

The Story of the Conquistadors

By Michael Wood

Introduction

'Everything that has happened since the marvellous discovery of the Americas has been so extraordinary that the whole story remains quite incredible to anyone who has not experienced it at first hand. Indeed it seems to overshadow all the deeds of famous people of the past, no matter how heroic, and to silence all talk of other wonders of the world.' -

Bartolome de las Casas

It is amazing to think that when Bartolome de las Casas wrote those words in 1542, barely 20 years had passed since the discovery and conquest of the Aztec world in Mexico. It was only three years since the defeat of the Great Revolt of the Incas in the High Andes of Peru. At that moment, in fact, Manco Inca still controlled an independent Inca state in the jungles of Vilcabamba. During the same years in which Cortes overthrew the Aztecs, Magellan circumnavigated the globe.

For the first time, people discovered the true scale and shape of the earth. We are blasé about the pace of change in our own day, but has history, and our ways of seeing the world, ever moved so fast as it did in the 16th century? The conquest of much of the New World by Spanish conquistadors during those few years was surely one of history's turning points. Indeed, as Karl Marx and Adam Smith claimed, perhaps it was the greatest event in history. There were many who thought so at the time.

'When has it ever happened, either in ancient or modern times, that such amazing exploits have been achieved? Over so many climes, across so many seas, over such distances by land, to subdue the unseen and unknown? Whose deeds can be compared with those of Spain? Not even the ancient Greeks and Romans.' - *Francisco Xerez, Pizarro's secretary, in his Report on the Discovery of Peru*

The conquistador-turned-historian Pedro de Cieza de Leon agreed:

'When I set out to write for the people of today and of the future, about the conquest and discovery that our Spaniards made here in Peru, I could not but reflect that I was dealing with the greatest matters one could possibly write about in all of creation as far as secular history goes. Where have men ever seen the things they have seen here? And to think that God should have permitted something so great to remain hidden from the world for so long in history, unknown to men, and then let it be found, discovered and won all in our own time!' - *Chronicle of Peru*

Colombian exchange

The long-term effects of the Conquest are no less fascinating. The 'Columbian Exchange' as modern historians call it, brought the potato, the pineapple, the turkey, dahlias, sunflowers, magnolias, maize, chillies and chocolate across the Atlantic. On the other hand, tens of millions died in the pandemics of the 16th century, victims of smallpox, measles and the other diseases brought by Europeans (and don't forget that the African slave trade was begun by the Europeans, to replace the work force they had decimated).

Then, after the defeat and extermination of the native societies, came the arrival of the European settler class and the appropriation of the native lands and natural resources. From this process has emerged the modern US empire. The effects on the economies of the world were no less marked as it shifted the centre of gravity of civilisation to the countries of the Atlantic seaboard and their offshoots in the New World. However, the story is also one of history's greatest adventures. The opening up of the continent involved unparalleled journeys of exploration with almost unbelievable bravery, endurance, cruelty and greed.

For instance, Almagro's 6,000km expedition to explore the wastes of Chile, or de Soto's fateful three-year march through a dozen US states - a tale only now being untangled by US historians. Then there are the extraordinary explorations across the Andes, deep into Venezuela and Colombia in the 1530s, journeys which gave birth to the alluring legend of El Dorado. It was the dream of El Dorado that fired Gonzalo Pizarro's 18-month expedition across the Ecuadorian Andes: 'the worst journey ever in the Indies', it was said. However, it led by accident to the discovery and descent of the Amazon. When all is said and done, it is no exaggeration to say that these are some of the greatest land explorations in history.

Moreover, this is a story of the reshaping of mental landscapes. The discovery of the New World after all was a 'Close Encounter of the Third Kind'. It was a meeting of civilisations which previously had no idea of each other's existence. One fascinating aspect of this encounter is how they responded to each other; how each categorised the other and read the signs. It has often been claimed, for example, that the Aztecs were fatally disabled in their encounter with the 'Other' because the conceptual tools of their civilisation did not enable them properly to categorise the aliens who had landed.

As a matter of fact, there is evidence that some of the Aztec leadership correctly assessed the Spaniards as foreign invaders. (We would surely categorise them as international terrorists today.) To an extent, this idea is confirmed by the Aztec version of events as collected by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagun as part of his monumental 'History of New Spain'. This is perhaps one of the greatest of all works of historiography, and a work that rebuts the still commonly held view that this story can only be told from the Spanish side.

The Aztecs

The Aztecs may have been unsure, at the beginning, whether the bearded strangers with their guns and horses were people like them, or agents of a higher power. However, they quickly came to realise that despite their technological superiority, the Spaniards were all too human. In Peru, on the other hand, native narratives of the Conquest suggest the Incas knew from the beginning who the aliens were. Guaman Poma's 1,200 page New Chronicle (completed in 1612) or the fascinating account dictated by Titu Cusi, the son of Manco Inca, all suggest the Incas understood that the Spaniards were people from another civilisation and responded to them as such. The book of the Conquistador-turned-historian Cieza de Leon confirms this from interviews with Inca eye-witnesses, including the keepers of the quipus which were the knotted strings on which the non-literate Incas preserved and communicated information:

'When the indigenous people saw the ship coming on the sea they were amazed, as this was something they had never seen before. They were astonished... but they prepared food for the Spaniards, as it was proper to give a warm reception to strangers... and they sailed out to the ship on balsa rafts without any guile or menace but rather with joy and pleasure to meet such new people.' The local Inca governor told the Spaniards they were 'welcome to come ashore and provision themselves with water and whatever they need without fear of harm... for he took his visitors for very rational people since they were not causing any harm.' - *Cieza de Leon*

From the start, each side in Peru took the other for 'rational beings'. These first recorded conversations, between representatives of the Inca world and the European, are enough to dispel some weird modern theories about the Incas' initial perception of the Europeans as aliens, spacemen, or the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy.

However, like all 'close encounters', these events also had a profound effect on modern ways of seeing the world. The deeds of the Conquistadors, for example, led to a passionate debate in Spain, among politicians and theologians, on the fundamental principles of justice and morality raised by the conquests. In particular, what were the rights of the native American societies? Were the 'Indians' fully human, like Europeans? Were the Aztecs, the Mayans and the Incas truly civilisations as, for example, Aristotle defined them? Did the Spaniards have the right to conquer them, and convert them to Christianity? Did they even have an obligation to do so? Or did they have no right to interfere in any way?

Conquistador regret

Out of this ferment of ideas came the first attempt in history to globalise justice and human rights. In the summer of 1550, in Valladolid, these great themes were aired before the King's council. The Aristotelian scholar and humanist Juan Gines de Sepulveda argued for

the civilising mission of Spain, so long as it was done humanely. The Indians were 'natural slaves' as Aristotle had defined the phrase, 'inhumane barbarians who thought the greatest gift they could offer to God was human hearts'. People whose brilliant art and sculpture was no proof of their civilisation, 'for do not even bees and spiders make works which no human can imitate?'

The great Dominican defender of Indian rights, Bartolome de Las Casas, brought a vast dossier of first-hand reportage to the hearing - as compelling an indictment of human cruelty as any modern report on the atrocities of Cambodia, Rwanda or Kosovo. His eloquent defence of the indigenous peoples ended with a noble *cri de coeur*: 'All the world is human'. What is amazing is that the Spanish king actually listened. In a moment unique in the annals of imperialism, Charles V ordered the conquests to be stopped, while the issues were explored further.

However, as we know from our own time, ethical foreign policy will always run up against the cold reality of politics. Once the genie is let out of the bottle, history cannot be stopped. The Conquista continued. In a sense, it is still not over. Indeed what we are seeing now is a Second Conquista. For the global culture creeps with the electricity lines up even the loneliest valleys of the Andes. It will be as hard to resist as the first.

Today some modern scholars see the arguments outlined in the Valladolid debate as the forerunner of our own conception of human rights, and Las Casas as the first inspiration for the UN Declaration of 1948. A declaration in part prompted by the lessons of the past, and in part by the tragedies of contemporary history. Certainly the tragic dimensions of the 16th-century holocaust were apparent to people at the time. Many of the Spaniards were profoundly moved by what they had seen. The destruction of the last civilisations to have risen independently on the face of the earth, without contact with the world outside them.

Among these Spaniards were not only churchmen, like Sahagun, who fell in love with Nahuatl (Aztec) culture, but even the conquistadors themselves. Bernal Diaz, who marched with Cortes, was moved to compare the tragedy of Mexico with the Fall of Troy. On his deathbed, Mansio Serra de Leguizamon, one of the conquerors of Peru, expressed profound regret for the unjust destruction of Inca society: 'I have to say this now for my conscience: for I am the last to die of the conquistadors.'

New identities

For once, then, all the hyperbole is justified. These are without doubt some of history's greatest stories and some of history's most remarkable deeds. Many were dreadful and appalling - as were their consequences. Travelling in the traditional societies of the

Americas, nearly 500 years on from the Conquest, I have often felt pessimistic about the fate of all these cultures, as they fight against the long aftermath of those events and the onset of global culture. Their encoded identities, built up over millennia, are being scrubbed away so rapidly, in just a generation or two. History, as we all know, leaves many wounds.

Some wounds never heal, but with time some do. The Conquista was at once one of the most significant events in history, and one of the most cruel and devastating. However, in history, there is no going back. Blame or regret are pointless. All we can do is try to understand.

History also works in mysterious ways. Out of the debris of the past, new identities are shaped out of what is at hand, and in some magical way they carry on the encoded memories in societies and civilisations, as well as in people. Something gets handed down, almost in the manner of genetics. At the beginning of the third millennium, the past still lives on in today's generation, forming new worlds out of the debris of the old, and the remorseless march of history.

On a personal level, I have a final admission to make. Perversely, perhaps, I finished these journeys with a grudging admiration for the likes of Mansio. The brutality of the Pizarros was at times beyond belief. However, there is no doubt that they were men of their time. Trudging in their footsteps with a good sort, like Cieza de Leon, as companion in my rucksack, I could not help but admire their amazing courage, nerve and endurance. Of course they knew they had the technological edge over what were in essence Bronze Age civilisations, which had, by an accident of history, come through to the 16th century. Nonetheless one was constantly amazed by their superhuman strength of will. 'Many nations have excelled others and overcome them', wrote Pedro de Cieza de Leon, looking back on these incredible events:

'The few have conquered the many before. They say Alexander the Great, with 33,000 Macedonians, undertook to conquer the world. So with the Romans too. But no nation has with such resolution passed through such labours, or such long periods of starvation, or covered such immense distances as the Spanish have done. In a period of 70 years they have overcome and opened up a new world, greater than the one of which we had knowledge, exploring what was unknown and never before seen...' - *Pedro de Cieza de Leon*

About the author

Michael Wood is the writer and presenter of many critically acclaimed television series, including *In the Footsteps of...* series. Born and educated in Manchester, Michael did postgraduate research on Anglo-Saxon history at Oxford. Since then he has made over 60 documentary films and written several best selling books. His films have centred on history, but have also included travel, politics and cultural history.

Life in the Spanish Colonies

Written by: Mark Christensen, Assumption College

The reliance of Spain on the cooperation, tribute, and labor of Native Americans and Africans drastically shaped life in colonial Spanish America. Daily life was a complex combination of compliance and rebellion, order and disorder, affluence and poverty. On the one hand, Spaniards relied on Native Americans for labor, tribute, and assistance in governing the many Native American towns. On the other hand, many Native Americans realized the benefits of accommodating the Spaniards to maintain traditional ways of life. In short, cooperation served the interests of both parties, although it was negotiated daily.

Upon their arrival in the New World, Spaniards constructed their colonies and cities upon or alongside established Native American communities such as the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, on the site that later became Mexico City. To establish political and economic control over their new



colonies, the Spaniards created two “republics”: the *República de Españoles* and the *República de Indios*. They and their enslaved Africans (and even free Africans) were in the first, and Native Americans were in the second. Although both republics fell under the purview of Spanish law, they operated semi-autonomously, with each established town having its own town council. For example, Mexico City had both a Spanish and a Native American town council.

The town councils governed the daily affairs of each town and its inhabitants in each respective republic. Councils in Native American towns were run by Native American officers, often those who already held positions of power. For example, the Maya ruler in most preexisting Maya towns became the governor of the colonial town council. The Native American nobility in each town filled other local government positions. In short, the establishment of the republics, their towns, and their respective town councils allowed the Native Americans a great deal of

autonomy and gave the original Native American elite a way to maintain their positions of authority in daily life. The Spanish relied heavily on these Native American elites not only to maintain order in the towns but also to redirect their systems of tribute into the hands of the Spaniards and assist in the establishment of Catholicism in their towns.

As subjects of Spain, Native Americans had various daily responsibilities. As Christians, they were to attend services and send their children to daily catechism classes. They also paid various religious fees and taxes designed to support the Church in the Spanish colonies. Local priests and officers of the Inquisition (a Roman Catholic tribunal established to investigate and suppress heresy) maintained spiritual order and orthodoxy among all inhabitants of the colonies. In addition, Native Americans had labor and tribute quotas to fill. Such duties provided many opportunities for confrontation and discontent, and the local Native American elite adjudicated many such situations through the town council. Indeed, the archives are full of petitions by Native American councils against corrupt priests and Spanish officials and complaints against excessive tribute quotas. Yet the council likewise mediated local affairs, including land disputes, bills of sale, and the filling of town positions. It even meted out punishments for wrongdoing. In many ways, the town councils in the *República de Indios* allowed Native Americans to continue governing Native Americans.

To govern and tax the Native Americans in the early decades of colonization, the Spanish relied on the *encomienda*, a grant of native labor and tribute given to Spanish conquistadors and settlers. Abuse and distrust of the system led to its gradual and sometimes incomplete phasing out, with control over Native American tribute and labor reverting to the crown, which tried to control corrupt colonial officials.

Tribute varied according to region and era but included mainly goods Spaniards could ship back to Spain for profit or sell on the local or regional market. Products presented as tribute included maize from Culhuacan, silk from the Mixteca Alta region, honey from Yucatan, pearls from the Caribbean, gold from Columbia, and even cattle from Argentina. After the initial years of colonization, Spaniards in central Mexico organized Native American labor around the *repartimiento*, or “allotment,” system. The *repartimiento* required those between the ages of eighteen and fifty years to give service in a variety of projects, from laboring in a Spaniard’s field to participating in large construction projects. The Native Americans were to receive payment for their labors, but it was often insufficient or withheld. In South America, labor was organized

through the *mita*, an Incan system in which adult Native Americans were drafted for extended periods. For example, the silver mines of Potosí required the labor of thousands of Andean laborers, who were drafted from towns hundreds of miles away and required to serve one year of every seven. Eventually, the decline in the Native American population and difficulties with the forced-labor system led to the development of wage labor.

Although Native American tribute and labor served as the linchpin of colonial society, Africans also contributed to the daily life of the Spanish colonies. In general, Spaniards employed native labor whenever possible. However, where the supply was insufficient, they purchased African slaves to work in the more profitable industries such as mining and sugar. For example, after the decimation of the native population in the Caribbean, Spaniards brought thousands of enslaved people from West Africa to work the islands' sugarcane fields. This drastically altered the Caribbean's population demographics. Not all enslaved Africans worked in the mines or sugar plantations. In the cities and large towns, they were rented out and served in other domestic roles, including as wet nurses and maids. Africans also learned the skilled trades of their owners and became proficient tailors, blacksmiths, and artisans.

Because Spanish law allowed an enslaved person to purchase his or her own freedom, Spain's colonies boasted a sizeable portion of free blacks who engaged in myriad trades; freed slaves became sailors, merchants, and even slave owners. Many joined militias and defended thousands of miles of coastline along the Spanish colonies against pirates – another common element of life in the colonies. They served in return for a salary, social advancement, and tax exemption. Moreover, free Africans formed their own Catholic brotherhoods – common among Spaniards and Native Americans – that supported an African-Christian worldview while providing monetary support for members by funding funerals and celebrations and even serving as banks.

Spanish cities and the activities within them modeled those found in Europe. Like their counterparts in Spain, the capitals of Mexico City and Lima housed universities, cathedrals, exquisite homes, central courthouses, and exclusive shopping. Cards, music, books, plays, bullfights, and parties occupied the time of the elite. Poorer citizens also partook in such activities but on a smaller scale, enjoying local ballads, cockfights, and town gatherings on feast days. The elite dined on wheat bread, olive oil, cured meats, and wine, while commoners ate maize tortillas, manioc, chilies, turkeys, and small dogs, and drank the local indigenous

intoxicant. Cities boasted the most refinement and Spanish influence, whereas the countryside was denigrated for its overwhelming “Indian” feel.

Throughout the colonial period, sexual relations between different people from the Americas, Europe, and Africa created a growing mixed-race population known as the *castas*. Disregarded as a minor inconvenience at first, the *castas* eventually threatened the social hierarchy. The Spanish sought to maintain themselves at the top and keep Native Americans and Africans at the bottom, whereas the *castas* were allowed a place somewhere in the middle. In daily life, however, people were often racially categorized by how well they spoke Spanish, how they dressed, what food they ate, or their social circle of acquaintances. As a result, in practice, the hierarchy allowed for some flexibility.

Perhaps this flexibility best reflects life in the Spanish colonies. It consisted of specific obligations, religious institutions, and social hierarchies, to be sure. Yet Native Americans, Africans, and Spaniards negotiated their own experiences, from conformity to resistance, within these limits. Most lived somewhere between the two extremes, doing their best to adapt their traditional ways of life to a diverse colonial world.