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THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

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Hernando Cortés was born in the early 1480s in Medellín, Extremadura, a dry, poor region of western Spain. He was the son of an illegitimate lesser nobleman, Martín Cortés. As a young man he probably began—at least—a course in law at the university in Salamanca. But he found sedentary life dull

or unremunerative and went to Valencia with the intention of seeking his fortune with the Spanish forces fighting in Italy. That ambition—to achieve glory and status through military accomplishment in the Mediterranean—never left him; even after his war against the Aztecs he aspired to fight in Italy, Africa, and the Holy Land. But in his early twenties he was led elsewhere, to the Caribbean, where many real and fictional pícaros, outcasts, and social or financial failures would seek their fortunes, unrestrained by the restricted acceptance back home. There he spent more than a dozen years as a conquistador-settler on Hispaniola and Cuba, followed by a decade of exploration and conquest in Mesoamerica.

As for Cortés and his ambition to be governor, perhaps viceroy, of New Spain: upon his return to Spain, he was well received by Charles V, but the king was wisely reluctant to make conquistadors into viceroys. Cortés was therefore bought off with a title and enormous encomienda holdings in Mexico (he became the marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca). In 1547, after participating in a failed expedition to North Africa, Cortés died in Seville. Shortly after, in 1550, his old conquest colleague Francisco de Montejo also returned to Spain—recalled to defend his performance as Yucatan's first governor—where he died within a few years.