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Missionaries or Crusaders? - The Self-Reception of the Spanish Conquistadors in the 16th and 17th Century

Frank JACOB (CUNY, QCC) and Riccardo ALTIERI (Würzburg University)

Introduction

The decline of the American Empires of the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans is definitely not a history of Western supremacy, as the myth of the early modern gunpowder revolution in Europe is no longer sufficient to explain this history.¹ It were internal problems that stimulated the Spanish military success. Despite this fact, the decline of the important civilizations in Latin and South America is highly connected to another foreign influence, namely the arrival of the conquistadors. These ruthless adventurers would become the founding fathers of modern Hispano America.² It was their influence that created a new sphere of intercultural relations and the basis for the wealth of the Spanish Empire in the time after the *Reconquista*.

However, the conquistadors are attractive not only as a consequence of their economic or political achievements. The attraction is mainly related to the military success those men were able to achieve. The victorious wars of the conquistadors were “sensational military conquests”³, especially because “Cortés and Pizarro toppled the highest civilizations of the New World in a few months each.”⁴ Not only did this outcome determine the future of the indigenous population and their reception of the conquistadors⁵, but the events also shaped the self-reception of the men who were willing to conquer old to create new empires. With regard to this aim, it were especially the rich resources of the new world, which attracted the adventurers from Spain, because since Columbus had

¹ On this topic see: Frank Jacob and Gilmar Visoni-Alonzo, “The Theory of a Military Revolution: Global, Numerous, Endless?” *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar* 6:3 (2014), 189-204.

² Bernard Grunberg, “El universo de los conquistadores: resultado de una investigación prosopográfica,” *Signos Históricos* 12 (2004), 117.

³ Alfred W. Cosby, “Conquistador y Pestilencia: The First New World Pandemic and the Fall of the Great Indian Empires,” *The Hispanic American Review* 47:3 (1967), 321.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Joanna Overing, “The Conquistadors of the Jungle: Images of the Spanish Soldier in Piaroa Cosmology,” *Indiana* 14 (1996), 180.

started to discover a Western route to East Asia, the people knew that there had to exist a rich world across the Atlantic Ocean.⁶

Like the explorer Columbus, the conquistadors Cortés or Pizarro were willing to become rich in the new world to achieve social recognition and wealth at home as well.⁷ It was this aim that determined the interrelation between the indigenous population and the intruders, who were not really interested in the cultural aspects of the former rulers. They were longing for the submission of the cultural “other“ by war⁸ to install a Spanish system based on its foreign values. Christianity played an important role because it was able to religiously light the conflict even more, which is why a lot of the conquistadors described their bloody work as a mission for the Catholic Church as well. Therefore, we seem to be able to determine different reasons for the conquerors to participate in the *Conquista*. Next to a personal longing for richness, social advancement, or simply adventure⁹, religion was a possible reason for the actions of the conquistadors. However, whatever the reason might have been, the image of the Spanish who conquered the New World seemed to be impacted by all these factors. Due to this, we want to ask for the self-reception of the conquistadors.

Hence, we will describe the conquistador class first by asking for their specific motives and targets. Next to gold, we will focus on Christianity as a driving force to finally analyze how far the new environment had created political establishments that went beyond everything that had existed before the age of the *Conquista*.

Conquistadors

The conquistadors resemble a personal continuity between the Spanish medieval ages, namely the *Reconquista* and the Spanish outreach in the early modern period during the *Conquista*. The last named provided the groups, whose members seemed to be lost without the struggle against the Muslim parts of Spain, with a new task, one that promised a career that could lead directly to social advancement and a life in luxury. The new “crusade“ outside the Spanish Peninsula could turn poor

⁶ *Colección de documentos inéditos del Archivo de Indias relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de America y Oceania* (Madrid: Imprenta de Manuel G. Hernandez, 1875), 42.

⁷ Wilmar Peña Collazos, “De Colón y los conquistadores : el problema de la reconstitución del sujeto en un nuevo mundo prefigurado,” *Cuadernos de Filosofía Latinoamericana* 27: 95 (2006), 49.

⁸ Grunberg, 117.

⁹ Ibid.

hidalgos like Pizarro into rich men.¹⁰ Consequently, men of all sorts, not only Spaniards, joined the new conquest movement. We even know African-born conquistadors who participated in the battles for the New World, e.g. Juan Garrido¹¹, who was only one of those participants.¹² People from other countries also joined the movement because they hoped for a similar success as those, whose stories spread through Europe.

Men like Hernando de Soto (1496-1542) were able to gain uncountable success by seemingly easy means. With only 650 men, 240 horses¹³ and some arquebus muskets, he was able to gain victories against pre-Columbian kingdoms and masses of enemies.¹⁴ De Soto's case is also important because he resembled "the quintessential conquistador – a fearless risk taker who relentlessly pursued wealth, fame and glory even when the odds seemed overwhelmingly against him."¹⁵ Like those who followed his example and became successful, he was driven by ambitions and the wish for entitlement, while believing in "his own superiority as a Spaniard, a Christian and a warrior".¹⁶ As well as he commanded his soldiers, as brutal was his attitude against the indigenous people, who were seen as a sacrifice for his personal ambitions. However, he returned with nine ships to Spain, all carrying gold and silver, thereby driving the fantasies of a next generation of conquerors further. Despite his success, de Soto never achieved the fame of the "genius" of all conquistadors, Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), who also provided a detailed account of his experiences in the New World.

Wanting to keep the king informed about his achievements as conquistador, he produced a report that was described as well written as Cesar's description of the Gallic War.¹⁷ Cortés provided five

¹⁰ Felipe Castañeda, "La imagen del indio y del conquistador en la Nueva Granada: el caso de Bernardo de Vargas Machuca," *Eidos* 4 (2006), 42; Das Gold der Neuen Welt. Die Papiere des Welser-Konquistadors und Generalkapitäns von Venezuela Philipp von Hutten 1534-1541, ed. Eberhard Schmitt and Friedrich Karl von Hutten (Hildburghausen: Franckenschwelle, 1996), 10; John Edwards, "A Conquistador Society? The Spain Columbus Left," *History Today* 42:5 (1992), 16.

¹¹ Ricardo E. Alegría, *Juan Garrido, el Conquistador Negro en las Antillas, Florida, México y California, c. 1503-1540* (San Juan: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y El Caribe, 1990); Peter Gerhard, "A Black Conquistador in Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 58:3 (1978), 451-459.

¹² Matthew Restall, "Black Conquistadors: Armed Africans in Early Spanish America," *The Americas* 57:2 (2000), 174. See also R. R. Wright, "Negro Companions of the Spanish Explorers," *American Anthropologist* 4:2 (1902), 217-228.

¹³ On the role of horses during the *Conquista* see: Heiko Schnickmann, "Waffe, Ungeheuer und Mythos - Die Pferde der Conquistadoren," in *Pferde in der Geschichte*, ed. Frank Jacob (Darmstadt: BÜCHNER, 2015) (in print).

¹⁴ David Ewing Duncan, "Mind of a Conquistador," *American History* 48:1 (2013), 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁷ Ernst Schultze, *Die Eroberung von Mexiko. Drei eigenhändige Berichte von Ferdinand Cortez an Kaiser Karl V.* (Hamburg: Gutenberg-Verlag, 1907), 23.

reports¹⁸, which, especially due to the lack of Indian counter-reports, were responsible for the creation of the historiographical image of the *Conquista* for far too long. Even though Cortés stated that he

will endeavor to describe, in the best manner in my power, what I have myself seen; and imperfectly as I may succeed in the attempt, I am fully aware that the account will appear so wonderful as to be deemed scarcely worthy of credit; since even we who have seen these things with our own eyes, are yet so amazed as to be unable to comprehend their reality.¹⁹

However, his perspective remained a Spanish one, criticizing the Indians for their disbelief in god, which forced the conquistador to say “everything to them I could to divert them from their idolatries, and draw them to a knowledge of God our Lord.”²⁰ Cortés would also

make them understand the true faith, they would follow my directions, as being for the best. Afterwards, Moctezuma and many of the principal citizens remained with me until I had removed the idols, purified the chapels, and placed the images in them, manifesting apparent pleasure; and I forbade them sacrificing human beings to their idols as they had been accustomed to do; because, besides being abhorrent in the sight of God, your sacred Majesty had prohibited it by law, and commanded to put to death whoever should take the life of another. Thus, from that time, they refrained from the practice, and during the whole period of my abode in that city, they were never seen to kill or sacrifice a human being.²¹

The conquistador described himself as a religious savior, a messiah who was sent to save the Indians from using unchristian practices during their spiritual festivities. However, he also strengthened the aspirations of further conquistadors when he describes the wealth of the Aztec Empire with all its gold and silver to show that nothing in Spain would be equal to the beauty and the luxuries of the New World, the world Cortés had made his own.²²

After sailing from Cuba to Mexico in 1519, he made his way through Montezuma’s empire to finally arrive in the Aztec capital, where he destroyed the existing system of rule, even though the conquistador assured the king of the Aztecs that he and his men had come to “Mexico as friends. There

¹⁸ For a short survey of their content see *Ibid.*, 23-40.

¹⁹ Second Letter of Cortés to Charles V, 1520, cited in Oliver J. Thatcher, ed., *The Library of Original Sources* (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), Vol. V: 9th to 16th Centuries, 317-326, online available at <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1520cortes.asp> (last access: 25 January 2015).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

is nothing to fear.²³ While the indigenous population of Tenochtitlan was not sure if Cortés might have been a god or a foreigner who would simply be a friend, they recognized too late the danger that was created by the arrival of the Spaniards in the capital. On the second day of a ritual festivity,

they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death. The dancers and singers were completely unarmed. They brought only their embroidered cloaks, their turquoises, their lip plugs, their necklaces, their clusters of heron feathers, their trinkets made of deer hooves. Those who played the drums, the old men, had brought their gourds of snuff and their timbrels.

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers-and even the spectators- were also killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.²⁴

Due to their cruelty, the conquistadors were finally able to establish a new rule and create a new cultural sphere on the soil of the already declining American empires.²⁵ They became an emblematic part of the Latin American myth and historiography²⁶ in the same sense as the *Conquista* became a determining factor of the New World in general, and states like Mexico, in particular.²⁷ However, the conquistadors themselves were rather the incarnation of a medieval age that founded a new field of action in the New World, while they seemed to have no future in the old one of European Spain. The conquistador itself as an ideal image for bravery, manhood, and the fight against the Islamic occupation of Spain goes back until the early 13th century, as James I of Aragon (1208-1276) received the title *El Conquistador* after liberating Valencia from its Muslim conquerors.²⁸ The term was consequently used to describe men like James I, which is why it was common to understand that “el conquistador es el hombre que hizo reconocer por las armas, el derecho de España y de la Iglesia

²³ *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. Miguel Leon-Portilla (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 64-66 and 129-131, online available at <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/aztecs1.asp> (last access: 1 February 2015), 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.* S.129-131.

²⁵ Hugo Hernán Ramírez, *Fiesta, espectáculo y teatralidad en el México de los conquistadores*. Frankfurt / Madrid / México: Vervuert-Iberoamericana / Bonilla Artigas, 2009.

²⁶ Carlos Alberto Montaner, “Pensadores, Conquistadores and Latin American Mythmaking,” *Society* 21:4 (1984), 53-57.

²⁷ Grunberg, 95.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

sobre las tierras que a partir de entonces formaron parte de la Corona española²⁹. Despite their noble image, a minority of the conquistadors was part of the gentry. Of 1175 known men, just 69 were noblemen.³⁰ However, many of them tried to achieve such a social status by a successful conquest, for which the battles for the New World seemed to offer a last chance, as Granada, the last Muslim bastion was reconquered in 1492, the year Columbus was granted his attempt to reach East Asia by crossing the Atlantic.³¹ Most of the conquistadors came from Andalusia, were around 30 years old and were descendants of a rather modest social class. Despite their social origin, most of them - around 84% - were well educated or were at least able to write.³² Thirty percent of the men came from an artisan background, just 16% were soldiers and 12% could be described as intellectuals (notaries or writers).³³ Furthermore, we are able to trace some physicians or even musicians. Following the call to arms “for god and his majesty,” they were fulfilling their task for religion and nation. While doing this, in 71 cases, the men were able to achieve a social advancement and a noble title.³⁴ Acting as agents of the Spanish king and empire,³⁵ they also founded new cities that fulfilled multiple functions:

- 1) implantación del poder político español,
- 2) la protección de los conquistadores y de los pobladores al abrigo de un centro defensivo,
- 3) el control de la economía de una región más o menos vasta,
- 4) la sumisión y posterior integración del mundo indígena en la vida económica, social, cultural y espiritual de la nueva colonia.³⁶

²⁹ Ibid., 96.

³⁰ Ibid., 97. See also Francisco Icaza, *Diccionario biográfico de conquistadores y pobladores de Nueva España*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Imprenta “El Adelantado de Segovia,” 1923).

³¹ Christian Büschges, *Familie, Ehre und Macht. Konzept und soziale Wirklichkeit des Adels in der Stadt Quito (Ecuador) während der späten Kolonialzeit, 1765-1822* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996), 17; Guillermo Lohmann Villena, *Los americanos en las órdenes nobiliarias*, Vol.1, (Madrid: CSIC Press, 1993), XX.

³² Grunberg, 98.

³³ Ibid., 99.

³⁴ Ibid., 101.

³⁵ Frank Grunert and Kurt Seelmann, *Die Ordnung der Praxis: Neue Studien zur spanischen Spätscholastik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), 219; Bernardino Vázquez de Tapia, *Relación de méritos y servicios del conquistador Bernardino Vázquez de Tapia* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1972), 53-54. For the image of the Spanish Empire in general see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World. Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500 – c.1800* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995), 29-103.

³⁶ Grunberg, 102.

The conquistadors saw themselves as legitimated to do this not only by the power of the king but also by the fact that they were waging a “*guerra justa*.”³⁷ Consequently, the use of violence was legitimized whenever needed to achieve the aims of the *Conquista*,³⁸ and cruelties were something rather common.³⁹ This was especially so during the periods after the Spanish conquest, when the so-called *encomienda* system⁴⁰ created a high grade of suffering for the indigenous population, and violence as well as enslavement became part of the economic system of Latin and South America.⁴¹ However, as we know today due to a more critical research with regard to the role of the native population for the success of the conquistadors, without indigenous support, the Spanish soldiers would have never been successful. Even though Cortés underlined the superiority of Western military, especially the cavalry⁴², without native forces, he would not have been able to survive for long. Despite the superior self-image of Western domination,⁴³ the conquistadors did not change the existing social order of rule because most of the former hierarchies were simply used further by exchanging the ruling class of the Aztecs with a foreign ruling class from Spain.⁴⁴ During this process, the “indigenous peoples now appear as pragmatic, flexible actors, creatively adjusting to the new conditions brought forth by the Europeans’ arrival, and even manipulating their supposed superiors.”⁴⁵ Cortés described that he and his men were often greeted very friendly by the natives⁴⁶, who recognized the chance to overcome the Aztec rule of Tenochtitlan. The consequence of these

³⁷ Ibid., 109.

³⁸ Juan David Montoya Guzmán, “¿Conquistar indios o evangelizar almas? Políticas de sometimiento en las provincias de las tierras bajas del Pacífico (1560-1680),” *Historica Critica* 45 (2011), 16.

³⁹ Idelfonso Díaz del Castillo, “Sublevación y castigo de los Indios Sindaguas de la Provincia de Barbacoas,” *Boletín de Estudios Históricos* 12:86 (1938), 41.

⁴⁰ Grunberg, 113-117.

⁴¹ Jerónimo Granados, “Poverty and Violence as the Atavistic Paradigm of Conquistador Christianity and its Counterweight in Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala’s New Chronicle and Good Governance,” *Journal of Latin American Herme- neutics* 8 (2011), 2.

⁴² Schultze, 57.

⁴³ R. Douglas Cope, “Indigenous Agency in Colonial Spanish America,” *Latin American Research Review* 45:1 (2010), 203.

⁴⁴ See Olivia Harris, “The Coming of the White People: Reflections on the Mythologisa- tion of Latin American History,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14:1 (1995), 9–24.

⁴⁵ Cope, 204.

⁴⁶ Schultze, 47.

friendly meetings was not only a cultural exchange⁴⁷, but many of them - and not only in Mexico - were changing sides and entering the rows of the conquistadors.⁴⁸ Despite these facts, the conquistadors developed a self-image that was not related to the native support at all; rather, it was influenced by other factors, especially gold and religion.

The Self-Image of the Conquistadors

The conquistadors established a new universal elite and as such were needing their own history and traditional legitimization. This did not happen immediately during the Conquista but was rather a long process, which mainly started during the time of the second or third generation of conquerors in the New World.⁴⁹ To achieve a segregation from the cultural “other,” they relied on cultural symbols and military power alike.⁵⁰ They created a new cognitive reality based on their Spanish heritage, their own fantasy as well as prejudicial values of a European context. While the fantasy was mainly expressed in stories like those dealing with El Dorado, a city of gold, the Spanish heritage was extensively based on Christianity. These two factors impacted the creation of the self-image of generations of conquistadors in the New World. Therefore, both of them should be taken into closer consideration when dealing with the self-reception of the Spanish conquerors.

⁴⁷ See Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).

⁴⁸ Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Yanna Yannakakis, “Allies or Servants? The Journey of Indian Conquistadors in the Lienzo of Analco,” *Ethnohistory* 58:4 (2011), 655. For surveys of the indigenous part of the Conquista, see: Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, eds., *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007); Florine Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan: A Nahuatl Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2004); Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Michel Oudijk and Matthew Restall, *La conquista indígena de Mesoamerica: El caso de don Gonzalo Mazatzin Moctezuma* (Puebla/México City: Universidad de las Américas Puebla, 2008); Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford, UK: London, 2003).

⁴⁹ Ottmar Ette, *ZusammenLebensWissen. List, Last und Lust literarischer Konvivenz im globalen Maßstab* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2010), 17.

⁵⁰ Collazos, 38.

Gold

The New World offered a lot of unknown things, like animals⁵¹ or plants. However, it also offered something that could change the personal luck and life of those who achieved it: gold and silver. The conquistadors, like de Soto who was mentioned above, who were able to return with those values to Spain, could advance in society and thus live a better life as a direct consequence of the *Conquista*. Therefore, many would-be conquistadors dreamt of the gold and silver that had been described by those who returned successfully or had sent letters about their discoveries to provide an imagination of sheer wealth and luxury:

In all these capitals, the Incas had temples of the Sun, mints, and many silversmiths who did nothing but work rich pieces of gold or fair vessels of silver; large garrisons were stationed there, and a steward who was in command of them all, to whom an accounting of everything that was brought in was made, and who, in turn, had to give one of all that was issued. (...) The tribute paid by each of these provinces, whether gold, silver, clothing, arms and all else.⁵²

Similar to the Incan Empire, same descriptions arrived from Mexico, where Cortés was able to get in possession of the knowledge about all gold mines in the Aztec Empire.⁵³ The European intruders seemed to be appeased solely by gold, for which they developed a specific addiction, as the first question while meeting new natives always longed for information about the valuable metal.⁵⁴ The gold that was found and brought back provided the effort of the army because 80% would go directly into its hand, while emperor Charles V would receive the remaining 20%.⁵⁵ The rather empty treasure chamber of the Spanish king was thus steadily recovered by the success of the conquistadors. Even his heir, Philipp II, could rely on these large advantages because from “New Spain (we)re obtained gold and silver“⁵⁶, even though it had become harder to collect masses of the metal:

⁵¹ María José Rodilla León, “Bestiarios del nuevo mundo: maravillas de Dios o engendros del demo,“ *RILCE: Revista de filología hispánica* 23:1 (2007), 195-205.

⁵² Pedro Cieza de León, *The Second Part of the Chronicle of Peru*, trans. & ed. Clements R. Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1883), pp. 36-50, online available at <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1540cieza.asp> (last access: 18 January 2015).

⁵³ Schultze, 139.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵⁶ Letters of Philipp II of Spain, cited in *The Western Tradition, Vol. II: From the Renaissance to the Present*, Fifth Ed., (Lexington, MA and Toronto; D. C. Heath, 1995) pp. 102-103, online available at <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/PhilipII.html> (last access: 30 January 2015).

great quantities of gold and silver are no longer found upon the surface of the earth, as they have been in past years; and to penetrate into the bowels of the earth requires greater effort, skill and outlay, and the Spaniards are not willing to do the work themselves, and the natives cannot be forced to do so, because the Emperor has freed them from all obligation of service as soon as they accept the Christian religion. Wherefore it is necessary to acquire negro slaves, who are brought from the coasts of Africa, both within and without the Straits, and these are selling dearer every day, because on account of their natural lack of strength and the change of climate, added to the lack of discretion upon the part of their masters in making them work too hard and giving them too little to eat, they fall sick and the greater part of them die.⁵⁷

The wealth that was provided by the New World increased the income of the monarch in Spain, who used the money to finance his wars in Flanders or other parts of Europe.⁵⁸ Consequently, the mining efforts that had already existed before their arrival in many parts of Latin and South America were increased by the Spanish conquistadors, and the “(m)iners followed in the footsteps of the conquistadores, side by side with the soldiers, priests and missionaries, locating ore deposits, creating wealth, opening roads and making significant contributions to the creation of new cities, towns and villages⁵⁹ with a development mainly based on the suffering of the indigenous population. While the imported gold and silver had a tremendous impact on the early modern European societies, it also stimulated the self-image of some conquistadors as treasure hunters, who were always looking for a new El Dorado in the jungles of South or the deserts of Latin America. If they were able to find such a place, they would not only be rich, but also be accepted as a major contributor to the success of Spain, something that could provide them an incredible increase of social prestige. However, most never found such a place and were driven crazy by the climatic conditions or died during their hunt for gold in the New World. Nonetheless, despite its impact, gold was not the only factor that influenced the creation of the conquistadorian self-image. Religion was also very important.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Sergio Almazan Esqueda, “Introduction: Conquistadores: Soldiers, Priests and Miners,” *Engineering & Mining Journal* 212:8 (2011), 52.

Religion

Cortés believed that he was obligated to bring Christianity to the native population of the New World⁶⁰ especially since the *Conquista* was highly related to religious belief and a Christian mission. Like the participants of the *Reconquista* in Spain, Cortés was impacted by the spiritual task he had to perform, waving flags that, following the tradition of Constantine the Great (272-337), stated: “Sequamur crucem, et si nos fidem habemus vere in hoc signo vincemus.”⁶¹ During one of his meetings with the Aztecs, the conquistador tried to force them to abolish their gods and worship the cross and statues of Saint Mary.⁶² The evangelization and mission, therefore, played a major role for the self-image of the conquistadors from the beginning onwards.⁶³ To achieve these aims, the Spanish crown had sanctioned a policy of “blood and iron,”⁶⁴ which became an essential part of the *Conquista* until the 17th century, when a rather moderate policy was used by the missionaries of the several Catholic orders and their members.⁶⁵

Before this change, the conquistadors acted in the tradition of the *Reconquista* and followed an announcement by Pope Alexander VI (1431-1503), who had demanded that the *Conquista* take place “en nombre de la Sancta Trinidad (...), el cual sera a su gloria y honra de la sancta religion cristiana.”⁶⁶ The Christian mission, consequently, was interrelated with the age of the Spanish *Reconquista*. As a result, the conquering of the New World by the conquistadors shows many medieval elements as well.⁶⁷

The aim of the conquistadors was finally not only the submission of the indigenous population but also the destruction of the foreign religion to replace it with Christianity. Therefore, they believed in

⁶⁰ Felix Hinz, “Der Wandel im Selbstverständnis des Hernán Cortés durch die Conquista,” online available at <http://www.motecuhzoma.de/wandel.html> (last access: 3 January 2015).

⁶¹ Nikolaus Böttcher, *Kontinuität und Brüche in Hispanoamerika* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013), 36.

⁶² Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Wahrhafte Geschichte der Eroberung von Mexiko*, ed. Georg Adolf Narziß (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel 1988), 263.

⁶³ Guzmán, 11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁶ Collazos, 39.

⁶⁷ Antonio Garrido Aranda, *Moriscos e indios: precedentes hispánicos de la evangelización de México*, (México: UNAM, 1980); Hernán G.H. Taboada, “Mentalidad de reconquista y primeros conquistadores,” *Revista de Historia de América* 135 (2004), 39.

waging a religiously justified war against pagan religions in the New World.⁶⁸ Consequently, it is not surprising that Cortés named the first city he founded *Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz* (Rich City of the True Cross)⁶⁹ and described his actions as a “pacification of the lands”⁷⁰ in New Spain. Like other conquistadors, his soldiers waved a flag showing a golden cross on black ground, and the first action after a battle consisted of the baptism of the Indians.⁷¹ In contrast to the Christian religion, the Aztec priests were described as members of a sect⁷² who were leading the Aztecs in a wrong direction. Cortés underlined that “there is just one god, (...) who had created heaven and earth.”⁷³ With regard to the *Reconquista*, due to which the Spanish had fought against the Muslims, meaning a crusade against Islam⁷⁴, the conquistadors reproduced such a fight in the new colonies, depicting the indigenous religions as the new enemy. The violent religious homogenization of the Spanish Peninsula, where the soldiers had fought against the Muslims and the church against the Jewish population, was, consequently, continued throughout the New World.⁷⁵ By emphasizing their religious motivation and task alike, the conquistadors established themselves as the heirs of the mission that had started with the *Reconquista* in Spain.⁷⁶ Particularly due to this, the *Conquista* remained something attached to medieval traditions and must be seen in contrast to later forms of colonialism that were driven rather by economic aims than by a religious mission although the last named was also used as an explanatory pattern of Western rule.

⁶⁸ Hernán Cortés, “Ordenanzas de Tlaxcala”, in *Cartas y documentos*, ed. Mario Hernández Sánchez-Barba (México:-Porrúa, 1963), 337; Grunberg, 100, 109; Francisco de Victoria, *Leçons, sur les indiens et sur le droit de guerre* (Genebra: Droz, 1966), 97-98.

⁶⁹ Schultze, 32.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 62, 87.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷⁴ Taboada, 43.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁷⁶ Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez, “Mayas, españoles, moros y judíos en baile de máscaras: morfología y retórica de la alteridad,” in *De palabra y obra en el Nuevo Mundo, 3. La formación del otro, México*, ed. Gary H. Gosen et al. (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1993), 323-376; Taboada, 45-48.

Politics

If the conquistadors are seen as a phenomenon that combined the traditional values of Spain with the new environment, it also seems logical that they created a new class there, one that was longing not only for a continuation of the traditions but also for the establishment of a new political sphere in which the conquerors would hold a dominant position. What they established, therefore, was also a new political order, emblematic of their social advancement to the status of a new ruling class. While some writers had criticized the methods of the men who went overseas to establish a new sphere of influence for their cruelty against the Indians⁷⁷, the conquistadors themselves underlined the righteousness of their actions and even revolted against the orders of the Spanish king, who seemed to have recognized the danger of powerful conquistadors, who were not willing to be integrated into his sphere of rule but were rather longing for the creation of a new one, far away from the power center of the monarchy.

One of the best-known cases is the one of Lope de Aguirre (1511-1561), who provided some kind of political statement with regard to the role of the conquistadors in the new world when the king had decided to get rid of their dangerous influence. Aguirre started a rebellion against this attempt and explained his situation in detail in a letter to King Philipp.⁷⁸ He starts with a description of his self-image as a conquistador, fighting for Spain and the king in the New World:

In my youth I crossed the sea to the land of Peru to gain fame, lance in hand, and to fulfill the obligation of all good men. In 24 years I have done you great service in Peru, in conquests of the Indians, in founding towns, and especially in battles and encounters fought in your name.⁷⁹

However, he felt betrayed by the king, who was “nothing but cruel and ungrateful.”⁸⁰ Aguirre, therefore, demanded political independence for himself and his conquistadors, who had done so much for the sake of the royal success in the new territories, when he wrote:

⁷⁷ Julián Díez Torres, “Los marañones y la polémica de la conquista: Retórica e ideas políticas en la carta de Lope de Aguirre a Felipe II,” *Alpha* 33 (2011), 202.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 203-205.

⁷⁹ “Letter from Lope de Aguirre to King Philip of Spain,” 1561, cited in *Documentos para la Historia económica de Venezuela*, ed. A. Arellano Moreno (Caracas: Univ. Central, 1961), translated by Tom Holloway, online available at <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1561aguirre.asp> (last access: 30 January 2015).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

I demand of you, King, that you do justice and right by the good vassals you have in this land, even though I and my companions (whose names I will give later), unable to suffer further the cruelties of your judges, viceroy, and governors, have resolved to obey you no longer. Denaturalizing ourselves from our land, Spain, we make the cruelest war against you that our power can sustain and endure. Believe, King and lord, we have done this because we can no longer tolerate the great oppression and unjust punishments of your ministers who, to make places for their sons and dependents, have usurped and robbed our fame, life, and honor. It is a pity, King, the bad treatment you have given us.⁸¹

The conquistador wanted recognition for himself and his men, a recognition that would be expressed by special rights in the colonial setting of New Spain, where the conquering soldiers would become the ruling class, not some officials who were sent after the conquest was over.

Look here, King of Spain! Do not be cruel and ungrateful to your vassals because while your father and you stayed in Spain without the slightest bother, your vassals, at the price of their blood and fortune, have given you all the kingdoms and holding you have in these parts. Beware, King and lord, that you cannot take, under the title of legitimate king, any benefit from this land where you risked nothing, without first giving due gratification to those who have labored and sweated in it.⁸²

It seems obvious that Aguirre left the self-sacrificing image of the conquistadors, who were fighting for cross and king, and established a new self-image, longing for rewards and entitlement as a consequence of the achievements during the years of conquest. Therefore, “the letter is best understood as an attempt to justify a political position”.⁸³ What becomes also obvious is the fact that the self-image of the conquistadors had changed by the *Conquista* as well. A creation that was highly connected to the *Reconquista* at the beginning, consequently became something connected to the new sphere of influence, where the rather poor hidalgos faced the possibility of becoming part of the ruling class.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Torres, 201.

Conclusion

It is true that the Europeans had started their approach to the New World with the wish to rule the new sphere of a possible influence and wealth.⁸⁴ This approach would not change during the process⁸⁵, but the image of the conquistadors would change during the years. Starting as fighters for Christianity, motivated by the religious traditions of the *Reconquista* in Spain, or simply driven by the search for gold and wealth, the conquistadors finally developed a self-image that would legitimize them for rule. This was a rule that would not accept a mixture of the new established ruling class with the indigenous population, as the privilege for rule should not be watered by interracial mixture.⁸⁶

Consequently, the distance from Spain and a life at the periphery of the Spanish Empire had changed the self-image. Instead of remaining in the lines of the medieval traditions, the soldiers developed a new self-reception, one that was based on their achievements and military success. The king might have recognized the danger of such a self-conscious group and tried to get rid of them by replacing the soldiers with loyal officials. However, the conquistadors rebelled against their master, telling him, like Aguirre did, that military success had granted them a right to the entitlement they were asking for now.

While the conquistadors were neither numerous nor powerful enough to finally create their own sphere of influence on a steady basis, they were still influential enough to become one of the cultural images highly connected to the establishment of early modern Latin and South American societies. Even though they were not able to achieve social advancement or luxury for long, the religious impact is still visible today, and the personal impact of the men who sailed around the world conquering the declining empires of America is a vivid part of the cultural heritage of the region and its historiography.

⁸⁴ Martina Grimming, *Goldene Tropen. Die Koproduktion natürlicher Ressourcen und kultureller Differenz in Guayana* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 28.

⁸⁵ Anthony Pagden, *Das erfundene Amerika. Der Aufbruch des europäischen Denkens in die Neue Welt* (München: Diederichs, 1996), 22.

⁸⁶ Norma Angélica Castillo Palma, *Cholula, sociedad mestiza en una ciudad india (1649-1796)*, (México: D.F. 2001), 18.