

THE SCIENTIFIC
REVOLUTION

Lawrence M. Principe

SCOTLAND Rab Houston

SEXUALITY Véronique Mottier

SHAKESPEARE Germaine Greer

SIKHISM Eleanor Nesbitt

SLEEP Steven W. Lockley

and Russell G. Foster

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL

ANTHROPOLOGY

John Monaghan and Peter Just

SOCIALISM Michael Newman

SOCIOLOGY Steve Bruce

SOCRATES C. C. W. Taylor

THE SOVIET UNION Stephen Lovell

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Helen Graham

SPANISH LITERATURE Jo Labanyi

SPINOZA Roger Scruton

STATISTICS David J. Hand

STUART BRITAIN John Morrill

SUPERCONDUCTIVITY

Stephen Blundell

TERRORISM Charles Townshend

THEOLOGY David F. Ford

THOMAS AQUINAS Fergus Kerr

TOCQUEVILLE Harvey C. Mansfield

TRAGEDY Adrian Poole

THE TUDORS John Guy

TWENTIETH-CENTURY

BRITAIN Kenneth O. Morgan

THE UNITED NATIONS

Jussi M. Hanhimäki

THE U.S. CONGRESS Donald A. Ritchie

UTOPIANISM Lyman Tower Sargent

THE VIKINGS Julian Richards

VIRUSES Dorothy H. Crawford

WITCHCRAFT Malcolm Gaskill

WITTGENSTEIN A. C. Grayling

WORLD MUSIC Philip Bohlman

THE WORLD TRADE

ORGANIZATION Amrita Narlikar

WRITING AND SCRIPT

Andrew Robinson

Available soon:

CHINESE LITERATURE Sabina Knight

ITALIAN LITERATURE

Peter Hainsworth and David Robey

HISTORY OF MATHEMATICS

Jacqueline Stedall

ANAESTHESIA Aidan O'Donnell

RUSSIAN HISTORY Geoffrey Hosking

For more information visit our web site

www.oup.co.uk/general/vsi/

Matthew Restall and Felipe Fernández-Armesto

THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

But from the onset of the conquest, among the merchants, captains, settlers, and priests, there were Spaniards who took more than a passing interest in the people and places they encountered. Some conquistadors observed their surroundings with sharp eyes, wrote about them, argued with their peers; a few of them took it to extremes. No doubt to his father's chagrin, Bartolomé de Las Casas's interest in the Taino led him out of the family business and into the priesthood. He renounced the trappings of settler success (his encomiendas on Cuba and Hispaniola) and became a Dominican firebrand, devoting his long life to a campaign to convince the king to make priests, not conquistadors, the governors of the new colonies. His experimental model settlements in Guatemala and Venezuela came to nothing, and the Spanish empire never became an archipelago of utopian religious colonies.

Las Casas's defense of Native Americans did not fall on deaf ears. He provoked such controversy that the king was obliged to listen. His arguments that native peoples be exempt from slavery, and that encomiendas (which provided Spaniards with native labor) not be passed on as inheritance by their Spanish holders, were reflected in a 1542 set of edicts known as the New Laws. Despite resistance and even rebellion from the conquistadors over the New Laws, they had a lasting impact on the development of the colonies. Las Casas's *Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* became a bestseller in his own lifetime. Until his death in 1566 he enjoyed the protection of the Crown and the right to petition in print and at court against abuses by the colonists against the colonized.

Las Casas was not an anti-imperialist nor a humanitarian or human rights activist in the modern sense. He did not denounce

the Spanish empire or question its right to colonize. But he did oppose and denounce the methods of those who forged the empire; he attacked conquistadors and, in effect, the very essence of conquistador culture. Many of his writings, including the polemical *Brief Account*, were translated into other European languages and widely read by Spain's enemies. Las Casas's descriptions of conquistador atrocities became the foundation stones for the so-called Black Legend. Spanish imperialism was imagined in the Black Legend as excessively brutal and immoral. There were two ironies to the popularity of this depiction in Protestant countries. One was that the Protestant empires would themselves go on to match, and then exceed, the violence committed by Spanish American conquistadors. The other was the legend's implication that the Spanish were cruel because they were Catholic, ironic in view of Las Casas's insistence that the colonies should be run by priests.

There were as many Spaniards who loathed the *Brief Account* as there were Englishmen who loved it. One such hater was Bernardo de Vargas Machuca (see fig. 8). Born a few years after the *Brief Account* was first published, Vargas Machuca pursued a career as a latter-day conquistador in the final decades of the sixteenth century. In what is now Colombia, he ran punitive raids on "rebel" indigenous communities and hunted for the mythical jungle city of El Dorado. Fed up with the way in which Las Casas and his ilk ran down the conquistador reputation, in 1603 Vargas Machuca wrote a point-by-point refutation of Las Casas's accusations. Although his *Defense of the Western Conquests* was not published for centuries (first appearing in English in 2010), it captured some of the attitude toward what was coming to be seen as the golden age of the conquistador.

Viewed through Vargas Machuca's apologia, native peoples were so inherently savage and pugnacious that their conquest was in fact "pacification"—a term used by conquistadors from the earliest days of the conquest wars. Vargas Machuca turns the

Black Legend on its head, using the insulting adjectives that Las Casas threw at the conquistadors to describe “Indians”: greedy, cruel, sexually depraved, cowardly. The classic conquistador figures are lauded in the predictable manner. For example, Machuca concluded, “God prepared, ordered, and guided the entry of don Hernando Cortés into New Spain.” The conqueror of Mexico is portrayed as a profoundly religious nobleman, whose deeds were “courtly.” Asks Vargas Machuca, “Why should this great gentleman and Christian deserve the title of cruel tyrant?”

Many Spaniards agreed, especially as the seventeenth century wore on; Vargas Machuca, it turns out, was ahead of his time. Although the century saw Las Casas’s international reputation grow steadily, while Vargas Machuca’s remained stillborn, the condemnation of conquistadors and their culture was neither taken for granted nor easily achieved in the Spanish world. It might be parodied, but in indirect ways. One example is Catalina de Erauso’s picaresque memoir, with her exploits in South America as a form of performance parody. Another is Miguel de Cervantes’s brilliant invention, the character of don Quixote de la Mancha, the ultimate delusional conquistador.