Spanish Conquerors

Cortés, Montezuma, and Quetzalcoatl

Although the Spanish invaders of Mexico—under the leadership of Hernán Cortés—had horses and weapons much superior to those of the Aztecs, their numbers were quite small. When Cortés entered the huge Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, he was in command of only 600 Spanish soldiers and about 1,000 Indian allies. The Aztecs could have easily overwhelmed the tiny force. But soon after meeting Aztec emperor Montezuma, Cortés convinced him to become his voluntary prisoner. This prevented Aztec warriors from immediately driving out the Spanish, who, over the next year and a half, conquered the empire.

1. Why was it important for Cortés to convince Montezuma to become his "voluntary" prisoner?

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Cortés owed his quick success, in part, to Montezuma's beliefs about him. Montezuma identified Cortés as a representative of the feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. Quetzalcoatl, who sometimes took the guise of a man with a beard, was a symbol of death and resurrection. According to an Aztec legend, Quetzalcoatl had fled to the east and would return again to Mesoamerica. Cortés's physical appearance and the direction he had come from made Montezuma unsure about whether to welcome or attack Cortés. Cortés, well informed by Montezuma's enemies, knew this and used his knowledge to full advantage in his dealings with Montezuma.

2. Who was Quetzalcoatl in Aztec legend? Identify at least 3 details.

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3. How did Cortés use this legend against Montezuma?

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Francisco Pizarro

From 1526 to 1528, Pizarro explored the west coast of South America. One of his men encountered a trading vessel from Peru filled with rich fabrics and precious metals. Pizarro asked the governor of Panama to send troops to help him find and conquer this land, but the governor refused. He thought that too many lives had already been lost in South American expeditions.

4. What had Pizarro discovered along the west coast of South America?

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5. Why did the governor refuse Pizarro's request to send troops to help him conquer the land?

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It is said that Pizarro drew a line in the sand and challenged those who desired wealth and glory to cross the line. Those who did cross the line became known as "the famous thirteen." They continued the exploration, finding Incan artifacts and hearing tales of a fabulous empire. Pizarro went to Spain to gain the support of Emperor Charles V for the enterprise. Pizarro was in Spain at the same time as Cortés, conqueror of the Aztecs. Charles gave his support, and Pizarro returned to Peru to conquer the Inca.

6. What challenge did Pizarro issue to his men by drawing a line in the sand? How many followed him?

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7. What chance meeting did Pizarro have in Spain? How did the meeting influence Emperor Charles V?