

Spanish Contact

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Spain's expeditions in the New World did not end with Christopher Columbus. Following Columbus's landing on Hispaniola in 1492, Spain embarked upon a massive project to both explore and conquer the land and the peoples of the Americas. This tutorial covers Spain's colonial project, including discussions of Spain's interactions with the Aztec Empire in Central America, the Inca Empire in South America, and the Native cultures of southern North America.

Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Spain Expands its Colonial Reach

Columbus's landing in the Americas opened a floodgate of Spanish exploration. Inspired by tales of rivers of gold and timid, malleable native people, later Spanish explorers, also known as **conquistadores**, were relentless in their quest for land, gold, and the conversion of Native peoples to Catholicism.



TERM TO KNOW

Conquistador

A Spanish conqueror in the New World, motivated by a search for wealth, national glory, and the desire to spread Catholicism.

One of these conquistadores was **Hernán Cortés**. He hoped to gain hereditary privilege for his family, tribute payments and labor from indigenous people, and an annual pension for his service to the Crown. Cortés arrived on Hispaniola in 1504 and took part in the conquest of that island. In anticipation of winning his own honor and riches, Cortés later explored the Central American mainland, specifically the Yucatán Peninsula. In 1519, with approximately 600 men, horses, and cannons, Cortés moved northward near present-day Veracruz to invade the Aztec (Mexico) Empire.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Hernán Cortés

Spanish conquistador who defeated the Aztec ruler Moctezuma and claimed the city of Tenochtitlán for Spain in the 16th century.

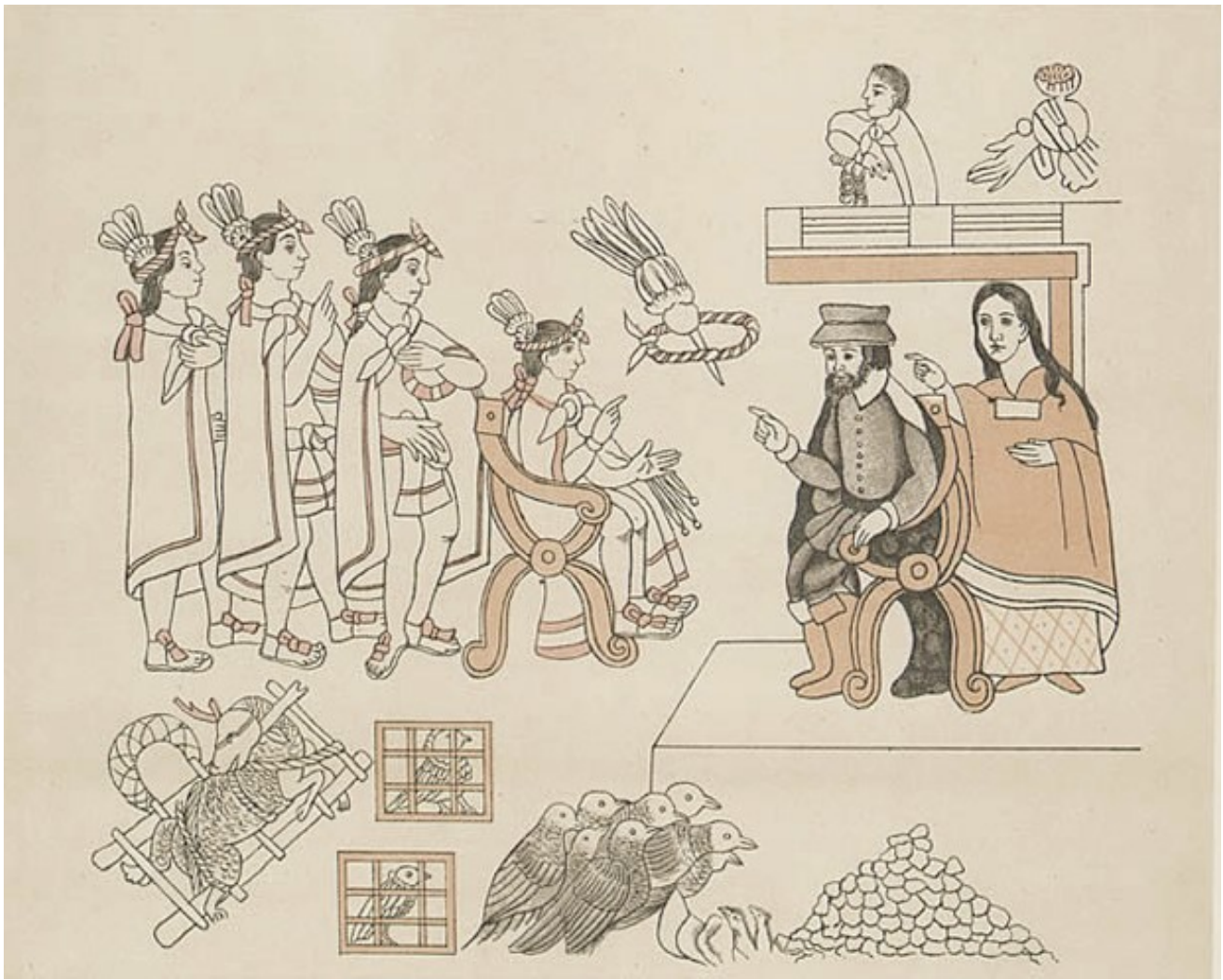
Later that year, Cortés and his men entered the capital of the empire, Tenochtitlán. They were astonished by the incredibly sophisticated causeways, gardens, and temples in the city, but they were horrified by the practice of human sacrifice that was part of the Aztec religion. Above all else, the Aztec wealth in gold fascinated the Spanish.

Hoping to gain power over the city, Cortés took Moctezuma (also known as Montezuma), the Aztec emperor, hostage. The Spanish then murdered hundreds of high-ranking Mexica during a festival to celebrate Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. This angered the people of Tenochtitlán, who rose up against the interlopers in their city. Cortés and his people fled for their lives, running down one of Tenochtitlán's causeways to safety on the shore.

Smarting from their defeat at the hands of the Aztec, Cortés slowly created alliances with other Native peoples who resented Aztec rule. It took nearly a year for the Spanish and the tens of thousands of native allies who joined them to defeat the Mexica in Tenochtitlán, which they did by laying siege to the city. Only by playing upon the disunity among the diverse groups in the Aztec Empire were the Spanish able to capture the grand city of Tenochtitlán. In August 1521, having successfully fomented civil war and fended off rival Spanish explorers, Cortés claimed Tenochtitlán for Spain and renamed it Mexico City.

The traditional European narrative of exploration presented the victory of the Spanish over the Aztecs as an example of the superiority of the Europeans over the "savage" native people of the Americas. However, the reality is far more complex. When Cortés explored central Mexico, he encountered a region simmering with native conflict. Far from being unified and content under Aztec rule, many peoples in Mexico resented the Aztecs and were ready to rebel. One group in particular, the Tlaxcalan people, threw their lot in with the Spanish, providing as many as 200,000 fighters in the siege of Tenochtitlán.

Cortés and his men also unwittingly benefited from the Columbian Exchange during their conquest of Central Mexico. Along with horses and cannon, the Spanish brought smallpox into Tenochtitlán. Although the Spanish fled the city shortly after their arrival, the virus remained and took a heavy toll on city residents. As the Spanish and their native allies laid siege to Tenochtitlán, a number of individuals within the city were already dead or dying of smallpox, which meant that the virus played a much greater role in the city's demise than did Spanish cannon.



Depiction of Cortez Meeting Moctezuma

Cortés was also aided by a Nahua woman called Malintzin (also known as La Malinche or Doña Marina, her Spanish name), whom a group of Native people had given to Cortés as tribute prior to his invasion of the Aztec Empire. Malintzin translated for Cortés in his dealings with **Moctezuma**, and, willingly or under pressure, she entered into a physical relationship with him. Their son, Martín, may have been the first **mestizo**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Moctezuma

Last of the Aztec emperors. He ruled in the 16th century over the great city of Tenochtitlan, until the city fell to Spain.



TERM TO KNOW

Mestizo

A person of mixed Indigenous American and Spanish descent.

Malintzin remains a controversial figure in the history of Spanish colonization in the Americas. Some view her as a traitor because she helped Cortés conquer the Aztecs, while others see her as a victim of European expansion. In either case, she demonstrates one way in which Native peoples responded to the arrival of the Spanish. Without her, Cortés would not have been able to communicate, and without the language bridge, he surely would have been less successful in destabilizing the Aztec Empire. By this and other means, Native

people helped shape the conquest of the Americas.

Spain's acquisitiveness seemingly knew no bounds as groups of conquistadores searched for the next trove of instant riches following the conquest of the Aztec Empire by Cortés. One such individual, **Francisco Pizarro**, made his way to the Caribbean in 1509, drawn by the promise of wealth and titles. He participated in successful Spanish expeditions in Panama before following rumors of Inca wealth to the south.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Francisco Pizarro

Spanish conquistador who captured the Inca emperor Atahualpa and defeated the Incan Empire in South America in the 16th century.

In many ways, Pizarro's invasion of the Inca Empire mirrored the invasion of the Aztec Empire by Cortés. His first efforts against the Incas in the 1520s failed. However, similar to the Aztecs, unrest between Inca rulers and conquered Indigenous groups left the empire vulnerable. Smallpox also wreaked havoc on the empire, as epidemics cut the empire's population in half by the early 1530s. The disease even killed the Incan emperor and many members of the royal family, which sparked a civil war and the rise of a new ruler named **Atahualpa**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Atahualpa

Incan emperor who was captured and executed by the Spanish in the 1530s.

Amidst the chaos, Pizarro invaded the Inca Empire in 1532 with less than 200 men, captured the new emperor, and demanded a ransom. One year later, he executed Atahualpa, seized the empire's capital city of Cuzco, and renamed it Lima. The Inca Empire disintegrated shortly thereafter in the face of Spanish conquest and diseases.

2. Spain in North America

The success of Cortés and Pizarro in Central and South America led other conquistadores to push into North America. Although these individuals failed to discover rich native empires to conquer, Spanish incursions into North America disrupted and altered Indigenous cultures in significant ways.

Hernando de Soto had participated in Pizarro's conquest of the Inca, and from 1539 to 1542, he led gold-seeking expeditions to what is today the southeastern United States. He and his followers explored what is now Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. Everywhere they traveled, they brought European diseases, which claimed thousands of native lives as well as the lives of the explorers. In 1542, de Soto himself died from a fever during the expedition. De Soto's men also tortured, raped, and enslaved thousands of native people. The surviving Spaniards, numbering a little over 300, ultimately returned to Mexico City without finding much in terms of gold and silver.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Hernando de Soto

Spanish conquistador who explored the present-day southeast United States in the 1500s.



This map traces Coronado's path through the American Southwest and the Great Plains. The regions through which he traveled were not empty areas waiting to be "discovered." They were, in fact, populated and controlled by the groups of Native Peoples indicated.

modification of work by National Park Service

Meanwhile, **Francisco Vázquez de Coronado** arrived in Mexico (then called New Spain) in 1535. He presided as governor over the province of Nueva Galicia, where he heard rumors of wealth to the north: a golden city called Quivira. Between 1540 and 1542, Coronado led a large expedition of Spaniards and native allies to the lands north of Mexico City, and for the next several years, they explored the area that is now the southwestern United States.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Francisco Vázquez de Coronado

Spanish conquistador who explored the present-day southwest United States in the 1540s.

Similar to the de Soto expedition, Coronado and his men failed to find a city of gold, but they left a path of death, disease, and destruction in their wake. During the winter of 1540–41, for instance, the conquistadores waged war against the Tiwa in present-day New Mexico. Coronado and his men did not find much gold or silver. Nor did they find significant native populations that could potentially provide a source of labor for Spanish farms and mines. The expedition left Coronado bankrupt, and the Spanish would then ignore southwestern North America for another half a century.

3. Spain in Florida

While Spain ignored much of North America during the early 16th century, it did gain a foothold in present-day Florida, because it viewed that area and the lands to the north as a logical extension of its Caribbean and Central American empire. In 1513, **Juan Ponce de León** claimed the area around today's St. Augustine for the Spanish Crown, naming the land Pascua Florida (Feast of Flowers, or Easter) for the nearest feast day. Ponce de León was unable to establish a permanent settlement there, but by 1565, Spain was in need of an outpost to confront the French and English privateers, who were using Florida as a base from which to attack treasure-

laden Spanish ships heading from Cuba to Spain.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Juan Ponce de León

Spanish explorer who laid claim to the area around present-day St. Augustine, Florida, for the Spanish crown.



In this drawing by French artist Jacques le Moyne de Morgues, Timucua flee the Spanish settlers, who arrived by ship. Le Moyne lived at Fort Caroline, the French outpost, before the Spanish destroyed the colony in 1562.

The need for a more robust Spanish outpost in Florida intensified in 1562, when a group of French Protestants (Huguenots) established a small settlement they called Fort Caroline, north of St. Augustine. With the authorization of King Philip II, Spanish nobleman Pedro Menéndez led an attack on Fort Caroline, killing most of the colonists and destroying the fort.

Eliminating Fort Caroline served dual purposes for the Spanish—it helped reduce the danger from French privateers, and it eradicated the French threat to Spain's claim to the area. The contest between the Spanish and the French over Florida provided an early illustration of how traditional European rivalries, especially religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants, could spill over into the Americas.

In 1565, following the destruction of Fort Caroline, the victorious Menéndez founded St. Augustine, now the oldest European settlement in the Americas. In the process, the Spanish displaced the local Timucua Indians from their ancient town of Seloy, which had stood for thousands of years.

The Timucua suffered greatly from diseases introduced by the Spanish, and their population shrunk from

around 200,000 precontact to 50,000 in 1590. By 1700, only 1,000 Timucua remained. As in other areas of Spanish conquest, Catholic priests worked to bring about a spiritual conquest by forcing the surviving Timucua—demoralized and reeling from catastrophic losses of family and community—to convert to Catholicism.



The Spanish fort of Castillo de San Marcos helped Spanish colonists in St. Augustine fend off marauding privateers from rival European countries.

Despite the consolidation of Spanish control in Florida by the late 1500s, Florida remained an inviting target for Spain's imperial rivals. Thus, over the next several decades, the Spanish built additional wooden forts in Florida, and between 1672 and 1695, they constructed the stone fort, Castillo de San Marcos, to better defend St. Augustine against challengers.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we discussed Spain's colonial project and Spanish interactions with other people and empires in South, Central, and North America. Although Portugal opened the door to exploration of the Atlantic World, Spanish explorers quickly made inroads into the Americas. Spurred by Christopher Columbus's glowing reports of the riches to be found in the New World, a number of Spanish conquistadores set off to find and conquer new lands. They accomplished this through a combination of military strength, strategic alliances with Native Peoples, and diseases, such as smallpox.

Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella promoted the efforts of conquistadores in order to strengthen and glorify their own empire, and the exploits of Spanish conquerors had a profound impact. As Spain's New World empire expanded into Central, South, and North America, gold and silver enriched the Spanish monarchy. This period of prosperity helped fuel a golden age—also known as the Siglo

de Oro—within the country, as art and literature flourished.

The exploits of Spanish conquistadores had a profound impact on the Americas as well. Specifically, the enrichment of the Spanish monarchy and explorers came at the expense of Native Peoples. Campaigns in the name of God, country, and personal wealth left trails of death and devastation in their wake.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Conquistadores

A Spanish conqueror in the New World, motivated by a search for wealth, national glory, and the desire to spread Catholicism.

Mestizo

A person of mixed Indigenous American and Spanish descent.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Atahualpa

Incan emperor who was captured and executed by the Spanish in the 1530s.

Francisco Pizarro

Spanish conquistador who captured the Inca emperor Atahualpa and defeated the Incan empire in South America in the 16th century.

Francisco Vásquez de Coronado

Spanish conquistador who explored the present-day southwest United States in the 1540s.

Hernando de Soto

Spanish conquistador who explored the present-day southeast United States in the 1500s.

Hernán Cortés

Spanish conquistador who defeated the Aztec ruler Moctezuma and claimed the city of Tenochtitlán for Spain in the 16th century.

Juan Ponce de León

Spanish explorer who laid claim to the area around present-day St. Augustine, Florida, for the Spanish

crown.

Moctezuma

Last of the Aztec emperors. He ruled in the 16th century over the great city of Tenochtitlán until the city fell to Spain.



DATES TO KNOW

1492

Christopher Columbus, with funds from Spain, sails west and lands on Hispaniola.

1504

Hernan Cortés arrives on Hispaniola.

1509

Francisco Pizarro arrives in the Caribbean.

1513

Juan Ponce de León claims the area around today's St. Augustine, Florida, for the Spanish.

1519–1521

Hernan Cortés arrives in Central America and conquers the Aztec empire.

1532–1535

Francisco Pizarro vanquishes the Inca.

1539–1542

Hernando de Soto leads gold-seeking expeditions in present-day southeastern United States.

1540–1542

Francisco Vasquez de Coronado explores present-day southwestern United States.

1562

French Protestants establish Fort Caroline near today's St. Augustine, Florida.

1565

The Spanish establish St. Augustine in Florida.