



Hernando Cortez

1485-1547

Spanish Conquistador of the Aztecs

Hernán Cortés was a Spanish explorer who is famous mainly for his march across Mexico and his conquering of the Aztec Empire in Mexico.

Cortés was born in the Spanish city of Medellín in 1485. When he was a young man, he studied law, but he soon gave that up to seek his fortune in the New World that was just being discovered by Columbus and others.

First he went to the island of Santo Domingo (now known as the Dominican Republic) in 1504. He was only 19 years old at the time. He stayed there for seven years, then took part in the Spanish conquest of Cuba in 1511. He became mayor of Santiago de Cuba and stayed there until 1518.

Cortés was eager for more power and conquests, so he talked the Spanish governor of Cuba into letting him lead an expedition to Mexico in 1519. Mexico had just been discovered by the Spanish explorer de Córdoba a year before.

At that time, Mexico was ruled by the Aztec Empire and its leader, Montezuma II. Cortés arrived in Mexico in March 1519 with a group of about 600 men and a few horses. He soon learned of the Aztecs and began to make his way inland to the Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlán. Along the way, he made friends with a native group called the Tlaxcalans, who were enemies of the Aztecs. The Tlaxcalans helped Cortés against the Aztecs.

In November of 1519, Cortés and his men reached the Aztec capital and met Montezuma. The Aztecs may have thought that Cortés was a god-king, and so they treated him and his soldiers well. However, Cortés was afraid that the Aztecs might soon try to get rid of him, so he took Montezuma hostage and asked for a huge ransom of gold and jewels.

It turned out that Cortés was right and the Aztecs finally drove him and his men out of their city in June of 1520. But Cortés regrouped and returned in the summer of 1521 to capture Tenochtitlán.

Soon after, he began to build Mexico City on the Aztec ruins and brought many Europeans over to live there. It soon became the most important European city in North America. Because of his conquests and all the gold and jewels he had collected, Cortés was very popular back home in Spain and so he was made governor and captain general of New Spain in 1523. But he wasn't done exploring.

In 1524, he led a group into Honduras and stayed in that area for two years. By 1528, the Spanish government was worried that Cortés was getting out of control in the Americas, and so he had to give up his governor's job and was sent back to Spain. He spoke to the king, who was persuaded to send Cortés back to Mexico in 1530, but with less power and freedom than before.

In 1536, Cortés explored the northwestern part of Mexico and discovered the Baja California peninsula. He also spent time exploring the Pacific coast of Mexico. This was the last major expedition by Cortés. In 1539, he went back to Spain, and spent much of the rest of his life there before he died near Seville in 1547.

