

2024 Premier’s History Teachers’ Association History Scholarship

Revising the Conquest Narrative

Current trends in the historiography of the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire

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# Introduction

The Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire, 1519-1521, was a pivotal event in Early Modern History. Along with the voyages of Columbus, this event marked the beginning of the domination of Europe in world affairs as well as European colonisation of Indigenous peoples. Despite the temporal and spatial distance from contemporary Australia, the historical significance of the conquest is recognised by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) through its inclusion in both the History 7-10 and History Extension syllabuses. While there are a variety of resources available to support student learning, few deal satisfactorily with the contestability of the Conquest Narrative, or with recent developments in the Anglophone Academy.

This study tour proposed to investigate the current trends in the historiography of the conquest by travelling to Mexico and the USA. The Mexican portion of the tour traced the Route of Cortés from Veracruz to Mexico City including visits to archaeological sites and cultural institutions to gain an understanding of the perception and reception of the conquest in Mexico. The US tour focussed on meeting conquest historians and visiting cultural institutions.

The goal of this study tour was to build expertise in this topic, to promote this History Extension case study, and to gather information for the creation of resources to support students across the state for the current Stage 4 and 6 syllabuses, and those to be implemented in NSW by 2027.

# Focus of Study

The historiography of the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire links closely to topics in two current NESA syllabuses, and two that are to be implemented in 2027 (Term 4, 2026 in the case of History Extension). The syllabus links below note the areas and case studies addressed in the study tour.

**Stage 4 History**: In the current History 7-10 syllabus, the Spanish Conquest of the Americas is an option in “Depth Study 6: Expanding Contacts”, part of the “Ancient to the Modern World” topic. In the new syllabus, it will appear as a depth study in “Historical Context 2: The Medieval World (c.500-c.1600)”. In both syllabuses, students look at similar content, including the nature of either Aztec or Inca society before the conquest, the interactions between the Spanish and Indigenous populations, the impact of the conquest, and the longer-term effects of colonisation.

**Stage 6 History Extension**: The current and upcoming Stage 6 History Extension syllabuses each contain a case study on the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. The current syllabus includes the case study “Spain and the Aztec Empire” and asks students to consider the origins and/or nature of Spanish conquest and colonisation, reasons for the decline of the Aztec empire, and impact of Spanish colonisation on Indigenous culture.

The upcoming syllabus has a slightly different emphasis, with the name of the case study, “Spain and the Mexica”, reflecting more accurate terminology (The name Aztec is an exonym granted to the Mexica anachronistically). Its debates are: the nature of Mexica society; reasons for the collapse of the Mexica empire; and impact and legacy of Spanish colonisation.

# Significant Learning

## Part I: Mexico

My study tour started in Veracruz, Mexico, where Cortés’ expedition against the Aztecs began in 1519. My journey took me along the Route of Cortés and included visits to archaeological sites and cultural institutions. I gained a sense of Mexican history, both of Pre-Columbian civilisations (of which the Aztecs were only the latest), as well as the Colonial period of New Spain, lasting from the end of the conquest in 1521 to the end of the War of Independence in 1821. In Mexico, I found that the conquest was often viewed as the preface in a longer story of national history that focused on independence, reform and revolution. These findings support the discussion of construction of history in the History Extension case study.

### Indigenous perspectives of the conquest

I visited archaeological sites relating to the conquest: Cempoala, city of the Totonacs, and nearby La Antigua, both in Veracruz; the great pyramid at Cholula in Puebla; and the sites of Tlatelolco and the Templo Mayor in Mexico City. Each site’s signage included written sources for context, typically Spanish narrative sources alongside Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs) documents, such as the *Florentine Code* and the *Codex Mendoza*. Most of the sites and institutions I visited in Mexico were overseen by the INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia). The Museo Nacional de Antropología and Museo de Antopología de Xalapa both contained numerous relevant displays of Indigenous artefacts directly relevant to the period of the conquest, including objects from the Mexica (Aztecs) themselves as well as Tlaxcalteca and Totonacs.

The Indigenous perspectives of the events presented at these sites and institutions are useful for developing Stage 4 resources, to show differing perspectives and contestability. They are also relevant for the “Nature of the Spanish Conquest” debate in the History Extension syllabus, as there are details here about Malintzin’s role as translator in Cempoala, the alliance of the Tlaxcaltecs against the Cholulans in Puebla, and the various discoveries made in the excavation of the Templo Mayor by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and others over the last several decades. The Templo Mayor excavations will also be relevant to the new History Extension syllabus, which asks about the nature of Mexica society – these ongoing excavations continue to deepen and extend our understanding of the civilisation that fell to the Spanish in 1521.

### National identity: Indigenismo and Mestizaje

In 1821, the new Mexican nation had not yet established an identity. Over three centuries, Mexico had become melting pot of ethnicity and culture, and by independence, the majority of the population was classified as Mestizo (“mixed”). The concept of Mestizaje (loosely “mixed-ness”) became an important element of national identity, and following the Mexican Revolution, José Vasconcelos, then Secretary of Public Education, also promoted the importance of ancient Mesoamerican civilisations to the modern Mexican identity – an idea called Indigenismo. The interplay between Indigenismo and Mestizaje are key to understanding the Mexican view of their history, including their place in the conquest narrative, an important consideration for History Extension students.

On the study tour, these concepts were highlighted through examining the public art of Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Orozco and David Siqueiros. The Mexican Muralist movement produced some profound public artworks which are of direct relevance to the History Extension case study due to their role in both reflecting and shaping national consciousness.

Rivera’s notable murals on this topic include *The History of Mexico* at the Palacio Nacional, depicting the conquest centrally, with subsequent events and historical figures radiating out from there. Rivera’s *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon at Alameda Central Park* at the Museo Mural Diego Rivera is a poignant view of the legacy of the conquest and treatment of Indigenous peoples in independent Mexico. José Orozco’s *Cortés y La Malinche* at the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso is a stark portrait of Hernán Cortés and Malintzin, whose union resulted in the first Mestizo child, Martín Cortés, who became symbolic of the Mexican people. Finally, Siqueiros’ twin murals, *Apotheosis of Cuauhtémoc* and *Torment of Cuauhtémoc* at the Palacio de Bellas Artes show a counterfactual history of the last Aztec leader defeating the Spanish alongside what actually happened, Cuauhtémoc being tortured by his captors.

### The Perpetual Conquest

Given the pivotal importance of the Spanish Conquest in Early Modern History, and its presence in the NSW curriculum, Mexico surprisingly didn’t have its own dedicated museum and it often had a less-than-prominent position in the museums I visited. In the Museo Naval Mexico in Veracruz, there was a focus on Indigenous watercraft and the siege of Tenochtitlan. Additionally, a corner of the Museo de Caballería in Mexico City outlined the role of horses in the conquest. While the National History Museum at Chapultepec did feature art and artefacts depicting the conquest in its first gallery, the story told was disjointed and empasized the narrative of human sacrifice as a justification for the conquest. The view that became evident here was that in Mexico, the Spanish Conquest was seen as a preface to the national history themes of independence, reform and revolution.

At the Palacio de Bellas Artes I asked an art historian whether the conquest had lost its importance in the national story due to more recent events from the 19th and 20th centuries. He replied that Mexicans saw history more as a pyramid – the revolution was built on La Reforma, which in turn was built on independence. Below this layer comes the colonial period and the story of the conquest, and before all that, the Indigenous empires and societies that had previously existed. He shared the view that modern Mexico is built on this “Pyramid of History”, that all of these events were still present and relevant, that the “Perpetual Conquest” still influenced Mexican society and culture today. This perspective likely accounts for the decentralisation of the conquest in the public institutions I visited.

This idea of Perpetual Conquest then, could be seen in many places I went throughout Mexico City and beyond. Most prominently I saw it in my visit to Tlatelolco, containing the Plaza de las Tres Culturas. This is an archaeological site where from one vantage point you can see Indigenous ruins, colonial churches and modern buildings. The idea of the Pyramid of History and the Perpetual Conquest are both very interesting and worthy of further exploration, particularly with regards to the Construction of History in the History Extension syllabus.

## Part II: United States of America

Within the Academy, the Spanish Conquest is viewed through two opposing paradigms: the “Traditional Narrative” and “New Conquest History”. The Traditional Narrative is based on the Spanish sources contemporary with the conquest (particularly Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz), and subsequent histories are built upon this original emplotment of the conquest story, constructed in three acts, with the individuals involved playing the roles of heroes and villains. Within the Academy, the Traditional Narrative is still popular with generalists and in world history courses, and remains dominant in Spain. It features heavily in Australian school textbooks and other publications available to the general public, with few textbooks or generalist publications offering alternative interpretations or contesting its premise.

New Conquest History is a revisionist school that has its foundations in New Ethnohistory and New Philology. It is fundamentally empirical, with an emphasis on close critique of all evidence including Spanish and Nahuatl sources. New Conquest History questions the foundation of the Traditional Narrative, asking fundamental questions from whether we should even call the event a conquest rather than a war, the role and agency of Indigenous peoples, and whether or not the “conquest” was truly completed by 1521. Matthew Restall is the founder and primary promoter of New Conquest History, and most anglophone historians of Mesoamerica are positioned within this school. Despite its importance in current historiography, New Conquest History is relatively understudied in Australia, and so is not easily accessible to students. One output of this study tour is building the expertise required to support students in their learning about this historiography.

### The New Conquest History paradigm

New Conquest History is a prominent paradigm in the anglophone Academy. Its methodology incorporates the use of Indigenous language skills to access Nahuatl-language texts, allowing historians to make best use of the archive to arrive at an authentic understanding of past events. Matthew Restall has contributed substantially to the field of conquest history, and the two texts that most clearly reflect the New Conquest History paradigm are *The Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (2003, 2nd ed. 2021) and *When Montezuma Met Cortés* (2018). Both of these texts are helpful in addressing all three of the debates in the History Extension case study. A highlight of my study tour was my time in the town of State College, Pennsylvania, home to Penn State University and Matthew Restall. My time with Restall consisted of numerous discussions about the historiography of the conquest and the NSW History Extension curriculum, attending two exhibition openings, meetings with his graduate students, and participating in a graduate research seminar conducted by Restall about his current research and practice as an historian.

Restall questions all aspects of the conquest narrative and along with other proponents of the New Conquest History, has revised many of the foundational premises held by the Traditional Narrative. He questions the circumstances surrounding Montezuma’s capitulation, and hesitates to call the events a conquest at all, preferring the term the Spanish-Aztec War 1519-1521, part of the larger conflict, the Spanish-Mesomerican War 1517-1550. In the *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, he debunks various truths so closely held for centuries, from the myth of European superiority to the myth of completion. In terms of current historiography, *When Montezuma Met Cortés* critiques every major source and representation of the conquest since the event, and is a solid summary of his interpretation. Restall is currently preparing to publish another work of historiography called the *Nine Lives of Christopher Columbus*, which links with the Origins of the Spanish Conquest debate, and this book, along with his already published work, will provide useful examples for the “Constructing History” topic.

### Working with Indigenous sources

One of the key elements of the New Conquest History, other than the re-examination of the foundational premises of the Traditional Narrative, is the examination of Indigenous sources and perspectives in their original languages. The close study of the Indigenous archive began with scholars like Susan Schroeder and James Lockhart. Previous writers, including Inga Clendinnen and Miguel León-Portilla, were very much concerned with these sources, but used existing translations – a practice Restall is wary of due to potential errors and misinterpretations. Restall, along with Kevin Terraciano and Lisa Sousa, produced an edited reader for students called *Mesoamerican Voices* (2006). This text is used as a teaching aide by New Conquest historians and could be effectively utilised by History Extension teachers of this case study.

Meeting with Camilla Townsend at the Library of Congress in Washington DC (where she currently holds the Kislak chair at the Kluge Centre) gave me a clear insight into how important these Indigenous sources are in current historiography. Townsend’s most famous recent work is *Fifth Sun* (2019), which focuses on Indigenous sources such as Nahuatl annals by Chimalpahin, Tezozomoc and others to examine the conquest and its colonial aftermath. Townsend is well known among her colleagues for her expertise in understanding Nahuatl literature, as she can pick up nuance and meaning not obvious to the casual scholar. She is currently researching Nahuatl-language cantares, a genre of song that gives use great insights into the Indigenous experience before and after the conquest.

During the study tour, I also met with Rebecca Dufendach at Loyola College MD, to discuss her research on medicine and disease in the *Florentine Codex*, a twelve-volume work compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún and his Nahua assistants. This is of particular interest due to the role disease played in Spanish victory in the conquest, linking with the second debate of the case study. My meeting with her improved my understanding of the language background of New Conquest Historians, and the influence and legacy of James Lockhart. Dufendach was also on the Getty Research Institute team working on the [Digital Florentine Codex](https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/), a searchable version of the source which will be useful to both Stage 4 and 6 teachers and students.

### Indian Conquistadors

I met with Laura Matthew at Dunbarton Oaks in Washington DC. Matthew edited *Indian Conquistadors* (2012, along with Michel Oudijk), about the role of Indigenous warriors in the conquests of Mesoamerica. In the introduction to this book, Susan Schroeder gives a brief survey of three previous trends in the genre of conquest studies (“The Epic Spanish Conquest”, “The Spiritual Conquest”, and “Loser History or the Conquest of Mexico as a Nonevent”) before suggesting this book presents a fourth trend, “The Indians as Conquerors”. Matthew provided me with an overview of New Conquest History, including the impact of Restall, Townsend and Lockhart on contemporary historiography, and highlighted her place within the school. We also discussed her current research on lienzos as a source, and about the role of Nahua conquistadors (Mexicanos) who invaded and then settled in what is now Guatemala. When I was in State College, I had the opportunity to meet with Cesar Ovando, one of Restall’s graduate students. Ovando is a Guatemalan-American with Indigenous heritage and was similarly examining the role of these Nahua conquistadors in the conquest of Guatemala. He noted a difference of opinion with Matthew, preferring not to refer to these people as Mexicanos, which is a loaded term in Guatemala and Mexico. These differing perspectives make the concept of Indian Conquistadors a useful addition for students to consider in the debate over the “Legacy of Conquest and Colonisation”.

### Legacy of the Conquest

Most of the historians I met on the study tour research an aspect of the conquest’s legacy. The majority of these historians are in the New Conquest History school, and therefore worked closely with Indigenous archives, which are written primarily in Nahuatl. For example, Caterina Pizzigoni, a teacher at Columbia University NY, has written *Indigenous Life After the Conquest: The De la Cruz Family Papers of Colonial Mexico* (2021, with Camilla Townsend). This research uses empirical evidence to reconstruct the Indigenous experience following the conquest. Similarly, her current research relates to religious syncretism within Indigenous households in the colonial period. Additionally, several of Restall’s graduate students were examining aspects of colonisation in this period: Ashley Smouse was working on female religious orders in colonial Mesoamerica; Sofia Rodriguez was researching the spread of voladores (Paplanta pole jumpers) into other parts of New Spain following the conquest; and Travis Meyer was looking at Nahuatl-language religious texts and sermons at the beginning of this period. All of these topics link to the third debate in the case study and indicate a trend towards postcolonial perspectives and history from below.

Perhaps the most unique contribution to scholarly understanding of the legacy of the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs is the book *In the Shadow of Cortés* (2015) by Kathleen Ann Myers. I met with Myers at the University of Indiana, Bloomington. In 2006 she received a grant to travel along the Route of Cortés and interviewed over one hundred people, asking them about Cortés, the conquest, and a range of related topics. Myers collected these interviews and published them in *In the Shadow of Cortés*, a corpus of oral history specifically on the continuing impact of the conquest. Excerpts of Myers’ study are fantastic resources for both Stage 4 and 6 students to use.

# Conclusion

This study tour addressed two principal areas of historiography regarding the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire: perceptions and reception of the conquest in Mexico; and New Conquest History, the dominant paradigm within the anglophone Academy. The Mexican portion of the tour uncovered a range of information concerning Indigenous perspectives and source material that will be useful in resource creation for the Stage 4 History syllabus. There is also scope to consider these findings in History Extension regarding the four key questions: Who are the historians? What are the purposes of history? How has history been constructed, recorded and presented over time? Why have approaches to history changed over time?

The focus of the American leg of the tour, historiographical trends in the anglophone Academy, is best understood through the publications of New Conquest Historians such as Matthew Restall, Camilla Townsend, and others I spoke to on this tour. This revisionist school is broad, but has solid foundations, being fundamentally empirical in its methodology. The questioning of the most fundamental premises of conquest history is a significant area of exploration for History Extension students, and the methodological emphasis on the Indigenous archive has important epistemological implications for our understanding of the event.

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