

# Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492-1580)

- 1492 Born in Medina del Campo, Extremadura, Spain, the region that was home to many 16th century conquistadors. His father was a town official (*regidor*) in Medina del Campo.
- 1514 Bernal Díaz went to the Caribbean in the company of a knight, Pedro Arias de Ávila.
- 1515 He moved to Cuba, when Diego de Velázquez was governor and Hernán Cortés was on the island.
- 1517 Under the leadership of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, Bernal Díaz went on a discovery and conquest trip to Yucatán.
- 1518 Bernal Díaz joined the expedition of Juan de Grijalva as a common soldier that went along the coast of Mexico.
- 1519 - 1521 Bernal Díaz accompanied Cortés' entire expedition to Mexico, which resulted in the complete conquest of the Aztec empire. Bernal Díaz fought in every battle in this conquest. As a result, he rejected an *encomienda* (legal allotment of subjugated people and their lands) of Mexican Indians.
- 1521 - 1535 Instead of settling an what might have been a lucrative *encomienda*, Bernal Díaz went in search of gold with these conquistadors on the following expeditions: (1) with Gonzalo de Sandoval (one of Cortés' lieutenants) in Coatzacoalcos; (2) with Luis Marín in Chiapas; (3) with Rodrigo Rangel in the regions of the Zapotecas; and (4) with Cortés in Honduras. During these expeditions he fought in 119 major battles!
- 1535 Bernal Díaz married Teresa Becerra, and the couple settled in Guatemala.
- 1540 He returned to Spain in an attempt to improve his situation in Guatemala. In Spain, he was made an *encomendero* in Santiago de los Caballeros, Guatemala, where he was one of the original founders of this city.
- 1550 Again he returned to Spain to improve his situation even further in Guatemala.
- 1552 He read the official published chronicle of Cortés' exploits and deeds, *Crónica de la conquista de Nueva España* (Chronicle of the Conquest of New Spain) by Francisco López de Gómara (1511-1566; known as Gómara), who was a Spanish historian and priest. His most famous work is this chronicle. Although he never went to the New World and he never took part in any expeditions, he did have direct access to Cortés and other conquistadors during their return visits to Spain. Bernal Díaz reacted strongly to what he knew from personal experience were serious inaccuracies in Gómara's work, which elevated Cortés' deeds at the expense of the common soldiers who did most of the warrior work. Bernal Díaz also felt that Gómara neglected to mention what he, a regular soldier, thought were defects of

character and actions in his commander. Hence, Bernal Díaz began writing his own chronicle.

1568

Bernal Díaz finishes his work: *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*. This work did not appear in print until 1632. The title in English is *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*. Bernal Díaz demonstrates a monumentally accurate memory, although there are a few mistakes in this lengthy work. It is remarkable for its realism, common sense, clear, readable style, and defense of regular soldiers and their difficulties. He displays a constant sense of *admiratio* concerning the amazing things he saw first-hand in Mexico and Guatemala. A copy of the title page of his famous humanities book, *Historia verdadera*, follows:



To read a key passage from this book, click on the **Document** button below.

1581

Bernal Díaz dies on his *encomienda* in Guatemala.

NOTES: Bernal Díaz del Castillo is important for Latin American humanities because he wrote one of the most significant books in Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the first complete century in which printed books circulated among an increasingly well educated public. He knew the power of published documents and books as a means to exchange information, to engage in public discourse, to express a personal (individual) point of view, to spread and refute knowledge, and to achieve the personal earthly fame and glory that was attached to writers of important works. As a common soldier with the opportunity to advance himself through his own individual effort he represents the individualistic or democratizing undercurrent that pulsates through Spanish and Latin American society during the Renaissance, which was also, the period when monarchical absolutism began to assert itself so strongly.

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