



Cortés

AND THE AZTEC CONQUEST

IRWIN R. BLACKER

HORIZON • NEW WORD CITY



Cortés
AND THE AZTEC CONQUEST

IRWIN R. BLACKER

HORIZON • NEW WORD CITY



GOLD IN THE WEST

CORTÉS AND THE AZTEC CONQUEST

On February 8, 1517, 110 Spanish adventurers in three ships put to sea from a small port on the north coast of Cuba. A breeze rose from the east, and their pilot - Antonio Alaminos, who had sailed with Christopher Columbus - pointed the prows toward the setting sun. Although the adventurers had heard that land lay to the west, none of them knew the winds in the area, the currents, or the depth of the water. They sailed on, however, until suddenly they were caught up in a raging storm. For two days and two nights, huge waves battered the three ships. Then the skies cleared, and they continued westward.

Twenty-one days after they left Cuba, they sighted a headland in the distance (Cape Catoche in modern-day Mexico), and on a rise beyond the coast, they could make out a great city. In two unrewarding decades of colonizing the New World and searching for the fabled riches of the Indies, no Spaniard had ever seen a larger or more promising objective.

The two smaller vessels moved boldly toward the shore and were met by ten Indian canoes. In one of the canoes was a native chieftain, a cacique, who beckoned the Spaniards to come ashore. Led by their captain, Francisco de Córdoba, twenty-five men formed ranks on the beach and prepared to march inland. They had proceeded only a short distance toward the city when they were suddenly ambushed by Indians hidden in the brush. The first volley of Indian arrows wounded fifteen Spaniards, and then the two forces closed with each other. The Spanish soldiers, with their heavy plate armor and steel swords, grappled with the natives, who wore only heavy cotton padding and wielded lances.

The unequal battle was over almost as quickly as it started. The Indians fled the field, leaving fifteen of their dead behind. Córdoba and his men moved forward eagerly. From where they stood, they could see a small open square and three houses built of masonry. As evidence of an advanced native culture, these intriguing buildings - the first masonry structures found in the New World - excited the Spaniards to hope that they were on the threshold of even greater treasures.

With combined curiosity and avarice, Córdoba and his companions entered the houses. Here they found pottery idols, some with the faces of demons and some with the faces of women.

They also found a wooden chest with tiny gold and copper ornaments. Convinced even by this small find that they had made an important discovery, they returned to their ships and continued exploring along the coast toward the setting sun.

What they had unknowingly discovered was the Maya civilization of the peninsula of Yucatán. By accident, Córdoba and his men had stumbled upon a people who have been called the Greeks of the Western Hemisphere.

Before the birth of Christ, the Maya civilization was taking form in what is now Guatemala, in highland and lowland regions to the south and west of the Yucatán city that Córdoba had sighted. According to the vague historical picture that archaeological research is now slowly providing, Maya civilization reached the culmination of its development in the six centuries between A.D. 300 and 900 and then began to decline. At their height, the Maya were in many ways the most civilized people in the Americas. They had a calendar more precise than any known in Europe until more than a half-century after Córdoba's voyage. The massive stone and concrete buildings they constructed for their numerous ceremonial centers displayed an impressive architectural skill. They engineered aqueducts and roads that still exist, and there is also archaeological evidence that the Maya succeeded in building stone bridges, reservoirs, and elaborate underground passages.

By a strange accident of history, the gold-hungry Spaniards happened to strike the New World in one of its richest cultural sites. The Yucatán peninsula and the mainland areas behind it (in present-day Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras) made up the homeland of the ancient Maya whose magnificent civilization flourished for six centuries before A.D. 1000. Throughout this vast, lush area are the ruined pyramids and palaces of a vanished culture. The Spaniards discovered some of these monuments; others continue to be found in the twenty-first century. Maya society was based on a religion of many gods - some fierce and insatiable - and was ruled by priests and nobles. But why the lofty temples of the Maya were often deliberately destroyed and why their great religious centers were abandoned are questions that may never be answered. Copán, where a massive, snaggle-toothed stone was discovered among over-growing trees, was one of the Maya centers that was

abandoned after the "classic period" (A.D. 300-900). Perhaps the most rewarding Maya site for modern tourists is Chichén Itzá in Yucatán. Like Copán, it was apparently abandoned but then re-occupied and overrun by a breed of bloodthirsty invaders from central Mexico. Encouraged by a glimpse of the heights reached by this Indian culture, the Spanish explorers hoped to find an even mightier civilization that had not yet declined, where a river of gold still flowed into the city.

The Maya were extraordinary artists in stone and wood sculpture and in painting. They were the only people in the New World to have an effective system of writing, a by-product of their consuming interest in mathematics and astronomy - sciences in which they excelled. They were also among the few people anywhere in the world at that time whose food supply was so abundant that they had an opportunity to develop their civilization more fully.

Late in their history, around the beginning of the eleventh century, the Maya lost much of the vigor and discipline that had regulated their former growth, and Yucatán was occupied by dissident and warring groups. It was one of these remaining tribes that Córdoba and his men had discovered on that fateful day in 1517.

After their first conflict with the Maya Indians, Córdoba's force sailed down the west coast of Yucatán for fifteen days until they saw another large town near a great bay. Here they dropped anchor and went ashore to fill their water casks. They were again attacked by the Maya, and this encounter proved to be even bloodier. The surrounded Spaniards received no quarter; from the beginning, the battle went against Córdoba. And then, more Maya warriors joined the conflict, violently swinging their flint-edged wooden swords. As the battle raged, Córdoba was wounded ten times. Soon, fifty of the Spaniards were dead, and those who still lived were wounded and weary. With their last efforts, the adventurers broke out of the circle of natives, and fighting shoulder-to-shoulder, they struggled back toward the beach where their boats were waiting. The natives continued to press them, and as Córdoba and his men reached the water, arrows showered over them. The Indians waded into the surf after them even as the smallest of the ships drew in close to shore, and the Spaniards clambered aboard.