

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/](http://www.oup.co.uk/general/vsi/)

Matthew Restall and Felipe Fernández-Armesto

# THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

But the story of the Spanish conquistadors was not to be written by or about the likes of Jiménez de Quesada. Indeed, as he himself churlishly recognized, the core narrative had already been penned and published by the time he was pacing the halls of the Spanish court in the 1540s.

That story originated in the reports that the earliest conquistadors were obliged to send back to the king in Spain. Conquistadors were not soldiers in a royal army dispatched to the New World by the king. They went on their own initiative, assembling investors and companies of men with considerable individual effort and ingenuity. They were, in short, armed entrepreneurs. In some cases, the king himself was an investor in a company. But typically the only royal support that a conquistador carried with him into the unknown was a piece of paper—the most important such document being a license to invade and conquer, making the holder an *adelantado* (a medieval military title, literally “advance man,” meaning “invader”). A successful, surviving adelantado had a good shot at being appointed governor of a new province within a Spanish American kingdom. Yet even an adelantado had to submit an extensive series of reports detailing his activities.

All conquistadors had to submit reports to the king—from renowned adelantados and other captains down to the humblest Spanish, Native American, and black African conquerors. These reports described the services, merits, and sacrifices of the author, offered up to the court as justification for royal favor in the form of offices, titles, and pensions. The genre was therefore called the *probanza de mérito*, or proof of merit.

The purpose of the *probanza* determined its style, its tone, and the evolution of its conventions to encompass almost all conquistador literature. Individual action and achievement were privileged at the expense of collective process and pattern, promoting the notion that victories came through the glorious deeds of great men. The genre also helped to fan the flames of the factionalism and violent rivalries that characterized the conquest era, as each *probanza* author attempted to sell his own merits to the king and dismiss or denigrate competing conquistadors.

Similarly, the roles played by non-Spaniards were systematically marginalized. Black Africans and men of mixed race, both slaves and free, fought in every company and often played key roles. Blacks often operated independently, forging their own little states and kingdoms, sometimes in collaboration with natives, rather as Spaniards did on a larger scale: their exploits show that it was not necessary to be white, or to have European resources in order to achieve power in parts of the early modern New World. In most conquests native auxiliaries greatly outnumbered Spaniards and preceded them in battle. But conquistador writings downplay the very existence of the non-Spanish participants, let alone the crucial nature of their presence.

Finally, conquistadors were always eager to show that they were not only loyal servants of the king but good Christians. That concept was particularly significant for Iberians at the turn of the sixteenth century, as the peninsula had experienced many centuries of the coexistence of three religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. That coexistence had always been a complex mixture of harmonious and hostile, peaceful and violent. But conflict became increasingly prevalent, so that by the 1490s a series of persecutions led to the exile or forced conversion of Jews, while the last Muslim kingdom fell to the sword of the Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon in 1492.

As well as providentialism and the rhetoric of petitions for reward, a third set of literary conventions distorted the writings of conquistadors and, therefore, the historiographical tradition. Most conquistador writers shared a background as readers of the sixteenth-century equivalent of airport-bookstall fiction: romances of chivalry, in which a hero, destined for greatness but down on his luck, takes to a life of adventure, battles monsters or giants or pagans, and ends up conquering an island or ruling a kingdom (and, in a common fade-out, marrying a princess). These stories inspired the conquistadors, providing plotlines and imagery for their lives and how they wrote about them.

On the one hand, conquistadors made much of their great deeds and extraordinary successes. They trumpeted their triumphs not just to the king but in letters to relatives and patrons, and in versions of their probanzas and letters that the better-connected conquistadors were able to publish. On the other hand, conquistador accounts are packed with complaints, sufferings, and sacrifices. Conquest was a dangerous and miserable business that left its practitioners impoverished and in pain, at the mercy of the king's pity.