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# THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

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## Expanding the category

Spanish men were not the only people who fought with invading companies. The category of conquistador has traditionally been restricted to its most obvious members: those described earlier. But to fully understand Spanish conquests in the Americas, we must expand the category to include anyone who fought alongside Spanish men, to some extent or another accepting and perpetuating conquistador culture, its ethos, and its goals. This meant participating in military campaigns, pursuing the violent subjugation of native communities and the acquisition of precious metals, all with a view to settling permanently in conquered lands, forging Christian provinces of the Spanish Empire, and petitioning to be granted official rewards and privileges by the Crown in return for services rendered in the conquest. Defined thus, the conquistador category included three additional groups, discussed here in order of numerical importance: *conquistadoras*, or Spanish women conquerors (very few); black conquistadors (a significant number); and native conquistadors (very many, greatly outnumbering Spanish and black conquistadors).

Of the thousand or so Spaniards who entered Mexico in the few years following the 1519 Cortés landing, nineteen were women whose participation in the invasion justifies calling them *conquistadoras*. There is evidence that at least five of them actually fought. A trio of *conquistadoras* in South America achieved some lasting notoriety. Inés Suárez voyaged to Venezuela and Peru in search of her husband, and when she discovered he had died she joined Pedro de Valdivia's conquest company in Chile; there she became the captain's lover, fought the Araucanians, helped defend Santiago in 1541, and was awarded an *encomienda* in 1545. She is still remembered in Chile today. In the 1550s, doña Isabel de Guevara accompanied her husband on a campaign to conquer

and settle on the Rio de la Plata, on the Mendoza expedition. She later petitioned the Crown, detailing her sacrifices and requesting an *encomienda* (as any conquistador would do). Finally, in her memoir of her years disguised as a man in Spanish Peru, Catalina de Erauso tells of her many battles fought against native warriors in what is today Chile and Bolivia.

The details of these examples show how they are exceptions that prove the rule: they are relatively late, none in the first wave of invasions; they took place outside the core areas of conquest and settlement; and the women in question all behaved like men, conforming to the model of the conquistador male. The rule was that conquistadors were not just men but gendered as exceptionally male, exemplars of a sixteenth-century stereotype that expected men to be bold and brash, capable of violence and cruelty in the pursuit of conquests of all kinds. Inés Suárez's most famous act was the beheading of seven native lords being held as hostages during the siege of Santiago. This was classic conquistador procedure, but it was told and retold as a courageous (and necessarily brutal) seizing of the moment when the men hesitated. The city of Santiago was named thus because the saint himself (St. James) allegedly descended on his white horse to save the day; in later accounts, Suárez rides out on a white horse, à la Santiago, to spur on the Spaniards.

Similarly, doña Isabel de Guevara wrote to Princess doña Juana, regent in Spain at the time, that as the La Plata company collapsed, the women had to act both as women and men. They carried sick men on their shoulders "with as much tenderness as if they were our own sons," but also "encouraged them with manly words." In doing so, the women were transformed into über-conquistadors:

The men became so weak that all the tasks fell on the poor women, washing the clothes as well as nursing the men, preparing for them the little food that there was, keeping them clean, standing guard,

patrolling the fires, loading the crossbows when the Indians came sometimes to do battle, even firing the cannon, shouting the alarm through the camp, acting as sergeants and putting the soldiers in order, because at that time, as we women can make do with little nourishment, we had not fallen into such weakness as the men.

To pass as a conquistador, Catalina de Erauso had to act out the conquistador stereotype to a degree that parodied it; the conquistador par excellence. Trouble finds Erauso wherever she goes (or he goes, as Erauso is always in drag); games of cards and casual conversations regularly turn into duels and street fights, and as the body count mounts, Erauso's signature phrase "and down he went" becomes a black comic cue for the reader to chuckle. Although it is not always clear if other women have seen through Erauso's disguise, her encounters with them—playful, noncommittal, vaguely contemptuous—tend to confirm her identity as a manly conquistador. Finally, in Erauso's memoir indigenous warriors are seldom given individual identities; like the unfortunate defenders of homelands in the accounts of Cortés, Díaz, Alvarado, and Las Casas, natives are massacred with a brutal, dismissive bravado:

Meanwhile, the Indians returned to the village more than ten thousand strong. We fell at them again with such spirit, and butchered so many of them, that blood ran like a river across the plaza, and we chased them to the Dorado River, and beyond, slaughtering all the way.

These few conquistadoras whose lives we can reconstruct in some detail do not represent a large number of other women still lost to history; conquistadoras were always relatively rare.

By contrast, the handful of black conquistadors whose biographies have been reconstructed do represent a large body of African men whose roles tended to be dismissed by Spaniards and ignored by historians. The stories of men such as Juan Valiente, Juan Garrido,

and Sebastián Toral, who fought in Spanish conquest campaigns and became black conqueror-settlers, are only now being told. From the very onset, as early as the 1490s, Spaniards brought with them African slaves and servants. Their numbers increased from less than a dozen in each conquest company to many hundreds per expedition after 1521. Although black conquistadors tended to be ignored in Spanish histories of the conquests, they were not only ubiquitous but much valued as fierce fighters.

One of the black conquistadors who fought against the Aztecs and survived the destruction of their empire was Juan Garrido. Born in Africa, Garrido lived as a young slave in Portugal, before being sold to a Spaniard and acquiring his freedom fighting in the conquests of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other islands. He fought in the Spanish-Aztec war as a free servant or auxiliary, participating in Spanish expeditions to other parts of Mexico (including Baja California) in the 1520s and 1530s. As a reward for his service, he was granted a house-plot in the new Mexico City, where he raised a family, working at times as a guard and town crier, both common occupations for black conquerors-turned-settlers. In his probanza to the king, Garrido claimed to have been the first person to plant wheat in Mexico.

Another African-born conquistador was Sebastián Toral. He had entered Yucatan as a young teenage slave owned by one of the Spanish conquistadors on the failed campaign into Yucatan of the early 1530s; he returned in 1540, possibly already free, along with the Spaniards who came to try and subdue the Maya of the peninsula for the third time. Once a colony was founded in the early 1540s, Toral worked as a guard, lived among Yucatan's new settlers as a Christian Spanish-speaker, and started a family. When a law was passed that required all those of African descent in the Spanish colonies to pay tribute, Toral wrote in protest to the king. Receiving no reply, he sailed to Spain. There he secured an order of exemption, sailing to Mexico, where he was granted a local permit to bear arms. He probably died back in Yucatan in the 1580s.

Garrido and Toral make good examples of black conquistadors for several reasons. First, as legendary war correspondent Martha Gellhorn famously observed, “war happens to people, one by one.” We cannot understand the conquistador experience without identifying individuals and something of how they personally navigated their way through the conquest wars. This is as true of black as of Spanish conquistadors, and Garrido and Toral are among the few whose lives can be partially reconstructed. Second, they behaved as conquistadors—fighting Aztecs and Maya, settling in the new colonial cities, petitioning the king for recognition. Third, they remained “black,” in terms of their occupations and subordinate status within the new colonies, a notch above the native peoples they had helped to conquer but never equal to the Spaniards to whom they had once been enslaved. Yet Garrido and Toral make for poor examples by virtue of their survival. Most black conquistadors did not live long enough to enjoy freedom, family, and the immortality of a place in the written record.

Last but by no means least, the title of conquistador was appropriated soon after the first wave of the conquest by Maya, Zapotec, and other indigenous elites who had allied with Spanish invaders and won certain privileges in the new colonial system. Their role was crucial, as without the many thousands of indigenous soldiers who fought as *indios amigos*, the Spanish conquistadors would not have lived to found colonies in the Americas. Native conquistadors can be viewed in two categories: those who allied with the invaders within their own lands, in order to retain some degree of local autonomy and power; and those who traveled distances to fight other native groups and settle among them.

One of the most vivid examples of the first category—especially in terms of the appropriation of the “conquistador” title—comes from Yucatan. The Pech, the royal dynasty that ruled the northwest corner of the peninsula, decided, in the face of the third Spanish invasion, to adopt an appeasement strategy. They agreed to let

Spaniards and their Nahua allies settle the Pech town of Tihó, which in 1542 was consequently “founded” as the new city of Mérida. Pech lords were baptized—taking the names of their Spanish sponsors to create hybrid monikers such as “don Francisco de Montejo Pech”—and confirmed as noblemen and rulers of the surrounding towns. They participated in campaigns against Maya in other regions of the peninsula, identifying themselves in writing as conquistadors. Nakuk Pech and Macan Pech, for example, both styled themselves in Maya-language accounts of the conquest wars as *yax hidalgos concixtador en*, combining Maya words with Spanish terms for “nobleman” and “conqueror” to mean “I, the first of the noble conquistadors.”

One of the best examples of native conquistadors in the second category—those who conquered and settled abroad—are the Nahuas, or Nahuatl-speaking natives of central Mexico. Tlaxcala was (and still is) an important Nahua town, whose inhabitants—the Tlaxcalans—became famous for having resisted first Aztec and then Spanish domination. They then made an alliance with the Spanish invaders in order to help destroy the Aztec Empire, going on—ironically—to become core members of Spanish-Nahua campaigns to reconquer and extend the old empire in its new guise (see fig. 7).

The Spanish-Tlaxcala alliance took the form of a marital alliance between the Alvarado family and the royal dynasty of Xicotencatl; Pedro de Alvarado married the Tlaxcalan princess doña Luisa Xicotencatl, with whom he had two children, and Jorge de Alvarado married her sister, doña Lucía. The Alvarados took their Tlaxcalan wives, and thousands of Tlaxcalan warriors and their retinues, on their campaigns into Guatemala. Bernal Díaz remarked that “Jorge de Alvarado brought on the road with him over two hundred Indians from Tlaxcala, and [others] from Cholula, Mexicans, and from Guacachula [Quauhquechollan], and from other provinces, and they helped him in the war.” The Nahua warriors also came from Xochimilco, Texcoco, and other towns in



7. Tlaxcalan conquistadors. This scene from the pictorial conquest account called the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* depicts Tlaxcalan warriors fighting in the 1522 campaign into Michoacán in western Mexico. The expedition's leader, Nuño de Guzmán, is shown along with one other Spaniard and a Spanish mastiff, outnumbered by four Tlaxcalans in full battle plumage wielding obsidian-tipped war clubs. The charge is led not by Guzmán but the Tlaxcalan captain. The Purépecha enemy are shown resisting the invasion, but their war regalia is less impressive than that of the Tlaxcalans, and the three warriors in the frame are offset by images of fellow Purépecha being hanged and dismembered.

Central Mexico, and other ethnic groups were represented as well, such as the Mixtecs and Zapotecs of Oaxaca.

Why did Nahuas and other Mesoamericans ally with the Spaniards in such campaigns? First, Mesoamerican identity was highly localized or micropatriotic. Although Aztecs, Tlaxcalans, Quauhquechollans, the K'iche', Kaqchikel, and Pipil did indeed

have much in common, such common characteristics and shared historical experiences were not enough to create a common sense of identity. Indigenous alliances across language barriers tended not to happen. Spanish leaders learned this in the 1520s, discovering that Nahua allies made conquests possible—from the fall of the Aztec Empire to the invasions of Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Guatemala.

Second, Mesoamerican city-states had learned under the Aztec Empire and during the Spanish-Aztec war that joining the imperial aggressor in an alliance preserved status, despite the loss of some autonomy as a junior partner; it also brought the protection of the expanding power, and the opportunity for advancement by joining new imperial expeditions. As one Spanish veteran conquistador put it, “some Indians from Mexico and from the province of Tlaxcala and its districts had come of their own free will to help and discover and settle the province of Guatemala, and there they stayed.”

The Nahua rulers of Xochimilco, in the Valley of Mexico, insisted in a letter to the king in 1563 that they “did not make war against nor resist the Marqués del Valle [Cortés] and the Christian army.” They were willing allies of Spain in the wars both against the Aztec Empire and the Guatemalan Maya:

In addition to [fighting the Aztecs], we served Your Majesty in the conquest of Honduras and Guatemala with adelantado Alvarado, our encomendero. We gave him 2,500 warriors for the journey and all the provisions and other things necessary. As a result, those territories were won and put under the royal crown, because the Spaniards were few and poorly supplied and were going through lands where they would not have known the way if we had not shown them; a thousand times we saved them from death.

Conquistadors sought encomiendas in order to settle down and profit from native tribute and labor after the war; but they also exploited encomienda privileges in order to take conquest war

elsewhere. Thus the Nahuatl town of Quauhquechollan was part of the *encomienda* held by Jorge de Alvarado. Its lords were obliged to send warriors with Jorge, but they also negotiated an agreement that granted them various privileges, protections, and exemptions, in return for a major investment of personnel in the 1527 expedition. The town's lords wrote to the Spanish viceroy in Mexico City in 1535 that they were:

*caciques* [native rulers], lords, and principal men of the town of Guacachula [Quauhquechollan], descendants of the princes and lords of this land, and in the company of other *caciques* they helped the Spaniards to conquer and pacify much of this land with bows and arrows, enduring terrible wars among the barbarians and infidels, suffering enormous travails, placing their lives at risk and in danger.

The Conquistadors

Their role in the wars made Tlaxcalans and other Nahuas into conquistadors, and the privileges that they claimed reflected their expectations that they would settle as such. Yet in new Spanish-Nahuatl colonies in the Mexican north, in Yucatan, and in Guatemala, privileges such as exemption from paying tribute or performing manual labor were later taken away. Within a generation of the invasion the Spaniards conveniently forgot how invaluable their Nahuatl allies had been and began to see them as just one more "Indian" group; they lost their status as fellow invaders and colonists, reverting to being mere native subjects of the new empire.

This betrayal resulted in profound disillusionment within Nahuatl colonies, expressed dramatically in hundreds of petitions sent to the viceroy and the king in the late sixteenth century. In one such letter, written in 1547 in Guatemala, Tlaxcalan and Aztec veterans complained of:

much and excessive labors, with hunger and thirst and pestilence and very bad treatments by our Spanish captains and their

henchmen, who forced and subjected us to violence by hanging and killing many of our people. And [although] we came with them already in peace, and to serve and help them, they made us give them slaves of war and peace, which were more than four hundred and then some more of which we have no memory, and we paid hens, corn, chili, salt, and sandals. And instead of treating us like sons and leaving us free, they made us their slaves and tributaries.

These Nahuas claimed that they were promised "allotments of Indians"—that is, their own Maya tributaries—in return for their services, but instead they themselves were divided up and allotted to Spaniards "like slaves." In other words, they expected to be treated like Spaniards, like conquistadors and *encomenderos*, but were instead treated like the conquered Maya—in other words, like Indians. As a bitter epitaph to the uncertain life of the native conquistador, the Tlaxcalan petitioner wrote: "And after the land was settled, we rested a little bit from the wrongdoings and mistreatments, no longer in our freedom since they brought us as servants and slaves."

To give account of who I am