



HERNANDO CORTÉS

THE
DISCOVERY
AND
CONQUEST
OF
MEXICO 1517-1521

by Bernal Díaz del Castillo

*Edited from the only exact copy of the original MS
(and published in Mexico) by Genaro García. Translated with
an Introduction and Notes by A. P. Maudslay. Introduction to
the American edition by IRVING A. LEONARD*



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which the old soldier later wrote for his bulky manuscript, declaring:

"That which I have myself seen and the fighting I have gone through, with the help of God, I will describe quite simply as a fair witness, without twisting events one way or another. I am now an old man, over eighty-four years of age, and I have lost my sight and hearing, and, as luck would have it, I have gained nothing of value to leave to my children and descendants but this true story, and they will presently find out what a wonderful story it is."

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Extracts from the Introduction by Señor Don Genaro García¹

The True History of the Conquest of New Spain, written by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of the Conquerors, was known to, and appreciated by historians and bibliographers before it was published. Antonio de Herrera² quotes it frequently, Friar Juan de Torquemada³ also refers to it on several occasions, and the Licentiate Antonio de Leon Pinelo⁴ devotes some lines to it in his brief bibliography.

Although the original manuscript has always been kept in Guatemala, first by the Author and afterwards by his descendants, and still later by the Municipality of the Capital, in whose archives it is preserved to-day, a copy of it was made in the sixteenth century and sent to Spain to King Philip II⁵ and was there consulted by the Royal chroniclers. After its publication

¹ The following extracts are translated direct from Señor Don Genaro García's Introduction. Any differences entertained with regard to the names of persons or places or the routes followed, will be explained in note attached to the translation of the text of Bernal Díaz's narrative.

² *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos en las Islas i Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano*. Madrid, 1726-30, Decada 2^a passim. The first edition was published in 1601.

³ *Los Veinte i un libros rituales y Monarchia Indiana*. Madrid, 1723, Tomo I passim. The first edition was published in 1615.

⁴ *Epitome de la Biblioteca Oriental i Occidental, Nautica y Geografica* (Madrid, 1629), p. 75.

⁵ So it was stated by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo de Medrano in 1579. In the *Historia de Guatemala ó Recordacion Florida*, by D. Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán (Madrid, 1882-3), Vol. i, p. 398.—G. G.

in Madrid by Friar Alonzo Remón of the Order of Mercy in the year 1632 the *True History* was universally accepted from that time onwards as the most complete and trustworthy of the chronicles of the Conquest of New Spain. A second edition followed almost immediately, in the same city, some four years later, a third, a fourth, and a fifth. It was translated into English by Maurice Keatinge in 1800 and John Ingram Lockhart in 1844; into German by Ph. J. von Rehfues in 1838 and Karl Ritter in 1848; into French by D. Jourdanet in 1876 and José María de Heredia in 1877,¹ and into Hungarian by Károly Brózik in 1878 and Moses Gaal in 1899.

Several of these translations obtained the honours of a second edition, as that of Keatinge in 1803, that of Rehfues in 1843, and that of Jourdanet in 1877.

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It must be pointed out that no secret has ever been made of Remón's extensive corruption of the original text. Don Antonio de Leon Pinelo, in his account of the *True History* in 1629, says, no doubt without malice, that Friar Alonzo Remón kept in readiness a "corrected" copy for publication. It was no sooner printed than the author of the *Isagoge Histórico Apologétic*² found in it "many things added which were not found in the original". More explicitly and with a better judgment Don Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán, the great-great-grandson of the author, and at that time the possessor of the manuscript, wrote at the end of the same century that the book, published by the reverend father Friar Alonzo Remón, differs considerably from the original, "for in some places there is more and in others less than what my great-grandfather the author wrote, for I find corruptions in chapters 164 and 171, and in the same way in other parts in the course of the history, in which not only is the credibility and fidelity of my Castillo clouded over, but many real heroes are defrauded of their just merit."

Fuentes y Guzmán states that this corruption (of the text)

¹ The French translations were—although an interval of one year lay between their publication—written simultaneously by the distinguished author of the *Influence de la pression de l'air sur la vie de l'homme*, and the excellent poet to whom France is indebted for the inimitable *Les Trophées*. This synchronism strongly indicates the extraordinary importance attributed to the *Historia Verdadera*.—G. G.

² Published in Madrid, 1892.

was not the least important of the motives that induced him to write his own work.¹ At the beginning of the following century Friar Francisco Vásquez proved that Friar Bartolomé de Olmedo was not in Guatemala at the time of its conquest, as is stated in the edition of Remón, and therefore he was not the first to spread the Christian faith through that province, unless, as he says, one should concede another miracle such as that of Saint Anthony of Padua, who managed to be in two different places at the same time.

Some years afterwards Don Andrés González Barcia, referring to the charge that Fuentes y Guzmán had launched against Remón, arbitrarily surmised that the differences that existed between the edition published by the latter and the original manuscript were matters of no importance, and simply inferred that it was "easy to believe that in copying the author should make some alterations, as ordinarily happens". This defence was not convincing, and on this account our great bibliographer in Mexico, Don Juan José de Eguíara y Eguren, delicately objected that P. Vásquez had declared even the first edition to be falsified, while in Spain the indefatigable chronicler Don Juan Bautista Muñoz endeavoured to procure a copy of the original manuscript with the object of ascertaining the alterations due to Padre Remón.

Finally, if there could be any doubt remaining about the bad faith of Remón, it was completely dispelled by the Guatemalan historians Padre Domingo Juarros Don José Milla, the Bishop Don Francisco de Paula García Paláez, and Don Ramón A. Salazar, who from personal inspection fully corroborated what had been asserted by their predecessors the author of the *Isagoge*, Fuentes y Guzmán, and Vásquez.

As a matter of fact we can see at a glance in the following notes (par. iv, and Appendix No. 2)² that Fray Alonzo Remón in printing the *True History* suppressed whole pages of the manuscript, interpolated others, garbled the facts, changed the names of persons and places, increased or lessened the numbers,

¹ *Historia de Guatemala ó Recordación Florida*, p. 8.

² This paragraph and appendix has not been translated. As we have now before us an accurate copy of the original text, the reader would not be much interested in a discussion of the corruptions of the text by Padre Remón. In most instances these corruptions of the text were introduced for the purpose of magnifying the importance of Padre Olmedo and the Friars of the Order of Mercy, of which Order Padre Remón was himself a member. In the edition of Don Genaro García these matters are fully investigated, and a complete bibliography is given.

modified the style, and modernized the orthography moved thereto either by religious fervour and false patriotism, or by personal sympathy and vile literary taste. As all the later editions, and all the translations without exception were copied from the first edition published by Remón, it results that in reality we do not know the *True History*.

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On the 20th October, 1895, Don Emilio León, the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary from the Republic of Guatemala accredited to Mexico, presented in the name of his Government to ours, "as a proof of friendship and especial regard", a photographic reproduction of the original manuscript. It was then, with some reason, believed that, at last, we should see the *True History* published; but this could not be carried out, for accompanying the gift of the reproduction was a prohibition against its being copied and printed.

Five years later, when I wrote my book entitled *Caracter de la Conquista Española en America y en México*, I was convinced that to perfect our Ancient history an exact edition of the *True History* was indispensable, and I desired to carry this work through.

Soon afterwards, in August, 1901, I wrote to the then President of Guatemala, Don Manuel Estrada Cabrera, telling him of my wish to print the precious manuscript.

This distinguished official had the kindness to reply on the first of the following month that on that very day he had decreed that "an exact and complete copy of the manuscript" should be made and sent to me for the purpose that I had stated. Señor Don Juan I. Argueta, Secretary of the Interior and Justice in that Republic, at once began punctually to send me instalments of the copy as soon as they were made, which copy I corrected here, and perfected with all care and accuracy by comparing it with the photographic reproduction already referred to, which is preserved in our National Library.

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The author says that, after making a fair copy of his narrative, two licentiates of Guatemala begged him to lend it to them, and that he did so most willingly; but he warned them not to cor-

rect it in any way, neither by addition nor deletion, for all he had written was true.

Assuredly with regard to truth the author would find no fault with us, for we have taken care to religiously respect the original text, without introducing the slightest variation, not even of the artless orthography or punctuation.

Any change would have been dangerous, and we might have fallen into the same error that we attribute to Remón; everybody knows that by a single comma one might reverse the meaning of a statement.

We reproduce in notes placed at the foot of the page all the erasures that can have any interest for inquiring readers, and in like manner we have transcribed all the various words blotted out, which, besides exhibiting important variations, give an idea of the method of composition employed by the author.

Occasionally, when a full understanding of the text necessitates it, or for the purpose of finishing off a clearly implied word or phrase, or of correcting some manifest numerical error, we have ventured to insert some word or number between brackets, so that it can be known at once that it is not the author who is speaking, and the readers are left at liberty to admit or reject the slight interpolation; finally, we have allowed ourselves to indicate by dotted lines the gaps that are found in the original manuscript, which, happily, are very few in number, except on the first and last pages, which, in the course of time, have naturally suffered more than the others.

May our modest effort meet with the approbation of the intelligent and learned, for we long for it as much as we fear their censure.

BERNAL DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO

Bernal Díaz del Castillo was born in the very noble, famous, and celebrated town¹ of Medina del Campo in the year 1492 at the very time when Christopher Columbus was joining the two worlds.

Bernal tells us that at the time that he made up his mind to

¹ "Muy noble é insigne y muy nombrada Villa". In old Spain towns and cities were formally granted such titles of honour.

come to New Spain, about the year 1517, he was a youth "of about twenty-four years", a statement which corroborates the date of his birth.

His parents were Don Francisco Díaz del Castillo and Doña María Diez Rejón.

†

Bernal was not the only son, he tells us of his brother, probably older than himself, whom he wished to imitate.

†

Bernal himself writes that he was a gentleman,¹ and that his grandparents, his father, and his brother were always servants of the Crown and of their Catholic Majesties Don Fernando and Doña Isabel, which Carlos V. confirms by calling them "our retainers and servants".

If the family of Bernal had not enjoyed esteem and respect in Medina del Campo, the inhabitants would not have chosen Don Francisco as their *Regidor*.² On the other hand, his financial position must have been a very modest one, for the author most certainly came here to seek his fortune, and often complains of his poverty.

After all, the fact that in the *True History* he discloses a very scrupulous moral sense, a fair amount of learning, accurate philosophy, and a piety out of the common, permits us to infer that his family educated him with great care: it would be exceptional for a man illiterate and untaught during his youth to acquire such qualities in his old age; it is proven, on the other hand, that the author knew how to write when he reached New Spain. Nevertheless, we know nothing for certain about the childhood and youth of Bernal, our information begins in the year 1514.

The author was then twenty-two years old.

From some of his remarks one may judge that he was tall or of middle height, active, quick, well made, and graceful; his comrades called him "the elegant" (*el galan*).

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Following the example of so many other Spanish youths, Bernal left his country in the year 1514 to emigrate to America in

¹ Hijodalgo.

² *Regidor* = magistrate, prefect.

search of adventures and riches, resolved to be worthy of his ancestry. He accompanied Pedro Arias de Avila, the Governor of Tierra Firme, as one of his soldiers.

When he reached Nombre de Dios he remained there three or four months, until an epidemic that broke out and certain disputes that arose between the Governor and his son-in-law, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, obliged him to flee to Cuba, to his relation, Diego Velásquez, who was Governor of the Island.

During three years Bernal "did nothing worthy of record", and on that account he determined to set out on the discovery of unknown land with the Captain Francisco Hernández de Córdoba and one hundred and ten companions.

They sailed in three ships from the port of Ajaruco on the 8th February, 1517, and after enduring a passage occupying twenty-one days and one fierce gale, they arrived at Cape Catoche, where the natives gave them a hostile reception.

After touching at Lázaro they stopped at Champotón, where the natives killed forty-eight Spaniards, captured two of them, and wounded the rest, including the captain, who received ten arrow wounds, and the author, who received "three, and one of them in the left side which pierced my ribs, and was very dangerous".

The survivors returned by way of Florida to Cuba, disillusioned and in ill-health, suffering from burning thirst and barely escaping shipwreck, for the ships were leaking badly. When recounting these calamities the author exclaims:

"Oh! what a troublesome thing it is to go and discover new lands and the risks we took it is hardly possible to exaggerate".

Nevertheless Bernal was not discouraged by experience; his poverty, which, of necessity, increased daily, impelled him to seek his fortune even at the risk of losing his life, and his youth made him naturally impatient; he did not care to wait for the Indians which Diego Velásquez had promised to give him as soon as there were some unemployed, and he at once enlisted in a second expedition, composed of four ships and two hundred soldiers, under the command of Juan de Grijalva, which weighed anchor in the port of Matanzas on the 8th April, 1518.

The author says that he went "as ensign", but it is doubtful.

The expedition went by way of Cozumel and Champotón, whose intrepid inhabitants wounded Grijalva and broke two of his teeth, and killed seven soldiers, by the Boca de Términos,

the Rio de Tabasco which they called the Rio de Grijalva, La Rambla, the Rios de Tonalá or de Santo Antón, de Coatzacoalcos, de Papaloapan or de Alvarado, and the Rio de Banderas, where they obtained by barter "more than sixteen thousand pesos in jewels and low grade gold". They sighted the Isla Blanca and the Isla Verde and landed on the Isla de Sacrificios and the sand dunes of Ulúa; thence Alvarado, accompanied by certain soldiers, returned to Cuba in search of reinforcements, while Grijalva, with the rest of his followers, including the author, pushed ahead by Tuxtla,¹ Tuxpan and the Rio de Canoas, where the Spaniards were attacked by the natives of Cape Rojo; then Grijalva, yielding to the entreaties of his soldiers, agreed to return to Cuba.

Velásquez, fascinated beyond measure by the gold which Grijalva had obtained by barter, organized a third expedition consisting of "eleven ships great and small", and appointed Hernan Cortés to command it. Bernal again enlisted, as at this time he found himself much in debt. Cortés set out from the Port of Trinidad on the 18th February, 1519. The author had started eight days earlier in the company of Pedro de Alvarado. All met together again at the Island of Cozumel, where a review was held, which showed a muster of five hundred and eight soldiers, "not including ship-masters, pilots, and seamen, who numbered one hundred and sixteen horses and mares". Keeping on their course, they passed close by Champotón without venturing to land; they stopped at Tabasco, where they fought with the natives, who gave the author "an arrow wound in the thigh but it was not a severe wound", and finally they arrived at Ulúa.

They went inland and marched to Cempoala and Quiahuiztlan, and in the neighbourhood of the latter they founded the Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, and they determined to push on to México, whose Prince, Motecuhzoma,² had been exciting their cupidity by rich presents of gold and other objects of value.

Before undertaking this march, the friends of Cortés (one of whom was Bernal) advised him to destroy the ships, lest any of the soldiers should mutiny and wish to return to Cuba, and so that he could make use of the ship-masters, pilots and

¹ This is an error. Tuxtla was passed before reaching the Isla de Sacrificios.

² Montezuma.

seamen "who numbered nearly one hundred persons" as we have already stated. When this had been done, "without concealment and not as the chronicler Gómara describes it", they started for Mexico in the middle of August, probably on the sixteenth, and passed without incident through Jalapa Xicochimalco, Ixhuacan, Texutla, Xocotla, and Xalacingo, but on reaching the frontiers of Tlaxcala they were stopped by the natives, who fought against them for several days. There the author received "two wounds, one on the head from a stone, and the other an arrow wound in the thigh", from which he was seriously ill in the Capital of Tlaxcala, after Cortés had made peace and an alliance with the inhabitants.

"On the 12th October" they continued their march by Cholula, where they committed a shocking massacre, Itzcalpan, Tlamanalco, and Itztapalatengo. Here Cacamatzin the Lord of Tetzco met them in royal state to welcome them in the name of Motecuhzoma, and they accompanied him along the causeway of Itztapalapa, which crossed the lake in a straight line to Mexico, and from it could be seen on both sides innumerable "cities and towns", some in the water and others on dry land, all of them beautified by stately temples and palaces. This wonderful panorama, as picturesque as it was novel, made the deepest impression on Bernal and his companions, and he says, "we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell us of in the story of Amadis, on account of the great towers and *cues*¹ and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not all a dream".

When they reached the junction of the causeways of Itztapalapa and Coyohuacan they met many Caciques and Chieftains of importance coming in advance of Motecuhzoma, who received the Spaniards a little further on, almost at the gates of Mexico, with sumptuous pomp and extreme ceremony. Many times the Mexican sovereign had contemplated attacking the Spaniards, but weighted down by superstition and rendered powerless by a timid and vacillating character, he now conducted them into the great Tenochtitlan, only to deliver it up to them at once. The autocrat felt himself fatally conquered before beginning the struggle.

¹ *Cue* = temple. This is not a Nahuatl or Maya word but one picked up by the Spaniards in the Antilles.

Thence step by step within a few days he suffered seven Spaniards, among whom was Bernal, to make him a prisoner in his own palace; he allowed his jailors to burn [to death] Quauhpopoca and other native chieftains, whose crime consisted in having, by his own orders, given battle to Juan de Escalante and other Spanish soldiers; he handed over to Cortés Cacamarzin, Totoquihuatzin, Cuitláhuac and Cuauhtémoc, lords respectively of Tetzoco, Tlacopan, Itztapalapan and Tlatelolco, who wished to set their sovereign at liberty, and finally, weeping like a tender unhappy woman, he swore fealty to the King of Spain.

With ease and in a short time Cortés was able to collect an immense treasure which amounted to "seven hundred thousand gold dollars", which he found it necessary to divide among his soldiers; nevertheless, he made the division with such trickery and cunning that there fell to the soldiers "a very small share, only one hundred dollars each, and it was so very little that many of the soldiers did not want to take it, and Cortés was left with it all". If the author did not complain of this as much as some of his companions, for example, as Cárdenas, who even "fell ill from brooding and grief", it was owing to his having already received from Motecuhzoma some presents of "gold and cloths", as well as of "a beautiful Indian girl . . . the daughter of a chieftain", whom he ventured to beg of the sovereign through the good offices of the page Orteguilla, a gift which he certainly thought that he had gained by his respectful courtesy "for whenever I was on guard over him, or passed before him, I doffed my helmet to him with the greatest respect".

The Spaniards began to enjoy the gold divided among them, abandoning themselves to a life of licentious pleasure, when in March, 1520, Pánfilo de Narvaez arrived at Ulúa with sixteen ships,¹ fourteen hundred soldiers, ninety crossbowmen, seventy musketeers, and eighty horses.

Diego Velásquez had sent him to punish Cortés and his followers as traitors, because they had rebelled against him without reason. However, as Cortés was immensely rich, and there is no power greater than riches, he soon won over almost

¹ The author says that there were nineteen, but the Oidor Lucas Vásquez de Ayllon, who accompanied Narvaez, writes that there were sixteen (Hernan Cortés, *Cartas y Relaciones*, Paris, 1866: (p. 42).—G. G.

all the soldiers of Narvaez with ingots and jewels of gold, in such a way that when the fight took place at Cempoala, Narvaez was the only man who fought in earnest, until he was wounded and lost an eye. The author figures among his captors: "the first to lay hands on him was Pedro Sanchez Farfan, a good soldier, and I handed him (Narvaez) over to Sandoval".

After his victory, Cortés returned with all speed to Mexico, where the inhabitants had risen in arms with the purpose of avenging the inhuman massacre carried out by Pedro de Alvarado in the precincts of the great Teocalli, which Alonzo de Avila pronounced to be disgraceful, saying that it would for ever remain "an ill memory in New Spain". Cortés now brought with him over thirteen hundred soldiers, eighty crossbowmen and as many musketeers, and ninety mounted men, without counting his numerous native allies.

Although they all reached the great Tenochtitlan "on the day of San Juan de Junio (St John's Day) in the year 1520", they could not make a stand against the Mexicans, who, under the command of Cuitláhuac and Cuauhtémoc, killed the greater number of the invaders and forced the rest, wounded and ruined, for they were unable to save the riches they had collected, to flee to Tlaxcala. The Tlaxcalans received them, lodged them and attended to them with affection. When they were somewhat recovered, the Spaniards began Vandal-like forays through Tepeyácac, Cachula, Guacachula, Tecamachalco, the town of the Guayabos, Ozúcar, Xalacingo, Zacatami, and other places in the neighbourhood, enslaving and branding with a hot iron all the youths and women they met with; "they did not trouble about the old men": the inhuman mark was placed "on the face", and not even the most beautiful young women escaped it.

The author did not assist in all these forays because "he was very ill from fever and was spitting blood".

Cortés then founded a second city, which he named Segura de la Frontera.

After the Spaniards had been reinforced by various expeditions that had come from Cuba, they resolved to return to Mexico to recover their lost treasure, and they forthwith took the road to Tetzoco.

They took with them many thousands of native allies.

When the headquarters had been established at Tetzoco,

Cortés opened hostilities by an assault on Itztapalapa, where he and his followers nearly lost their lives by drowning, for the Mexicans "burst open the canals of fresh and salt water and tore down a causeway": the author was "very badly wounded by a lance thrust which they gave me in the throat near the windpipe, and I was in danger of dying from it, and retain the scar from it to this day".

Cortés did not think of a direct attack on Mexico, he understood that it could lead to no satisfactory result; he proposed merely to invest the city and reduce it by starvation; so as to accomplish this he had entrusted to the Tlaxcalans the construction of thirteen launches, which he anxiously awaited.

Meanwhile, he attacked the neighbouring towns with fire and sword. The author did not join in these earlier combats as he was still ill from his dangerous wound, but as soon as it healed, he again took up arms, and accompanied Cortés, who went to assist the natives of Chalco, and distinguished himself among the most intrepid soldiers.

On his side, Cuauhtémoc, who was now Lord of Mexico, took measures for the defence of his country with unequalled courage; he had obtained from his subjects a promise "that they would never make peace, but would either all die fighting or take our lives".

The strife was remarkably prolonged and bloody, and no quarter was given.

The siege began on the 21st May, 1521, and lasted eighty-five days. Not for one moment did the Mexicans show signs of discouragement, notwithstanding the scarcity of fresh water and provisions, the superiority of the arms of the Spaniards, and the immense number of their native allies;¹ each day as it came was for them as the first day of the strife, so great was the determination and the strength with which they appeared on the field of battle, and, moreover, they never ceased fighting "from dawn to dusk".

When the greater number of them had already perished, the few who still remained stoically resisted thirst, hunger, weariness, and pestilence in the defence of their country, and even then refused, with indomitable fortitude, the proposals of peace

¹ The author makes immoderate efforts to lessen the number of the allies, but Cortés informs us that there were "numberless people", "an infinite number", "which could not be counted", that those that accompanied him alone numbered "more than one hundred and fifty thousand men".—G. G.

which Cortés repeatedly made to them. In this manner only did they die.

The army which was to attack the Mexicans by land was divided from the beginning into three sections. It fell to the lot of the author to serve in that of Tlacopan, commanded by Pedro de Alvarado. Many times Bernal was in danger of losing his life, first of all when the siege had just been commenced; a few days later when the Mexicans succeeded in seizing him, "many Indians had already laid hold of me, but I managed to get my arm free and our Lord Jesus Christ gave me strength so that by some good sword thrusts that I gave them, I saved myself, but I was badly wounded in one arm"; on another occasion they succeeded in taking him prisoner, but "it pleased God that I should escape from their power"; and, finally, at the end of June on the day that Cortés suffered his terrible defeat, the author received "an arrow wound and a sword thrust".

The siege ended on the 13th of August, 1521, with the capture of the north-east corner of the city where the few surviving Mexicans still offered a heroic resistance.