

This book offers a non-partisan approach to the most controversial figure in Mexican history. This study is based on original documents, modern works and previously unpublished material.

cruelty, nobility and criminality. He was also a surprising personality. Although he was merely a settler among many others, at a crucial moment he rose to lead the conquest of Mexico as if he were a captain and experienced politician.

With a few hundred Spaniards and superior weapons, he manoeuvred so effectively that the Indians

Hernán Cortés

*José Luis Martínez**

The history of Mexico is alive and kicking. Here no one has died, in spite of the assassinations and the firing squads. Cuauhtémoc is alive, and so are Cortés, Maximilian, Don Porfirio (Díaz) and all the other victors and the vanquished. That is the original thing about Mexico. All its past is alive and present. The past is not dead. The past is not past, it has stopped.

José Moreno Villa

As soon as Cortés stops being an ahistoric myth, and becomes what he really is—a historical character—the Mexicans will be able to have a clearer, more generous and more serene view of themselves.

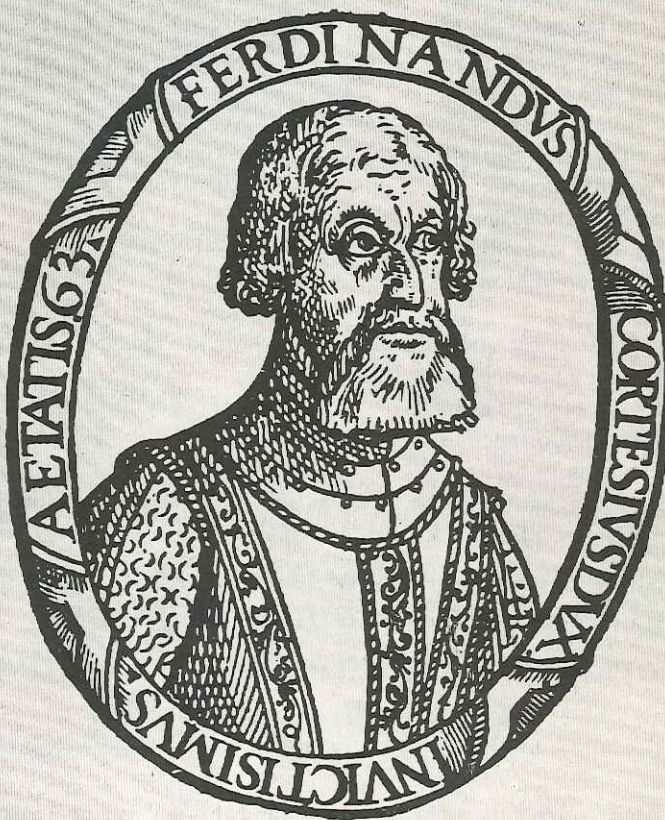
Octavio Paz

The fate of the conqueror and the vanquished

Like almost all mortals, Hernán Cortés was a contradictory mixture of good and evil, fair and unfair acts, greatness and meanness, courage and

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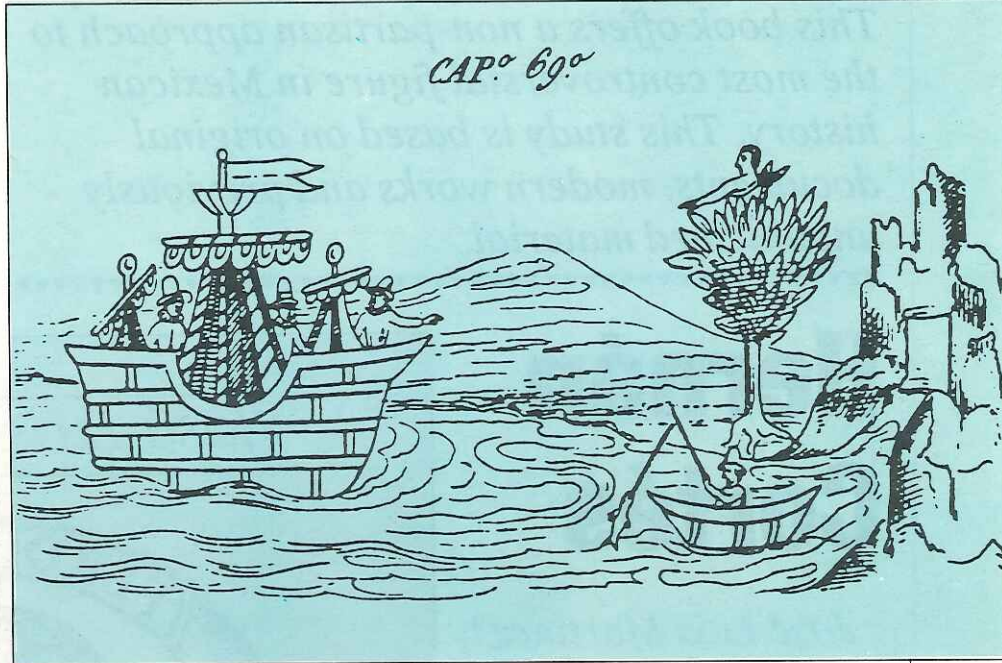
Hernán Cortés



themselves defeated a powerful empire defended by thousands of valiant warriors. After his victory, he built one of the most ambitious Spanish cities of all times, and in the territory he called "New Spain" he laid the groundwork for its political organization and for the introduction of Spanish language, religion and customs, in addition to Spanish-style agriculture, cattle-raising and industry.

Not only did he conquer the people of ancient Mexico but he subjected them and made them into serfs of the conquerors. He had experienced the failure of the brutal exploitation in the West Indies, yet he insisted on a similar type of servitude designed to preserve, the Indians, purely as cheap labor. In this way was initiated the integration of indigenous and conquering peoples and cultures, which was to be one of Mexico's permanent features.

Although Cortés recognized the native people's political capacity and aptitudes, he perhaps did not attach sufficient importance to the strength and antiquity of their culture. The fact is that the Indians, in spite of having accepted that their



Juan de Grijalva's arrival in Chalchicuecan.

Extreme attitudes

Therefore, Cortés always pushes us to extremes; we either exalt him or detest him. We locate in him the conflict of our origin and, faced with the clash brought about by this joining together, some are led to consider the actions of the conquerors as unjust, brutal and rapacious, and the native people as victims, whose

among historians, from Francisco López de Gómara and Bartolomé de las Casas, in the times of the Conquerors, to Eulalia Guzmán and Salvador de Madariaga in our own days. The same is true of historians writing in other languages.

A third path

The eulogies or the condemnations may reinforce one's prior convictions but cannot change the past and hardly help us to know it better. With regard to Cortés and the conquest, some partisans have considered a handful of facts sufficient to support their judgments and pay more attention to the arguments than to research into what actually happened.

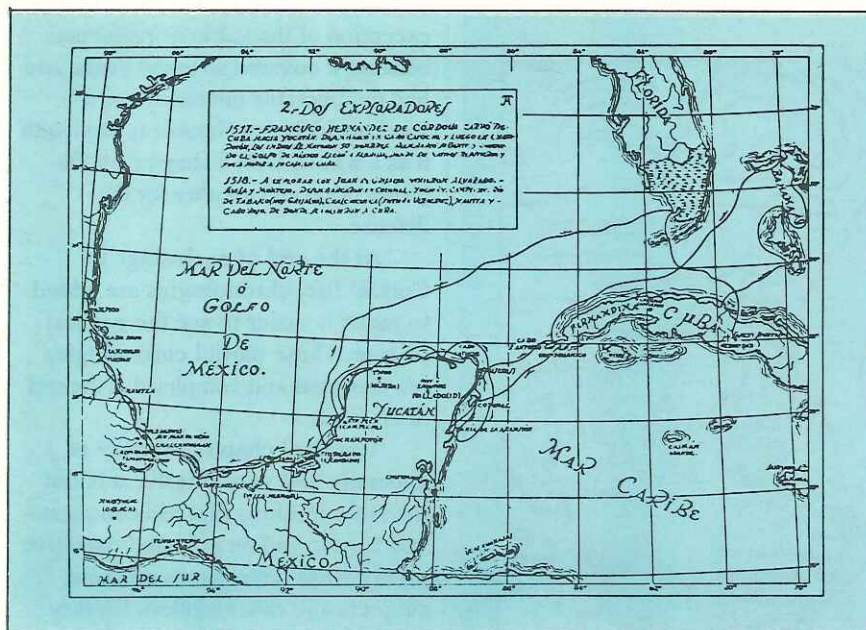
If we avoid such preconceptions a third path is also possible. In the case of Cortés there is an enormous collection of documents published over many years, and in addition a large body of unpublished material. Moreover, the chronicles, the old historians and the modern researchers have gathered data, analyses and interpretations that make it possible to

“Cortés did not attach sufficient importance to the strength and antiquity of the Indian culture”

gods were dead, and that they had become serfs of tyrannical and often ruthless masters, kept alive their consciousness, their traditions and their resentment. This resentment was nurtured by the new nation that Mexico was to become, and would later be the dynamic behind the grievances against the conqueror. The trauma of the conquest is, in some respects, still an open wound in Mexico.

culture is exalted as a noble past; while others, starting off by justifying the right to conquer, imagine it as a series of heroic acts, whose protagonist was Hernán Cortés, and that thanks to his victory over barbarian and bloodthirsty peoples, we received the benefits of Spanish and Western culture.

With a few notable exceptions, these attitudes towards Cortés and the conquest have also been predominant



Route taken by Fernando Hernández de Córdoba and Juan de Grijalva, early Spanish explorers.

accumulate an historical knowledge of the facts as objectively as possible.

However, in spite of this abundance of documents and information there are still considerable gaps in the story of Cortés' life, and some rather shady patches. For example, the *juicio de residencia* (trial) against Cortés, the second part of the defense of which has been ignored; his last decade in New Spain; the maritime expeditions which have been well studied but not the other aspects of Cortés' life in those years; and, finally, his last stay in Spain which is hardly known and is usually glossed over with a few anecdotes.

Therefore, we are far from exhausting the study of Cortés' life and personality, since there is still much to verify, clarify and interpret. As he was one of the main actors in the drama of our origin, in the personality and actions of Cortés and those of this time many features of our political, social and cultural life have their origin, as do some of our vices and virtues. For all of these reasons, it is still important to know more about Cortés.

Standards and methods of work

The main standard for judging the present work on Cortés is its commitment to being guided by an honest desire for knowledge. To achieve this we have only the testimonies of the past, what different sources related and what has been preserved. These sources are

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sufficient to guarantee that all flights of fancy can be minimized, and that each fact is based on the documents. And whenever there are outstanding and controversial episodes, we must retrieve all the versions known – whether from Spanish, Indian or other sources – so that the reader may form his own judgement from the divergences and contradictions, or he may simply allow himself to slide into perplexity. In this work the author sometimes interprets the facts and gives his opinion, but he does not omit any possible element that may lead to different conclusions.

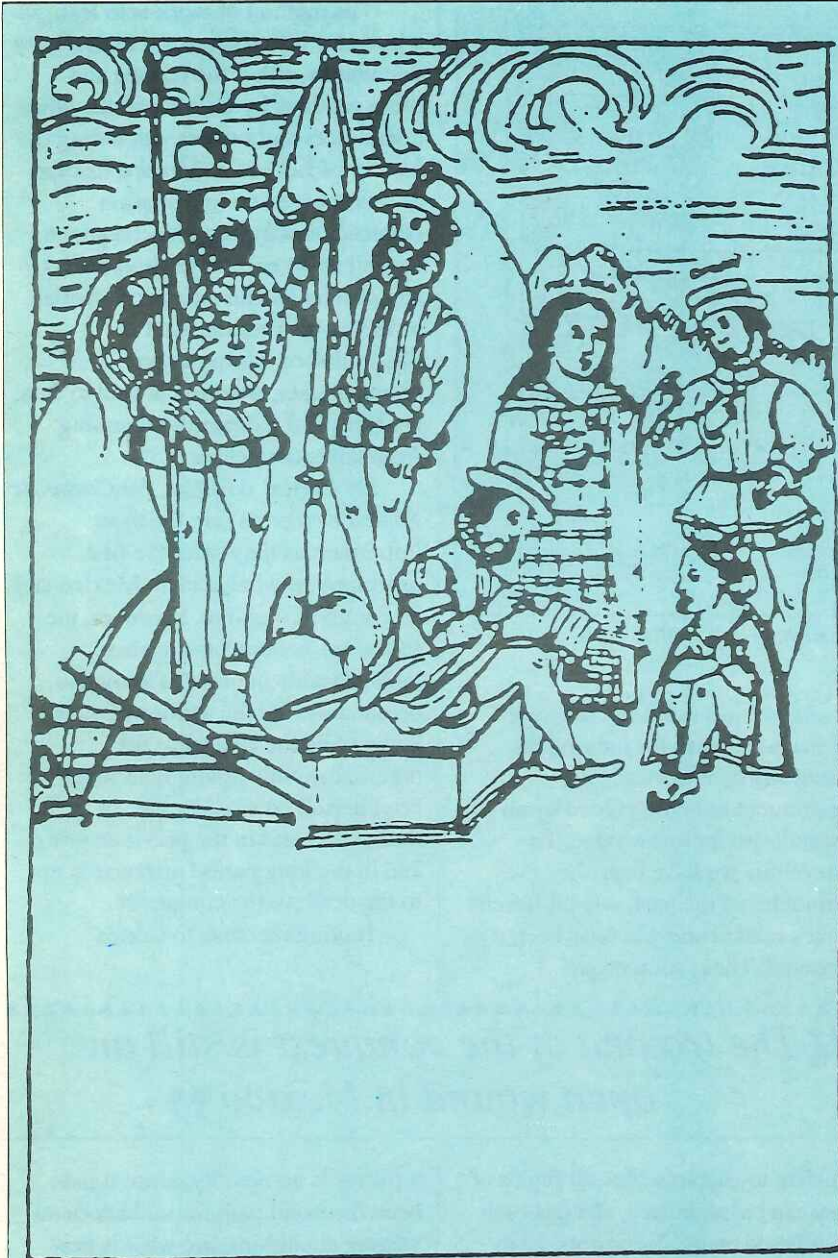
The method of work is to lean, as a basis for information, on the primary documents, either the reports and other writings by Cortés and the other conquerors and settlers – including the history of López de Gómara, insofar as this is based on information obtained directly from the conqueror –, as well as on ancient testimonies by chroniclers and historians of Spanish or Indian inspiration. And as illustrative or interpretative complements, attention is paid to data, analyses and judgments stemming from later researchers.

Of Cortés' writings, the *Cartas de Relación* (reports) are the most important, as they offer the first testimony of what ancient Mexico and its conquest was like. However, the rest of his documents are also indispensable in order to know the personality and the actions of their author, and the first steps for organizing New Spain, both in the brief period covered by the *Relaciones* and in the previous years, and in the long period afterwards up to the death of the conqueror.

Having recourse to Cortés'

writings is no novelty, since it has been the usual path for all historians writing about him, but what is new in this work is the systematic confrontation of these writings and the wider volume of material that is available today.

This has been possible thanks to the fact that the author of this history worked at the same time on gathering and editing the body of material known as the *Documentos cortesianos* (Cortés' documents), comprising slightly over three hundred works, and which, in addition to the *Relaciones* is constantly kept up to date as an



El indio habla y Marina le interpreta lo que dice y Cortés lo dicta y el escribano lo escribe.

The Indian speaks, Marina translates, Cortés dictates and the scribe writes.

ongoing history of Cortés. The present study and the *Documentos* are in fact conceived as a unit.

The first three chapters that describe the clash of the Old and the New World, ancient Mexico, 16th century Spain and the situation of the

Indians after the conquest, are schematic and should be considered merely as a frame of reference for situating Cortés' actions in cultural time and space.

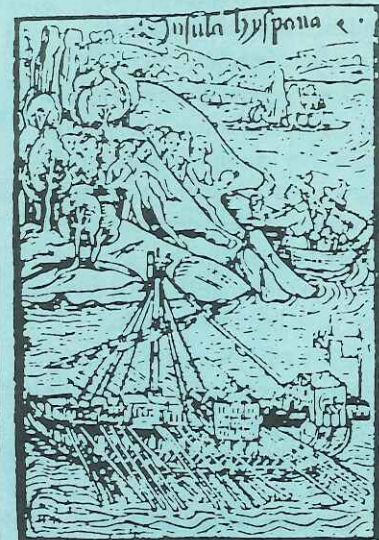
In general a chronological sequence is followed, with the

exception of the *juicio de residencia* because it covered so many years, and had innumerable interruptions, it was considered preferable to deal with it as a whole, with a chapter for the prosecution and another for the defense.

At the end of each stage in Cortés' life, chronologies are added to make it easier to see the general picture. These partial chronologies are repeated and completed at the end of the book.

The final chapter, by way of appendix and very briefly, sets out the repercussions that the conquest and Cortés had on epic and narrative poetry, with some notes on these subjects and other modern literary and artistic forms of expression. ❖

De Insulis nuper in mari Indico repertis



The first image of America.