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Hernan Cortés (1485–1547)

At the age of 19, Hernan Cortés decided to leave Spain to seek his fortune in the new Caribbean colonies. He eventually settled on the island of Cuba where he gained political power and was twice elected mayor of Santiago. He proved to be intelligent, clever, and ruthless — qualities he would use in his dealings with the people of Meso-America.

When rumours of a wealthy empire on the mainland reached the Spanish governor of Cuba, Diego Velazquez, he urged Cortés to lead an expedition to find this wealthy civilization. As the ships were about to set sail, Velazquez changed his mind about sending Cortés, but Cortés was determined to lead the expedition, even if it meant angering the governor. He sailed from Cuba on February 18, 1519, before the voyage could be officially cancelled, with 11 ships, 16 horses, and 500 men.

Cortés knew that he would be imprisoned by Velazquez if he returned to Cuba, so he had to conquer and settle wherever he landed. He travelled to the island of Cozumel and then along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico to what is now Veracruz, a city on the east coast of central Mexico. He founded his own city where he landed and his crew became its citizens. He was elected the captain-general of the town council and eventually had this title sanctioned by King Charles V of Spain, Isabella’s and Ferdinand’s grandson.

Once he and his sailors had settled in Veracruz, Cortés feared they would mutiny since they were surrounded by enemy kingdoms. Fearing a mutiny, he ordered his fleet of ships burned, saying that they were no longer seaworthy. The crew was forced to stay in enemy territory. Cortés’s personal goal was to conquer all of Meso-America. He wrote to the king stating that he wanted to capture the territory in the name of Christianity and the Spanish crown. He had been greatly influenced by the Spanish conquistadors of the Reconquista.

Cortés proved to be an exceptional strategist. He knew that he and his men were hopelessly outnumbered by the Aztec. He would have to use stealth and cunning to overcome his enemies, even though he had guns and they did not. Cortés’s military strategies contributed to the success of the Spanish conquistadors.