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THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

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Rhetoric and (in)famous cases aside, then, it is clear that the conquistadors came from similar backgrounds and had similar goals in the Americas—where they responded to the conditions of conquest in similar ways and enjoyed or suffered similar careers. The patterns of conquistador biographies thus reveal a set of representative characteristics. From these we can construct a conquistador type, one who echoes in some respects the tiny minority whose names became legend.

That type was a young man in his late-twenties, semiliterate, from southwestern Spain, trained in a particular trade or profession, seeking opportunity through patronage networks based on family and hometown ties. Armed as well as he could afford, and with some experience already of exploration and conquest in the Americas, he would be ready to invest what he had and risk his life—if absolutely necessary—in order to be a member of the first company to conquer somewhere wealthy and well populated.

Our conquistador type was not a soldier in the armies of the king of Spain. Although the conquistadors are often misleadingly referred to as soldiers—and they were certainly armed, organized, and experienced in military matters—they acquired their martial skills from conflict situations in the Americas, not from formal training. Expedition members tended to be recruited in recently founded colonies; the New World inexperience of Jiménez de Quesada and others brought from the Canaries in 1536 was atypical, as most participants in conquest expeditions already had some experience in the Americas. Among the Spaniards who participated in the famous capture of Atahualpa at Cajamarca, at least two-thirds had prior conquest experience and more than half had spent at least five years in the Americas. But none of this amounted to formal training.

This lack of formal training was paralleled by a lack of formal ranking; Spanish forces in Europe at this time were led by commanders from the high nobility and organized into various

ranks. In contrast, conquistador groups were headed by captains, the sole named rank and one that varied in number. The record of the division of spoils at Cajamarca listed the men in two categories only, *gente de a caballo* (men on horseback) and *gente de a pie* (men on foot). A man could move from one category to the other by buying a horse (or losing one).

Because conquistadors were not soldiers in a formal army, their dress, armor, and weaponry were individualized. Lacking an official uniform, each company member dressed according to his occupation, status, and wealth—with adjustments made during the course of an expedition. But there was a basic dress common to all Spaniards, consisting of leggings, a pullover tunic, and an unadorned cloak. The better-off wore an outer garment such as a doublet or jerkin, trimmed with silk or fur if possible (see fig. 6). These typically had buttons from the neck down, with fitted waists and small skirts; styles varied, and evolved, during the sixteenth century (the doublet eventually became the modern jacket). Spaniards rapidly replaced or altered European dress during conquest campaigns, out of two different necessities: clothing from Spain was scare and expensive; and American climates required adaptation for survival's sake. Wool, flax, and linen gave way to cotton; heavy doublets gave way to the *xicolli* and the *tilmatli*, the short jacket and rectangular cape worn by Aztecs and other Central Mexicans (or the cotton ponchos of the Andeans); shoes and boots gave way to sandals.

The conquest paintings and screens that were popular in seventeenth-century Mexico often depict entire conquistador companies in full body armor and helmets. But such paintings are laden with anachronisms and imagined details, the inclusion of armor being one of them. Earlier drawings and textual evidence suggests that Spaniards seldom wore armor, that such armor was primarily limited to iron breastplates, and those were carried with the supplies to be put on only at the onset of battle. From the 1520s on, Spaniards in Mesoamerica adopted the *ichcahuipilli*

of the Aztecs. This quilted cotton vest was designed to protect the torso from the obsidian weapons used by native Mesoamericans, and it was more appropriate to the American climate and more readily available than iron armor. Round, iron shields were brought from Spain but were less common than wooden and leather ones, which could be more easily made in the Americas or replaced by native shields. Likewise, iron helmets were less common than flat caps, skullcaps, and simple war hats. The elegant, crested helmet called the *morion*, typically shown on the head of Cortés and other conquerors in later paintings, did not become common in Europe until the 1540s and was never worn by conquistadors.

The typical conquistador carried a broadsword. Although Toledo swordsmiths perfected rapiers and other lighter, slimmer, sharper—but equally strong—weapons in the sixteenth century, the Spaniards who fought native warriors in the 1520s and 1530s typically wielded blunt-tipped three-footers. Some carried broadswords five or six feet long, which were swung with two hands and could devastate massed native warriors. Spanish accounts frequently describe long battles in which native forces suffer high casualties while inflicting only wounds on the invaders. Issues of exaggeration aside, such outcomes were possible because of the disparities in length and durability between Spanish steel swords and native weapons made of wood and obsidian.

A less prestigious, less important—but still significant—weapon carried by some conquistadors was the twelve-foot lance. These could also be used as pikes and could be made in the field, using recycled iron tips, and there is evidence that the allied native warriors that accompanied Spaniards on almost every expedition soon learned to make and use these lances. Still, they were less useful than in Europe, because native enemies had no cavalry. Similarly, the European crossbow was often highly effective and relatively easy to repair in the Americas. But its use was restricted

to small units of bowmen, who tended to be outnumbered many times over by skilled archers among the native allies.

Did the typical conquistador carry a gun? Probably not. The matchlock first appeared in the Americas within a few years of Columbus's first voyage across the Atlantic, barely a decade after its invention, and colonial-period accounts make much of its impact on native warriors. But the matchlock of the conquistador era was a clumsy, unreliable weapon, ill-suited to the tropics. Mostly known as the harquebus—*arcabuz* or *escopeta* in Spanish—this long-barreled gun required dry powder, often misfired, and took longer to reload than an Aztec, Maya, or Inca archer took to unleash dozens of arrows. Again, later paintings are misleading, as they sometimes show conquistadors with muskets—a more useful matchlock handgun that was not invented until the 1550s. The harquebus's greatest virtue in the conquest wars was its psychological impact, a display weapon that could be deployed selectively to impress and terrify the enemy.

This was also true—but on a larger, more dramatic scale—of the cannon. Even small cannon made a deafening sound, spat fire, and could throw a ball some 2,000 yards; Spaniards claimed that natives were petrified by the cannon's apparent ability to harness the power of thunder and lightning. But, like the matchlock, their utility in combat was highly limited. Take, for example, Cortés's deployment of cannon on his invasion of the Aztec Empire in 1519–21. He landed on the Mexican coast with ten brass lombards, but they were too heavy to move inland. He was able to move the smaller (three-inch-bore) falconets, but he only had four of them. They could be used only in dry weather and with enough warning to mount them on makeshift carriages. Furthermore, they were all lost in the lake surrounding the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán when the Spaniards and their allies were forced to flee the city at night (the so-called *Noche Triste*). Only with considerable planning, effort, time, and native assistance was Cortés able to transport the lombards into the Valley of Mexico to use in the 1521 siege of Tenochtitlán.

Yet historians have tended to take the Spanish-generated stories of their superiority at face value and even to add to them. Most of the historical literature represents the Spaniards as advantaged not only in morale and prowess, but also in technology, political sophistication, and metabolic resistance.

Take technology first. As detailed in the previous chapter, Spaniards had "guns and steel," but it is doubtful whether these really conferred an advantage. Guns are good only as long as powder and shot can be replaced. Even crossbows need supplies of bolts. Heavy armor is an encumbrance in rarefied atmospheres and hot climates—indeed, the Spaniards rapidly discarded steel cuirasses and heavy leather jerkins for the quilted cotton armor of the Aztecs and other Mesoamericans. Images of conquistadors in full armor were mostly created after the events, reflecting the battle dress of later generations of European soldiers (see figs. 2–8).

Horses, Spain's other supposed secret weapon, extinct in the Americas for ten thousand years before Spaniards reintroduced them, were much loved by Spaniards as a status symbol, and they seem to have captured native imaginations. But they were of little use in mountainous terrain and street fighting of the kind decisive in most of Mesoamerica and the Andes. Pedro de Alvarado's complaints that in Guatemala at times "the horses were not able to keep up the lead owing to the roughness of the road" and "the horsemen could not fight on account of the many marshes and thick forests" were common refrains. In the earlier campaigns, horseshoes became a rare and valued commodity, as without them horses went from being a help to a hindrance; Alvarado wrote in 1524 from Guatemala that horseshoes "are now worth among us 190 pesos a dozen and so we are trading them and paying for them in gold." Horses could be used to devastating effect on open plains, and Spanish accounts of conquest battles are full of descriptions of efforts to lure enemy warriors onto an open field—and of the slaughter that ensued if they were successful. But such moments serve to illustrate the limitation of horses in general. Furthermore, native warriors soon learned to avoid open battles, to hamstring horses or pull them down by their tails, and to dig hidden pits of sharpened stakes to impale horses and their riders. Natives also learned to ride horses themselves readily enough.

The really significant technology at the Spaniards' disposal was nautical. Their ships got them to the New World in the first place—an achievement no indigenous seafarers could match in the opposite direction. And they were able to extemporize suitable craft for river and lake warfare. But this advantage, though critical in some places, such as central Mexico where assailants had to approach the Aztec stronghold of Tenochtitlán across a lake, was obviously of limited application.