

HIST221

Subunit 2.1.2

Guide to Responding for Hernán Cortés' "Second Letter to Charles V, 1520" and "An Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico"

Main Point Summary/Background:

These readings chronicle Hernán Cortés' 1520 campaign in Mexico from both points of view, that of the Spanish conquerors and that of the Aztecs. These narratives are a reflection of the nature of the Spanish conquest of the Americas and contain exquisite observations on the life and conduct of both the Native Americans and the conquistadors. They also tell us about their understanding of each other's' religion, civilization, and authority.

Related Readings:

These readings are related to the other readings in subunit 2.1 ("The Conquest of Mexico"), especially Dale Hoyt's "The Spanish Conquest (1519–1521)" and Bernal Diaz del Castillo's "True History of the Conquest of Mexico." They also relate to the readings in sub-subunits 2.1.1 (Mariners' Museum's "Hernán Cortés") and 2.1.3 (Monterey Institute of Technology and Education's "Cortés Defeats the Aztecs").

Instructions:

Following are excerpts from the reading and sample responses that help to answer the study questions. Review these answers after you have completed the study questions. Highlighting or taking notes while you read paired with later outlining and paraphrasing is an excellent method to ensure comprehension and retention of difficult material.

1. Hernán Cortés was above all an explorer and a conquistador, and he subsequently understood the importance of knowing the geography of the territory he was planning to explore and conquer. Clearly, for early explorers knowing the terrain and being able to locate natural resources could mean the difference between life and death.
2. He does this probably for two reasons: first, because he is attempting to make his description audience-relatable; and second and more importantly, because he is trying describe the degree of sophistication of this great city of Tenochtitlan. In fact, he not only compares the Aztec capital to several Spanish cities but to three of the most cosmopolitan centers and architectural beauties of the Old World: Seville, Cordoba, and Salamanca. Seville was the port city to which all merchants needed to go to acquire New World goods, Cordoba—the old capital of Muslim al-Andalus—was an important culture fusion center, and Salamanca shined as a cultural city, mostly due to its university, which was founded in 1134.



3. First, he does this because of the nature of the Spanish conquest of the New World; and second, because of both Hernán Cortés and Emperor Charles V's religiosity. In the conquest of the Americas, the Christian duty to evangelize took central stage. The evangelization of natives at the hands of the conquistadors also was used to justify the policy of enslavement of Indians and the destruction of native cultures and civilizations. Also, both Hernán Cortés and Emperor Charles V were devotedly religious; thus, it is not surprising that he would spend so much time explaining both the Aztec religious practices and his actions regarding the Christianization of the natives.
4. Even though Cortés tells the Spanish monarch in his letters of the greatness of the Aztecs and its capital city, Cortés describes Montezuma as "a barbarous monarch." In the eyes of the Europeans, Indians were "savages" and often were described as not "fully human." Thus, very often European explorers and colonists rationalized their superiority with the assumption that they were saving a barbaric and pagan world by spreading Christian civilization.
5. This narrative describes their encounter as amicable. In fact, every surviving contemporary account tells us how their first meeting was characterized by goodwill from both sides.
6. Even though the text does not exactly explain who she was, it is obvious that La Malinche was an interpreter. In fact, La Malinche was a Nahuatl slave who served Hernán Cortés as a guide, translator, and often as an advisor, in his Aztec campaign. Subsequently, she played a very important role in the conquest of Mexico.
7. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly why "The Sun" commanded for Montezuma to be made prisoner; however, it is quite probable that the cause was the fact that his subjects, particularly the nobility, had become increasingly displeased with Montezuma's friendship with the Spaniards.
8. According to this account, Montezuma simply begged the Spaniards to stop the slaughter. Even though we do not exactly know how and why Montezuma died, it is mostly accepted by academics that he was first made prisoner (as explained in question #7) and later killed by his own subjects because they resented his good relations with the Spanish conquistadors.

