Chapter 4
Mesoamerica and Spain: The Conquest

For three centuries, the Mesoamericans were part of a vast colonial empire ruled by Spain. Spanish domination profoundly altered the culture and history of Mesoamerica's indigenous peoples. Old World infectious diseases, combined with violence and exploitation, killed millions of people; new technologies and new plants and animals had a deep impact on local economic and ecological adaptations; and new social and religious customs were imposed. Spanish rule also introduced new categories of people into the social scene: Spaniards and other Europeans; the Africans they brought as slaves; and people whose heritage mixed Indian, European, and African ancestry in every possible combination. The native people who survived these upheavals found themselves at the bottom end of a new social hierarchy, with power concentrated in the hands of the foreigners and their descendants.

In this chapter we present a historical overview of the Spanish invasion, in order to explain how this small European nation came to rule over the densely populated, socially complex, and highly militarized Mesoamerican world described in the preceding chapters (Figure 4.1). Particular attention is given to the beliefs and motivations of the actors on both sides of the conflict. We begin by examining events in Spain's history that led up to the country's colonial enterprise and affected its course in many ways.

THE ORIGINS OF SPANISH IMPERIALISM

Spanish imperialism grew out of the Christian "reconquest," or *reconquista*, of Spain from the Moors. The Moors were Muslims of North African descent, whose Arab and Berber ancestors had conquered most of the Iberian Peninsula between A.D. 711 and 718. The Moorish rulers in Spain presided over a cosmopolitan, multiethnic society in which Jews and Christians were tolerated and permitted to practice their religions. Many Spanish Christians, however, found rule by these foreign "infidels" unacceptable,

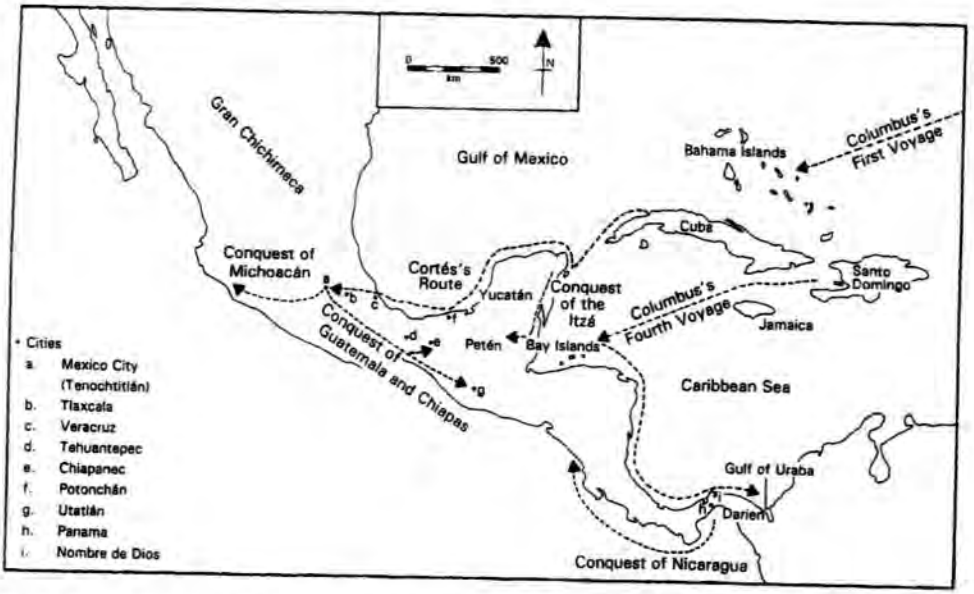

Figure 4.1 Map showing the main routes by which the Spaniards conquered the Mesoamerican world.

and bands of independent Christians challenged Moorish rule from their bases in mountainous northern Spain.

During the ninth century, the originally united Muslim state fractured into many small and competing kingdoms. Thereafter, Christian armies from the north were able to confront their Muslim enemy one faction at a time. Between A.D. 850 and 1250 the balance of power gradually shifted until the only remaining Moorish kingdom was Granada, a wealthy mountain stronghold in the south of Spain. The rest of the peninsula was dominated by the Christian kingdoms of Portugal in the west, Castile in the north and center, and Aragon in the northeast.

For the Christians, the conflict with the Moors was a holy war: The Islamic religion was seen as evil and the Muslim way of life as sinful. Spanish soldiers believed that Saint James, the patron saint of Spain, not only sanctioned their quest but also often appeared before them on a white horse, leading them into battle. Religious faith and military zeal went hand in hand; these in turn were barely distinguishable from political and economic ambitions. That Christ's soldiers should enjoy the material spoils of victory, appropriating the wealth and property of vanquished Moors, was seen as no more than their due reward.

Over the centuries of the *reconquista*, Spanish Christian society came to glorify military achievement. Lacking ancestral ties to particular pieces of territory, the aristocracy was highly mobile, counting its wealth in herds of domestic animals rather than in agri-

cultural land. The knights who conquered a territory would move in as its new overlords, being rewarded for their military service with rights to tribute and labor from the subject population. Soldiers recruited from the peasant class would be given parcels of land in the new territory, which they owned outright (in contrast to the serfdom prevailing elsewhere in Europe). The Christian kings found their power always circumscribed by the need to placate the nobles, on whose military prowess they depended for the conquest of additional lands; as a result, there was constant tension between the central authority of the monarch and the local concerns of the feudal lords.

After a long hiatus marked by the Black Death and by factional disputes within the Christian kingdoms, the reconquest resumed in 1455 under King Henry VI of Castile. In 1469, Henry's eighteen-year-old half-sister and heir, Isabella, married seventeen-year-old Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the much weaker kingdom of Aragon. After much political intrigue, including a civil war in Castile, the couple emerged as the powerful rulers of a united Spain. They succeeded in limiting the influence of both their own nobles and the pope. Themselves very pious, they used religion as an effective means of promoting national unity. They established the Spanish Inquisition as a tool for enforcing religious conformity among Spanish Christians, including increasing numbers of *conversos*, or converts from Judaism, and *moriscos*, or Christianized Moors, thousands of whom would be executed as heretics. The couple's close ally Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, a Franciscan priest and Isabella's confessor, raised the standards of orthodoxy and austerity among the religious orders, especially the Franciscans, and sought to revitalize the religious faith of the entire populace. Appointed Archbishop of Toledo in 1495 and Inquisitor General in 1507, Cisneros was the most powerful individual in Spain apart from the king and queen themselves. He twice served briefly as regent of Castile, following Isabella's death in 1504 and Ferdinand's in 1516.

Isabella and Ferdinand sponsored scholarship in the humanities, earning an international reputation as patrons of learning. Among their circle of learned associates was Antonio de Nebrija, a *converso* scholar who in 1492 published the first grammar of a modern, spoken language, as opposed to Latin and Greek. Nebrija's *Grammar of the Castilian Language* elevated Castile's dialect of Spanish to a privileged position previously restricted to those ancient languages. It thus helped to legitimize Castile's supremacy over the rest of Spain, and beyond: When first presented with the book, Isabella reportedly asked its purpose; the Bishop of Ávila, speaking on Nebrija's behalf, explained, "language is the perfect instrument of empire."

His words were apt, for the year 1492 launched Spain on its way toward becoming the world's most powerful state. Early that year, Isabella and Ferdinand had seen the *reconquista* come to an end: The forces of Christian Spain marched victorious into Granada on January 2. With the Moorish frontier closed at last, Spain's heavily militaristic and aristocratic society might have settled down to focus on internal economic development. The towns were already dominated by a middle class of tradespeople and entrepreneurs; production of certain goods, especially wool and leather, was in the process of industrialization. However, other events of 1492 steered the nation onto a different track.

On March 30, 1492, Isabella and Ferdinand signed a decree demanding that all Jews be expelled from Spain within four months. A campaign to force Muslims to convert began in 1499, with an edict of expulsion following in 1502. Prior to the fall of Granada, Jews actually had fared better in Spain than elsewhere in Europe. Spanish Christians knew that any Jews or Muslims expelled from Christian-held territory would have been welcomed in Moorish lands, where their skills and assets would only strengthen the power of the Moorish rulers. But after the conquest of Granada, there was no longer any such refuge, and in the climate of religious fervor that accompanied the culmination of the *reconquista*, Spain's rulers opted to impose their faith on all their subjects.

Between 120,000 and 150,000 Spanish Jews left the country; today's Sephardic Jews are descended from these exiles. Thousands more, like the majority of the Moors, chose to convert to Christianity, at least in name, rather than leave their homes and property. As *conversos*, the descendants of Jewish families often continued to practice at least some Jewish customs in secret, and they were always at risk of being tried by the Inquisition for real or alleged Judaic practices. Some were attracted to Christian religious orders, such as that of the Franciscans, that were somewhat compatible with their own traditions of scholarship, prophecy, and mysticism. Scholars from *converso* families contributed significantly to the sixteenth-century flowering of Spain's universities.

The departure of the majority of Spain's Jews took a tremendous toll on Spain's economy. Jewish merchants and financiers had dominated the middle class; without their skills and trading networks, Spain's commerce was devastated. Jewish traders were replaced not by upwardly mobile Spanish Christians but by foreigners who took their profits out of the country. What had been a thriving and industrializing commercial system sank into centuries-long stagnation.

On August 3, 1492, a Genoese mariner named Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain on a voyage sponsored by Isabella and Ferdinand. The goal of the enterprise was to discover a westward route to Asia and to claim Spanish sovereignty over any previously unknown lands found along the way. For the Spanish rulers, such a route—and their control over it—would facilitate trade for such items as silk and spices as well as giving them access to whatever riches might lie in undiscovered lands.

Their interests were more than economic, however, for Columbus and his Spanish patrons envisioned a worldwide religious crusade. They hoped that with a Spanish-controlled route to Asia, the struggle against Islam could be continued beyond Spain's borders. The abandoned medieval crusade to establish Christian control over the Holy Lands, which were then part of the Ottoman Empire of the Turks, could be restarted under Spanish leadership, financed by new wealth from the western trade. In effect, a westward passage would allow Christian armies to sneak up on the Turks (and other Islamic peoples) from behind, rather than having to battle their way eastward through the Turks' formidable defenses. Furthermore, the non-Islamic peoples of Asia might be converted to Christianity. Not only would such conversions be pleasing to God, but also the new converts, potentially numbering in the millions, would swell the ranks of the Christian armies as they passed westward toward what

might be the ultimate battle between the followers of Christ and the followers of Mohammed.

But on October 12, Columbus and his men stumbled upon an island in the Caribbean. That island proved to be one of many lying adjacent to two large continents. Instead of establishing new links to Asia, Isabella and Ferdinand found themselves presiding over a massive project of exploration, invasion, and conquest, as the lands Columbus mistook for the "Indies" were forcibly transformed into colonies of Spain.

SPAIN'S COLONIAL ENTERPRISE BEGINS

The leaders of Spain believed that they had a God-given right to dominate non-Christian peoples and to bring to them the word of Christ; the fact that the "new" lands were revealed to Columbus while he sailed under the Spanish flag was proof enough of divine intent. Spanish claims were further legitimized by Pope Alexander VI, himself a Spaniard, who issued a papal bull in 1493 giving Spain the right to explore westward and southward and to claim any territory not already under Christian rulership.

This act ran afoul of Portugal, which was engaged in expeditions in the eastern Atlantic and along the coasts of Africa. In 1493, Spain and Portugal agreed to divide between themselves the right to explore and conquer unknown parts of the world. This Treaty of Tordesillas declared a line of demarcation, which passed through the Atlantic Ocean 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands (which Portugal already claimed). Spain had rights to everything to the west of this line and Portugal had rights over all lands to the east. Spain, though intending to claim all of America, had inadvertently yielded to Portugal the eastward-projecting mass of Brazil.

Once Spain's rights to American territory had thus been formally recognized, the process of invading and conquering these lands could be treated juridically as a process of pacification. Native peoples who declined to recognize Spanish dominion were by definition rebelling against their lawful rulers and thus inviting violent retaliation and suppression. Native groups that submitted peacefully to Spanish rule were merely performing their duty as Spanish subjects. This "myth of pacification" served to justify the Spanish invasion and mask its accompanying brutality behind a façade of legitimate statecraft.

The *reconquista* had won back previously Christian territories from the descendants of Muslim invaders. The conquest of America was an aggressive campaign against peoples who had never heard of, let alone threatened, Spain. However, for many Spaniards the invasion of America was a logical continuation of their struggle against the Moors, led, like that campaign, by their warrior patron Saint James. The new frontier provided new employment for soldiers and new opportunities for sons of the aristocracy to rule over territory and subjects that they had helped to conquer. Spain had been purged of Jews and Muslims, and the new lands also would be uniformly Christian. Indeed, the prospect of converting the native peoples of America was compatible with the plan to convert Asia: The Church would be that much more fortified against the Muslim threat.

Also, the economic decline of Spain could be temporarily stalled by an influx of wealth from America. Although the cities of gold that filled Spanish dreams never materialized, Spanish colonists extracted enough silver, gold, and other precious substances to enrich their homeland. However, the result of flooding Europe's markets with American silver was similar to what would happen if a modern nation sought to offset economic problems by printing additional currency: It set off a cycle of inflation that only furthered Spain's long-term decline.

Even though millions of pounds of silver poured into Spain, its New World colonies were never profitable. Under the Habsburgs, Spain concentrated its energies and wealth on expensive military campaigns throughout Europe instead of developing successful commercial and industrial enterprises as the northern European powers were doing. The Dutch, British, and French, unhappy with the Pope's having essentially given the New World to Spain and Portugal, sought to gain America's wealth through control of commerce and banking, as well as through outright piracy. In the end, Spain's royal coffers were nothing more than a funnel through which New World silver flowed on its way to the pockets of northern European merchants and bankers.

Spanish attention, following the example of Columbus's voyages, focused at first on the Caribbean islands, especially the island of Hispaniola—today shared by the nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic—where the settlement of Santo Domingo was established in 1496. The native inhabitants of the islands, divided among many small polities with no standing armies or other organized defensive forces, were ill-prepared to ward off the Spanish invasion.

Spain's rulers rewarded successful conquerors with rights to tribute in goods and labor from the native people. This reward system, which had precedents in the reconquista, was called encomienda; an individual who held an encomienda grant was an encomendero. Encomenderos comprised a colonial aristocracy that from the beginning found its interests often in conflict with those of both the Spanish Crown and the Church. Encomenderos were officially charged with seeing to the religious instruction of the native peoples entrusted to them; the *encomenderos'* frequent indifference to this demand was one source of friction between them and their rulers.

The consuming purpose of the early colonists was the search for gold, which overrode any concern for the long-term integrity of a colonial society. The islands contained some placer deposits of gold, and the native people were compelled to work the gold fields for the enrichment of their new overlords. Already facing massive population loss owing to disease, these people saw their survival further threatened by this forced labor and other abuses: beatings, rapes, and murders. They also suffered from a nutritional crisis resulting from the disruption of their agriculture, hunting, and fishing.

Such problems only made the people more susceptible to the Old World infectious diseases that European invaders and their African slaves inadvertently introduced to the Americas. Never having been exposed to these bacterial and viral agents, the native peoples had no natural immunity to the diseases they caused. Mortality rates when a new disease first struck were as high as one-third of the population,

with the sickness affecting healthy adults as severely as children and the elderly. Owing to a combination of brutality, exploitation, and disease, within three decades of Columbus's first landfall very few native people of the islands were left alive. (See Box 4.1 for a more extensive account of the demographic consequences for the Mesoamericans of the European contact.)

Box 4.1 The Demographic Consequences of European Contact

A precontact indigenous population that some estimate as high as 27.1 million in Mexico alone was reduced to around 1.2 million in the first century of Spanish rule, after which it began a gradual rebound (see the Introduction for estimated figures). During the conquest years, warfare was directly responsible for the deaths of many Indians, and in the years immediately after the conquest, slavery and the harsh treatment of Indians in the mines and in other Spanish enterprises accounted for many more deaths. Random acts of torture and murder, whether for the purpose of "sport" or to maintain a state of terror, were responsible for additional deaths. In terms of sheer numbers, however, most of the deaths were the result of infectious diseases previously unknown in the Americas. The biggest killers were smallpox, measles, typhus, bubonic plague, yellow fever, and malaria. In many areas, native populations were already weakened by early epidemics before they had to fight the Spanish invaders.

The process of *mestizaje* also affected native demographics. Mestizos were neither Spanish nor Indian: They were the children of unions between Spaniards and Indians (usually a Spanish father and an Indian mother). Indians and Africans also formed unions, giving birth to children who were classified as mixed-race rather than natives. Thus, Indian populations declined in areas where *mestizaje* was high, even if Indian mortality rates were relatively low.

Within colonial Mesoamerica there was significant variability in demographic patterns in different regions. Generally, populations in the lowland regions suffered greater declines than did the highland populations, although the causes for this difference are still not well understood. Throughout much of colonial Mesoamerica this pattern has had a long-term impact, and today Indian populations are typically much greater in highland areas than in the lowlands. Thus, in the highlands of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guatemala, Indians still constitute the majority of the population.

The impact of high mortality rates in the years just preceding and following the Spanish conquest was profound. In many areas as much as 90 to 95 percent of the native population died within the first fifty to seventy-five years following contact, such that all aspects of native life were disrupted. Communities were left with no legitimate leaders, children were without parents or even close relatives to care for them, and entire families died out.

Spaniards often explained the epidemics as punishment wrought by God. Native practices before the conquest—the worship of false gods, human sacrifice, polygyny, and so forth—were now being avenged. Certain sympathetic priests, however, asserted that it was the Spaniards who were being punished for their ill treatment of the native people. The Indians, now baptized as Christians, would go to heaven, but the rapacious colonists would be deprived of a native population to labor for them.

It is difficult to determine how the Mesoamericans themselves explained these diseases. At least some insight is provided by the answers to a questionnaire that Spain's King Philip II sent to all the communities in the colony in the late 1570s, just after a particularly severe epidemic. Asked about the health of their people, elders in a number of Indian towns blamed the high mortality rate on the changes in lifestyle that had followed the Spanish conquest. People no longer followed the strict behavioral regimen of their ancestors. They ate too much meat, dressed

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too warmly, married too young. Behaviors such as these caused people to become weak and easily susceptible to illness. Indirectly, these elders were blaming the Spaniards, who had introduced domestic animals like sheep and pigs, wool (for warmer clothing and blankets), and previously unknown garments such as shirts and coats. Similarly, Catholic priests, trying to prevent premarital sex, encouraged the Mesoamericans to marry in their midteens. The ancestors' way of life had been more rigorous and virtuous. In contrast to the Spanish idea that the Indians were being punished for the "sins of the ancestors," these Indians blamed their decline on the adoption of Spanish ways.

Some native documents provide particularly vivid descriptions of epidemics and their effects on the population. The Mayan *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, from the Yucatán Peninsula, speaks as follows:

> There was no sickness then;
> They had no aching bones then;
> They had no high fever then;
> They had no pustule fever [smallpox] then;
> They had no burning chests then;
> They had no abdominal pains then;
> They had no consumption then;
> They had no headaches then;
> The course of humanity was orderly then;
> The foreigners made it otherwise
> When they arrived here.
> They brought shameful things
> When they came. (Roys 1933:22)

In the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* an epidemic that struck in 1519 is described in equally vivid terms:

> It happened that during the twenty-fifth year [1519] the plague began, oh, my sons! First they became ill of a cough, they suffered from nosebleeds and illness of the bladder. It was truly terrible, the number of dead there were in that period. . . . Little by little heavy shadows and black night enveloped our fathers and grandfathers and us also, oh, my sons! when the plague raged. . . . Great was the stench of the dead. After our fathers and grandfathers succumbed, half of the people fled to the fields. The dogs and the vultures devoured the bodies. The mortality was terrible. Your grandfathers died, and with them died the son of the king and his brothers and kinsmen. So it was that we became orphans, oh, my sons! So we became when we were young. All of us were thus. We were born to die! (Recinos 1980:119–120).

The status of native people under Spanish colonial rule was inherently problematic. At first treated unambiguously as potential slaves—Columbus being the first to enslave Indians—under Isabella's orders they were soon declared citizens of the Spanish Crown with corresponding legal rights. However, since the Crown had the right to tax its subjects and also had somehow to reward conquerors for their service,

it was considered acceptable to require tribute from these new subjects. But heavy tribute requirements could amount to virtual slavery. Furthermore, an illegal slave trade flourished, and slavery long remained a legal option when dealing with peoples who resisted Spanish domination or who were believed to practice cannibalism. False accusations of cannibalism were used to justify slave-raiding campaigns. The nature and extent of service that Spaniards could legitimately extract from Indians remained a major issue of contention.

Christian evangelization was a second major issue. Religious fervor played such a key role in promoting Spanish unity and legitimizing Spanish imperialism that the conversion of the Indians was a top priority for the Crown, especially for pious Isabella. How could the Indians be brought to the faith? Were they capable of becoming fully Christian? How could the material needs and desires of Crown and colonists be reconciled with the spiritual needs of the native people? So rapidly were the island natives decimated that these questions were barely considered before it was too late.

In Spain, Isabella's death in 1504 ushered in another era of factionalism and instability. After a series of deaths in the royal lineage, Isabella and Ferdinand's daughter, Juana, inherited the throne of Castile. Juana was married to Archduke Philip of Burgundy, a member of Europe's powerful Habsburg dynasty. Philip's father, Maximilian, was ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, a confederation of feudal states in Central Europe whose princes traditionally elected their so-called "emperor."

Many Spanish nobles allied themselves with Philip in order to curtail Ferdinand's claims to his dead wife's dominions and to boost trading links with Habsburg possessions in the Netherlands. The ensuing disputes are too complex to be treated in detail here, but the upshot was that, with Philip's death in 1506 and Juana's alleged insanity, after Ferdinand died in 1516, the Spanish crown passed to the eldest son of Philip and Juana, young Charles of Ghent.

Charles, born in 1500, had grown up in the Netherlands. He did not speak Spanish and had never set foot in his mother's homeland until he arrived as king in 1517, bringing with him a bevy of Flemish advisers. Two years later, Charles's grandfather Maximilian died, and Charles was elected to succeed him as Holy Roman Emperor. This event further linked Spain to the fortunes of other European lands, lands that would soon be torn apart by the religious wars of the Protestant Reformation. A man of the Renaissance, Charles opened Spain's closed and conservative society to humanistic influences from elsewhere in Europe. Not all Spaniards wished to see this virtual foreigner upon their throne, however, and he did not secure his control over the Crown until 1522.

By 1520, the limited quantities of gold that the Caribbean islands had held were nearly gone. Lacking both gold and the native laborers to extract it, the Spanish colonists had to turn to new enterprises. As the native population dwindled, trade in African slaves had become widespread. With Africa as the new source of forced labor, an economy based on livestock ranching and agriculture began to develop. The Spanish settlers, descendants of the original *encomenderos,* came to constitute a landed gentry, a small, elite group living off of the work of a large subject population of African slaves and free African and mulatto wage laborers.

Some Spaniards, however, unwilling to settle for the increasingly limited options offered by the island colonies, looked toward the vast, unconquered mainland as a potential source of new opportunities. On his fourth voyage in 1502, Columbus had encountered an elite Mayan merchant and his entourage sailing near the coast of Honduras, their large ocean-going canoe laden with rich goods (see the Introduction for an account of this historical event). Since then, Spaniards had known that the mainland was home to peoples whose societies were more complex and whose material goods more sophisticated than those of the island natives.

The Spanish conquest and occupation of the mainland was staged from strongholds in Central Mexico and Panama. Most of Mesoamerica was brought under Spanish control by Spanish forces radiating out from Central Mexico. But even before their struggle with the Aztecs in Central Mexico had begun, the Spaniards already had established towns in Darién and the Panamanian Isthmus.

The Spanish occupation of the mainland began in 1510 with the foundation of Santa María de Antigua del Darién (in modern Colombia). In 1519, six years after Santa María's founder, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, first saw the Pacific Ocean, the new settlement of Panama was established on the Pacific side of the isthmus, a short distance from the Caribbean port of Nombre de Dios. Spanish treatment of the native population was harsh. Under the brutal leadership of governor Pedro Arias de Ávila (Pedrarias), Spaniards raided native settlements for gold and slaves, and soon the indigenous population had virtually disappeared.

Spanish expansion into Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras was carried out primarily by forces based in Panama. The native peoples of these regions also suffered from heavy-handed treatment by their conquerors. Indians throughout lower Central America were captured and sold as slaves during the first decades of colonial rule, but nowhere was the slave trade as lucrative as in Nicaragua. Tens of thousands of Nicaraguan Indians were taken as slaves; most were transported to Peru, but large numbers died en route. In 1542, Indian slavery was officially outlawed, although Indians continued to be enslaved in subsequent years. When the Indian slave trade died out around 1550, its cessation was not because the Spaniards were concerned about the legal ramifications of their actions but because there were so few Indians left.

Once the slave trade had died out and the Isthmus and the rest of lower Central America were firmly under Spanish control, the Caribbean and Pacific port cities in Panama served primarily as a locus of movement of people and goods from Spain, New Spain, and the Caribbean to Peru and the rest of Pacific South America.

THE DEBATE OVER INDIAN RIGHTS

The disastrous effects of Spanish rule in the Caribbean caused a small number of contemporary observers to question Spain's right to govern these lands. How could Christians, charged with bringing the Word of God to these fellow humans, justify their presence in the face of such widespread suffering and abuse? In 1511, a Dominican priest named Antonio de Montesinos preached a famous sermon to the

Spanish colonists of Hispaniola. He asked them, "Are these Indians not humans? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as you love yourselves?" The *encomenderos* were outraged that a priest would dare to criticize their behavior. And thus was born a campaign for the human rights of the Indians.

An alliance between priests and the powerless that foreshadowed the Liberation Theology movement of the late twentieth century, this campaign was phrased in terms of Christian religion and tended to take a paternalistic view of the Indians as helpless victims. Nevertheless, the arguments of Montesinos and his followers speak across the centuries to anyone concerned about human rights and the survival of indigenous peoples.

The most influential convert to Montesinos's views was the Spanish adventurer-turned-Dominican-priest Bartolomé de Las Casas. Las Casas would come to view the entire Spanish enterprise in America as unjust and illegal. Although he would also play an important role among the native people of Mesoamerica as a missionary and the first bishop of Chiapas (see Chapter 5), he is most famous for his activities in Spain, where he publicized the brutal effects of Spanish colonialism. In Spain he found an ally in Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican priest who was one of the country's foremost theologians. Although Vitoria never visited America, he lent his immense knowledge of Classical philosophy and Medieval theology, plus his skill in logic and rhetoric, to the cause of Indian rights. He concluded that the Indians were civilized people with full rights to their own territories. They were not irrational or otherwise mentally deficient. Customs that offended Spanish sensibilities were not unknown among Old World civilizations and, however shocking, did not provide grounds for invasion and conquest.

Las Casas's own writings went beyond Vitoria's careful reasonings and into polemical, sensationalized accounts of Spanish brutality. His treatise entitled "A Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies" was printed in several European languages and helped give rise to the so-called "black legend" regarding the injustices associated with Spanish domination (Figure 4.2). To these European readers, the tract was less relevant as a description of the distant colonies than as a warning about their own possible fate, given Charles V's control over Habsburg and Holy Roman Empire lands outside Spain and his intentions to enlarge these holdings. Las Casas's work thus helped to stir up anti-Spanish (and in Protestant territories, anti-Catholic) sentiment throughout Europe.

Las Casas never went so far as to doubt that the Indians would benefit from the Christian religion. He argued, however, that the only proper way to introduce them to that faith was through peaceful contact and that there was no justification for violent conquest. In his book entitled "Of the Only Way to Attract All Peoples to the True Religion," he proposed that missionaries should enter Indian territory unarmed and unaccompanied by soldiers. If they were welcomed and permitted to preach, the Indians—being as intelligent and rational as any other people—would soon be persuaded that Christianity was indeed superior to their own forms of worship. And if not, then so be it; the priests should depart in peace and hope that future ventures might prove more successful.

Figure 4.2 Illustration from Las Casas's "Brief Relation on the Destruction of the Indies," Spanish edition, Seville, 1552. *Source:* Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

Charles V, troubled by the assertions of Las Casas and Vitoria, summoned a group of theologians to present arguments on both sides of these issues. This famous debate occurred at Valladolid, Spain, in 1550 and 1551. Las Casas was the spokesman for the anticolonial side. His opponent was Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a distinguished theologian and historian. Sepúlveda based his arguments on the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's theory of natural slavery. He claimed that the Indians were by nature brutish and irrational and therefore inferior to Europeans. Not only did Europeans have the right to conquer and enslave them, but also the Indians would actually benefit from their own subjection by being provided with superior behavioral models. Las Casas countered that the Indians were fully rational, of equal or superior capacity to all other peoples. Since the judges of the debate did not leave a record of their decision, we do not know who was considered the winner.

The pro-Indian movement, despite the stir it caused in Europe, did little to improve the lot of native people in the colonies. Las Casas and his allies had some impact on official Spanish policies, but these efforts to mollify the damage wrought by

colonial rule were often ignored by the colonists who were supposed to enforce them. The whole controversy over whether the conquest was justified was little more than a game of words, since almost all of Mesoamerica was already under Spanish control by the time of the Valladolid debates, and there was no way that the conquerers were going to pack their bags and return home. Franciscan priests criticized Las Casas for focusing on these philosophical debates instead of living among the native peoples and helping to defend them against their more immediate Spanish neighbors.

Some scholars have claimed that the pro-Indian movement of Las Casas and his allies indirectly promoted African slavery. Since their efforts contributed to the outlawing of Indian slavery (in law if not always in practice), Spanish colonists who wanted to own slaves had to look elsewhere. The African people sold as slaves by Portuguese traders were, for these colonists, a convenient source of forced labor.

It is true that Las Casas and Vitoria saw nothing inherently wrong with the enslavement of Africans; Vitoria even admitted that he would be willing to own such a slave. The pro-Indian movement's most effective argument against Indian slavery was not based on a belief in human equality. Rather, it was based on legalistic principles. Spain could not claim jurisdiction over the Indies and simultaneously enslave their inhabitants, any more than the Spanish king could arbitrarily enslave citizens of his own nation. In Africa, however, where Spain had no territories and claimed no jurisdiction, Portuguese treatment of the native people, whether benign or brutal, was of no concern to Spain. African peoples had no legal rights that were recognized by Spain. Thus, if an African person had the misfortune to end up transported to the Indies, she or he had no legal grounds on which to claim mistreatment.

Although the movement for Indian rights was of limited benefit for the natives of the Spanish colonies—and did nothing to promote fair treatment of Africans—it did have a long-range impact on European intellectual currents. The efforts by Las Casas and his allies to describe and analyze native cultural patterns, in order more effectively to defend them, were among the first attempts to create systematic accounts of other cultures. Their insistence that these cultural patterns were valid in respect to the societies that practiced them was an early expression of cultural relativism, the idea that any particular cultural trait must be understood in relation to the rest of the culture within which it makes sense.

In a broad sense, as Europeans learned about the Americas, the Europeans were led to question many of their traditional assumptions about human nature. The very existence of a "New World" forced radical adjustments to a mindset that had always assumed that the world was composed of a trinity of continents: Europe, Africa, and Asia. A theology that explained everything in terms of the Bible and the accrued contemplations of medieval scholars was hard pressed to reduce all of the new knowledge to its traditional categories of thought.

Accounts of the native cultures were often highly distorted, alternately exalting and vilifying indigenous customs; nevertheless, they challenged Europeans to think in new ways about their own cultures and their own social structures. It became possible to imagine that one's own cultural patterns were arbitrary and might be changed. The accomplishments of native American civilizations were admired; at

Box 4.2 La Malinche

La Malinche today is a figure of folklore. On the one hand, she is detested as a traitor of her people and as a whore for the Spanish invaders, a beautiful but evil woman who lusted after the white man Cortés's virility and power. On the other hand, she is glorified as Cortés's equal and the first mother of the mestizo Mexican nation. What do we know about the real woman behind these conflicting images?

She was a native speaker of Nahuatl living among the Chontal Mayas of coastal Tabasco, to whom her mother and stepfather had given or sold her (or she may have been stolen into slavery). Her original name was never recorded. She was one of the first Mesoamericans to be baptized a Christian, by Cortés's companion priest Bartolomé de Olmedo during the Spaniards' interactions with the Chontals in 1519. She was given the Spanish name Marina as her Christian, baptismal name. Nahuatl does not have the sound "r," and Nahuatl-speakers changed this sound to "l" when they pronounced Spanish words. The suffix "-tzin" shows respect or affection. Thus, Malintzin means "honored Marina" or "dear Marina." The name "Malinche" originates in a Spanish mispronunciation of this respectful name.

We do not know how old Malintzin was when the Chontal Mayas gave her to Cortés's party, but she was likely still a teenager. She was first given as a servant, and possibly as a forced mistress, to Alonso Hernández de Puertocarrero, one of the leaders of the expedition. But Cortés took her back a few weeks later, when he realized her usefulness as a Maya- and Nahuatl-speaking interpreter. She learned Spanish quickly and was indispensable to Cortés in his negotiations and communications with Nahuatl-speaking enemies and allies.

In serving Cortés, Malintzin was not betraying her "race" or her "people." As readers of this textbook by now realize, the native peoples of Mesoamerica belonged to many different ethnic and linguistic groups, with shifting patterns of alliance and warfare. Nahuatl-speaking peoples were divided into many groups, and some were bitter enemies of the Aztecs. Malintzin, though a native speaker of Nahuatl, was not an Aztec and had no reason to feel any loyalty to the Mexica state in Tenochtitlan. She was more likely to sympathize with the provincial peoples who paid tribute to the Aztecs and who sought, by allying with Cortés, to throw off that burden. Neither she nor the thousands of other native people who supported Cortés knew what Spanish colonial rule would be like. After being a slave, she might have felt empowered by her vital role among the Spaniards and their allies, but she was not seeking revenge.

Malintzin became Cortés's lover and bore him a son, Martín (named after Cortés's father), in 1522, ten months after the fall of Tenochtitlan (by which time he was certainly not the first mestizo baby!). The timing of Martín's birth suggests that the couple might have delayed having sexual relations until after that victory; pregnancy and new motherhood would have hampered Malintzin's ability to campaign with Cortés. Whether Cortés forced her into this relationship or she was willing, we cannot know, but it probably would have been difficult for her to refuse him.

Cortés had a wife in Cuba, who came to Mexico a few months after Martín's birth but who died within months of her arrival. He did not then marry Malintzin; as conqueror of Mexico, he likely envisioned a more elite second marriage. But Cortés did make her part of his household in Mexico City, and he brought her along, in her old job as interpreter, on his 1524 expedition to Honduras. Early in the expedition she married another Spaniard, Juan Jaramillo. When she returned from Honduras in 1526, she was pregnant with Jaramillo's child, a daughter who was baptized María. In 1527, Malintzin died; the cause of her death is not known.

When Martín was six he traveled to Spain with his father, who successfully petitioned the Pope to legitimize the mestizo boy (i.e., have him recognized as his father's legal son). When his father returned to Mexico with a new and high-born wife, Martín stayed behind. He became a knight in the Order of Saint James, married a Spanish noblewoman, and in middle age returned to Mexico, where he was implicated in a plot to oust the Spanish viceroy and put his half-brother, the son of Cortés and his second wife, in power. Martín was tortured and then, banished from Mexico, returned to his military career in Spain. María grew up with her father and his second, Spanish wife. When Jaramillo died and left that wife the *encomienda* (see Chapter 5) Cortés had granted to him and Malintzin upon their marriage, María, by then married to a Spaniard, spent years litigating to establish her claim to the property, eventually winning partial rights to it. She died in 1563. (The preceding account is based on Karttunen 1994; Restall 2003.)

Figure 4.3 Motecuhzoma's emissaries present gifts to Cortés. To Cortés's left stands his Nahua interpreter, Malintzin. *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, folio 8v. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Códice florentino. Facsimile of the Codex Florentinus of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979.

Quetzalcoatl: Rather than reciprocating with rich gifts of his own, Cortés had the messengers shackled and then demonstrated the power of the Spanish guns.

When the emissaries returned to Motecuhzoma, they described the Spaniards' weapons, armor, horses, and personal appearance:

> . . . the guns went off at [the Spaniards'] command, sounding like thunder, causing people actually to swoon, blocking the ears. And when it went off, something like a ball came out from inside, and fire went showering and spitting out. And the smoke that came from it had a very foul stench, striking one in the face. And if they shot at a hill, it seemed to crumble and come apart. And it turned a tree to dust; it seemed to make it vanish, as though someone had conjured it away.
>
> Their war gear was all iron. They clothed their bodies in iron, they put iron on their heads, their swords were iron, their bows were iron, and their shields and lances were iron.
>
> And their deer that carried them were as tall as the roof. And they wrapped their bodies all over; only their faces could be seen, very white. Their faces were the color of limestone and their hair yellow-reddish, though some had black hair. They had long beards, also yellow-reddish (Lockhart 1993:80).

Motecuhzoma sent more emissaries, and wizards found that their magical spells had no effect upon the strangers.

While the native people wondered who the Spaniards were, the Spaniards themselves were beset with internal dissensions. Many in Cortés's party were eager to continue to the Aztec capital, but others were dissatisfied with Cortés, believing that he had exceeded his orders, and still others had fallen ill. Cortés managed to have himself declared leader of the newly founded Spanish town of La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz ("the rich town of the true cross," today's Veracruz), and as such, he claimed that he was no longer subject to Cuba's governor, Velásquez, but instead responsible directly to the king of Spain. The newly established *cabildo* (town council) of Vera Cruz sent emissaries to Spain to lobby for Crown support for Cortés at the same time that Velásquez was asserting new powers for himself on the mainland and continuing his efforts to contain Cortés. With several of Cortés's men threatening to desert and return to Cuba, Cortés took bold steps: He had two of the men executed, and he sank his ships.

Before moving inland, Cortés made his first alliance with a native group, the Totonacs who lived in the town of Cempoala and who were weary of Aztec domination. In August 1519, the expedition began its journey toward Tenochtitlan, accompanied by a large party of Totonacs. Within two weeks Cortés's party was in Tlaxcala, a powerful independent state that had never fallen to the Aztecs (see the account of these events in the Introduction). The Tlaxcalans decided to ally themselves with Cortés, and they provided him with several thousand warriors (Figure 4.4). The party moved next into Cholula, where they were initially received favorably, but it soon became clear that the Cholulans were preparing an ambush. The Spaniards, however, captured Cholulan leaders and then reportedly massacred thousands of Cholula warriors. Subsequently the Cholulans declared their loyalty to the Spanish king.

Shared enmity toward the Aztecs was the most important reason why these and other indigenous polities allied themselves with Cortés. Having themselves been taken by surprise by Spanish weapons and Spanish tactics, they recognized that these could be a potent force against their own enemies. In allying himself with these groups, Cortés began the process that would lead to his ultimate victory. His small party of Spaniards had no hope of conquering Mexico. What he did was organize and oversee a joint uprising of the Aztecs' traditional enemies and subject states that were tired of paying tribute to Aztec overlords.

In early November 1519, Cortés' party, now made up of around 350 Spaniards and several thousand Tlaxcalan warriors, made the last leg of the journey to Tenochtitlan. As they approached the city, Motecuhzoma sent Cortés more rich gifts. But instead of feeling humiliated that they had nothing of like value with which to reciprocate, the Spaniards only longed for more. Their reaction to the golden treasures is described in a native account:

> They gave [the Spaniards] golden banners, banners of precious feathers, and golden necklaces.
>
> And when they had given the things to them, they seemed to smile, to rejoice and be very happy. Like monkeys they grabbed the gold. It was as though their hearts were put to rest, brightened, freshened. For gold was what they greatly thirsted for, they were gluttonous for it, starved for it, piggishly wanting it. They came lifting up the golden ban-

Figure 4.4 Two of Tlaxcala's four principal lords declare their alliance with Cortés. The scrolls in front of the faces represent speech. *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, folio 21v. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Códice florentino. Facsimile of the Codex Florentinus of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979.

> ners, waving them from side to side, showing them to each other. They seemed to babble; what they said to each other was in a babbling tongue. (Lockhart 1993:96, 98)

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of Cortés' companions, later penned a lengthy account of his experiences. When he and his fellows caught their first glimpse of the Basin of Mexico, they thought it looked like something out of Spain's popular romances of chivalry:

> . . . when we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level Causeway going towards Mexico, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and cues [temples] and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream. (Díaz del Castillo 1956:190–191)

On November 8, 1519, Cortés and his party entered the great city of Tenochtitlan, and Cortés and Motecuhzoma met face-to-face (Figure 4.5). Motecuhzoma welcomed the Spaniards, treating them as honored guests and allowing them to reside in the imperial palace of his father, Axayacatl. Despite the later accounts that depict him as extremely fearful, it is unlikely that at this point he felt insecure: At a word from him, his armies could have conquered the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans or driven them out of the city.

Figure 4.5 The first meeting between Motecuhzoma and Cortés. The native artist highlights the crucial role of Malintzin, Cortés's Nahua interpreter. *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, 26r. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Códice florentino. Facsimile of the Codex Florentinus of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979.

Some accounts say that Cortés soon took Motecuhzoma prisoner and held him in the Spaniards' quarters, while he pretended to reside there willingly. This treatment may be untrue, but somehow the presence of the Spaniards and their allies, something between invaders and guests, was tolerated for several months. In April 1520, the situation changed when it was learned that a fleet of eighteen ships sent by Governor Velásquez had landed on the Gulf Coast. The leader, Pánfilo de Narváez, had orders to arrest Cortés and bring him to Cuba to stand trial. Cortés's response was to try to win over Narváez and his men to his side through a combination of bribery and armed attack. The latter was accomplished when a force, led by Cortés, attacked Narváez's men as they slept. Narváez was captured, and his men surrendered to Cortés, thus increasing the size of Cortés's force.

Meanwhile, in Tenochtitlan, Pedro de Alvarado, whom Cortés had left in charge, was losing control of the situation. Alvarado flew into a rage upon hearing of the celebration of a traditional Aztec festival in honor of Huitzilopochtli that was to include human sacrifice, even though he had initially given permission for the ceremony to

take place. Alvarado ordered his men to attack the defenseless participants, and hundreds of Mexica were massacred. This act prompted retaliation against the Spaniards: There were attempts to burn the palace where they were housed, and several Spaniards were killed. At this moment, Cortés and his entourage, which included several thousand Tlaxcalan warriors, returned to Tenochtitlan. The Mexica allowed them to join Alvarado, but attacks on the Spanish compound continued.

In the midst of growing tension, members of the Mexica ruling elite, who had long opposed Motecuhzoma's cooperation with the Spaniards, decided to depose Motecuhzoma and elect his brother Cuitlahuac to succeed him. In late June, Motecuhzoma was killed. Spanish accounts claim that he was stoned by his former subjects; native accounts claim that he was murdered by the Spaniards. The situation for the Spaniards was grim, and Cortés decided to retreat (Figure 4.6).

The night of the Spaniards' retreat, usually identified as June 30, 1520, has come to be called the *noche triste* (the night of sorrows) because of the high casualty figures on both sides of the conflict. As the Spaniards and their Tlaxcalan allies attempted to flee the island of Tenochtitlan on the causeways, they were attacked by Aztec warriors. Many were killed, and many others drowned in the lake, some of them weighed

Figure 4.6 The *noche triste*. The Spaniards, with their Tlaxcalan allies, begin their flight from the city. A man standing atop a temple and a woman drawing water from a canal raise the alarm. *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, 42v. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Códice Florentino. Facsimile of the Codex Florentinus of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979

down by the gold they had looted from Motecuhzoma's treasury. What was left of Cortés's troops made their way back to the safety of Tlaxcala.

In the following months, Cortés strengthened his position east of the Basin of Mexico by carrying out raids and making new allies. Several hundred Spanish reinforcements arrived from Jamaica and Cuba, and a garrison founded along the road to Veracruz established control over routes to the south. By late December, Cortés and his troops were making the final preparations for an assault on Tenochtitlan. By now Cortés had a force of over 700 Spaniards and an estimated 75,000 Tlaxcalan allies as well as eighty-six horses and fifteen cannon.

In the meantime, the people of Tenochtitlan may have experienced their first encounter with an Old World infectious disease: smallpox (Figure 4.7). It is not entirely certain that this epidemic struck in 1520. The accounts of Cortés and other conquistadors do not mention it; it is possible that the epidemic did not occur until after Spanish control was established the following year. However, the principal na-

Figure 4.7 The smallpox epidemic. A woman, possibly a doctor, attempts to comfort a sick man; other sufferers lie helpless on their sleeping-mats. *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, 53v. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Códice Florentino. Facsimile of the Codex Florentinus of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979.

tive history of the conquest, as well as other native documents and an important chronicle written by a Spanish priest in 1541, place the smallpox outbreak in 1520 after the *noche triste* retreat and before Cortés's final campaign. In addition to causing population losses, the epidemic could have had a severely demoralizing effect on the survivors, who had never before experienced widespread suffering from infectious disease. The native chronicle gives this account of the disease's progress:

> They could no longer walk about, but lay in their dwellings and sleeping places, no longer able to move or stir. They were unable to change position, to stretch out on their sides or face down, or raise their heads. And when they made a motion, they called out loudly. The pustules that covered people caused great desolation; very many people died of them, and many just starved to death; starvation reigned, and no one took care of others any longer.
>
> On some people, the pustules appeared only far apart, and they did not suffer greatly, nor did many of them die of it. But many people's faces were spoiled by it, their faces and noses were made rough. Some lost an eye or were blinded. (Lockhart 1993:182)

This account is an accurate description of how smallpox afflicts its victims. The most severely ill, those with a great many pustules, are unable to move about. If a whole family or neighborhood is stricken, such that no one is able to tend to the ill, people are as likely to die of thirst or starvation as of the virus itself. People with relatively few pustules are likely to survive but may be left scarred by pockmarks or even blind.

The new Mexica ruler, Cuitlahuac, also died between the *noche triste* and the Spanish assault. It has often been assumed that he died of smallpox, but no source states this cause explicitly. Cuitlahuac was succeeded by Cuauhtemoc, a nephew of Motecuhzoma selected for his prowess in war. Cuauhtemoc led a valiant resistance against Cortés and his allies. Cortés's strategy for the final assault on Tenochtitlan involved first subduing settlements along the lakeshore, which effectively isolated Tenochtitlan. A blockade kept fresh water and food from reaching the island city. People had to drink the briny water of the lake, and when their food stores ran out, they were reduced to eating such things as marsh grass and worms. The final blow was struck through a combined force by lake and land. Spaniards and Tlaxcalans who approached Tenochtitlan by foot along the causeways were aided by thirteen sailing vessels that had been constructed under Spanish supervision, disassembled, and then reconstructed on the shore of Lake Texcoco (Figure 4.8).

The final battle for Tenochtitlan lasted for almost three months. Differences between Spanish and native military tactics, as well as the element of surprise fostered by Spanish horses, huge dogs, cannon, and guns (which were so clumsy and inaccurate that they caused relatively few actual casualties), had favored the Spaniards in their earlier battles against native groups. The goal of native warfare was not to kill or maim the enemy upon the battlefield but to seize uninjured prisoners to take home as captives. The native soldiers fought one-on-one, seeking to display their individual prowess rather than to maximize the other side's casualties. In contrast, the Spaniards fought as a closed and, to native warriors, impenetrable rank, while indiscriminately killing and wounding warriors and even unarmed civilians. On an open battlefield, a small group of Spaniards was able to vanquish a much larger native army.

Figure 4.8 The siege of Tenochtitlan. The Spaniards attack from their ships, while Mexica soldiers fight back from canoes and from the city's walls and rooftops. *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, 56r. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Códice florentino. Facsimile of the Codex Florentinus of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979.

The conquest of the island city, however, posed a greater challenge. In the narrow streets there was no space for Spanish fighters to close ranks. Horses had limited footing. It was difficult to move cannon around, and equally difficult to find clear targets amid the tangle of streets, canals, and buildings. Mexica warriors could carry out guerrilla-style attacks on isolated parties of Spaniards and their allies, then disappear along the familiar alleyways (Figure 4.9). They also learned quickly how to dodge cannon fire and how to kill horses with their obsidian-bladed swords. Captured Spaniards—and even horses—were sacrificed atop the great pyramid and their heads displayed on a rack, to the distress of fellow Spaniards.

Figure 4.9 Fighting in the city streets: Mexica warriors unhorse and kill a Spanish soldier. *Florentine Codex*, Book 12, 58r. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*, Códice florentino. Facsimile of the Codex Florentinus of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979

To conquer Tenochtitlan, Cortés and his allies had virtually to level it. They proceeded bit by bit, tearing down buildings and filling in canals in order to provide a flat surface on which they could move freely and challenge their enemies to open combat. The city's defenders, weakened by the lack of food and fresh water, resisted as long as they could but were gradually driven back. Finally, on August 13, 1521, the day One Serpent in the native calendar, Cuauhtemoc surrendered to Cortés. As starving, ragged people fled the city, Spaniards searched their bodies for valuables and selected women to rape. Cortés's first act as victor was to demand that all remaining gold be brought to him.

With the defeat of the Aztec capital, virtually all of the territories of the Aztec empire also were now under de facto Spanish rule. The native allies who joined with Cortés in order to free themselves from Mexica rule would now find themselves subject to overlords whose demands were even more burdensome.

THE CONQUEST OF MICHOACÁN

Once the Aztec empire was firmly under Spanish control, the Spaniards began their expansion to other areas of Mesoamerica. To the west and north of the Basin of Mexico, in what is today the state of Michoacán, was the powerful Tarascan or Purepecha state. From their capital at Tzintzuntzan on Lake Patzcuaro, the Tarascans maintained

an independent polity that had successfully resisted every attempt by the Aztecs to impinge upon its territory (for details, see Chapters 1 and 2).

Before any official contacts between Tarascans and Spaniards took place, a smallpox epidemic hit Michoacán, and one of its first victims was the Tarascan ruler or Cazonci, Zuangua. He was succeeded by one of his sons, Tzintzicha Tangachoan, and as the new Cazonci, this young man was faced with difficult decisions about how he would respond to the Spaniards. The first face-to-face contacts between Spaniards and the Tarascans took place in February 1521, before Tenochtitlan had fallen. A year later Cristóbal de Olid was sent by Cortés to explore in the region. Initial contacts between the Tarascans and the Spaniards were friendly, although Olid ultimately failed to subdue the region. In 1525, the Cazonci converted to Christianity, formally accepted Spanish domination, and requested that friars be sent to Michoacán. The Cazonci apparently hoped that peaceful acceptance of Spanish rule would result in his maintaining some degree of autonomy. But this was not to be the case.

In 1528, Nuño de Guzmán, who would earn a reputation as one of the most ruthless conquistadors and treasure-seekers in New Spain, took the office of President of the Audiencia of Mexico, the colony's first ruling body. Early on, he began pressing the Cazonci to turn over more gold and silver, and he had the Cazonci imprisoned in Mexico City on more than one occasion, holding him for ransom. But what must have at one time seemed an inexhaustible source of gold and silver was now in short supply. In 1529 to 1530, Guzmán organized a large expedition, made up of both Spaniards and Indian allies, to bring Michoacán more firmly under Spanish control.

Guzmán's expedition quickly made its way from Mexico City to Tzintzuntzan, leaving looted and burned towns and tortured victims in its wake. Shortly after arriving in the Tarascan capital, Guzmán took the Cazonci prisoner, and he was put on trial for a number of offenses, the most serious being interference with the *encomienda* system and ordering the killing of several Spaniards. After being tortured by Guzmán, the Cazonci confessed guilt. His sentence was harsh: He was to be dragged through town behind a horse and burned at the stake. With the death of the Cazonci, the great Tarascan kingdom ended.

THE MAYAN AREA

A situation quite different from that of Central Mexico confronted the Spaniards in the Mayan region, where no single group dominated large territories (see Chapter 3). Within the Mayan area were numerous small polities that were often at war against each other. Here, the Spaniards faced a more protracted battle. It was simply not possible to gain control of the Mayan area except through a series of campaigns that could subjugate each region one by one. This process took over 175 years.

In Chiapas initial contact with the Mayas there may have occurred as early as 1522, but it was not until 1524 that a small group of Spaniards, led by Luis Marín, made a concerted effort to bring the Tzotzil Mayas and the neighboring Chiapanecs, a non-Mayan people, under Spanish control. Although the Spaniards apparently

achieved some military success, their failure to establish a Spanish community in the region rendered any military victories meaningless.

The definitive conquest of the area occurred during the 1527 to 1528 campaigns of Diego Mazariegos, in which the Zoques, the Chiapanecs, and the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Mayas were pacified. By 1535, a Spanish town, Ciudad Real (today San Cristóbal de Las Casas), was established in Chiapas, and within a few years the outlying areas also were under Spanish control.

The Yucatán Peninsula was not brought under Spanish control until 1547, although initial contacts between Spaniards and Mayas there had taken place several years before Cortés's arrival in Central Mexico. Early expeditions were received with hostility and did not succeed in establishing any permanent Spanish presence. There is good evidence that the peninsula was hit by a series of epidemics before the first party of conquistadors, under Francisco de Montejo, arrived in 1527. Initially, Montejo and his men were received in peace, but within months they met with considerable opposition. After two years Montejo left to renew supplies and enlist more men.

Montejo's second campaign took place between 1531 and 1534. This time, he concentrated more on the west coast of the peninsula. After some initial successes, this campaign, too, met with defeat. Toward the end of the campaign, word reached the expedition of the riches to be found in Peru. By this time it was clear that there was no gold in Yucatán, and most of Montejo's men abandoned him to go to Peru. Now left vulnerable to attacks by the Mayas, Montejo was forced to withdraw.

The final campaign to "pacify" Yucatán was carried out by Montejo's son, Francisco de Montejo the Younger, from 1540 to 1547. Although much of the Yucatán Peninsula was under Spanish control by 1545, uprisings occurred for the next two years. Even then, Spanish control was not complete, for many Indians fled south to the Petén. The Mayas in the Petén would successfully resist Spanish domination for another 150 years.

The Spanish invasion of Guatemala was preceded by a smallpox epidemic in 1520. Three years later, in December 1523, Pedro de Alvarado was commissioned by Cortés to lead a group of over 400 Spanish soldiers and hundreds of Tlaxcalan warriors south to Guatemala. En route Alvarado and his troops successfully subdued Mixtecs in Oaxaca, Zapotecs in Tehuantepec, and Mixe-Zoque groups in Soconusco.

As in Central Mexico, the Spaniards were aided in Guatemala by a polarized situation that had been created by the existence of a powerful and expansionist state ruled by the K'iches. The K'iche' Mayas had made many enemies during the course of expansion; by 1523, their power was waning, and many groups that had once been subjugated by them were willing to join with the Spaniards to ensure their defeat.

Alvarado's first encounters with the K'iche' warriors came in early 1524 in battles on the Pacific piedmont and in the highlands of western Guatemala. During hostilities near Xelaju (today Quetzaltenango), the K'iche' leader, Tekum, was killed (Figure 4.10). A passage from a K'iche' document, the *Títulos de la Casa Ixquin-Nehaib*, describes in vivid detail the personal battle between Tekum and Alvarado. Told from

Figure 4.10 Conquest of Quetzaltenango, the place where the K'iche' Mayan leader, Tekum, was killed by the Spaniards. From the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. Guatemala, CA: Dirección General de Cartografía (DGC), Editorial del Ejército, 1963.

a K'iche' point of view, this version casts the encounter in mythological terms. In attacking Alvarado, Tekum is transformed into a valiant eagle; in death he becomes a resplendent quetzal bird whose beauty astonishes the Spanish leader. Even in defeat the native hero is glorified (see Box 4.3 for the full text on the death of Tekum from the K'iche' perspective).

After this defeat, the K'iches invited the Spaniards to return with them to their capital, Q'umarkaaj or Utatlán. Once there, Alvarado realized that the Spaniards had been led into a trap, and he and his men slipped away, taking several K'iche' lords prisoner. Alvarado then fought to bring the area surrounding Utatlán under control, and Utatlán itself was burned. Here the Spaniards were aided by the Kaqchikel Mayas, enemies of the K'iches.

Box 4.3 The Death of Tekum

The account to follow is based on a Spanish version of the original K'iche' Mayan text.

> . . . this captain [Tekum] brought many people from many towns, ten thousand Indians in all, all came armed with their bows and arrows, slings, lances and other arms. And Captain Tekum, before leaving his town and in front of the chiefs, demonstrated his courage and his spirit and he put on wings with which he flew and his two arms and legs were covered with feathers and he wore a crown, and on his chest he wore a very large emerald which looked like a mirror, and he wore another on his forehead. And another on his back. He looked very gallant. This captain flew like an eagle, he was a great nobleman and a great sorcerer. . . .
>
> . . . [after a battle of many hours] the Spaniards killed many Indians, there was no count of those whom they killed, not a single Spaniard died, only the Indians who had been brought by Captain Tekum and much blood ran from all the Indians. . . . And then Captain Tekum flew up, he came like an eagle full of feathers that grew from his body, they were not artificial; he wore wings which also sprang from his body and he wore three crowns, one was of gold, another of pearls and another of diamonds and emeralds.
>
> This Captain Tekum came with the intention of killing Tunadiu [Alvarado] who came on horseback and he hit the horse instead of the Adelantado and he cut off the head of the horse with one lance. It was not a lance of iron but of shiny stone and this captain had placed a spell on it. And when he saw that it was not the Adelantado but the horse who had died he returned to fly overhead. . . . Then the Adelantado awaited him with his lance and he impaled this Captain Tekum with it. . . .
>
> . . . [Captain Tekum] appeared covered with quetzal feathers and very beautiful plumes, for which reason this town of Quetzaltenango ["Quetzal fortress"] was given its name, because here is where the death of this Captain Tekum came to pass. And immediately the Adelantado called to all his soldiers to come and see the beauty of the quetzal Indian. Then the Adelantado told his soldiers that he had never seen another Indian as gallant and as noble and covered with such beautiful quetzal feathers, in Mexico, nor in Tlaxcala, nor in any of the towns that he had conquered. . . .
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> And as the rest of the Indians saw that the Spaniards had killed their captain, they fled, and immediately the Adelantado Don Pedro de Alvarado, seeing that the soldiers of this Captain Tekum were fleeing, said that they also should die, and the Spanish soldiers pursued the Indians and caught up with them and killed all of them. There were so many Indians that they killed that they made a river of blood . . . all the water became blood and the day became red because of the great bloodshed that day. (Recinos 1984:89–94)

With the conquest of the K'iches complete, Alvarado founded the first Spanish capital in Guatemala at the Kaqchikel city of Iximché on July 25, 1524. At first the Kaqchikels welcomed the Spaniards, but Alvarado's increasing demands soon led the Kaqchikel to revolt. In fact, a general revolt against the Spaniards took place in 1526. One by one, the other Mayan groups of the Guatemalan highlands fell to the Spanish invaders. The Tzutujils, the Mams, the Poqomams, the Ch'ortis, and others were all under Spanish control within a few years.

For almost 200 years after the first contact between the Spaniards and the Mayas of the Yucatán Peninsula, the dense forests of the Petén served as a zone of refuge for

Mayas fleeing Spanish rule in the northern part of the peninsula. In fact, the movement of peoples between northern Yucatán and the Petén had begun well before the arrival of the Spaniards (see Chapters 1 and 2). The Itzas were one of the groups who, according to native tradition, fled to the Petén lakes region after the demise of Chichen Itza and/or Mayapan. There they established a capital, Noh Peten, on the island where the modern town of Flores lies today. In the sixteenth century, the Itza polity was composed of a confederacy of four territorial groups, with the Canek lineage in control of the most powerful group.

The Spaniards showed little interest in the Petén during the sixteenth century, but several attempts were made in the seventeenth century to bring the Itzas under Spanish rule. The Spaniards were not successful until 1697, and the fascinating story of the final conquest of the Itza is worth recounting.

For many years the influence of Mayan prophecies in the conquest of the Itzas has received attention. It has been argued that the Mayan view of cyclical history meant that certain events were destined to be repeated at specific dates within calendrical cycles. The year 1697 has long been thought to be one such date, a date that was destined to bring political collapse. According to this view, the conquest of 1697 was inevitable; the Itzas simply surrendered knowing that any attempt to resist the Spaniards would be futile. Recent research by ethnohistorian Grant Jones has led him to call into question this interpretation, suggesting that the situation was, in fact, more complex.

Jones does not deny that the Itzas were influenced by prophecies and a cyclical view of history but argues that, in the case of the events of 1697, the Spaniards, in particular a certain Franciscan priest, took advantage of their knowledge of Mayan beliefs to try to negotiate a peaceful surrender. Subsequent events make it clear that, contrary to some reports, these efforts did not succeed.

The Itzas put up a valiant fight, and it was only after the Spaniards slaughtered huge numbers of Indians that they succeeded in taking the city. One report states that the Spaniards killed "such an innumerable quantity that the dead bodies of the Indians appeared as an island in the lake."

If the Itzas did not surrender to the Spaniards peacefully, then what was the role of prophecy in these events? Jones suggests that internal struggles within the confederacy had disrupted the existing balance of power in which Canek (leader of the ruling lineage) enjoyed a dominant position. The year 1697 was, in fact, seen by the Itzas as a year of political collapse foretold by the prophecies, but it was interpreted as the time when the local ruling dynasty would change, not the time to submit to Spanish rule. Canek's lineage had ruled over the Itzas for 256 years, which constituted an entire calendrical cycle, and rival lineages sought a change of command. Canek himself, it seems, had agreed to surrender in the hope that the Spaniards would let him remain in power as governor. But his strongest rivals had effectively seized power, and they were the ones who put up the resistance to the Spanish army. Thus, despite the decades of cautious negotiations aimed at a peaceful surrender, the last independent Mesoamerican kingdom came to a violent end. Canek, his hopes of alliance shattered, ended up a prisoner in Guatemala City.