myth of superiority through a discussion of two sets of five explanations of the Conquest. The first set consists of mythic explanations, those based on the misunderstandings or misconceptions presented in this book. The second set are my antimythic explanations for the Conquest.



"We took this lord by a miracle of God," Gaspar Marquina wrote to his father in Spain, shortly after he had seen Atahualpa seized at Cajamarca, "because our forces wouldn't be enough to take him nor to do what we did, but God gave us the victory miraculously over him and his forces."<sup>6</sup> Attributing to divine intervention an outcome that surprised or otherwise perplexed Spaniards was an easy option to which conquistadors often resorted. While he was governor of the colony of Tierra Firme, centered on the city of Panama, Pedrarias de Avila implied in a letter to the king in 1525 that both he and the local natives shared a view of epidemic disease as providential. He wrote,

more than 400,000 souls have been converted to our holy Catholic faith of their own free will, and more continually come to request baptism, because the Indians in one town where a wooden cross had been set up tried to burn it and never succeeded, and then all the people of the town died of pestilence without an Indian remaining, and seeing this miracle and other miracles that have occurred, the Indians of the region around came to be baptized and request crosses.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes the citing of miracles was specific, as in the claims that the Inca siege of Cuzco was lifted in 1537 by the appearance of the Virgin Mary, or by Santiago (St. James) riding his white horse into the Andean forces. In fact, early colonial accounts of the siege by both Spaniards and Andeans—Antonio de Herrera, Titu Cusi, Cristóbal de Molina, Garcilaso de la Vega, and fray Martín de Murúa—all credit the intervention of Santiago and the Virgin as important explanatory factors, if not the deciding factor.<sup>8</sup> On other occasions, the references to God by sixteenth-century Spaniards—to His will, blessing, and intervention—seem so much a part of the linguistic currency of the day that they can be seen as no more than convenient façades for complex explanations and understandings.

The most obvious question begged by the conquest-as-miracle explanation was *why* did God intervene on the side of the Spaniards? The answer was deceptively simple: because their endeavors were sanctioned by God. As Sahagún explained, "Many were the miracles which were performed in the conquest of this land." The sentence appears in Sahagún's 1585 revision of the Conquest account that is Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*, which the Franciscan friar felt gave insufficient credit to such factors as the role of providence. Before Sahagún, Las Casas and Motolinía had similarly argued that the Conquest was ordained by God in order to bring Christianity to natives. In general, the Franciscans and Dominicans worked hard to promote their evangelization efforts in the Americas not just as God's own work but as the very purpose and justification of the entire Conquest.<sup>9</sup>

The message was easily transferred to the secular realm. Conquistadors such as Cortés laid claim to being agents of providence, and chroniclers such as Oviedo and Gómara constructed Conquest history around the notion that God's plan was to unite the world under Christendom and the Spanish monarchy. In a speech delivered in Tlaxcala to rally the Spaniards for the siege of the Mexica capital, as later reported to the king, Cortés used this idea to underpin his reasons for why the Conquest was a "just cause." "First, because we were fighting against a barbarian people to spread our Faith; second, in order to serve your Majesty; third, we had to protect our lives; and last, many of the natives were our allies and would assist."<sup>10</sup> This perspective allowed justification and explanation to be intertwined and mutually supportive. The Conquest had "good reason" because it was a civilizing mission against barbarians. It was successful because it was aided by God's will and the Spanish "habit of winning."<sup>11</sup> "As we had the flag of the cross and fought for our faith and service of our sacred majesty," Cortés explained on another occasion, "God gave us such a victory and we killed many persons."<sup>12</sup>

Conquistadors such as Marquina, Avila, and Cortés may have casually attributed events to God's will. But their understanding of what Spaniards were doing in the Americas and how they did it was nurtured by a culture that placed the conquest-as-miracle explanation within the ideological context of the Spanish claim to be the chosen people. For the unprecedented scope of their explorations, conquests, and conversions of "idolaters," proclaimed Gómara, "Spaniards are most worthy of praise in all parts of the world. Blessed be God who gave them such grace and power."<sup>13</sup> Even in attributing Conquest miracles, the concept of Spanish superiority was always transparent.

The second mythic explanation blames native peoples for their own defeat. It combines the notion that native resistance was hindered or forestalled by the belief that the Spaniards were (or may have been) gods, with the interrelated blaming of the Mexica and Inca emperors for the subsequent collapse of their empires. Spanish superiority is promoted through the contrast between native and Spanish leaders—the more that Moctezuma is condemned as "timorous and cowardly," in Sepúlveda's words, the more Cortés seems "noble and valiant"—and by the implication that the appearance, abilities, and actions of the conquistadors inspired natives to take them for gods.

The third myth-based explanation stems from the view of native cultures as inadequate to the task of fending off the Spanish invasion. Again, native inferiority serves to feed the myth of Spanish superiority. Early European views of Native Americans included the belief that they either lacked culture in any "real" sense, or that their cultures were weakened by naiveté or a rotten moral core. Such views also gave rise to explanations for the Conquest's outcome. That sixteenth-century Spaniards found such explanations convincing is not surprising, but these cultural explanations were also perpetuated in modern history books. For example, J. H. Elliott, the prominent English

historian of Spain and its empire, argued that Spanish weaponry alone does not explain the Conquest.

There must here have been a superiority that was more than merely technical, and perhaps it ultimately lay in the greater self-confidence of the civilization which produced the *conquistadores*. In the Inca empire they confronted a civilization that seems to have passed its peak and to have started already on its descent; in the Aztec [i.e. Mexica] empire, on the other hand, they successfully challenged a civilization still young and in the process of rapid evolution. Each of these empires was thus caught at a moment when it was least capable of offering effective resistance, and each lacked confidence in itself, and in its capacity for survival in a universe ruled by implacable deities, and for ever poised on the brink of destruction. The *conquistador*, hungry for fame and riches, and extremely confident of his capacity to obtain them, stood on the threshold of a fatalist world resigned to self-surrender; and in the sign of the cross he conquered it.<sup>14</sup>

This passage embraces much of Conquest mythology: the Conquest is achieved by a few gold-hungry exceptional men; native empires quickly collapse; natives are handicapped by fatalism and a lack of confidence; and Spaniards enjoy a double "superiority," technical and civilizational. Elliott does not explicitly blame native religion, but the idea is implicit in his phrase "fatalist world," which amounts to a modern version of the "superstition" of which colonial-era Spaniards accused natives. As Santiago Mendez, Yucatan's governor in the early 1840s, remarked, in "Indian" minds "superstition and credulity go hand in hand."<sup>15</sup>

In 1949 the Belgian illustrator Hergé vividly captured seemingly timeless attitudes toward natives in his *Prisoners of the Sun*, the illustrated adventure in the *Tintin* series in which the heroic reporter travels to Peru. On one level, the titular prisoners are Tintin and his friends (tied to stakes in Figure 18), but on another level it is the native Andeans who are imprisoned by a static, primitive culture.<sup>16</sup> Tintin's use of his knowledge of an imminent eclipse is wonderfully comic, but its theater works only because it plays upon European assumptions of Western ingenuity and native superstition.

Hergé's early *Tintin* strips portrayed a colonial world of civilized Europeans and barbarous others, while his later stories and his revisions of earlier work presented a postcolonial world imbued with neocolonialism. Tintin's adventures have been devoured by generations of European schoolboys, and have seen a resurgence among adults, with the books selling tens of millions of copies worldwide.<sup>17</sup> The representational legitimacy of *Tintin* thus lies in the dissemination of the series, but it is confirmed by the fact that less comic sources, from popular historians to revered scholars, have continued to articulate a comparative view of native culture not far removed from that illustrated by Hergé.<sup>18</sup>

Michael Wood, for example, suggests that the Mexica accepted their defeat because "the Aztec polity was, unquestionably, a moral order with a deep, if tormented, spirituality." Le Clézio goes further, stating that "the Maya, the

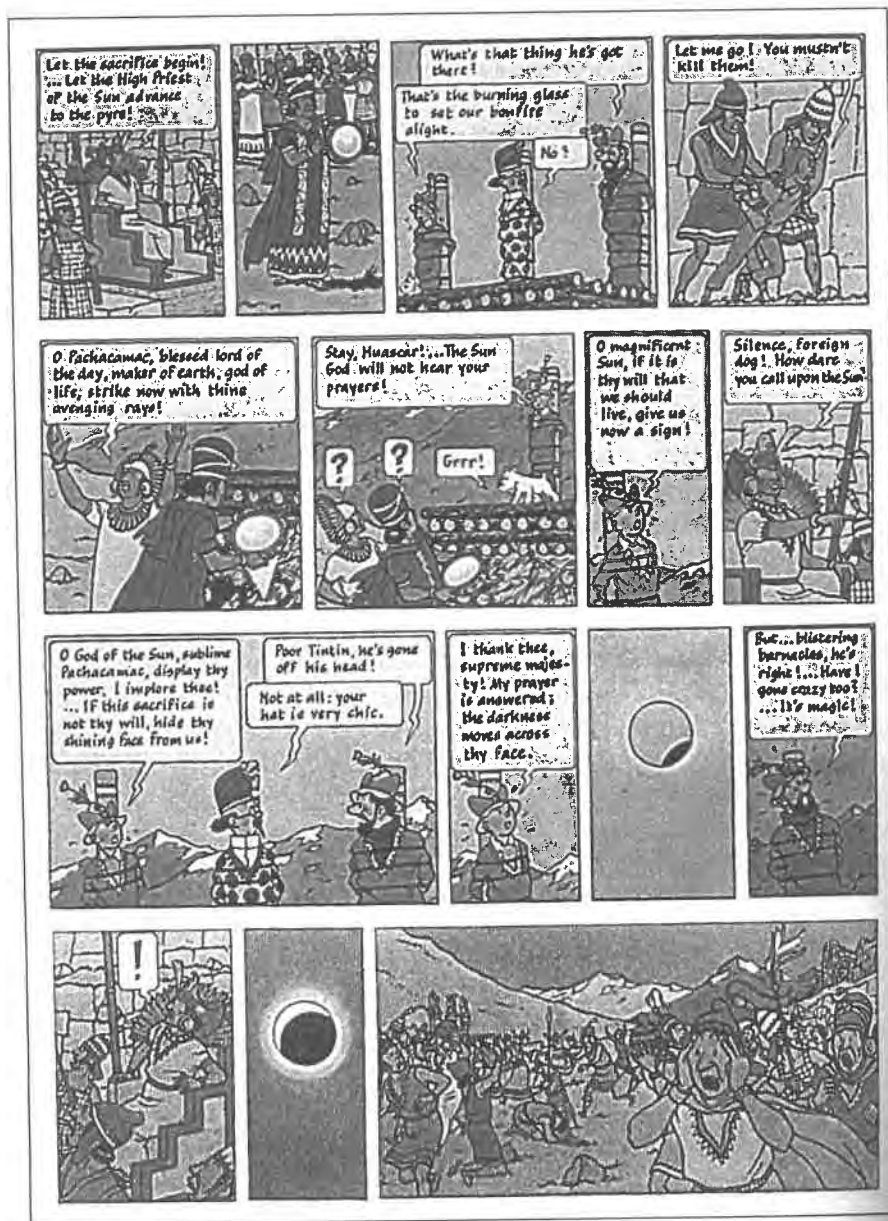


Fig. 18. Excerpt from Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin: Prisoners of the Sun* (1949; first English edition, 1962), p. 58. (© Hergé/Moulinsart 1962)

Totonacs, and the Mexica were profoundly religious tribes, completely subservient to the order of the gods and to the rule of their priest-kings.<sup>19</sup> Charles Dibble, misled by the *Florentine Codex* upon which he labored for decades, explained the Conquest of Mexico largely in terms of the Mexica cultural outlook as “omen-ridden” and “permeated with a resigned fatalism”; the Mexica were traumatized by the apparent “ineffectiveness of native religion and magic” and the realization that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl.<sup>20</sup>

Benjamin Keen, in his popular textbook on Latin American history, also contrasts European and Native American civilizations as one reason for the success of the Conquest. “The Spaniards were Renaissance men with a basically secular outlook, while the Indians represented a much more archaic worldview in which ritual and magic played a large role.” Spaniards viewed war as “a science or art,” but “for the Aztecs and Incas, war had a large religious component.” Jacques Soustelle, in his classic study of the Mexica, first published in French a half century ago, made the same argument. Mexica civilization “went down above all because its religious and legal conception of war paralyzed it,” argued Soustelle; “by reason of its material inadequacy or the rigidity of its mind, the civilization was defeated.” The juxtaposition is thus between a progressive civilization and a traditional one. However the argument is articulated, the trope of civilization and barbarism always lurks in the background.<sup>21</sup>

One of the oldest definitions of the difference between civilization and barbarism is that of writing. The fourth myth-based explanation of the Conquest assumes a Spanish superiority in language, literacy, and reading “signs.” Columbus’s comment, at first seemingly extraordinary, that he would bring Caribbean natives to Spain “in order that they may learn to speak,” is echoed in Le Clézio’s declaration that Mexico’s Conquest “was achieved thanks to Cortés’s chief weapon—his ability to speak.” Columbus and Le Clézio mean to compare not the mute and the vocal, but superior and inferior communicators. Thus despite Todorov’s claim that his explanation of the Conquest as a native defeat “by means of signs” is one that “has hitherto been neglected,” the myth of the superior communication skills of Europeans is both deeply rooted and still alive.<sup>22</sup> Antonio de Nebrija’s famous statement in his Introduction to the first published Spanish grammar that “language has always been the partner [*compañera*] of empire” is often quoted partly because of the symbolism of his book’s presentation to Queen Isabella in 1492.<sup>23</sup> But it is also cited because it functions as a bumper-sticker slogan to support the idea that Spaniards enjoyed what Samuel Purchas termed “the litterall advantage.” Purchas, an Englishman writing in the early seventeenth century, meant that literacy gave its possessors both a moral and technological advantage. Modern proponents of this idea have abandoned its moral dimension (almost reversing it in their anticolonial sympathy for native peoples), but cling to its technological aspect.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 19. The frontispiece to the first edition of *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*; by Bernal Díaz (1632).

The frontispiece drawing to the first published edition of Díaz's *True History* (Figure 19) depicts Cortés on the left, beneath a sign upon which is inscribed the Latin word *manu* (by hand, i.e., by deed), and a friar on the right beneath the word *ore* (by word). It seems to me that the intention of the Mercedarian friar who found and edited Díaz's manuscript, if indeed he designed the frontispiece, was to signal that the role of conversion and of the friars was as important as that of Cortés and the conquistadors. The symbolic significance of the images is their reflection of competing Spanish visions of the Conquest, its rationale, its importance, and the explanations for its success. It would probably be taking the symbolism too far to define the Conquest as "a conquest of language and a conquest by language."<sup>25</sup> Language was important in the Conquest, but trying to explain the Conquest in terms of signs, language, or writing comes far too close to Sepúlveda's blunt expression of what Purchas called "the litterall advantage." "The Indians," declared the Spaniard, were "little men in whom you will scarcely find traces of humanity, who not only lack culture but do not even know how to write."<sup>26</sup>

The final myth-based explanation is rooted in the notion that Spanish weaponry in and of itself explains the Conquest, something that not even the conquistadors believed. While weapons were clearly a factor in the Conquest's outcome, the extreme version of this explanation—whereby weaponry explains everything—has become a modern manifestation of the old superiority myth. As the once-dominant notion of civilizational superiority became unfashionable, the idea of Spanish technological superiority became a politically acceptable alternative.

Early expressions of this view in Cortés's letters to the king and in Díaz's account tend to mix the straightforward idea of differences in weapons with other explanations more clearly based in Conquest mythology. Later, Ilarion da Bergamo was given to understand from his travels in Mexico in the 1760s that the crucial moment of divine intervention in Cortés's campaign was the Spanish discovery of "saltpeter" at the mouth of the Orizaba volcano, with which gunpowder could be made. "For if there had not been powder," wrote Ilarione,

to charge the field cannons with their cartridges and withstand the tremendous number of Indians who resisted their advance into their country, and (according to the history) nearly darkened the sky with the immense quality of arrows launched against the aggressors, they would not have been able to decimate them as they did. . . . These wretched Indians had all the more reason to claim that the Spaniards manipulated lightning when they heard the noise and saw the fire from the artillery and, at the same time, countless numbers of their own people dropping dead.<sup>27</sup>

There are recent versions of this colonial view, whereby superior Spanish weapons vanquish superstitious natives; Carlos Fuentes states that in both

Mexico and the Andes “two factors came together to defeat the Indian nation: myth and weaponry.”<sup>28</sup> But modern versions of the explanation often focus exclusively on military matters, and thus become potentially pernicious because they can so easily be couched in material, rather than human, terms. The use of the word “superiority” to discuss the Conquest is thereby seemingly benign.<sup>29</sup>

The historians who have used the term “superiority” do not see natives as barbarians. Rather, the term tends to be used in the context of neutral discussions of the military specifics of a particular segment of the Conquest. But the heavy emphasis on so-called military superiority is *potentially* pernicious because of the way it can be read as an acceptable recycling of the old superiority myth. Web sites devoted to the Conquest often explain it in terms of European weaponry, but natives tend to be judged as primitive or unintelligent for not also having invented such weapons. Guns and steel are emphasized as the key factors, but natives, especially a scapegoated Moctezuma, still tend to be seen as “superstitious and weak.”<sup>30</sup>

When the weapons factor is removed from context and privileged as the sole or overwhelming Spanish advantage, the entire Conquest comes down to the clash of superior and inferior weapons. But behind that clash lies the larger more problematic clash of civilization and barbarism. Whether the focus is on weapons, words, ideas, or the intervention of God, as long as the implication is that Spaniards were in some sense better than Native Americans, we are not moving any closer to better understanding the Conquest.



In this final section of the chapter I shall suggest five factors that, in combination, better explain, the Conquest's outcome. None of these explanations is entirely original; I have not found the lost key to the Pandora's Box of infallible Conquest explanations. But that means that all five—in particular the first three—are well evidenced, well documented, and easily pursued further in the historical record.

The conquistadors had two great allies, without which the Conquest would not have taken place. One of these was disease. For ten millennia the Americas had been isolated from the rest of the world. The greater numbers of people in the Old World, and the greater variety of domesticated animals from which such diseases as smallpox, measles, and flu originated, meant that Europeans and Africans arrived in the New World with a deadly array of germs. These germs still killed Old World peoples, but they had developed relatively high levels of immunity compared to Native Americans, who died rapidly and in staggeringly high numbers. During the century and a

half after Columbus's first voyage, the Native American population fell by as much as 90 percent.<sup>31</sup>

Sudden epidemics had immediate impacts on the invasions of the Mexica and Inca empires. When Prescott put the fall of Tenochtitlán down to “causes more potent than those from human agency” he was in a way correct. The Mexica capital fell not by the force of Spanish arms, but to disease and plague. The siege of the island city cut off food supplies, but as starvation approached, defenders succumbed to plague or disease. Smallpox seems to have been the prime culprit. As Spaniards and their Nahua allies moved through the devastated city, they found pile after pile of corpses, and huddled groups of the dying, covered with telltale pustules. As the Franciscan chronicler Sahagún later put it, “the streets were so filled with the dead and sick people that our men walked over nothing but bodies.”<sup>32</sup>

Diseases moved through the Americas faster than germ-carrying Europeans and Africans could. Moctezuma's successor, Cuitlahuac, was killed by smallpox during the siege of Tenochtitlán, but the Inca emperor Huayna Capac, and then his successor, both died of the disease before Pizarro and his colleagues had even reached the empire. A succession dispute arose as a result; Huayna Capac's two surviving sons, Atahualpa and Huascar, attempted to share power, but the arrangement soon dissolved into a civil war that Pizarro was able to manipulate to his own benefit.<sup>33</sup>

The two great native empires in the early sixteenth century were not the only regions hit by Old World diseases. It is unlikely that any corner of the Americas escaped unscathed. The virus that killed Huayna Capac in the late 1520s was probably a continuation of the great pandemic that arrived in the Caribbean in 1518. It was brought to Mexico by the Narváez expedition of 1519, spread by the Spaniards and Africans led by Cortés and Alvarado through central and southern Mexico and into Guatemala, traveling rapidly through Central America in the early 1520s, before fanning out across South America. This smallpox pandemic, which alone killed millions of Native Americans, was followed in the 1530s by a lethal pandemic of measles that likewise ran from Mesoamerica to the Andes. These and successive waves of disease penetrated up into North America, decimating the densely populated lower Mississippi, and southwest into Amazonia, where large towns shrank to villages or became uninhabited. Whereas disease aided and accelerated the Conquest among Nahuas, Mayas, and Andeans, it averted invasion in regions such as the lower Mississippi and Amazon. Too few people were left to attract major expeditions and not until modern times were the population levels of the original native empires even realized.<sup>34</sup>

The second great ally of the conquistadors was native disunity in its many forms and manifestations. Native American identity was highly localized; native peoples saw themselves as members of particular communities or city-states, very seldom as members of larger ethnic groups and certainly not as

anything even approaching the category of “Indians” or “natives.” The nature of native identity was thus the root of a native disunity that the invaders encouraged to blossom. Natives allied to the Spanish cause were essential to the Conquest, almost always outnumbering many times over the Spanish and African members of an expedition. Their role in saving companies from disaster and turning the tide of Conquest wars can hardly be overstated. As Cortés himself admitted in a rare moment of candor, one of the factors in the Spanish favor was that “many of the natives were our allies and would assist.”<sup>35</sup> Two further examples of how native disunity aided Spaniards were the roles played by native interpreters and the cooperation and collaboration of native rulers—the latter often stemming from their desire to advance their own dynasties and communities at the expense of neighboring ones.

The third well-evidenced factor that helps to explain the Conquest’s outcome is weaponry. Much has been made of five military advantages that Spaniards allegedly enjoyed: guns, steel, horses, war dogs, and the tactical skills needed to maximize the impact of these. But the advantages they offered faded during the Conquest period, as unconquered natives acquired the same technology; the Araucanian use of pikes and horses is a good example.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the theoretical tactical advantage of Spanish weapons was often very different from the actual possibilities for their application in the Americas. Arguably, the limited applicability of Spanish weapons such as guns and horses made the way in which they were used all the more important.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, it seems clear that guns, horses, and mastiffs were a minor factor.

Horses and dogs were in limited supply for most of the Conquest period, and both animals could only be used in battle under certain circumstances—horses on open ground, and dogs at close quarters, preferably against the unarmed. The insistence by the conquistador Vargas Machuca on the importance of dogs was based entirely on his opinion that “the Indian greatly fears the horse, and the harquebus, but he fears the dog more.” Yet the general fearfulness of the “Indian” was mostly wishful thinking on the part of invaders. Another colonial writer, Herrera, details the gutting by a dog of an unarmed native chief on Hispaniola in 1502, but otherwise offers no evidence in his eight-volume Conquest history of the military utility of dogs.<sup>38</sup>

Conquistadors greatly prized horses, and during campaigns they exchanged hands for high prices. But this was not primarily because they offered a military advantage against native warriors. To some extent horses were valued because expeditions often traveled long distances over difficult ground, but they were only a rapid means of transportation if the whole company was mounted. Above all horses were prized because they were a status symbol; there were not enough to go around, they were expensive to buy and maintain, and their ownership placed one in a separate category that came with a larger share of the spoils. At the *fundición*, or meltdown of

precious mineral booty, at such places as Cajamarca in 1533, larger shares were given to men with horses. Yet despite the enormous social importance of being a horseman, when it came to fighting, even Francisco Pizarro preferred to be on the ground.<sup>39</sup>

Guns, too, were of limited use. Cannons were few in number in the Americas, and without roads or navigable rivers, their transportation was a major challenge. Much of the Americas where Spaniards fought was tropical or subtropical, and in the humidity the powder became too wet to fire. Firearms, in the form of harquebuses, whose unwieldy barrels required the support of tripods, were likewise not plentiful and required dry powder. Vargas Machuca advocated Spaniards using harquebuses in the Americas, but his detailed exposition on how to avoid damaging the gun, getting it wet, or discharging it prematurely or by accident would surely have caused any conquistador to think twice about carrying such a weapon.<sup>40</sup> The more reliable and faster-loading musket was not invented until decades after Cortés and Pizarro invaded the American mainland. Nor had Europeans yet developed volley-fire techniques, in which soldiers formed banks of rows in order to provide continuous fire, although there were seldom enough firearms in a Conquest company to have made good use of such a technique. Those Spaniards who did have firearms were lucky to get a single shot off before reversing the weapon to use as a club or dropping it to concentrate on sword wielding.<sup>41</sup>

The one weapon, then, whose efficacy is indubitable was the steel sword. It alone was worth more than a horse, a gun, and a mastiff put together. Because a steel sword was longer and less brittle than the obsidian weapons of Mesoamerican warriors, and longer and sharper than Andean clubbing weapons or copper-tipped axes, a Spaniard could fight for hours and receive light flesh wounds and bruises while killing many natives. Spanish swords were just the right length for reaching an enemy who lacked a similar weapon. Pizarro preferred to fight on foot so he could better manipulate his sword. Descriptions of battles in which Spanish swordplay caused terrible slaughter among native forces pepper the Conquest accounts of Cieza de León, Cortés, Díaz, Gómara, Jerez, Oviedo y Baños, Zárate, and others. Military historian John Guilmartin deftly summarizes the point: “While Spanish success in combat cannot be attributed to a single factor, it is clear that the other elements of Spanish superiority took effect within a tactical matrix established by the effectiveness of Spanish hand-held slashing and piercing weapons.”<sup>42</sup>

This trilogy of factors—disease, native disunity, and Spanish steel—goes most of the way toward explaining the Conquest’s outcome. Remove just one and the likelihood of the failure of expeditions under Cortés, Pizarro, and others would have been very high. As Clendinnen has observed of the Spanish-Mexica war, both Spaniards and natives were aware that the Conquest was “a close-run thing,” a point that applies broadly across the Conquest.<sup>43</sup> The failed expeditions outnumbered successful ones, and cautionary



tales can be found by looking at the fate of Spanish expeditions such as Montejó's early attempts to conquer Yucatan, the early campaigns into Oaxaca's northern sierra, or the Pizarro-Orellana journey into Amazonia.<sup>44</sup> Spaniards would have suffered steady mortality from fatal wounds, starvation, disease, and so on, with survivors limping back to Spain or to colonial enclaves scattered along the coasts and islands. Time and again, this outcome was averted because Spanish steel weapons permitted them to hold out long enough for native allies to save them, while the next wave of epidemic disease disrupted native defenses.

A fourth factor also played an important role—the culture of war. For example, the Mexica were hampered by certain battle conventions that the Spaniards ignored. Mexica methods of war emphasized the observation of prebattle ceremonies that eliminated the possibility of surprise attacks and the capture of Spaniards for ritual execution rather than killing them on the spot.<sup>45</sup> The conquistadors were outraged by the apparent native disdain for human life, as manifested in elaborate rituals of human “sacrifice.” But from the Mexica perspective, it was the Spaniards who disrespected human life by slaughtering natives en masse, killing noncombatants, and killing from a distance.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the pomp and ritual with which the Mexica—and to some extent all Mesoamericans—preferred to take a human life suggests profound respect, in contrast to Spanish practices, which seem indiscriminate and insufficiently ritualized.

But the culture of war must be considered along with other explanatory factors for several reasons. First, it is only one aspect of the combat that took place during the Spanish invasions of Mesoamerica. Both Spaniards and natives engaged at times in the killing of noncombatants, in mass slaughter, in killing from a distance (natives used arrows most effectively), and in ritual displays of public violence and ritualized executions—such as the Spanish burning alive of native lords in town plazas. Second, the point applies most to the Mexica, less to other Mesoamericans such as the Mixtecs and Mayas, and very little to Andeans and other Native Americans.<sup>47</sup> Third, the larger context of the point about different methods of war is not that of general cultural differences between Spaniards and natives, as it is usually presented, but that of the circumstances of war. Natives were fighting on their home ground; Spaniards were not. Spaniards had nothing more to lose than their lives. This may seem like everything—Cortés told the king that the conquistadors prevailed in part because “we had to protect our lives.”<sup>48</sup> But Native Americans stood to lose their families and their homes and were thus quicker to compromise, to accommodate the invaders, to seek ways to avoid full-scale or protracted wars. While Dibble describes the “seasonal” Mexica view of war—“there was a time to plant, a time to harvest, and a time to fight”—as distinct to Mexica culture, this was a practical consideration that would

have been made by all Native Americans—and by Spaniards, had they been fighting on their home ground.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, the Spanish Conquest can only be fully understood if placed in the larger historical context of the age of expansion. This larger story is not one of Spanish superiority, or even of Western European superiority, but is instead a complex phenomenon in world history that transcends the particulars of the Spanish Conquest in the Americas. If we focus only on the century following Columbus's voyages we see Mexica and Inca warriors as losers, West Africans as fighting slaves, and Spaniards as quite reasonably contemplating a world empire. But the age of expansion began with the rise of empires outside Europe, with the Mexica fanning out across Mesoamerica and the Inca dominating the Andes, and in West Africa with the rising of the Songhay empire from the ashes of that of Mali. In Europe, the Ottomans and the Muscovites began empire building before the Spaniards, as did the Portuguese—who beat their Iberian neighbors in the race for a sea route to East Asia. And after the sixteenth century the Spanish empire was gradually eclipsed by the trading and colonial networks of the Dutch, English, and French.<sup>50</sup>

Looking at human history over thousands of years, the Spanish Conquest is a mere episode in the globalization of access to resources of food production. The plants and animals of certain Old World environments and regions have a greater potential as food, and the peoples of those regions have enjoyed advantages over others as a result. But eventually, through uneven encounters, those advantages have been introduced to the previously disadvantaged regions.

In the case of Europeans introducing new foods to Native Americans, the parallel introduction of Old World diseases made the encounter especially uneven, while colonialism hindered native access to these new resources. This process is too broad and complex to be understood in terms of the alleged and simple “superiority” of one group of people over another. It is also a process that is incomplete. We are still living through the long period of uneven encounters and the gradual globalization of resources.<sup>51</sup>