1

A Handful of Adventurers

The Myth of Exceptional Men

Mr. Christopher Columbus,
sailed the seas without a compass.
Well, when his men began a rumpus,
up spoke Christopher Columbus.
He said, 'There is land somewhere,
so until we get there,
we will not go wrong,
if we sing a swing song.
Since the world is round,
we'll be safe and sound.
Till our goal is found,
we'll just keep a-rhythm bound.'
Soon the crew was makin' merry.
Then came a yell,
'Let's drink to Isabel-la!
Bring on the rum!'
That music ended all the rumpus.
Wise old Christopher Columbus.

—Andy Razaf (1936)

The Conquest of Mexico and the conversion of the peoples of New Spain can and should be included among the histories of the world, not only because it was well done but because it was very great. . . . Long live, then, the name and memory of him [Cortés] who conquered so vast a land, converted such a multitude of men, cast down so many idols, and put an end to so much sacrifice and the eating of human flesh!

—Francisco López de Gómara (1552)

> When in ancient or modern times have such huge enterprises of so few succeeded against so many? . . . And who has equaled those of Spain? Certainly not the Jews nor the Greeks nor Romans, about whom most is written.
>
> —Francisco de Jerez (1534)

> To such lengths of blind partiality will men be carried, who care less for the truth of history than for the fame of its creatures.
>
> —Aaron Goodrich (1874)

One of the great themes of historical literature over the past five centuries has been the assessment of the European discovery of the Americas as one of the two greatest events in human history. Perhaps the earliest such judgement made in print was the claim by the Paduan philosopher Lazzaro Buonamico in 1539 that nothing had brought more honor to mankind "than the invention of the printing press and the discovery of the new world; two things which I always thought could be compared, not only to Antiquity, but to immortality." A similar, better-known pronouncement was penned by Francisco López de Gómara, Hernán Cortés's private secretary and official biographer, in 1552. "The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it)," wrote Gómara, "is the discovery of the Indies [i.e., the Americas]."[1]

By the eighteenth century, the "discovery" had come to share its number one position with a related European achievement.[2] "No event," wrote the French philosopher Abbé Raynal in 1770, "has been so interesting to mankind in general . . . as the discovery of the new world, and the passage to India by the Cape of Good Hope." Six years later the economist Adam Smith issued a bolder version of this assessment, stating that "the discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind."[3]

In the theme's most recent incarnation, the Discovery has acquired a distinctly modern companion. Writing near the dawn of the space age, in 1959, the intellectual historian Lewis Hanke focused not so much on the Discovery as the subsequent debate over Native Americans. "No matter how far rockets may reach into outer space," he asked, "will any more significant problems be discovered than those which agitated many Spaniards during the conquest of America?" In a similar vein, more than a decade after men walked on the moon, the semiotician Tzvetan Todorov declared that the voyages of the astronauts were of secondary significance because they led to "no encounter

at all." In contrast, "the discovery of America, or of the Americans, is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history."[4]

The connection between seafaring and spacefaring is made particularly explicit in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. In an exhibit titled *Where Next, Columbus?* the exploratory achievements of mankind are placed within a trajectory beginning with Columbus's transatlantic voyages, running through the European settlement of the North American West, and climaxing in space travel. One graphic from the exhibit even shows Columbus and the moon afloat in the same constellation.[5]

That image illustrates a second theme that has run parallel to the "greatest event" theme ever since the days of Columbus himself. This is the characterization of the European discovery and conquest of the Americas as the achievement of a few great men. This theme can also be summed up in a phrase that has appeared in print over and over—a handful of adventurers. The roots of this interpretation run deep into the Conquest period itself, and versions of the phrase go back at least to the eighteenth century. Denis Diderot, for example, described the conquistadors as a mere "handful of men."[6] The version I have chosen as emblematic of the theme appears to have been coined in 1843 by the great nineteenth-century historian William Prescott. The Conquest of Mexico, wrote Prescott, was "the subversion of a great empire by a handful of adventurers."[7] Since then the phrase and variations upon it have become inescapable in the historical literature. The Conquest is the tale of "how a handful of Spaniards won two empires;" Cortés and Francisco Pizarro overthrew empires "leading only small bands of adventurers" with "no more than a handful of men"; the Conquest of Peru is achieved by "illiterate adventurers," or "by a mere handful of men," and that of Mexico by "a small contingent of Spanish adventurers" or "a motley bunch of Spanish adventurers."[8]

These two themes have inevitably given rise to a third. If history's greatest event—the European discovery and conquest of the Americas—was achieved by a mere "handful of adventurers," how did they do it? In the words of Francisco de Jerez, a conquistador of Peru who in 1534 published an account of the initial Spanish invasion of the Inca empire, "When in ancient or modern times have such huge enterprises of so few succeeded against so many?"[9] Historians writing today continue to repeat Jerez's question. "What . . . made so awesomely implausible a victory possible?" "How were small bands of conquistadores successful against powerful and populous polities?" "How could empires as powerful as those of the Aztecs or the Incas be destroyed so rapidly by a few hundred Spaniards?"[10]

The question represents "one of the most puzzling problems to have vexed historians."[11] Indeed, it is at the heart of this book, not only because the answers to it written before so often contain elements of all seven of the myths anatomized in these pages. It is also because the very posing of the question itself is profoundly misleading; it is the lid to the Pandora's Box of Conquest myths. Viewed within the circular confines of these three themes, the question of "how" answers itself. How could so few accomplish something so great? Because they themselves were exceptionally great men. This is the myth that is the focus of this first chapter.

In 1856 the Mexican artist José María Obregón completed a painting titled *The Inspiration of Christopher Columbus* (see Figure 2).[12] The painting captures the two principal elements of the Columbus myth—his brilliant use of the technology of the day, and, more importantly, the genius of his vision. The source of his inspiration is the ocean itself and what he somehow knows lies beyond it. Columbus gazes at the Atlantic horizon, seeing it not as a linear boundary but as a curved gateway to a new world.

This painting in fact tells us much more about the nineteenth century and views of Columbus in Obregón's day than it does about Columbus himself. In fact, the most exceptional thing about Columbus's geographical vision was that it was wrong. His achievements were the result of historical accident and his role in an historical process that was far larger than he was. Similarly, the Spaniards who subsequently crossed the Atlantic were part of a process peopled by many would-be conquerors. They and the people they encountered—not a mere handful of supposedly remarkable and great men—were responsible for the events that followed.

Among those Spaniards, Cortés and Pizarro are the best known. Indeed, the myth of exceptional men is centered on three monumental figures who still enjoy extraordinary name recognition almost half a millennium after their deaths. In a sense, the reputations of Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro are justified. One discovered the Americas for early-modern Europeans, the other two led the initial expeditions that discovered and partially destroyed the two major empires that existed in the Americas in the early sixteenth century (the Mexica, or Aztec, and the Inca). As Columbus remarks in Sir Ridley Scott's feature film *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, summarizing his life's accomplishments: "I did it; you didn't."[13] Thus the Spanish empire in the Americas was made possible by the deeds of these three in the simplest sense; Spaniards needed to find the Americas and its major population centers in order to construct that empire.

Although using Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro as larger than life characters that more or less explain the entire Conquest is clearly too facile, the simplicity of the model helps explain its incessant appeal. There seems to be a human impulse to personalize the past, to render complex processes intelligible and accessible by reducing them to emblematic characters and a narrative of their actions. The additional appeal of this reduction is that it gives the reducers a chance to shape the story and its protagonists. We shall see in a moment how this has occurred with respect to the examples of Columbus and Cortés.

My purpose is not to denigrate this technique of historical writing completely; after all, I use it myself in this book. Nor do I mean to create a narrative in which individual action is utterly subordinated to the larger structural forces and causes of social change. But in its absolute form the "great men" approach ignores the roles played by larger processes of social change. It fails to recognize the significance of context and the degree to which the great men are obliged to react to—rather than fashion—events, forces, and the many other human beings around them. The focus on a prominent few marginalizes the many other individuals whose lives were similar to those of the great save for the historical circumstances—that can often be described as historical accidents—that placed them in a different place and time. It likewise renders virtually invisible the Native Americans and Africans who played crucial roles in these events and whose inclusion in the story of the Conquest makes it so much more interesting and, ultimately, more intelligible.

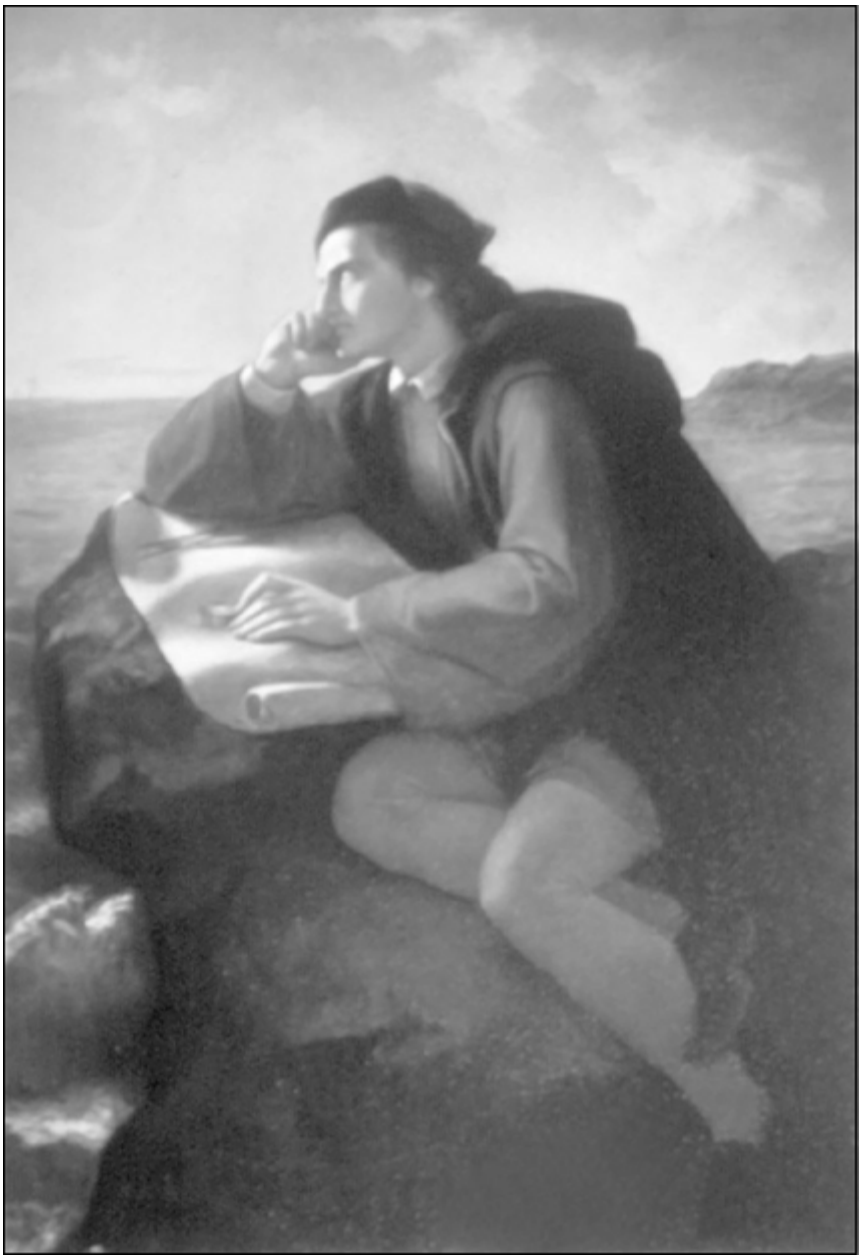

Fig. 2. José María Obregón, The Inspiration of Christopher Columbus, *1856.*

The complete explication of the myth of exceptional men will develop through all seven chapters, culminating in the myth to which it is most profoundly related, the myth of superiority. However, this chapter goes a long way toward explaining the myth through the related discussions of three sections. The first examines the role of Columbus in the myth's development. The second section traces the development of conquistador legends, focusing on Cortés as the most lauded of them all, from the myth's sixteenth-century roots to the present. The third and final section of the chapter details the seven principal elements of conquistador patterns of action—the procedures that were not exclusive to the visionary or brilliant few, but were the standard practices of all the Conquest's Spanish protagonists.

The Obregón painting of Columbus would probably be seen by most viewers today not as a true historical portrait, but as an allegory. One could argue that while Columbus may not have spent much time staring at the Atlantic (except perhaps when he was crossing it), he was surely inspired by its possibilities. Likewise, the Berry/Razaf song is on one level a witty ditty of the swing era and not to be taken too seriously. On the other hand, its humor only makes sense if the listener can be depended upon already to have a perception of Columbus as sagacious and visionary. The lyrics are a parody of that sagacity, for his hitting upon the idea that a mutiny can be averted by throwing a party (hardly an original or visionary notion) is only funny if one knows that he is "wise old Christopher Columbus" for more historically significant reasons.[14]

One of these reasons is what historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto has called "the infamous canard," namely Columbus's allegedly exceptional knowledge of the world's sphericity. As he sings in the song, "Since the world is round, we'll be safe and sound."[15] This legend is similarly the reference point to the opening scene of Scott's *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, in which Columbus, in a pose reminiscent of the Obregón painting, is sitting on the rocks looking out to sea. One of his sons is with him, a young boy whom Columbus instructs to watch a ship disappear over the horizon. His father, meanwhile, is peeling an orange. Again, whether the viewer takes the scene as accurate historical depiction or dramatic allegory, it only works because of the filmmakers' reasonable assumption that the viewer anticipates the significance of the orange. Sure enough, when the fruit is peeled and the ship disappears, Columbus spells out his brilliant connection between the shape of the orange and that of the world—"What did I tell you? It's round. Like this. Round!"[16]

One historian, Jeffrey Burton Russell, has written an entire book about this aspect of the Columbus myth, tracing it back to Washington Irving's 1828 account of the *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Irving vividly described a 1486 debate in Salamanca between Columbus and a gathering of the wise men of Spain, professors, friars, and other senior churchmen who cited ancient authorities in support of their contention that the earth was flat. Columbus, bold visionary, risked condemnation as a heretic to defend his position on the earth's roundness. This scene was repeated in various forms by historians for the next hundred years.

The problem was, it was largely fiction. The Salamanca meeting, which occurred either in 1486 or 1487—and only two of whose wise men can be identified for certain—actually concerned the size of the ocean to the west, with Columbus erroneously arguing that the distance from Spain to Asia was shorter than the authorities claimed. "All agreed that what the Admiral was saying could not

possibly be true," one of the professors present later testified. They were right in this, and in their belief that the earth was round, a belief shared by all educated Europeans of the day. Although Samuel Eliot Morison pointed out in his widely read 1942 biography of Columbus that the flat-earth Salamanca debate was "pure moonshine," the myth had caught hold and still resists being uprooted today.[17]

As Umberto Eco recently observed, most people, when asked "what Christopher Columbus wanted to prove," will answer that "Columbus believed the earth was round, whereas the Salamanca sages believed it was flat and hence thought that, after sailing a short distance, the three caravels would plunge into the cosmic abyss."[18] But although the men of Salamanca were right (about the earth's size), they were also wrong (about what lay to the west). And although Columbus was wrong (about the earth's size), he was also right (that sailing west led to land). In the end, it was not the vision and genius granted to Columbus by later myth makers that allowed him to stick doggedly to his error and still turn out to be right, it was rather (in Eco's phrase) "thanks to serendipity."[19]

It may have been serendipity, yes, but also historical process. In order to understand how Columbus fits into the myth of exceptional men, he must be placed in the dual context of two distinct historical processes. The first of these is the fifteenth-century process of Portuguese expansion into the Atlantic. The second is the nineteenth-century process whereby the modern myth of Columbus was constructed in the English-speaking world.

Columbus had profound Portuguese connections. Although he was Genoese and the sponsor of his voyages across the Atlantic was Queen Isabella of Castile, Columbus spent much of his life from the 1470s on in Portugal. In the late 1470s he married the daughter of a Portuguese Atlantic colonist, and he repeatedly sought royal Portuguese patronage before and after first approaching the Castilian monarch.

These Portuguese connections have tended to be ignored in popular representations of Columbus for various reasons. One is the obvious fact that Columbus's eventual contract with Isabella led to conquests in the sixteenth-century Americas that were far more Spanish than Portuguese. Another is the cliché-ridden history taught in schools, one rooted in the nineteenth-century development of the Columbus myth.[20] But Columbus himself is also to blame. His years spent as a foreigner peddling erroneous ideas about the size of the world fostered a sense of individual distinction tinged with paranoia, one he did not hesitate to promote on paper. "The image of the lonely man of destiny," as Fernández-Armesto has written, "struggling against prevailing orthodoxy to realize a dream that was ahead of its time, derives from his own self-image as a friendless outsider, derided by a scientific and

social establishment that was reluctant to accept him."[21] As a result, Columbus's own writings have provided fodder for the formation of legends and myths about him—including the omission of the Portuguese context.

This context is so important because it is by looking at Portugal before and during Columbus's years there that one can see the degree to which the transplanted Genoese navigator had neither a unique plan nor a unique vision nor a unique pattern of previous experience.[22] Many others created and contributed to the expansion process of which Columbus became a part. Beginning 200 years before Columbus crossed the Atlantic, southern European shipping broke out of the Mediterranean into the Atlantic. The Vivaldi brothers, most notably, set off from Genoa in 1291 on what turned out to be a one-way voyage west across the Atlantic. Then, in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries a new zone of navigation was created that was bordered by the Azores in the north, the Canary Islands in the south, and the Iberian-African coasts in the east.[23]

Finally, from the 1420s on, a further stretch of exploration and navigation into the mid- and west Atlantic was created and charted. In the 1450s and 1460s, Flores, Corvo, the Cape Verde Islands, and the islands of the Gulf of Guinea were explored. The Madeiras and Canaries were settled and turned into sugar-plantation colonies and by 1478 the former was the largest sugar producer in the Western world. Maps of the time show how important and extensive was the discovery of Atlantic space; speculation about the lands and features of the ocean was the most noteworthy feature of fifteenth-century cartography.[24]

Although men from Italian city-states were involved from the start, and Castilians increasingly participated in the process (especially, from the late-fourteenth century on, in hostile competition for control of the Canaries), it was Portugal that dominated this expansion. Italian navigators were systematically and most effectively co-opted by the Portuguese monarchy (later joined by the Flemish), permitting the new Portuguese empire to control Atlantic settlement (except for the Canaries) and the agenda of expansion.[25]

This agenda featured a steady mapping of the African coastline with a view to rounding the foot of the continent and charting a route to the East Indies. By 1486 the Portuguese were so confident of imminent success that their ambassador to the Vatican, Vasco Fernandes de Lucena, pitched their endeavors to Pope Innocent VII during his coronation as something worthy of immediate blessing. Portuguese exploration to date allowed the ambassador "to perceive how many and how large

accumulations of fortunes and honors and glory will befall not only all of Christendom but also . . . this most sacred See of Peter." The pitch worked, and the following year the pope issued one of his so-called expansion bulls condoning Portuguese imperial ambitions.[26]

Columbus tried to become part of this process with growing desperation in the 1480s and 1490s. He failed for so long because he lacked the connections and persuasive ideas of other navigators. Even after he succeeded in crossing the Atlantic and returning, the extent of his success was questioned and questionable within the context of the time. The islands he had found (in the Caribbean) fell within the zone assigned to the Portuguese by the 1486 papal bull. And although in 1494 the papacy brokered a Portuguese-Castilian treaty that redefined these zones, it became increasingly apparent during the 1490s that Columbus had not found the much-sought sea route to the East Indies—but had been lying about it to Queen Isabella. Then, in 1499, Vasco da Gama returned from his successful voyage around the Cape and it became clear that the Portuguese had won the competition after all.

Columbus's career was irreversibly damaged. His claim to have found islands off the coast of Asia, and thus the coveted sea route to that continent, rang hollow in the face of mounting evidence that these were new lands entirely. Columbus seemed to be lying for the sake of his contractual rewards. Perceiving the extent of his failure and his duplicity, the Castilian crown dispatched an agent to the Caribbean to arrest Columbus and bring him back to Spain in chains. Although he was later permitted to cross the Atlantic, he was forbidden to revisit the Caribbean and was stripped of the titles of Admiral and Viceroy of the Indies—titles he had fought to be included in his original contract and arguably the chief goal of his career. Meanwhile, those titles were conferred by the Portuguese crown upon da Gama.[27]

The fact that it was Columbus's voyages, not da Gama's, that would lead to the changing of world history was not to the Genoese's credit. His discoveries were an accidental geographical byproduct of Portuguese expansion two centuries old, of Portuguese-Castilian competition for Atlantic control a century old, and of Portuguese-Castilian competition for a sea route to India older than Columbus himself. Furthermore, had Columbus not reached the Americas, any one of numerous other navigators would have done so within a decade.[28] Most obviously, the Portuguese Pedro Álvares Cabral explored the Brazilian coast in 1500, likewise arriving there in an attempt to reach Asia (by rounding the Cape). In 1499 Alonso de Ojeda had sailed to the Venezuelan coast, accompanied by the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci, who also crossed the Atlantic under Portuguese license two or three times in 1501–1503 (and in 1508 became the chief pilot of Castile). Because Vespucci's letters made for much better reading than Columbus's and were published and sold well

in the years immediately following his voyages, it was his name that a German cartographer assigned to Brazil in a map of 1507—a name that caught on and was applied to all the "Americas."[29]

The "unfairness" of this naming, and the irony of the phrase "Columbus discovered America," has not been lost on historians.[30] But it is an important reflection of the fact that in his lifetime—and for decades, to some extent centuries, afterward—Columbus was correctly perceived as a briefly fortunate but unexceptional participant in a process involving many southern Europeans.

Indeed the image of Vespucci taking the credit for Columbus's achievements should be tempered by the fact that the Florentine's fame came after the Genoese's death. Columbus did not live to see "America" named. The two explorers were friends, in fact, colleagues in the large Iberian community of navigators who were collectively responsible for the two seafaring feats that would one day be hailed by the likes of Abbé Raynal and Adam Smith as history's greatest events. Amidst the self-pity of his final years, Columbus lamented the lack of approbation heaped upon himself and his friend Vespucci, for whom he wrote that "Fortune has been adverse . . . as for so many others. His labors have not brought him the benefits they deserve."[31]

The decline of Columbus's fortunes after 1499 was not only the result of his losing the race to the East Indies, but also a product of his marginal status as a Genoese and a man of the sea in an ethnocentric Castilian world where Italians and sailors tended to be derided. He was also hampered as a "Spanish" settler and administrator by notions of colonial procedure that were derived more from Portuguese models than Castilian ones; the Portuguese emphasized trading posts, the Castilians permanent settlements. As a result, he was fated to be pushed aside by colonial-era historians just as he was by royal officials during his lifetime. When Gómara eulogized the conquest of the Americas as mankind's greatest moment since the coming of Christ, he not only had in mind Cortés, rather than Columbus, as the personification of that achievement, but he even denied the Genoese his role as first discoverer.[32] Toward the end of the sixteenth century Columbus began to appear in Italian epic poetry, and in the following century there emerged two complementary images of him, both rooted in his own writings but now given the romantic veneer characteristic of legend formation. One such image saw Columbus as an instrument of providence, the other portrayed him as an unappreciated visionary, an unjustly mocked heroic dreamer—as in Lope de Vega's 1614 play, *El Nuevo Mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón* (The New World discovered by Christopher Columbus). Nevertheless, the Genoese remained a distant second, if that, to Cortés as the principal symbolic hero of the Discovery and Conquest.[33]

All of that began to change with the tricentennial of Columbus's first landfall in the Americas. Significantly, it was not in Spain or Latin America, but in the young United States, that this rehabilitation and reconstruction of the navigator took place. Certainly the new republics of Latin America did not ignore Columbus as a symbol ready for appropriation—one of these nations was named after him, and two Caribbean colonies fought over his remains.[34] But it was in Boston, Baltimore, and New York that celebrations were held on 12 October 1792. It was North American historians, such as Washington Irving, who generated interest in Columbus among English-speaking readers of the nineteenth century. And it was Italian and Irish immigrants and their descendants in the United States who in the late nineteenth century created solidarity organizations centered on an image of Columbus as an emblematic Catholic immigrant.[35]

Academic and popular interest in Columbus gathered pace in both North America and Europe as the four hundredth anniversary of his first voyage approached. These culminated in two colossal celebrations of the quadricentennial in Madrid in 1892 and Chicago in 1893. Years of preparation, millions of pesetas and dollars spent, hundreds of related events, millions of visitors and participants, all had the effect of so thoroughly creating a Columbus in the popular mind on both sides of the Atlantic that he survives to this day. In 1912 Columbus Day became an official holiday, and by 1992 it generated a public controversy almost as great as the celebrations of a century earlier. Yet whether the Genoese explorer is vilified or celebrated as hero, our Columbus—the one of present-day myth, history, and debate—is not a fifteenth-century man, but a nineteenth-century one, with a twentieth-century veneer.[36]

If Columbus is the principal icon of the Discovery, Cortés is the principal icon of the Conquest. How did Cortés—and to a lesser extent Francisco Pizarro and other conquistadors—become elevated to icons by history?

The Mexican historian Enrique Florescano has observed that the Conquest gave rise to "a new protagonist of historical action and narration: the conquistador" and with him "a new historical discourse" that featured "a new manner of seeing and representing the past."[37] The historical discourse of the conquistadors may have been new in the sense of its application to the Americas, but it was actually based on a genre of document developed by Iberians before they reached the New World. This genre was the report that conquerors sent to the crown upon completion of their activities of exploration, conquest, and settlement. Such reports had a dual purpose. One purpose was

to inform the monarch of events and newly acquired lands, especially if those lands contained the two elements most sought as the basis for colonization—settled native populations, and precious metals. The other purpose was to petition for rewards in the form of offices, titles, and pensions. Hence the Spanish name for the genre, *probanza de mérito* (proof of merit).[38]

The very nature and purpose of *probanzas* obliged those who wrote them to promote their own deeds and downplay or ignore those of others—to eliminate process and pattern in favor or individual action and achievement. Most of Conquest mythology can be found in these reports—the Spaniards as superior beings blessed by divine providence, the invisibility of Africans and native allies, the Conquest's rapid rush to completion, and above all the Conquest as the accomplishment of bold and self-sacrificing individuals.

Probanzas are also important because so many were written. Literally thousands sit in the great imperial archives in Seville, and still more are in Madrid, Mexico City, Lima, and elsewhere. In addition to documents declaring themselves to be *probanzas* and conforming strictly to its conventions, there were also other types of reports that featured most of the characteristics of *probanzas*, including *relaciones* (reports or accounts), *cartas* (letters), and *cartas de relación*. Typically *probanzas* and *relaciones* were addressed to the king, although sometimes other royal officials were approached directly as intermediaries.

Only the best-connected petitioners had a hope of the king himself reading their letters. Most such reports were brief—a page or two—wooden, formulaic in style, given scant attention by royal officials, then shelved until their rediscovery by twentieth-century historians. Many, no doubt, have never been read. But an influential minority were widely read either through publication as conquest accounts, or by being worked into colonial-period histories. For example, the famous letters by Cortés to the king, which were in effect a series of *probanzas*, were published shortly after reaching Spain. They so efficiently promoted the Conquest as Cortés's achievement, and sold so well in at least five languages, that the crown banned the *cartas* lest the conqueror's cult status become a political threat. The letters continued to circulate, however, and later admirers traveled like pilgrims to Cortés's residence in Spain. The Cortés cult was further stimulated by Gómara's hagiography of 1552—that the crown attempted to suppress too.[39]

There was plenty of precedent to the publication of *probanza*-like letters and to crown intervention in their distribution or suppression. Within months of Columbus's return to Spain from his first Atlantic crossing, a "letter" putatively written by him but actually crafted by royal officials based on a document by Columbus was published in Spanish, Italian (prose and verse versions), and Latin. It promoted the "discovery" as a Spanish achievement that cast favorable light on the Spanish

monarchs and on Columbus as their agent.[40] Significantly, it also made the letter originally written by Columbus, who as a Genoese would have been less familiar with the Iberian genres, look more like a Spanish *probanza*.

Probably the best known of Conquest accounts, Bernal Díaz's narrative of the Conquest of Mexico, is seldom recognized for what it was—a monumental *probanza* whose absurd length (over 600 pages when later printed) counterproductively assured it would not be read by the king, as indeed it almost certainly was not. Perhaps Díaz had lost hope in the efficacy of the more conventional *probanza*, having penned a number of them earlier in his life. Requesting a pension in 1552, for example, he declared that he wrote to "your majesty as a loyal servant, the best I can, because for thirty-eight years I have served you." And six years later, he asked "to give account of who I am so that your majesty might deign to do me fuller favors." But despite coming from a family of good social standing, Díaz's connections proved to be a barrier rather than a conduit to those "fuller favors." As a relation of Diego Velázquez (early patron and then great enemy of Cortés), he was denied due reward in Mexico in the 1520s by Cortés, and suffered almost as much as a marginalized settler in Guatemala in the decades that followed.[41]

Perhaps Díaz's age at the time of his book's completion was such that he cared less about official royal reaction and more for the satisfaction of the creative process and the opportunity to pen countless jabs at Gómara, whose account Díaz judged with damning simplicity to be "very contrary to what happened."[42] In this sense, his account is more akin to a modern history book. Yet the structure, tone, and thrust of Díaz's text remain profoundly rooted in the conventions of the *probanza* . As one Díaz scholar, Ramón Iglesia, has commented, "his book is an unrestrained list of merits and services."[43]

Why did Díaz feel the need to list such "merits and services?" His dissatisfaction with his lot, his paltry share of the spoils of the conquests of Tenochtitlán and highland Guatemala, and his desire to set the record straight for posterity are only part of the answer. The larger context to his expectations and his choice of format for expressing himself is the culture of patronage in sixteenth-century Spain—a system of social, political, and economic networks that underlay almost all Spanish activities in the Americas and that nurtured the written culture of the *probanza*.

Royal patronage not only helps explain the first stage in the development of the great men myth—the *probanza*—but also the second, which is the body of literature comprising the chronicles or histories written in the colonial period. The dividing line between the two is blurred, but this is central to my point: the *probanza* evolved into the chronicle, *probanzas* were used as the basis of

histories, and historical works adopted the conventions of the *probanza*. The most notable of those conventions was the way in which individuals were treated, especially the heroes to whom the Conquest could be attributed.

This treatment of individuals was in effect promoted by the crown. But, paradoxically, the crown also sought to suppress it. Official chronicler positions, created in 1532 and 1571, were intended to control the dissemination of information about the Conquest.[44] Such efforts were in vain. Part of the problem was that the Spanish crown lacked the centralized control and bureaucratic reach of the modern state—precisely the reason that attempts were repeatedly made to control the production of historical literature. More significantly, perhaps, was the fact that the culture of the *probanza*—its way of portraying the Conquest and its protagonists—became in the sixteenth century the dominant historical discourse, the conventional way in which Spaniards viewed and represented the Conquest.

The ultimate purpose of that representation was justification. The eyewitness accounts, such as Cortés's letters or Jerez's narrative of the massacre at Cajamarca, framed the justification of personal actions and roles within a larger context of imperial justification. The later writings of the chroniclers further developed the theme of justification into an ideology of imperialism that represented the Conquest as a dual mission, bringing both civilization and Christianity to the Americas. In the great sixteenth-century histories by Gómara, Antonio de Herrera, and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo the succession of discoveries and conquests are part of a providential plan to bring the true faith to the whole world. The Spaniards are obviously the agents of that divine plan, and the most prominent conquistadors are thus presented as God's principal agents.[45]

Cortés emerged in the sixteenth century as the most recognizable of God's agents for several reasons. One was the impressive nature of the Mexica empire and the subsequent importance of central Mexico to the Spanish empire. Another was the rapid publication and wide circulation (despite royal attempts at censorship) of Cortés's letters to the king, which argued unambiguously that God had directed the Conquest of Mexico as a favor to the Spanish monarchy. The blessed status of Cortés himself was heavily implied; in one letter he uses the Spanish term *medio* (medium or agent), to describe his providential role.[46] A third was the supportive spin placed on Cortés and the Conquest by the Franciscans.

Friars of the Order of St. Francis were the first Spanish priests into the Mesoamerican regions that would become the colonies of New Spain. In competition with the Dominicans, to a lesser extent other orders, and later the secular clergy (priests who were not members of an order), the Franciscans remained central to the activities of the church throughout colonial Spanish America. In central Mexico, Yucatan, and other parts of New Spain, sixteenth-century Franciscans were the driving

force behind efforts to convert native peoples and build a colonial church. The roles that natives themselves played in that process, and the writings generated as a result by both friars and natives, gave rise to an extraordinary body of literature that was foundational to the academic discipline of ethnography.[47]

The Franciscans saw Cortés's support of their entry into Mexico and their activities in the earliest colonial years as being crucial to their mission, and as a result contributed much to the formation of his legend. One such friar, Toribio Motolinía, who was one of the famous first Franciscan Twelve into Mexico, asked the emperor in a letter of 1555, "Who has loved and defended the Indians of this new world like Cortés?" Motolinía (who took his name from the Nahuatl for "poverty") was partly reacting to the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, who had attacked Cortés and who, significantly, was a Dominican. The likes of Las Casas, the Franciscan told the emperor, sought through exaggerations, errors, lies, and simple ignorance to obscure "the services [Cortés] did God and your majesty." Above all, "through this captain, God opened the door for us to preach his holy gospel, and it was he who caused the Indians to revere the holy sacraments and respect the ministers of the church."[48]

Even Bernardino de Sahagún, the Franciscan who had preserved an important Mexica account of the Conquest as the final book of his epic twelve-volume *General History of the Things of New Spain* , later rewrote the account into "a paean of praise to Hernán Cortés and a justification of the Spanish victory."[49] The original 1579 version reflected the perspectives of the Mexica of Tlatelolco (a subordinate municipality within the capital that was Tenochtitlán and then Mexico City). Sahagún claimed that his 1585 revised version was still a native perspective that simply corrected "certain mistakes." But the historian Sarah Cline has convincingly shown how the revisions promoted the attitudes of Sahagún and the other early Franciscans toward the providential role of Cortés in leading the Spaniards into Mexico in 1519 and inviting the Franciscans in 1524. The 1585 version thus had a political purpose, at a time when the early Franciscan agenda was under attack from other Spaniards, and it reveals to us how the Cortés legend continued to be perpetuated long after his death.[50]

The Franciscans saw the Conquest as a great leap toward the conversion of all mankind and the subsequent second coming of Christ. This millennial vision influenced Cortés himself, inspiring him to make further expeditions in the 1520s north to Baja California and south into Honduras. It also contributed to his legendary status among humanists and other intellectuals who frequently gathered at his house in Spain in his final years. These included Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, whose extreme negative views on "the Indians" pitted him against Las Casas and would bring him infamy in

twentieth-century academic circles. In 1543 Sepúlveda depicted the Conquest as epitomized by "a noble, valiant Cortés" and "a timorous, cowardly Montezuma." Also included in the Madrid group was Cervantes de Salazar, whose 1546 ode to Cortés (the dedication to a dialogue on the dignity of man) compared him to Alexander, Julius Caesar, and St. Paul.[51]

Here and facing page: *Figs. 3 and 4. Frontispieces to Gabriel Lasso de la Vega's* Cortés valeroso, y Mexicana *(1588). The two images contrast the "invincible" man of arms at age 63, eyes heavenward, with the young ruff-collared man of letters, eyes on the reader; the Cortés coat of arms is complete with the icons of status, Lasso de la Vega's is a plain shield.*

Another member of the circle was Gómara, whose account of the Conquest took the form of a hagiography of Cortés, who emerges as an idealized figure to whom the entire Discovery and Conquest is subject; his narrative begins and ends with the birth and death of Cortés.[52] Although Bernal Díaz claimed that his own account was inspired in part by the errors he perceived in Gómara's book, he nevertheless portrayed Cortés as a flawed but larger than life figure—the flaws serving only to add a ruggedness to his heroism.[53] Although there were many accounts of the Conquest published during the colonial centuries, most giving the likes of "the great Cortés" the kind of adulatory treatment he received in Gabriel Lasso de la Vega's *Cortés valeroso, y Mexicana* (Valiant Cortés) of 1588 (see Figures 3 and 4), the three by Cortés, Gómara, and Díaz remained the most influential.[54] Their effect was to magnify Cortés as the emblematic conquistador, and to make the Conquest of Mexico a symbol and model of the entire Conquest, with Columbus and Pizarro placed partially in Cortés's shadow and other conquests and conquistadors almost entirely eclipsed.

For centuries, the standard sources on the Conquest and related topics were the reports of Columbus and Cortés, similar accounts by other conquistadors, and the colonial histories based on them.[55] These tended to conform to the conventions of Spanish imperial ideology, with many of the more controversial texts not being published until after the colonial period. The longer works of Las Casas, for example, the *Historia general de las Indias* (General History of the Indies) and *La Apologética historia sumaria* (The Apologetic History) saw print in 1875 and 1909 for the first time, and Motolinía's *Historia de las Indias* (History of the Indies) and his *Memoriales* (Memorials) were not published until 1848 and 1903, respectively.[56]

Yet the nineteenth century hardly unraveled the colonial-era development of the myth of Cortés and the other "great men" responsible for the Conquest. This was in large part due to the third chronological stage in the development of this chapter's myth—the success of the histories of the Conquests of Mexico and Peru by William Prescott. Like Gómara's account, Prescott's narrative of the Mexican story ends not with the fall of Tenochtitlán, but later with the death of Cortés. As Prescott admitted, "The two pillars upon which the story of the conquest mainly rests are the Chronicles of Gómara and of Bernal Díaz." For Prescott, these two balanced each other, so that

while Díaz "freely exposes [Cortés's] cunning or cupidity, and sometimes his cruelty, he does ample justice to his great and heroic qualities."[57]

Prescott's books repackaged the Conquest myths that were rooted in the *probanzas*, *relaciones*, and *cartas* of the conquistadors, and reworked them into an ideology of imperial justification by the colonial chroniclers. He presented them to an audience eager to read that a "handful" of Europeans, because of their inherently superior qualities, could triumph over numerous barbarous natives despite the odds and hardships.[58] This audience was well fed on a diet of the nineteenth-century European and North American versions of imperial and expansionist ideology. Prescott's Spanish Conquests were credible and comforting, while the Catholicism of the conquistadors allowed the Protestant author and readership alike a facile explanation for the occasional, unfortunate excess or act of cruelty.

Although Prescott wrote his histories of the Conquest a century and a half ago, they remain in print and are still read.[59] Furthermore, his influence is widely visible, combined as it is with the larger cultural impetus (one that influenced Prescott himself) toward depicting European conquests as achievements personalized by great leaders.[60] A fine example of the longevity of Prescottian perspectives on the Conquest is Hugh Thomas's *Conquest*, which has sold well in many languages since it was first published in 1995. Although Thomas uses some native sources and did some original archival research, his book is overwhelmingly based on Spanish sources and projects a traditional Spanish perspective on events. As suggested by the subtitle—*Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico*—the book reproduces Bernal Díaz's gripping narrative by similarly emphasizing the intrigues and decisive impact of the Spanish and native Mexican leaders, in particular the former.[61]

Thomas's book contains the chief elements of that Conquest perspective running back through Prescott and Gómara to Cortés himself and the *probanzas* of the conquerors. Those elements are the structuring of the Conquest into a clear narrative that leads inexorably to victory, an explanation of the Conquest that ultimately testifies to the civilizational superiority of the Spaniards, a glorification of Cortés, and an endorsement of the myth that a few great and exceptional men made the Conquest possible.[62]

Shortly after landing on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in 1519, in a move routinely hailed as bold and brilliant, Cortés burned his ships. Actually, he did not. The ships were scuttled and at least one

was merely grounded. But in 1546 Cervantes de Salazar referred in print to Cortés's ship-burning and the image took hold.[63]

The myth of the burning ships not only reflects the existence of numerous little legends within the larger myths, but also illustrates how every move of Cortés's has been taken as indicative of his exceptionality.[64] With respect to the destruction of ships, Francisco de Montejo did the same thing in 1527 on the coast of Yucatan.[65] Arguably this was in imitation of Cortés, and no doubt Cortés did influence other conquistadors through their common experience of the invasion of the Mexica empire or through reading the published editions of his letters to the king. However, too often, without any direct evidence, the actions of conquistadors after the 1519–21 invasion of Mexico are taken as deliberately imitating Cortés, while pre-1519 patterns are ignored.

The classic position is summed up well in this sentence written in 1966 by Charles Gibson, one of the most eminent colonial Latin American historians of his generation: "Although no other conquistador rivaled Cortés in military skill or in the capacity to control the conquest aftermath, all subsequent campaigns were in some measure modeled upon the conquest of the Aztec empire."[66] This image of Cortés as both exception and archetype has been articulated in various forms by numerous scholars, who see Cortés as "incomparable" in his particular combination of skills, as "a remarkably gifted man" who is "the first to have a political and even a historical consciousness of his actions." Without Cortés, "there might very well have been no Conquest," as he "was the one who created the dream of gold and new power which intoxicated all those who followed him."[67]

In fact, Cortés followed Conquest procedures that had Iberian roots predating the Conquest and were consolidated during the Caribbean phase of Conquest (1492–1521). These routines were further developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not because all conquistadors mimicked Cortés—although some may have imagined they were emulating him—but because Spaniards were concerned to justify their actions and give them a legalistic veneer by citing and following approved precedents. The Conquest pattern was a procedure followed by many, not the exceptional actions of a handful.[68]

The first aspect of Conquest procedure was the use of legalistic measures to lend a veneer of validity to an expedition. Such measures typically included the reading out of a legal document, such as a conquest license or the so-called Requirement—the request for submission that was rather absurdly to be read to native communities or armies before hostilities took place. Also included was the declaration of a formal territorial claim. Finally, typical legalistic measures included the founding of a town. Spaniards placed great emphasis on city-dwelling, equating it with civilization, social

status, and security, and so the gesture was imbued with reassuring symbolism for the conquistadors. It also permitted a given group of conquistadors to turn themselves into a *cabildo* (town council) and thereby acquire standing sufficient to make certain kinds of resolutions, laws, and other legally valid decisions.

The most famous instance of this is the founding of Vera Cruz on the Gulf of Mexico coast by Cortés and his fellow captains. The cabildo thereby created wrote immediately to the crown, stating that "to all of us it seemed better that a town with a court of justice should be founded and inhabited there in the name of your Royal Highnesses, so that in this land your Majesties might possess lordship as in your other kingdoms and domains."[69]

In fact, the purpose of the imaginary Vera Cruz was not to set about building a town but to create a new basis of authority to replace that given to Cortés by his patron, the governor of Cuba. This case is famous but not unique; conquistadors routinely "founded" towns and cities during the course of explorations and invasions, settlements that were not built at that moment, if ever, but that figuratively marked the countryside as legally claimed and possessed by the expedition leaders. Early Caribbean cities such as Santo Domingo and Havana were founded two or three times before becoming permanent settlements. Francisco de Montejo founded at least four settlements on the coast of Yucatan named after his home town of Salamanca; only one was ever actually built and none retained that name, but the putative foundings gave a legalistic veneer to Montejo's claims that his expeditions were going better than they actually were.[70]

The purpose of Vera Cruz as a town that existed in 1519 in name only leads us to the second aspect of Conquest procedure—the appeal to a higher authority, typically and ideally the king himself. In the passage quoted above, the Vera Cruz *cabildo*, obviously representing the interests of Cortés and his faction within the expedition, state that founding a town is "better" than carrying out the orders of Diego Velázquez, the governor of Cuba and patron to Cortés and his expedition. These orders were, in the rather snide words of the letter to the crown, "to acquire as much gold as possible and, having acquired it, return with it to the island of Fernandina [Cuba] in order that it might be enjoyed only by Diego Velázquez and the captain [Cortés]."[71] By supporting a different course of action, Cortés is thus portrayed as selflessly giving up this collaborative enjoyment with Velázquez, to the crown's benefit. In fact, Cortés needed the direct approval of the crown in order to claim governorship of whatever lands he was able to conquer. His strategies did not so much reflect his allegedly exceptional political skills, but rather the nature of his legal position. Simply put, Velázquez held the crown's license to explore (and was about to receive a license to conquer) and to become governor, Cortés needed that license. To that end, he betrayed Velázquez, wrote directly to

the king, sent agents to argue his case at court, and scuttled the remaining ships to prevent Velázquez loyalists from slipping back to Cuba to warn him—all logical, predictable, standard conquistador responses to the situation.[72]

One of the agents sent to Spain was Francisco de Montejo. He likewise sought to circumvent the patronage of Cortés and acquire directly a license to conquer from the king. Thus while campaigning at court in the early 1520s on behalf of Cortés, Montejo also lobbied to have Yucatan defined as a territory separate from Mexico with himself the recipient of a license to conquer it—that he received in 1526.[73] Similarly, the roots of the Conquest of Peru can be found in expeditions of exploration under Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro sent out along the Pacific coast by Pedrarias de Avila, governor of Panama and Nicaragua. Voyages of 1524–28 along the northern Pacific coast of South America convinced Pizarro that the region contained enough wealth and native population to be worth making the arduous return voyage to Spain to acquire his own license to conquer. Pedrarias had died, but it was important to Pizarro that he shut out potential rival claims from the governor's successor, Pedro de los Ríos, and from Pizarro's own partner, Almagro.[74]

Returning from Spain in 1530 with a long list of titles and honors for himself, and none for Almagro, it was clear that Francisco Pizarro had stabbed his partner in the back. Although the two men remained partners with a fatally bitter competitiveness (Pizarro had Almagro executed in 1537 and four years later Almagro's son had Pizarro assassinated), Pizarro's apparent treachery should not been seen as an individual character trait. Nor should Almagro's attempts to take southern Peru from Pizarro be seen solely in terms of personal rancor. Both men were simply following standard procedures in order to attain the ultimate goal of every conquistador—royal confirmation of the governorship of an imperial province. As Francisco Pizarro wrote in a letter a few days before he was murdered, the governorship of Peru "is the most important thing to me and for which I have always clamored, since without it all my hardships and services will have been in vain."[75]

Another example of an appeal to the king as typical Conquest procedure took place when Gonzalo Pizarro (Francisco's brother) led a vast expedition east from Quito across the Andes and into Amazonia in 1540. The terrain got the better of the Spaniards and their African and native auxiliaries, and as the death toll mounted the expedition ground to a halt. One of the company's captains, Francisco de Orellana, was sent ahead by river to find food. He and his small party never returned, instead successfully navigating the Amazon all the way out to the Atlantic and eventually making it to the Caribbean and then Spain. Pizarro, meanwhile, waited for weeks before struggling back to Quito.

According to Orellana, the river's current made it impossible for him to return to Gonzalo Pizarro and the main body of expedition survivors. According to Pizarro, Orellana deliberately and treacherously abandoned him. Colonial chroniclers took Pizarro's side, and subsequent historians followed their cue. Prescott, for example, accused Orellana of abandoning his "unfortunate comrades . . . in the wilderness;" the "glory of the discovery" of the Amazon was "barren [and] surely not balanced by the iniquitous circumstances which attended it." In the 1950s the English writer George Millar wrote an *apologia* for Orellana, whose reputation for centuries, complained Millar, had been that of "a cad if not a coward." Historians over the past half century have done little to build upon Millar's obscure efforts to undo Gonzalo Pizarro's labeling of Orellana as "the worst traitor that ever lived." Most have simply ignored him, and Michael Wood's sympathetic attention to him in his recent *Conquistadors* television series and book is unusual.[76]

Yet Orellana's actions were neither heroic nor treacherous. Regardless of whether he was or was not able to return upriver to Pizarro, his willingness to go ahead alone, his subsequent defense of his actions, and his acquisition in Spain of a conqueror's permit to return as *adelantado* (licensed conqueror) to the Amazon (where he soon died) all conformed to the well-established patterns of conquistador behavior.[77]

The purpose of Gonzalo Pizarro's expedition over the Andes was to locate the source of gold usually embodied in the legend of El Dorado (a mythical ruler or city of gold)—bringing us to the third routine aspect of Conquest procedure. This was the search for precious metals, preferably gold, with silver a close second. This aspect of Conquest procedure has probably least often been depicted as the exceptional or original strategy of Cortés or one of the other well-known conquistadors. On the contrary, it has been accurately seen as a concern of all members of Spanish expeditions. But it has certainly been misunderstood, to the extent that Spanish "thirst for gold" represents one of the many little legends or mini-myths of the Conquest. The conquistadors have been depicted as "driven by the lust for gold" or by a "greed" for it that "is strongly reminiscent of the collective psychosis that seized upon California gold diggers in the mid-nineteenth century." In the words of another scholar, "It never occurred [to Spanish colonists] to do anything but look for gold, and this frantic search for precious metals, jewels, and pearls prevented them from engaging in any productive economic activity."[78]

Such a perspective fails utterly to understand the nature of the early colonial economy and the role played in it by precious metals. The "most important thing" to Pizarro was not gold, but the governorship. However, he needed to find gold in order for there to be a governorship worth having. Put in the larger context, Spaniards had no interest at all in the metal per se, any more than we

treasure credit cards as objects. The finely worked gold artifacts collected at Cajamarca and other places were melted down in the *fundición*, a routine that immediately followed all such acquisitions and that allowed shares to be paid out, debts settled, and further supplies and credit procured. It was the value and buying power of gold and silver that Spaniards cared for. They conceived of the precious metals as money—often referring to shipments of them as *dineros*—and as the basis of the credit system that supported so much conquistador activity.[79]

If Spaniards seem at times single-minded in their quest for these metals, this was because gold and silver were not just the preferred source of wealth, but the only items whose value in relation to their transportability made the entire Conquest and colonial endeavor possible. No other New World product even came close to being as valuably nonperishable, divisible, and compact. Rather than being a barrier to "productive economic activity," gold and silver from the Americas and its pursuit by Spaniards underwrote the Conquest and virtually all subsequent economic activity in the New World (let alone altering the economic and political history of Europe).

Almost as determinedly as they sought gold, Spaniards looked for native populations. One aspect of this complex process was the need to acquire native allies—the fourth standard Conquest procedure. This strategy was necessitated by the fact that Spanish expeditions were always outnumbered by the native peoples of the regions being invaded, and that Spaniards were often ignorant of both region and people. Allies were potential sources of invaluable information. They also provided crucial support in the way of provisions and porters to transport them. Above all, native allies provided military assistance, offsetting the potential imbalance of numbers during battle and allowing the Spaniards to pursue a classic divide-and-conquer strategy. This was by no means an original or exceptional strategy as pursued by Cortés or by Pizarro; every conquistador sought native allies, as many and as soon as possible.

The fifth routine aspect of the Conquest was the acquisition of a particular category of native ally—the interpreter. Much has been made of Cortés's use of a Nahua noblewoman as his interpreter—the famous Malinche—often giving the impression that she was an example of Cortés's superior strategic skills. Yet Cortés was only following procedure and had quite predictably been keeping his eyes out for a potential interpreter ever since first sighting the mainland. To that end, he had gone to some trouble to rescue Gerónimo de Aguilar, shipwrecked seven years earlier on the Yucatec coast, on the reasonable assumption that Aguilar had learned the mainland native language.[80] But Aguilar could only speak Yucatec Maya, not Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica empire, so Cortés continued to search. That Malinche could speak Maya and Nahuatl was pure luck, but she was soon taught Spanish anyway.

As with many of these patterns, the routine search for an interpreter can be traced back to the earliest days of the Conquest. Columbus seized and acquired native guides beginning with his first voyage, guides who were obliged to learn Spanish immediately and therefore could soon be called upon to act as interpreters. Seven Caribbean natives were brought back to Spain in 1493 to be instructed as interpreters. Five soon died, but the others returned with Columbus on his second voyage. After these two apparently died, the quest for interpreters continued. In 1502, for example, a Central American native was captured, christened Juan Pérez, and trained specifically for this purpose.[81]

Examples abound from then on. Hernández de Córdoba, acting "in an entirely expected manner" (as historian Hugh Thomas observes), took two prisoners off the Yucatec coast in 1517, either nicknaming or baptizing them Melchor and Julián, and tried to make interpreters of them. Julián reluctantly cooperated and returned to the coasts of Yucatan with the Grijalva expedition of following year, but died soon after. Melchor resisted (that Gómara would later read as lack of couth). Although he too accompanied Grijalva, Melchor escaped at the first opportunity when brought along on Cortés's expedition. Other interpreters, some Spanish but the vast majority native, pop up periodically in the accounts of these expeditions. For example, there is the native Jamaican woman found on the Yucatec coast; a Nahuatl speaker captured by Grijalva, baptized Francisco, and used by Cortés; the Shakori native of South Carolina, interpreter for Vásquez de Ayllón, who called him Francisco de Chicora and took him to Spain; the Spanish page Orteguilla, assigned by Cortés to Moctezuma during the emperor's captivity, who soon became bilingual; and Gerónimo de Aguilar, the shipwrecked Spaniard rescued by Cortés after eight years among the Mayas.[82]

Many others followed in later decades. For example, the Conquest role of Martinillo, an Andean interpreter, allowed him to become don Martín Pizarro. Gaspar Antonio Chi enjoyed a long career in sixteenth-century Yucatan as both a Maya nobleman and the colony's Interpreter General.[83] The fates of native interpreters like Malinche, Martinillo, and Chi owed much to their own abilities, but they also reflected the fact that the quest for interpreters and their relative acceptance into colonial society was a fundamental and ubiquitous Conquest pattern.

The sixth aspect of Conquest procedure was the use of display violence, or the theatrical use of violence. Despite the assistance of native allies (and interpreters), and the use of African auxiliaries, Spanish-led forces often remained outnumbered and seriously threatened by the native peoples whose lands they were invading. Despite evidence of numerous massacres by Spaniards and the routine enslavement of the seminomadic peoples of the Caribbean and Central America, for the most part Spaniards did not seek to decimate or enslave native peoples but rather to subdue and exploit

them as a more or less compliant labor force. A standard means of pursuing such subjugation was to employ dramatic displays of concentrated violence in order to terrorize a native group and convince them of the efficacy of cooperation with Spanish demands. Theatrical and terrorizing techniques appear again and again in the records of Conquest expeditions.[84]

These include the severing of the right hands (or sometimes the arms) of native prisoners, often by the hundreds;[85] the killing of women and, if necessary, sending the corpses home; and the mutilation or killing of select individuals, most typically by fire or by setting mastiffs on them, in front of native witnesses.[86] Another technique was the massacre of unarmed natives, whose effect was magnified if women, children, and the elderly were killed (as in the Cortés-led massacre in Cholula), or if the victims were celebrants in an important native festival or ritual (as in the Alvarado-led massacre in Tenochtitlán), or if the victims were confined by space or crowded tightly together (as in both of the above cases as well as the Pizarro-led massacre of Atahuallpa's entourage). As John Ogilby put it in 1670, Spanish expeditions advanced with "fear conquering more than slaughter."[87] If these examples use terror more than theater, more theatrical tactics and techniques were intended to confuse or impress. These included the attaching of bells to horses; the sounding of trumpets in conjunction with the firing of guns; and the use of cannons to blow apart trees or buildings.[88]

One particularly theatrical form of display violence was the public seizure of a native ruler (the seventh aspect of conquistador procedure). The move by Cortés that has been commonly judged his most bold, his "most startling decision," in Todorov's words, is the seizure of Moctezuma following the Mexica emperor's welcoming of the Spaniards into Tenochtitlán.[89] While the Spaniards were themselves prisoners of the Mexica within one of the palaces in the city center, they kept Moctezuma their prisoner in order to guarantee their safety. The ploy worked for a while, and then when Moctezuma was no longer useful to the Spaniards, they murdered him—later claiming that a stone thrown by one of the emperor's own people had dealt him a fatal blow on the head. Much has been made of the genius and even the supposed originality of this strategy, with Cortés being given all credit and Moctezuma denounced for allowing it to happen.

Such analysis, however, fails to recognize that Spaniards routinely took native rulers hostage. Pizarro's famous capture of Atahuallpa at Cajamarca in 1532 is either taken to be as exceptional and ingenious as Cortés's seizure of Moctezuma or assumed to be an imitation of the Mexican case.[90] In fact, the leaders at Cajamarca—Pizarro, Benalcázar, and Soto—were all 20-year veterans of the Conquest of Panama and Nicaragua, where they had been capturing native rulers long before any

Spaniard even knew Mexico existed.[91] And shortly before the march to Cajamarca, Pizarro had captured and held hostage the native ruler of Puná Island, Tumbalá.[92]

What made Atahuallpa's capture unique was simply a matter of scale—the extent of Atahuallpa's empire, the size of his entourage, the quantity of gold and silver with which he was "ransomed" (the Spaniards executed him anyway). But his capture as a strategy was by no means original. Indeed, the practice was instinctive to Spaniards from the start of the Conquest. When, in 1493, the Haitian native lord Guacanagarí appeared to slip from Columbus's control, the Spaniards on the expedition demanded that they be allowed (in the words of Las Casas) "to take Guacanagarí prisoner, but the Admiral would not do it."[93] However, Columbus's uncertainty as to how to control and treat the natives soon allowed standard Spanish practices to become dominant. A year later another Haitian lord, Caonabó, was publicly executed, and thereafter Spaniards routinely captured, ransomed, tortured, and executed native rulers throughout the Caribbean islands and later the adjacent mainland.[94]

Four decades after Columbus's first voyage, and shortly after Atahuallpa's capture at Cajamarca, one of the men present, Gaspar de Marquina, sent his father a letter attached to a gold bar acquired from the Inca ruler's ransom. Gaspar casually mentioned that the Spaniards had captured one of the local "great lords," and "with him prisoner, a man can go by himself 500 leagues without getting killed."[95] Thus, in a nutshell, Marquina unwittingly conveyed both the routine nature and causal efficacy of the capture of native leaders.

Just as prominent conquistadors such as Cortés and Pizarro were not original in their decisions and actions, nor were the Spaniards in their general conformity to the routine aspects of the Conquest employing unique tactics. Many of these aspects were part of the patterns both of Native American and western European imperial expansion and warfare. In the decades before the major Spanish invasions of the American mainland, Castilians and their neighbors had developed conquest practices and routines through the acquisition of a string of possessions in the southern Mediterranean, northern Africa, and the Caribbean.[96] During this same time, the Mexica and Inca had likewise developed standard procedures through the rapid creation of extensive empires, the former stretching from northern Mexico to the edge of the Maya area, the latter ranging from Ecuador to Chile.

Yet the larger contexts of conquistador activities have been overwhelmed by a view of the Conquest that has dominated our historical discourse on its events and protagonists, a view that gives

primacy of cause and explanation to a handful of exceptional men. Collective achievement, of course, is less appealing both to the participants and to those later reading about it as the human impulse is to look for the heroes and villains. Explaining the Discovery and Conquest in terms of the vision of Columbus or the genius of Cortés would no doubt have delighted both men, but it has been a barrier to a fuller understanding of this “greatest event since the creation of the world.” Fortune may have been “adverse” to Columbus, as he claimed was true of his friend Vespucci, but history has not—nor has it been to Cortés and Pizarro.