

Final art project: the conquest of the Maya

The Maya civilization is an important topic today and has affected what is today's modern México and Guatemala. The Spanish "conquest" of the Maya and other native civilizations is a crucial element in history and was accomplished due to many different factors such as geography, weaponry, disease, language, alliances, war strategies, time and inspiration. The following is a research and a description of the Spanish conquest of the American continent focusing on the Maya civilization.

Let's start by stating that motivation and inspiration were important factors that fueled the Spaniards to succeed in their conquest. The preceding period in Spanish history was filled with war victories, territory expansions, and conversions from other religions to Christianity. Spain had just become a unified state or country with the conquest of the last Islamic kingdom of Granada, Spain. Spanish kings had just unified several kingdoms like Castilla, Aragón and Cataluña to become a powerful nation. The war between Spanish Christians and Muslims that lasted about seven hundred years, from 711 a.d to 1492 a.d. The reason for this war was territory and religion; the Arabs wanted to expand their reign up north all the way to France and force their Islamic religion to the Visigoths and other Europeans but Spaniards were not happy about this. The Arabs started taking control of the peninsula in 711 a.d, but started losing it as centuries passed until 1492 a.d. "La Reconquista" started in 718 a.d.; a couple of years after the Arabs took full control of Spain. La Reconquista is the reconquest, meaning the Spaniards fully gained control of previously owned territory. Because Spain had been engaged in war for over seven hundred years, they were motivated to keep fighting and expanding their territories. The victory against the Arabs and regaining control of the last kingdom of Granada gave the Spaniards great confidence in war.

Not only won battles and successful victories against the Muslims inspired Spaniards to keep expanding and forcing their religion to other cultures but also the rumors about the "new world" of having tremendous amounts of gold, gems and riches. Hernan Cortes and other conquistadors traveled to the new world to get rich and powerful, also to bring back wealth to their families. Leaving a legacy and being in history books was another reasons many conquistadors traveled to the "new world". They saw this as an opportunity to be someone important to their country. These people had an ambition that had to be accomplished no matter what.

Geography is an important key that favored Europeans in all aspects. What this means is that Europeans used minerals, animals, and germs in battle that guaranteed their triumph against natives. Powerful weapons were made with steel and gunpowder; animals that didn't exist in the Americas were used in battle as well as germs. For example: the macuahuitls made out of wood and obsidian, stone knives, atlatls, and arrows were no match for the steel swords and armors worn by conquistadors. Obsidian is sharp but is very fragile compared to Spanish steel. The case is not that Spaniards were better soldiers or had a better army, is the technology they had that made them conquer the natives. The native Mayas had greater numbers of warriors, if they had even weapons

the Spanish conquest would have never happened. Spanish horsemen usually had lances and swords, their lances were long wooden spears that had a steel points at the end. This lances were very effective on foot native warriors, conquistadors stabbed enemies from the horse's back. Swords were used in close range combat, they slashed Maya warriors and effectively pierced through their shields. Foot soldiers used "harquebus", is like an early musket, it was hard to load and slow but really effective on damaging the enemy resulting in death. These muskets could easily penetrate Maya warrior's shields and of course human flesh. Like mentioned before, these muskets were hard to reload and took a lot of time to do so because of the wick that had to be kept lit, Spaniards had a group of soldiers to load them and another group just to fire them, this was effective teamwork tactics. Another secret weapon was the cross bow; this was design to penetrate through knights' armors. This was really effective and accurate on the cotton shields of the poorly protected Maya warriors. Foot soldiers used swords as well to kill Maya by dozens. Another advantage in the battlefield for conquistadors was the steel armor they wore. This steel armor fully protected the conquistadors' chest and vital organs, making it impossible for Maya warriors to penetrate this armor with obsidian blades and wooden arrows. The steel made helmets that looked like cooking pots protected another Spaniards' vital organ, the brain. This armor and helmets were made from the finest steel of Toledo, Spain, the finest one in the world at the time.

Another powerful weapon used in battle were war dogs, conquistadors brought war dogs that were trained to kill. Spaniards had been using dogs like mastiffs and pit bulls in the battlefields for a long time and already had experience using them. These tactics had been practiced long time ago since the times of the Romans. Now these dogs were not like the native xoloitzcuintles that Aztecs had; these were furious, fearless and powerful dogs. Historians believe that these dogs were protected by cotton armor, a tactic used by native warriors and soon adopted by the conquistadors. These dogs were appreciated by the Spaniards and didn't want to send them unprotected to the battlefield. It is thought that these dogs were more likely to attack the unarmed wounded Maya warriors. After the Spaniards slashed, cut and wounded the Native warriors, they sent the dogs to finish the job. Another cruel tactic used by conquistadors was pretending to release captives into the wilderness and then releasing war dogs to attack these captives.

Battle strategy or war tactics played an important role in the victory of Spain over the Mayas. Once again, this goes back to the geographical advantage of the Europeans; given that in the battlefield they used animals and weapons that were never seen by the Mayas. Geography favored Spain due to that horses, pit bulls and gunpowder did not exist in the "new world" they were brought from Europe in ships and boats. Spaniards used this geographical advantage in their war strategies to inflict fear into the Maya warriors. For example, because the Mayas and other natives in the whole American continent had never seen a horse, they were terrified when they saw these animals in the battlefield. They thought that conquistadors riding the horse were one divine being or deity, like a creature half human half horse. With the mental image of these half horse half beast characters, seeing these powerful beasts charging at them with tremendous speed terrified some Maya warriors and made them run with fear. The Spaniards took advantage of this idea and easily killed many Mayas from the horses' back.

Another magical powder created with the combination of European minerals unknown to the Mayas was gunpowder. Gunpowder was invented by the Chinese, passed

to the middle east then Europe. Not only the tremendous damage that guns fueled by gunpowder created was a success in the battle field but the noise it created by it affected the outcomes of war. Natives had never heard the noise of gunpowder, they thought these Spaniards were creating thunder and other magical effects. Native warriors mistakenly thought these white men were gods of thunder. This was a big psychological advantage to scare native warriors away. Conquerors were also loaded with cannons that made loud noises as well.

The Maya war strategy of capturing the enemy captive to enslave him or sacrificing him was not a good idea at the time. The Maya did not want to just kill the enemy at the time but take him alive and use him as a sacrificial victim or offering to the gods. Unlike the Maya warriors, the Spaniards had just one objective, it was to kill as many enemies in the battlefield no matter what. Besides all the other advantages mentioned before, this was one of the main reasons for the Maya failing or losing battles.

Disease is one of the most if not the main cause of the decimation of the Maya population. Historians believe that more than one third of the Maya population was killed by disease between 1521 and 1523. The legend tells the story of a soldier that arrived in México in 1513 carrying smallpox and initiated the tragical epidemic that killed from 75% to 95% of all natives in the Americas. The Maya called this pestilence the *mayacil* or “easy death”. The large reddish pustules on the skin characterized this pestilence; this slowly rotted the Maya population. But the question is, why only the natives died from smallpox and not the Spaniards? During the middle ages, infectious diseases swept through Europe and wiped out millions of lives. Repeated epidemics in Europe made them more resilient to these viruses; in each outbreak there were more people that could genetically fight off the virus. These people that survived were able to have children and pass on their genetic resistance on to their children. Over centuries, European population acquired some immunity to diseases like smallpox, chickenpox, etc. Most of these viruses evolved from animal diseases, domestic farm animals. Most of farm-domesticated animals except for the lama are native from Eurasia and North Africa; no current farm animals inhabited the Americas in pre-colonial times. As you can see, Spaniards and other Europeans grew up breathing in these germs and drinking them in animal milk. The Mayas didn't have immunity to these germs and diseases, making them easy prey for the Conquistadors.

Allies were a big component in the success of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Given that the Maya empire had already deteriorated by the time the Spaniards arrived to the America, the Mayan civilization was not at its peak. The most powerful Maya kingdom at the time was the K'iche, whose well-known rivals were the Kaqchikels. The K'iche current leader was Tecún Umán, a brave Mayan warrior. The first conquistadors who made contact with the Mayas arrived around 1513. But the war between these started until November, 1523; after the Spaniards defeated the Aztec empire. So the conquistadors already had some experience in conquering other Natives. Pedro de Alvarado was the conquistador in charge of conquering the Mayas; he had worked his way up in the ranks of Hernán Cortés' army by being an ambitious, ruthless and courageous soldier. Cortes sent Alvarado on a journey to “discover” the lands of south of Mexico and Central America right after conquering the Aztecs. Alvarado was given an army of three hundred soldiers, one hundred and twenty archers and gunmen, and already carried hundreds of Cholulec and Tlaxcaltec allies that had been conquered

already. Pedro de Alvarado had Mexican allies as well from the previous conquered Aztec empire. Another group of allies that united to the Spanish army were the Kaqchikels, another powerful Maya kingdom that had already surrendered to the Spanish rule in 1520. Pedro de Alvarado was a good student and learned a lot from Hernán Cortés, he knew Cortes' ability to turn rival natives against each other and used this knowledge to form an alliance with the Kaqchikels. The Kaqchikels sent thousands of warriors to help Alvarado accomplish his goal. With the alliance with Kaqchikels and with some other ten thousand allies from previous conquered empires, it was really hard for the K'iche to win this battle. Despite this unfavorable statistics, Cortes sent a messenger to the K'iche kingdom of Q'umarkaj requesting a peaceful submission to the Spanish rule that was immediately denied by the K'iche. The K'iche were ready for battle against these conquistadors not caring about the consequences. The K'iche were proud people and would have fought under any circumstance never accepting defeat or surrendering.

Tecún Umán knew of the Spanish alliance with the Kaqchikels and was not happy about it. Tecún Umán went to the neighbor kingdoms that refused alliance with the conquistadors and tried to form an alliance as well coming up with an army of around ten thousand soldiers. The legends tells the story of Tecún Umán coming into the battle field adorned with Quetzal feathers, Maya weapons and a Quetzal bird accompanied him during the battle. In the middle of the skirmish of the battle of "El Pinal", Alvarado and Tecún Umán actually met face to face. When Umán saw Alvarado riding his horse, he thought he was one being half horse half human. The Maya warrior attacked him and pierced through the horse's flesh getting it down to the ground. Umán managed to kill the horse but Alvarado was still alive, then Alvarado stabbed Tecún Umán on the chest taking his life away. After that Spaniards kept on killing Maya warriors by the dozens. Because the Spanish weaponry being so advanced, the Maya army was not match for the conquistadors even thou they fought bravely.

Language, translators and communication were another huge advantage the Spaniards had over the Maya. Back in 1513, the K'iche Maya had captured a group of "conquistadors" whose boat sank but managed to arrive at Yucatán. This group of conquistadors was traveling under the command of Valdivia from Panama to Santo Domingo. Once at the Yucatán peninsula, Valdivia and fifteen of his men were sacrificed by Mayas leaving only two survivors; Geronimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero. Guerrero married a Mayan princess who was the daughter of Nachan Can, the Mayan ruler of Chetumal at the time. While Aguilar served the Mayan lord, he learned Maya language and adapt to their lifestyle. Now with Aguilar at his disposal, Pedro de Alvarado was able to communicate with other Maya kingdoms and form allies to fight the K'iche. Not only did Spaniards use Aguilar to conquer the Mayas but the Aztecs as well. When the inhabitants of Potonchan lost against the conquistadors, they offered gifts and women to the Spaniards; among these women was "La Malinche". Malinche knew Nahuatl and Maya, so Cortes could use Aguilar to talk to "malinche" and used her to talk to the Aztecs. Language was used effectively by Alvarado to turn Maya kingdoms against each other and gather allies.

In conclusion, many elements contributed to the conquest of the Maya civilization. The main ones are geography, disease, and war strategies but secondary ones such as language, alliances, time an inspiration also affected the conquest.

