

The HISTORY of the

CONQUEST of NEW SPAIN



By **BERNAL DÍAZ del CASTILLO**

Edited and with an introduction by

DAVÍD CARRASCO

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with additional essays by

ROLENA ADORNO, DAVÍD CARRASCO,

SANDRA CYPRESS, AND KAREN VIEIRA POWERS

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*I dedicate this book on the “conquest” of the New World
to two great teachers, Carlos Fuentes and William Tribby.*



*Carlos Fuentes taught me through his writings and
friendship that Tenochtitlan was built in the
true image of gigantic heaven.*



*William Tribby taught me through his classes the
deep meaning of the Theater of the Absurd.*



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INTRODUCTION
*The Dream of the Conquistador
and a Book of Desire and Destruction*

DAVÍD CARRASCO



The dream of the conquistador—his astonishment—was quickly converted into the indigenous world’s nightmare. Of the enchantment that was Tenochtitlan no stone upon stone remained. The dreamer was converted into the destroyer. But in between we should not forget he was also the man of desire; complex desire for fame and gold, for space and energy, for imagination and faith.

—CARLOS FUENTES, *This I Believe: An A to Z of a Life*

This abridgment provides a new understanding of some of the political and religious forces that gave life and direction to the great cultural encounter between Spain and the Americas known as the “conquest of Mexico.” It does so in three ways. First, this abridgment includes important passages, events, and scenes from Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s original *La verdadera historia de la conquista de la Nueva España* (*True History of the Conquest of New Spain*) never before included in other abridgments.* These inclusions reveal some of the travels, battles, failures, and achievements of the Spaniards before and after they took control of the Aztec

*Extended italic passages are summaries by the editor of sections of the original manuscript not included in this version. Notes within brackets (unless italicized) were incorporated into the text from footnotes in the original English translation by Maudslay.

capital of Tenochtitlan in August of 1521. They help give us access to the conquistadores' dreams for land and fame and aid us in reading more clearly this book of desire and destruction. The passages also deepen our knowledge about some of the ways indigenous peoples struggled to maintain their sense of identity and place in the oppressive and tumultuous early months and years of colonial society in Mexico. Secondly, in order to help the reader get below the polemical surface of Bernal Díaz's narrative, this volume includes eight short, focused interpretive essays designed to help understand (a) the role of indigenous women and colonial sexuality in the conquest, (b) the political and economic purposes behind Díaz del Castillo's narrative, (c) the religious cosmology of the ceremonial capital of Tenochtitlan, (d) ritual sacrifice and cannibalism, and (e) the identification of Spaniards as returning gods. One purpose of these essays is to alert readers to the complexity and diversity of several indigenous societies *before* the Spaniards arrived as well as the interlocking cultures and histories that went into motion beginning in 1492 and especially during the encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica. Thirdly, this abridgment contains a series of maps designed to help the reader visualize the routes of the conquistadores, the variegated terrain of central and southern Mexico, the organization of indigenous settlements, the war for the Mexica lake capital of Tenochtitlan, as well as the disastrous Spanish expedition to Guatemala. Let me explain how my readings of other abridgments led to this publication and why I believe it makes important and innovative contributions to our understanding of the wars and cultural encounters in New Spain as narrated by the Spanish soldier.

Díaz del Castillo's Book as Initiatory Reading

When I began to teach the Mesoamerican Civilizations course at Harvard University in 2002, I discovered that two English language abridgments of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *True History* were the most widely read accounts about the European encounter with the peoples of the Americas on college campuses. The Spanish conquistador's long, though truncated,

narrative was serving as a kind of “initiatory reading,” a beginning point of comprehension for thousands of students who wanted to learn about the Spanish conquest as well as the indigenous New World civilizations and the transformations and disasters that befell them with the coming of the Spaniards. Its significance as a literary tour de force extended far beyond the student reader. For instance, Francisco Rico, scholarly editor of numerous medieval classics, included Bernal Díaz’s *True History* in a list of the greatest works of Spanish literature along with *The Song of the Cid*, *Don Quixote*, *Amadís of Gaul*, and *Celestina*. When I asked students what they took away from the book, they said they now had an initial understanding of “where and how the ‘Americas’ began,” and “how the Spaniards managed through cunning and viciousness, in two years, the conquest of the greatest empire of the New World,”¹ or “what a shrewd and effective leader Hernán Cortés really was” and that “the Aztecs were both civilized and barbaric in their cultural and religious practices.” But these students also asked for guidance in reading more deeply into Bernal Díaz’s story to gain a fuller understanding of the nature of Aztec and Maya cities, the role of women and sexuality in the conquest, the scope of the role of indigenous warriors in the Spanish success, the life of Malintzin (better known as Doña Marina or Malinche) who became the translator and mistress of Cortés, the theology of both the Spaniards and the Aztecs, the practices of sacrifice and cannibalism in Mesoamerica, the technological differences in European and Mesoamerican cultures, the narrator’s justification of Spanish cruelty, the indigenous points of view about the encounter with the Europeans, and most importantly, “what happened to the city, the Aztecs, and the Spaniards after Cuauhtemoc surrendered to Cortés on August 14, 1521.”

As my students and I worked through the most widely read abridgments, namely Alfred Maudslay’s 1927 *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (reprinted several times) and J. M. Cohen’s 1963 Penguin Classic *The Conquest of New Spain*, two serious problems arose. The first is the lack of any interpretive aids that enable the reader to understand the cultural complexities and historical setting of the book or the author’s narrative

purposes in writing it.² Instead, readers were fed a series of distorted “blurbs” on the cover and one-dimensional introductions that made Díaz del Castillo not only the author of the story but its hero as well. There is a literary and political alliance between these blurbs, introductions, and editors that encourages the readers to swallow lock, stock, and barrel Díaz del Castillo’s views of Spanish overall cultural superiority and his religious and political justifications for the transformative and destructive human events of 1517–38. These previous abridgments continued to celebrate the *veracity* of Bernal Díaz without alerting the reader to valuable critical scholarship that discussed his craft *and* craftiness in composing his narrative.³ The second problem is that the editors chose to end their abridgments nearly two hundred pages before Bernal Díaz ended his story, that is, at the moment of the fall of the Aztec capital to the Spaniards.⁴ This ending strategy gives the false impression of a final, sweeping, dramatic “mission accomplished” victory by the Spaniards over the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. Díaz del Castillo did not stop his story with this event and neither should we, regardless of what other subtractions from the longer original we make. Let me address both of these problems in sequence.

The Literary Alliance between Abridgments and Bernal Díaz’s True History

The introductions and blurbs present the author and the work not as a complex, paradoxical, and often contradictory man and book, but more as an old righteous soldier looking back over the years with a slightly flawed memory, who told it, for the most part, like it really was. Bernal Díaz appears, even before you read him, almost in the spirit of Miguel de Cervantes (minus the humor and satire), recording the high adventures of how he and his Spanish comrades courageously righted the wrongs of indigenous cruelty and idolatry in the service of their sovereign ruler Charles V.⁵ One influential commentator, J. M. Cohen, who produced an otherwise compelling abridged translation, goes so far as to write, “For Bernal Diaz was singularly free from the temptation to pervert his story in the interests of affections or feuds or personal vanity. To have marched

with Cortés was for him sufficient glory. He did not need to increase his reputation or self-esteem by tricks of the pen.”⁶ Nothing could be further from the truth, but this naive and idealized attitude is what prepares the reader to read the text. The famous British historian Hugh Thomas continues the illusion when, in the most recent publication of an English language abridgment, he takes a large side step away from Díaz del Castillo’s political and economic motives and narrative complications by stating, in his most critical moment, that “on occasion Bernal Díaz’s memory is at fault.”⁷ The *New York Times* announced that Bernal Díaz had given us “the most complete and trustworthy of the chronicles of the Conquest” while the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* claimed it was “the most reliable narrative that exists . . . of the actors in that golden age.” The reputable *Library Journal* swooned that it was “one of the most thrilling adventure stories of all time” and “a joy to read,” while another review said it was an “artless depiction of the atrocities.”⁸

The problem for students was that as they read through the stirring, repetitious, and sensational text they became suspicious of this triumphant, single-minded framing of the book and its celebrated “reliability,” “completeness,” and artless presentation of the “true history.” Students could see that the author, while in fact writing one of the few books of the sixteenth century that is still readable in the twentieth,⁹ had artfully distorted scenes of meetings and speeches between Spaniards and indigenous leaders, invented the numbers of the wounded and the dead always favoring Spanish valor and success, and not understood what indigenous people were saying or doing on many occasions even while claiming he knew what local elites were actually thinking about the Spaniards. These inventions and distortions are interwoven with invaluable eyewitness descriptions and detailed discussions of people, clothes, temples, gestures, landscapes, battles, ceremonies, and settlements, which make the work rich and compelling, but also complex and problematic.

We should not be surprised that Bernal Díaz used polemics and passions to inform his writing, but the most widely read abridgments fail to alert the readers to these narrative complications. For example, neither

editors nor introductions acknowledge that Bernal Díaz purposely downplayed the powerful and indispensable role of native warriors in Spanish victories even while he acknowledged the heroism of both native enemies and allies. Readers are then shocked when they learn what Ross Hassig points out so well in his excellent study of the conquest, namely that after Cortés was beaten by the Tlaxcalans, who then made peace with him, “he was always accompanied by far larger allied forces, such that his own Spaniards constituted no more than 10 percent of the army’s force.”¹⁰ This fact, that up to 90 percent of the army that attacked the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was made up of indigenous warriors, indicates that the so-called conquest of Mexico was as much a rebellion of rival city-states against Moctezuma’s capital. The readers of other abridgments are given little indication of this powerful political ambiguity. Even a casual reading of the abridgments shows that Díaz del Castillo was carrying on polemical arguments with at least two other books (the *Letters of Cortés* and *The History of the Conquest of México* by Francisco López de Gómara) and also energetically pushing a certain theological justification for the vicious destruction of towns and people. Students were taken aback by the detailed and callous descriptions of violence committed by the Maya and the Mexica, but they also were troubled by Díaz del Castillo’s justifications of Spanish brandings, sexual abuse, exemplary punishments, and massacres. These violent practices and theological attitudes, which make up significant elements of the narrative, call out for contextual information and interpretive aid. Furthermore, none of the previous abridgments seriously alerts the readers to Bernal Díaz’s economic agenda for writing the book; that is, he wrote it largely to protect his right to keep his *encomienda* in Guatemala, when the Spanish Crown was moving to eliminate the practice. Also, students can finish these abridgments without knowing anything meaningful about the debate within Spanish society concerning whether the “conquest” was a just war or carried out in ways that violated Christian values. Yet this debate greatly influenced Bernal Díaz’s thinking and writing of the book and appears in camouflaged references throughout.¹¹

Obviously, some aids were needed for the general reader to enter into a more informed, balanced, and critical understanding of this document, its author, and the tumultuous events of the early sixteenth century in Mesoamerica.¹² The purpose of these new excerpts, essays, and maps is, in part, to illuminate some of the paradoxes of the conquest (referred to but disguised in Bernal Díaz's narrative) and invite the readers to work with contradictory ideas in mind rather than drift toward simplistic conclusions about the wars of conquest and rebellion in Mexico and Guatemala.

The Problem of the Triumphant Ending

The second problem arose when I compared the Maudslay and Cohen abridgments with the much, much longer Spanish original (known as the Guatemala manuscript) and the complete 1908 Maudslay English translation. Maudslay's 1927 abridgment ends right at the moment of Cuauhtemoc's surrender to Cortés at Tlatelolco in 1521, while Cohen goes just one chapter further into the original narrative. Both abridgments leave the reader with a sense of Spanish triumph and Aztec collapse. This ending strategy by Maudslay, who had translated the entire Spanish manuscript and who knew that the story went on for another book and a half, also gives emphasis to the notion that the Aztecs were to blame for the destruction of their city. A passage on the last page of his abridgment tells us that Cortés "wished that Guatemoc [Cuauhtemoc] had made peace of his own free will before the city had been so far destroyed and so many of his Mexicans had died." The Maudslay version then ends in the rain with the defeated ruler and his entourage given "the best that at that time there was in the camp to eat," followed by a grand thanks to "Our Lord Jesus Christ and Our Lady the Virgin Santa Maria, His Blessed Mother. Amen." This final scene of Spanish generosity and devotion to Jesus and the Virgin Mary serves to seal, in the reader's mind, the perception of a divinely ordained triumph of the Europeans.

As the additional passages included in this abridgment show, Díaz del Castillo's subsequent narrative of over 150 pages depicts not so much moments of divine grace or Spanish generosity and triumph, but

disorientation and chaos, infighting among the Spaniards (sometimes humorous), the murder by hanging of Cuauhtemoc and Cortés's subsequent depression, Spanish defeats and brandings of natives in Oaxaca, extreme brutality in Chiapas, catastrophe in Santiago Atitlan, the death of Pedro de Alvarado, the ceremonial arrival of twelve Franciscans to officially initiate Christianity, and the theatrical transformation of the center of Mexico-Tenochtitlan into a public stage-play designed on the Spanish fantasy of Roman conquests! The present abridgment includes a modest but revealing series of new excerpts that give the reader a fuller picture of the fate of Spaniards, Aztecs, Maya, and other indigenous peoples following Cuauhtemoc's surrender at Tlatelolco in August of 1521. The inclusion of these sections of the original, plus the interpretive essays to be discussed later in this introduction, enables the reader to finish the text not with a sense of triumph or defeat but knowing that a colonial process of domination, resistance, asymmetrical negotiation, and change was under way.

Readers of Bernal Díaz will be greatly impressed with the descriptions of landscape and geography as well as the territories organized by Tlaxcalan, Maya, and Aztec city-states. Díaz's memories are intimately tied to the coastlines, valleys, lakes, mountain passes, and diverse ecologies that Cortés's forces crossed and in which their dramatic encounters with indigenous peoples and other Spaniards continued to take place after the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521. In a profound way, the story of the conquest of Mexico is a story of the crossing, invasion, battles for, and the political reorganization of huge and valued territories and borderlands. Therefore, this volume includes attractive and instructive maps that complement the narrative pathways of the various landfalls, marches, visits to towns, battles and alliances, retreats, sieges, conquests, and defeats. These maps, artistically presented by the University of New Mexico Press, illuminate further the territorial organizations of these parts of Mesoamerica as well as the geopolitical achievements of the Spaniards.

Bernal Díaz's Two Wars: Soldier and Writer

Bernal Díaz thus understood that, regarding the conquest of Mexico, there was a second war to be fought and won; it would take place at court and it had to be engaged on the battlefield of the documentary record and especially written history.

—ROLENA ADORNO, “Bernal Díaz del Castillo:
Soldier, Eyewitness, Polemicist”

As Rolena Adorno writes elsewhere in this volume, Bernal Díaz actually fought in two wars in Mesoamerica: one as a foot soldier in Cortés's troops and the second in the writing of his *True History*. A basic outline of Díaz del Castillo's life and the life of his grand narrative will help the reader understand some of the cultural and political complexities of both wars and this abridgment.

He was born around 1495 in the great market town of Medina del Campo in Castile into a middle-class family. The visitor to Medina del Campo today will discover that just off the huge main square there is a short street named for him at the end of which is a corner building with a plaque that states it was the birthplace of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the conquistador. As of this writing, the building houses a public Internet café. While we know little about his life before he left Spain in 1514, he states in the first sentence of his narrative that his father, Francisco Díaz del Castillo, known as “the Graceful,” was a *regidor* or councilor of the town. We know that Medina del Campo was a political and cultural crossroads in this part of Spain. Queen Isabel the Catholic had a special affection for this town, and, during one of the royal tours of the kingdom, she died in an apartment on the main square in 1504 when the future conquistador was about ten years old.

This huge square served as a magnet for traders and goods that were linked to trade routes beyond Spain and its neighbors. When Bernal saw the huge Aztec market at Tlatelolco, it reminded him, with its bustle,