



Hernando Cortes , Conqueror of Mexico

Frederick Ober

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During the Age of Exploration, some of the most famous and infamous individuals were Spain's best known conquistadors. Naturally, as the best known conquistador, Hernán Cortés (1485-1547) is also the most controversial. Like Christopher Columbus before him, Cortés was lionized for his successes for centuries without questioning his tactics or motives, while indigenous views of the man have been overwhelmingly negative for the consequences his conquests had on the Aztecs and other natives in the region. Just about the only thing everyone agrees upon is that Cortés had a profound impact on the history of North America. Of course, the lionization and demonization of Cortés often take place without fully analyzing the man himself, especially because there are almost no contemporaneous sources that explain what his thinking and motivation was. If anything, Cortés seemed to have been less concerned with posterity or the effects of the Spanish conquest on the natives than he was on relations with the Mother Country itself. Of the few things that are known about Cortés, it appears that he was both extremely ambitious and fully cognizant of politics and political intrigue, even in a New World thousands of miles west of Spain itself. While those ambitions and politics understandably colored his writings about his activities and conquests, scholars nevertheless use what he wrote to gain a better understanding of the indigenous natives he came into contact with. As Adolph Francis Bandelier noted in the Catholic Encyclopedia in 1908, "Cortés was a good writer. His letters to the emperor, on the conquest, deserve to be classed among the best Spanish documents of the period. They are, of course, coloured so as to place his own achievements in relief, but, withal, he keeps within bounds and does not exaggerate, except in matters of Indian civilization and the numbers of population as implied by the size of the settlements. Even there he uses comparatives only, judging from outward appearances and from impressions."

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