

Background to the Drawings: Spaniards and Aztecs

In 1492 Spain was ruled by a new king and queen (Ferdinand and Isabella), who proved to be strong monarchs. The Spanish believed that their culture was superior to others and that any and all resources that were discovered through exploration belonged to Spain. In the same year, the monarchs reinstated the Spanish Inquisition, which resulted in Roman Catholicism being the only religion allowed to be practised in Spain and other lands within the Spanish Empire.

Spanish explorers such as Christopher Columbus and Hernándo Cortés were among the first Europeans to begin exploring the world in the late 1400s and early 1500s. They searched for new trading routes to India as well as riches such as gold, silver and spices. They claimed the lands that they explored for the King and Queen of Spain even though Indigenous peoples had lived there for thousands of years.

Spain was a very religious country and the idea of spreading the Catholic faith to other peoples was seen as a primary reason for the Spanish explorers, including the Conquistadors, to undertake voyages of discovery. One of the first acts of the explorers was to plant a cross, symbolizing the claiming of land in the name of Christ.

In 1519 Cortés led about 450 men to Mexico and made his way from Veracruz on the Gulf Coast to the island city of Tenochtitlan, the stunningly beautiful Aztec capital situated in Lake Texcoco. They seized the emperor Motecuzoma II, who died in 1520 during a skirmish between Spanish forces and residents of Tenochtitlan. Aztec forces soon drove the conquistadors from the capital, but Cortés built a small fleet of ships, placed Tenochtitlan under siege, and in 1521 starved the city into surrender.

Source: Bentley and Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*, Vol. II (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 596-597. Retrieved from <http://www.historians.org/tl/LessonPlans/ca/Fitch/Bentley.htm>, March 15, 2008.

Drawing 1: Landing on the shore of the new world

This drawing is one of a series of original European sketches of Spanish explorers in America. Images such as these depict the artist's view of the conquest of the Americas by the Spanish. Most of these were published in 1590 by Theodore de Bry in a book called *The New World*.

Drawings 2-6:

In this series of drawings, Alfredo Chavero depicts another perspective regarding contact between the Aztecs and Spanish. For example, the drawing of Quitlauhtique shows that the Tlaxcalans gave many presents and provisions to Cortés. Also shown at the bottom left are a number of women who were given (some say they were slaves to give service to the Spanish, and some say they were daughters of royal families to marry the captains of Cortés in order to bind the Spanish and Tlaxcalans together) as was customary. The Nahuatl legend says that presents are given. The other drawings are representations of the contact between the Spanish and the Aztec peoples and are drawn from a specific perspective.

Source: Washington State University Digital Collections, Retrieved from <http://content.wsulibs.wsu.edu/index.php>, March 15, 2008.