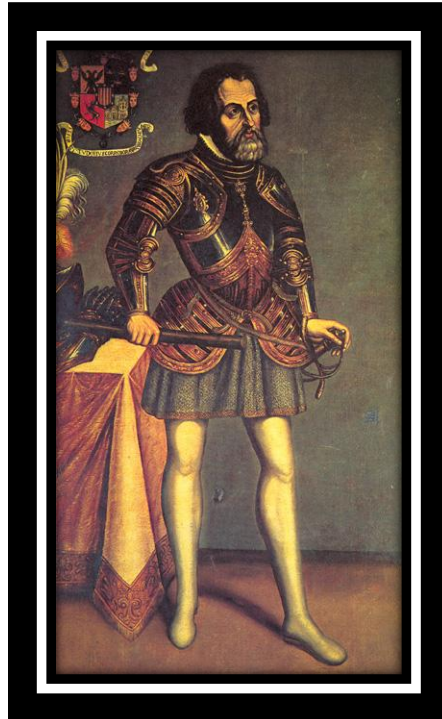


Cortés (Hernán Cortés, 1485 - 1547)



- 1485 Born in Medellín (province of Extremadura), Spain, a province from which many conquistadors came. Before the age of 19 he studied law at Spain's preeminent university, *la Universidad de Salamanca* (still a great university), but he did not get a degree.
- 1504 Cortés went to Santo Domingo as a farmer and notary public.
- 1511 He accompanied governor Diego Velázquez to Cuba from Santo Domingo; Cortés became mayor (*alcalde*) of Santiago, then the capital of Cuba. In Cuba, Velázquez sent Cortés on a failed rescue mission to Yucatán.
- 1518-1519 Cortés recruited men from various places in Cuba, but most notably, he stopped in the old Cuban port of Casilda, near Trinidad and Playa Ancón. For a view of a place close to this Cuban site, see: => [Ancón #2](#).
- 1518 November 18: Without permission from governor Velázquez, Cortés began his trip to México with 11 ships, 508 soldiers, 100 seamen, 16 horses, 10 cannons, and 13 shotguns (*arcabuces*).
- 1519 March 12: He arrived at Tabasco on the Mexican coast, where he stayed for a while in order to gain a foothold on the mainland. At Tabasco he conquered the local natives, who, as a peace offering gave him 20

women. Among these women was the famous (infamous) **Doña Marina**, known as la Malinche (her native Náhuatl name was Malintzin). Because of her language competencies (Náhuatl, Mayan, and later, Spanish), she was instrumental in Cortés's strategies of conquest. She also became Cortés' mistress.

He founded the city of Veracruz in order to avoid the authority of Velázquez. His men then elect Cortés as chief justice of the Spanish cohort.

To follow Cortés' cohort from Veracruz to Tenochtitlán / Mexico City, see the following map:



Cortés ordered his ten ships dismantled and run aground. (That he had the ships burned is a fun legend, but it's not true.) The purpose of destroying his ships, which he had done gradually and surreptitiously, was to cut off all means of retreat for some of his disgruntled men, thus signaling his intention to push forward into the Mexican interior and to find the “great city of Tenochtitlán,” about which the coastal inhabitants had told stories of fabulous riches and a magnificent emperor (*tlatoani*).

Marching into the interior, Cortés' forces encounter the Tlaxcalans, whose territory on the NE edge of Lake Texcoco was independent from direct Aztec control. The Tlaxcalans were enemies of the Aztecs. At first they fought against the Spaniards, but, after being defeated, they later allied permanently with Cortés' forces.

From Tlaxcala Cortés decided not to take a route to meet Moctezuma in Tenochtitlán as recommended by messengers from the Mexica *tlatoani*, but rather he led his combined Spanish and indigenous forces south along the east side of the great Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt (*Eje Volcánico Transversal*), which is also known as the Sierra Nevada. There he encountered the great city of Cholula, whose people both were allied with the Aztecs and were fearful of them. This is where Cortés carried out a demonstration massacre, the result of which was to cause a number of other nearby tribes to join forces against the Aztecs.

From Cholula, Cortés marched his forces up over the Sierra Nevada between the legendary twin volcanic peaks of Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatepetl.



Cortés crossed the lake and entered Tenochtitlán with his Spanish forces and with 1,000 Tlaxcaltecas.

Cortés was greeted peacefully by Moctezuma, emperor of the Aztecs (*tlatoani*), who early on had thought that Cortés was Quetzalcóatl returning as this demigod had supposedly promised five hundred years earlier, first at Tula, and later on the coast of Yucatán.

November 8, 1519, Moctezuma made a grand procession from his palace in Tenochtitlán to greet Cortés and his men on the south side of the lake. For an anonymous document in which a Náhuatl-speaking Aztec records the Mexican perspective on this monumental and peaceful first encounter, click on the **Document** button below.

When Cortés heard that some Mexican (i.e., Aztecs) had attacked the Spanish rearguard at Veracruz, he seized Moctezuma and placed him under arrest in his palace. Cortés then attempts a political and religious, rather than, military conquest.

For a simple map of the area around Tenochtitlán, click on the following image:



1520

Meanwhile, Velázquez sent Pánfilo de Narváez (of failed Florida fame) to Mexico in order to relieve Cortés of his command. As soon as Cortés heard that Narváez had landed at Cempoala, near Veracruz, he divided his forces in Tenochtitlán into two groups; one group with 80 Spaniards and the Tlaxcalans under Pedro de Alvarado remained in

the Aztec capital, while Cortés commanded the rest of his forces on a lightening march back to the coast to confront Narváez.

A battle took place on May 24th between Narváez's forces and Cortés's.

The latter won, wounding Narváez in the process (he lost his eye; in Florida he was a one-eyed commander) and imprisoning him. Using his power of persuasion, Cortés convinced Narváez's men to join him. Together they marched back to Tenochtitlán.

On the return march back up to the Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs fought against Cortés's large force of Spaniards because, when Cortés was absent from the capital, Alvarado, fearing a nighttime attack by Aztec warriors who were dancing in a (wild: Spanish view) ritual ceremony at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán, did a preemptive strike against the Mexicans. War then broke out in Tenochtitlán. When Cortés returned with his new large force he had to fight his way into the center of the city. The fighting was so fierce, and the Spaniards were so outnumbered, that Cortés ordered a full retreat from the city. They had to fight their way out of the city. This retreat, which was a disaster, but not a total defeat, for the Spaniards, is known as *la Noche Triste* (the sad night). During the fighting Moctezuma was killed (either by Aztecs themselves or by the Spaniards: versions vary).

Cortés's troops were well received in Tlaxcala; he regrouped his forces there; increased the size of his mixed army; and planned his counterattack.

1521

In order to reconquer Tenochtitlán, Cortés established his battle headquarters in Coyoacán, at the time a small Aztec on the south side of lake Texcoco. Nowadays Coyoacán (Aztec => “place of coyotes”), one of the sixteen boroughs (Spanish => (*delegaciones*) of Mexico City. It is located about seven miles south of Mexico City's central plaza, known as the *zócalo*, where one finds the ruins of the Aztec's Great Temple and the Metropolitan Cathedral. In itself, Coyoacán is a lovely middle class town with a population of about 700,000 people. Now it is famous for the homes of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahla, and Leon Trotsky. In 1521 the town's Tepanec people welcomed Cortés in order to overthrow Moctezuma's oppressive control over them. Cortés made Coyoacán New Spain's first capital, and, in 1521-1522, he lived in the residence of the town Tepanec leader, Juan de Guzmán Iztolinque (his name upon conversion). Furthermore, he constructed various Spanish colonial government buildings here. The Municipal House, known as the Casa de Cortés, was built on this site in the 18th century. Shortly, thereafter, when he was named Marqués de Valle de Oaxaca, he built the administrative center for his vast land holdings, part of which was the Tepanec area of Coyoacán. A popular belief is that Cuauhtémoc, the Aztec's last (and most heroic) emperor, was tortured here, although it is more likely that he was tortured in Guatemala. For a photo tour of Coyoacán's central square (Plaza

Hidalgo), with, typical of Spanish municipal urban planning, the Casa Municipal on one side and the cathedral on the other, see: =>



August 13: After bitter fighting bridge by bridge, street by street, and house by house in Tlatelolco much of which was demolished as they marched forward—the Spaniards succeeded in recapturing Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco. The new Aztec emperor (a national hero in Mexico nowadays), Cuauhtémoc, was captured and held prisoner, and 40,000 *tenochcas* and *tlatelolcas* were slaughtered by the Spaniards in the central square in Tlatelolco (Mexico, D.F., nowadays).

For a brief photographic tour of the Plaza de Tlatelolco and references to events there of both 1521 and 1968, click on the following image:



- 1521-1524 Cortés ruled Tenochtitlán while expanding Spanish control over all former Aztec territory. He lived like a prince and statesman; he organized the government; he reorganized the lands he controlled with the *encomienda* system; he studied all its resources; he exploited its mines; he became fabulously rich.
- 1524-1526 Cortés led an expedition of discovery and conquest to Honduras. He took Cuauhtémoc with him, but had him executed in Honduras because the Aztec *tlatoani* would not or could not tell him where more Aztec treasure was to be found.
- 1528 Because king Carlos I (V) of Spain was informed that Cortés had too much power, Cortés was stripped of his supreme command. So Cortés returned to Spain to plead his case.
- 1529 The king partially rewarded Cortés by naming him Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, but by not making him governor again. Cortés' new title made

- him a nobleman; it gave him a seigneurial estate which his descendants retained until Mexican independence in 1811. The Oaxaca Valley was one of the wealthiest region of New Spain. Cortés had 23,000 vassals, and his wealth increased greatly.
- 1535-1550 Antonio de Mendoza (1495-1552) became the first viceroy of Nueva España (New Spain).
- 1535 Cortés led a new exploration toward the west of Mexico; he discovered the Baja California peninsula and named it California. (See the book by William Little, *The Labors of the Very Brave Knight Esplandián*, MRTS, 1992, for detailed information about this act of *nominatio*.) Cortés continued exploring Mexico's Pacific coast. Note that originally the Gulf of California was called the Sea of Cortés (Mar de Cortés), so named by Francisco de Ulloa on his voyage of discovery there in 1539.
- 1535-1541 Cortés remained in México. When he was not out on an expedition he lived retired on his estate in **Cuernavaca** (called the **Hacienda de Cortés**, which nowadays is the site of a fine restaurant). The thick-walled, fortified palace was built in 1526 for him and his second wife, Juana Zúñiga. The site had been a Tlahuica-Aztec building used for collection of tribute to the Mexica rulers, but Cortés had it razed to build his residence, from which he imposed his authority and power over the conquered people. From here and his two other residences he threw himself into various enterprises: silver mines, cattle and hog ranches, gold exploration, ship building on Mexico's Pacific coast, farms of maize, beans, and wheat; buying and selling slaves, silkworm production from his importation of mulberry trees, sugarcane, and monuments to himself; he even designed and had constructed what at the time was a kind of shopping mall in the center of Mexico City.
- 1541 He returned to Spain. Carlos I (V) engaged Cortés to accompany him on a failed voyage of conquest against Algiers in North Africa.
- 1547 He died in a town near Sevilla in southern Spain wealthy but un-honored by the Spanish royal court.

Cortés in Latin American humanities: He was a learned man who embodied many of the dynamic aspects of the early Renaissance in Spain. However, given the fact that his childhood and early youth was lived during the last years of the Reconquest of Granada from the Muslims of Granada (who represented the last vestiges of what once had been the great Arabic region of Al Ándalus), nevertheless he also exemplifies a couple medieval characteristics: knight errant, crusader against infidels, expansion and imposition of Hispanic language, religion, culture. As a transitional figure, however, he displays new traits: individualism; personal (not corporate or communal) glory; earthly (not heavenly) fame; humanistic knowledge and expression. Among his most enduring legacies are his five *Cartas de relación* (half letters, half dispatches) sent from Mexico to Emperor Carlos V (1517-1556) of Spain. Although one cannot say perhaps that these works are literary masterpieces, nevertheless, they display Renaissance characteristics:

simplicity of expression (which is a kind of elegance); competent prose with his own unique style; a preference for information rather than pedantry. The five letters were written between 1519 and 1526, and they vary greatly in length, between 10,000 and 40,000 words. The first letter deals with discoveries along the Mexican coast up to the founding of Veracruz (1517-1519). The second letter begins with the burning of his ships on the Mexican coast and ends with a description of the terrible *Noche Triste*. The third letter deals with the capture of various towns around Lake Texcoco, the assault of the capital, and the extension of the Spanish conquest around Tenochtitlán. The fourth letter expounds on his efforts to consolidate and organize his victory, and it relates several expeditions beyond the capital. The last letter relates Cortés' expedition to Honduras including events that occurred in Mexico City during his absence.

For an enlargement of a portrait of Cortés and for a brief photographic tour of Cuernavaca, click on the following image:



WTL Hon

Documen

Context Inc

Hum 246