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THE CONQUISTADORS

A Very Short Introduction

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Although Spaniards had suffered bruising encounters with Maya warriors along the Yucatec coast in the 1510s, the assault on the Maya first began in earnest in 1524–29. That half-decade saw two massive invasions of the Guatemalan highlands, led first by Pedro de Alvarado (see fig. 6 in chap. 3) and then by his brother Jorge. The Alvarados seemed to have two major advantages. First, the highlands were dominated by two rival kingdoms, those of the Kaqchikel and K'iche' Maya; their enmity could be exploited, setting one against the other and using both to pick off the smaller kingdoms and city-states that surrounded them. This was the predictable Spanish strategy, but it collapsed under the weight of Pedro's heavy-handedness and Maya intransigence. The second advantage was the size of the invading force—not the Spaniards per se, who numbered a few hundred, but their allies. Pedro brought some six thousand Aztecs, Tlaxcalans, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and other Mesoamericans. Jorge's allied force was even larger, comprising up to ten thousand Aztecs and other central Mexican warriors. The impact of such a force was devastating, and the highlands were virtually destroyed in order for them to be conquered. In the end, it was the indigenous conquistadors who made a colony in the highlands possible. The survivors stayed as settlers, contributing to the creation of colonial Guatemala.

Meanwhile, a similar tale unfolded to the north, in Yucatan. There Spaniards led by Francisco de Montejo failed to encounter either an empire to topple or a source of great wealth. As in Guatemala, a handful of kingdoms with a history of conflict seemed ripe for a divide-and-conquer strategy. But Maya rulers proved as adept as using the Spanish invaders as the Spaniards did at manipulating

them. Beginning in 1527, it took the Montejos (father, son, and nephew) three invasions and two decades to secure a colony in the north. As in the Guatemalan highlands, victory came only after the importation of thousands of allied central Mexican warriors, and after the majority of the Maya populations had succumbed to disease and violence.

Still, the Spanish colonies of Yucatan and Guatemala in the late sixteenth century excluded most of the Maya area. Spanish maps marked the miles between the two colonies as *despoblado* (“uninhabited”), but that fiction masked the failure of colonial authorities to conquer all the Maya. The border periodically expanded, but at times it also contracted. The Spanish town of Bacalar, located in the middle of the Maya area near the Caribbean coast, was abandoned in the 1630s for a century. The colonial border at the southwest base of the peninsula shifted dramatically in the 1660s with a Maya “rebellion,” as Spanish officials called the migration of thousands of Maya out of the drought-ridden colony into independent kingdoms of the so-called *despoblado*. The largest such kingdom, that of the Itzá Maya, actually grew in the seventeenth century, until its bloody and expensive destruction in 1697 by an invasion force of Spaniards, free-colored militiamen, and Maya from Yucatan.