

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52731-6 - Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in

Yucatan, 1517–1570: Second Edition

Inga Clendinnen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Spaniards

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52731-6 - Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in

Yucatan, 1517–1570: Second Edition

Inga Clendinnen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-52731-6 - Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in
Yucatan, 1517–1570: Second Edition
Inga Clendinnen
Excerpt
[More information](#)

1

Explorers

We seldom or never find any nation hath endured so many misadventures and miseries as the Spaniards have done in their Indian discoveries. Yet persisting in their enterprises, with invincible constancy, they have annexed to their kingdom so many goodly provinces, as bury the remembrance of all dangers past . . . Many years have passed over some of their heads in the search of not so many leagues: Yea, more than one or two have spent their labour, their wealth, and their lives, in search of a golden kingdom, without getting further notice of it than what they had at their first setting forth . . .

Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*, 1614

In 1502, on his fourth and final voyage, Christopher Columbus happened upon a great trading canoe just off the coast of Honduras. It was ‘long as a galley’, as Ferdinand, the Admiral’s thirteen-year-old son recalled, and carved from one great tree trunk. Neither its twenty-five naked paddlers nor the richly clad men who appeared to be their masters offered any resistance as the Spaniards seized the craft, and they remained paralysed with fright as the bearded strangers rifled through the cargo. It was only when some cacao beans were allowed to spill from their containers in the course of the looting that they momentarily forgot their fear, scrambling to retrieve them ‘as if they were their eyes’.¹

Along with the precious cacao beans were copper axes and bells; razors and hatchets of a translucent yellow stone, probably Mexican obsidian; heavy wooden war clubs studded with flints; pottery; and garments of many-coloured woven cotton. The small huddle of women and children clustered under a canopy were probably also part of the cargo, to be sold, together with some of the paddlers, along the coast.

Columbus and his men picked over the cargo, keeping whatever took their fancy, and then let the canoe go on its way, detaining only the old man who seemed to be its captain to test his usefulness as a

guide. Precisely what the natives made of the encounter we don't know. The canoe was certainly part of the great and enduring trading network linking Honduras and Mexico, in which merchants from the Yucatan peninsula controlled the traffic between Honduras and Xicalango, where the Aztecs, overlords of much of Mexico, maintained a station.² We can be sure that news of the strangers, and of their uncouth and piratical ways, ran through the whole complex system, although only a hint of that disquiet survives in the records: it was at about this time, very early in the century, that Chilam Balam, a prophet-priest of northern Yucatan, prophesied the invasion of the peninsula by bearded strangers who were perhaps the emissaries of the self-exiled culture hero Kukul Can, the Feathered Serpent.³

If for the Indians the encounter was threatening, it was for the Spaniards profoundly cheering: Columbus' determined praise of the lands he had discovered had become increasingly defensive, for nowhere to that point had his men found any evidence of the rich civilisations he had promised them. The Indians of the islands they had touched on, whether ferocious Caribs or timid Arawak, were miserable creatures, living like beasts in the forest or in shelters too mean to be called huts; going shamelessly naked, or with mere wisps of loincloths scarcely covering their genitals. The Indians of the great canoe had a proper sense of shame: the Spaniards noted approvingly that the women modestly held their shawls before their faces, like the Moorish women in Granada, and that when the paddlers' loincloths were snatched from them – a glimpse of rough-and-thorough Spanish search techniques – they hastily covered their private parts with their hands. The trade canoe, with its varied cargo, the technical sophistication implied by its hierarchy of well-clad supervisors and docile labourers, represented in miniature the thriving civilisation Columbus had sought so long.

He was not to find it himself. More than a decade was to pass before Spaniards were to penetrate the tangle of islands and the restless currents and winds of the Caribbean to the extraordinary worlds which lay beyond. But the story of the great trading canoe became part of the folklore of the Indies, and lay like a promise in men's minds.

Early in 1517, a small slave-hunting and exploring expedition made ready to sail out of Cuba. Cuba had been conquered – or more correctly over-run, as its predominately Arawak Indians had offered no resistance – six years before, and had attracted the usual swarm of

Spanish adventurers hungry for a share of whatever spoils there might be. Among them was Bernal Díaz del Castillo, twenty-four years old, already four years in the Indies, and as yet unremarkable among his equally poor and hopeful companions (in old age he was to write his *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, or ‘Mexico’ as we now call it, one of the greatest participant histories ever written). He had come, along with many others, from Darien, where there was a superfluity of Spanish soldiers, and for a time was sustained by the expectation that his distant kinsman Diego Velázquez, Governor of Cuba, would honour his promise to give him some Indians ‘as soon as there were any available’. But Indians were in short and dwindling supply, the Cuban natives dying almost as fast as the men brought in from other islands to replace them, and the few there were had already been distributed among the powerful men of the island. So Díaz, and about another hundred men who, like him, were weary of cooling their heels, pooled their meagre resources to buy two caravels and a brigantine on credit. They provisioned them, minimally, with cassava bread, pigs – at scandalously inflated prices, Díaz believed, given the way pigs multiplied on the island – oil, and a few beads and other trifles for trading with the natives, and set off to try their luck under the leadership of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, one of the few men of any substance to invest in the ramshackle enterprise.⁴

If the expedition suffered the defects of its *ad hoc* beginnings, it was fortunate in its pilot. Antón de Alaminos was a native of Palos, the port which had produced some of the first and continued to produce many of the best of Spain’s seafarer-explorers. He knew the waters of the Caribbean as well as any other man, or, at least, any other Spaniard. He had been around them long enough to have learnt to read the messages coded in the surge and ruffle of water and the driftings and pilings of cloud. He could recognise the small signs – the slow oily swells, the restless surface play of dolphins – which were the muted warnings of the onset of the great ‘norther’, the terrible wind which leapt from nowhere to whip water and sky into shrieking confusion, and which had littered the reefs and beaches of the Caribbean with the shells of vessels whose pilots had run from the turmoil for the illusory safety of the shore.

Alaminos had been with Columbus as pilot on the old admiral’s last voyage: he had seen the trading canoe, and all it promised. It had come, he remembered, from the west. It was Alaminos’ confidence, and his reputation, which swung the Córdoba expedition away from the slender but easy pickings of slaving among the known islands

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-52731-6 - Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in
Yucatan, 1517–1570: Second Edition
Inga Clendinnen
Excerpt
[More information](#)

towards an authentic voyage of exploration. Passing San Antonio, Cuba's westernmost point, the three ships maintained their course west.

After twelve days sailing the little fleet had left known waters, but Alaminos still held toward the setting sun, 'knowing nothing of the depth of the water, nor the currents, nor of the wind that normally prevailed in that latitude', recalled Bernal Díaz, who was no mariner and who had no trust in signs or those who claimed to read them.⁵ Then came two days and nights of terror as the ships were buffeted and tossed by a storm. When the wind at last dropped, all three were still afloat, and still together. Seven days of easy sailing more, and they knew their luck held: a long, low coast slowly lifted above the horizon. This (though the Spaniards didn't know it) was the north-eastern point of the great peninsula they would call 'Yucatan'. Edging cautiously towards the shore – the water shallowed a great distance out – they saw two leagues back from the beach, on slightly elevated land, and sharply defined in the clear air, a great town. It was the first town seen in the Indies, and the jubilant men instantly named it 'el Gran Cairo', the 'Great Cairo', for its size, its white pyramids, and their own vaulting hopes.

The next morning, as the two ships of the least draught probed about for a secure anchorage, ten huge canoes, bearing sail and driven by paddlers, came swooping out to meet them. These natives showed no sign of fear. As the Spaniards made banners of their capes in welcome, more than thirty Indians swung themselves aboard the flagship and swarmed over its length and breadth. They cheerfully accepted strings of green beads, and the leader among them, whom the Spaniards called by the Arawak title '*cacique*', meaning chief, appearing anxious to be hospitable in his own turn, indicated by signs that the strangers should come ashore, and that he would return the next day with canoes enough to ferry them all to the beach. Then he and his men dropped back into their craft and swept back to land.

There must have been celebrations aboard the Spanish ships that night. These Indians, decently clad in loincloths and vivid jackets, living in towns – both central requirements in Spanish notions of civility, and a promise of productivity and exploitability – these were a far cry from the sorry wretches of the settled islands, miserably crouched in their scattered huts with scarcely a rag to cover themselves. They were also well-disposed, and gratifyingly unsuspecting. Córdoba's ragged Spaniards knew that as their discoverers they could become their masters – provided Governor Velázquez

should not prove too greedy, and provided they could amass so substantial a claim by priority and effectiveness in action as to outweigh their own poverty and lack of status. The natives also proved men of their word. The next morning the chief came back as he had promised, still smiling and still affable, with twelve canoes manned by sturdy rowers, and again urged the newcomers ashore. The Spaniards were wary. The caravels had to be anchored a good league out to sea, and they could see that the beach where they were to land was one solid mass of Indians. But there could be no question of refusal: honour, curiosity and avarice drove them on. They packed into the brigantine and the ships' boats, with the most venturesome perched in the native canoes. Córdoba, still cautious, contrived that the whole flotilla came into the beach at the same time. Once landed, the *cacique* beckoned them towards the town, saying something which sounded like '*cones catoche, cones catoche*', which the Spaniards guessed meant 'come to our houses', and which was to lead them to name the headland Cape Catoche. Again, there was no serious alternative: clutching their weapons, and moving in the loose but conscious formation they adopted so naturally in situations of potential threat, they began the march along the path towards the town glistening white in the morning light. Then, as they drew level with some brush-covered hillocks the chief shouted, and Indian warriors, crested and painted, bodies swathed in quilted cotton armour, and armed with stones, bows and arrows, and flint-studded lances, leapt from hiding and attacked. The first flight of arrows wounded thirteen Spaniards. It says much for the discipline of men who had never fought together before that they did not break under that first rush, but were able to regroup, protect their wounded, and after sharp fighting drive the Indians off. Then they pushed quickly on to the small security of a little plaza, presumably on the fringe of the city, where there were three stone temples to the Indians' idols.

Bernal Díaz described the Indians' surprise attack as an ambush. It probably was. Ambush was a favourite tactic in Indian warfare. Deceptive displays of friendship were also not unusual. But there might have been no deception here. Certainly they intended war: their warrior regalia makes that clear. It is possible that the Spaniards' armed advance along the beach was taken as tacit acceptance of an Indian challenge: improvised sign language is not a particularly precise mode of communication. The Spaniards, reading the chief's demeanour as 'friendly', assumed their own physical security, but a courteous reception of strangers did not preclude combat in Indian

etiquette. While the hostilities may have been a conventional response to uninvited intrusion, they may have been fuelled by more particular knowledge. If the excited Spaniards had had little sleep the previous night, we can be sure the Indians had no more. Stories of Spanish doings in the islands had certainly crossed to the peninsula; while there was no established trade between the two areas there were a multitude of less formalised contacts (a later Spanish expedition came across a woman from Jamaica, a member of a fishing party blown off course, who had fetched up on the peninsula's east coast). The purposeful investigation of the Spanish ships the previous day suggests the Indians had made the connection between these vessels and those others which had intercepted the trade canoe and made off with its captain fifteen years before. The Indians of Yucatan also had other sources of information regarding Spanish nature and intentions of which Córdoba and his men knew nothing: a small party of shipwrecked Spaniards had drifted to that coast six years before, and two survived still.

For Córdoba's men, some still bleeding, it was an 'ambush'. But as they rifled through the temples they cared little for Indian motivations. They were not vexed by Indian perfidy, nor deeply perturbed by the grotesque idols, nor even by the possibility, suggested by some strange sculpted figures, that these people lacked a proper abhorrence of sodomy, for in those temples they also found a few chests containing objects made of gold. The objects were small – a few 'diadems', some roughly-shaped ducks, some fishes; the gold was low grade. But it was gold. Returning exuberantly to their boats, the Spaniards hustled along with them two captured Indians as potential interpreters. In a country so full of promise, and hazard, communication by sign language could no longer be regarded as adequate.⁶

Fifteen days more of slow and cautious sailing, hugging the coast west and then south, and Spanish spirits were lower. They had learnt that while the slender Indian arrows struck with no great force the flint heads usually shattered on impact, making for a foul wound and a slow and ugly death. Two men had died since Cape Catoche, and their comrades had watched their bodies slide overboard to the patient sharks. Water was becoming the desperate problem it was to remain for the rest of an increasingly desperate voyage. The casks so hastily purchased in Cuba had begun to leak, Díaz thought because unscrupulous merchants had taken advantage of their need and poverty to sell off defective casks; but perhaps because in those early days of settlement men lacked the skill and the tested knowledge of

local timbers to make them tight. But whether due to avarice or ignorance, the consequences were grave. From that time forward decisions as to where to make landfall were dictated not by calculations of security, but by the coercive need for water. And as the big ships could not come in closer than half a league, water-getting was a prolonged, exposed and risky business.

When an inlet was sighted, giving promise – falsely, as it turned out – of a stream, the Spaniards knew they had to go ashore, even though too many of their men were wounded, and even though another great town was clearly visible from the ships. They called the town ‘San Lazaro’, because it was on his day they first saw it, but they soon came to know it by its Indian name of Campeche.

The ships’ boats and the brig carried a sizeable force of men ashore, where they found a pool of ‘good water’, and hastily filled their casks. As they were wrestling them back into the boats the Spaniards saw about fifty Indians come out from the town, and move steadily towards them. Unarmed and dressed in fine mantles, they had more the look of a delegation than the advance guard of an army. Through signs they asked the Spaniards what they wanted. The Spaniards, who had as yet no notion that water was a scarce resource throughout most of the peninsula, and its taking no light matter, urgently mimed the innocence of their presence: they had landed solely to fill their casks, and desired nothing more than to get them and themselves back to the ships riding at anchor out to sea. The Indians did not respond to the Spaniards’ urgency. Pointing in the direction of the sunrise, they spoke with what seemed a questioning intonation a word which sounded to the desperately attentive listeners like ‘Castilan, Castilan’. Then they turned, and signalled the Spaniards to follow them into the town.

It was a formidable dilemma. Another mauling like the one at Cape Catoche, too many wounded men, and they would have to call off the exploration of this intriguing coast, and their tenuous rights as its discoverers would be extinguished by more powerful men. Yet there was the compulsion of reputation. Refusal, or even too prolonged hesitation, could be read as fear. Fear could provoke attack. After a rapid consultation the Spaniards took the only course open to them. Shouldering their weapons, they let themselves be led into the town. This time there was no surprise attack. Their guides brought them to an open space before some large buildings made hideous, at least in Spanish eyes, by the great serpents and idols and strange cross-like symbols painted on their walls. To the front was a structure like an

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-52731-6 - Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in
Yucatan, 1517–1570: Second Edition
Inga Clendinnen
Excerpt
[More information](#)

altar covered with what looked to be clotted blood. The Spaniards, huddled nervously together, took brief comfort in noting that there were women in the great crowd of Indians, strolling about with reassuring casualness. Then the press drew back and hushed to an expectant silence.

A group of Indian men, wearing ragged mantles and carrying loads of reeds, advanced, piled their reeds before the Spaniards, and withdrew. Behind them followed two squadrons of Indian warriors, painted, befeathered and fully armed, who halted at a little distance. Then ten men came swiftly out of one of the temples. Their long white mantles fell straight to their feet, but it was their hair which caught and held the Spaniards' incredulous attention, for it hung long and strangely thick, impenetrably matted and crusted with dried blood.

They came steadily forward through the silent crowd swinging their incense burners, finally wreathing the Spaniards in the sweet heavy smoke of the copal resin. In eloquent dumbshow they indicated that the strangers were to leave before the piled reeds were destroyed. They thrust fire into the heap, turned, and reentered the temple. The formal warning had been given with chilling confidence as to its intelligibility. Then the Spaniards heard for the first time a sound they were to learn to dread; the high whistling of Maya warriors on the attack. But no attack came. Despite the whistling, despite the thump of drums and the blasting moan of the conch-shell trumpets, the warriors held their ranks. The piled reeds still burned. There was neither time nor need for consultation. Pressing close together in tight defensive formation the Spaniards pulled back – not to their original landing-place, because that was too far, and too thick with Indians, but cutting directly to the shore, and then along the beach to where the brigantine and the boats, their anxious crews following events as best as they could from the water, came sidling in to scoop them up and to pull fast away to the security of the ships.

It was a bruising experience, to have run from a mere warning, and unnerving to recollect the dread that had made them run. There could, after all, be problems in the subjugating and management of these 'civilised' Indians. But the water had been got aboard, they had discovered another substantial town, and punishment for impudence and instruction in proper attitudes could always come later. Córdoba and his men pushed on.

Six fair days sailing, and then four days and nights of storm, and again water was desperately short, for now the casks gaped open and