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# Introduction

## *For Riches Yet Unfound*

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*There might still be large treasures which the Aztecs had hidden to spite their foes . . . The search continued: houses were again ransacked, gardens upturned, cellars and passages examined, and graves were opened and the lake was dragged.*

**Bancroft<sup>1</sup>**

It may seem curious to debate the question of what brought the Spanish conquistador to North America. Those who have read early accounts of the conquistador would likely answer the question in a single word—"gold." Authoritative studies such as *Rivers of Gold* (2003), by the accomplished British scholar Hugh Thomas, provide solid evidence of the impetus gold gave to Spanish exploration from the famous first voyage of Columbus forward.

Other reputable historians today dispute this, however. They charge that historians and popular writers of the past have wrongly portrayed the conquistadors as so single-minded in their search for gold as to be "lustful." As an example, they point to the way journalist Paul Wellman described the conquistadors in his 1954 book *Glory, God, and Gold*. "Every Spaniard," Wellman wrote, "would plunge his arms elbow-deep in gold ingots before he returned."<sup>2</sup>

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Wellman's description was an improbable exaggeration designed to emphasize a point and was not intended to be taken as a literal fact. Indeed, it may be difficult to prove that conquistador leaders or their expedition members were inordinately "lustful" in their search for gold. It is also difficult to prove that they weren't.

Hernando Cortés, the most prominent of the conquistadors—who knew if anyone did—once spoke about the matter to the Aztec leader Montezuma. "The Spaniards," Cortés confessed, employing his own improbable exaggeration, "had a disease of the heart that only gold could cure."<sup>3</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas, the censorious Catholic clergyman, declared more directly: "Their [the conquistadors'] whole end was to acquire gold and riches in the shortest time so that they might rise to lofty positions out of all proportion to their wealth."<sup>4</sup> "For Spaniards," current historian David J. Weber concurs, "the accumulation of gold and silver was not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself."<sup>5</sup>

All of the European nations in the sixteenth century, in fact, were desperate for gold. Spanish author Jean Descola addressed this matter: "Europe lacked gold. What was looted from Turkish coffers, the few nuggets brought back from Africa by Portuguese explorers, and the melting down of gold plate had increased the reserves of metal very little . . . Localized for a long time to the land routes of Oriental caravans and the sea routes along the African coasts, the battle for gold was soon to spread to the Dark Sea. Where could gold be found, indeed, if not in the Indies?"<sup>6</sup> It is entirely true, however, that past literature in America was prone to emphasize the conquistadors' desire to find gold to the exclusion of other significant goals. Earlier scholars and writers had good cause to be one-sided on this issue, given the enormous witness by sixteenth-century literature and art to the extent the early conquistadors would go to obtain gold.

The essential fact is that obtaining gold abetted all other ambitions of Spanish conquest. In many instances, and this was true of both Coronado and Oñate, gold was not the ultimate objective of a conquistador expedition. The hope of finding it, however, was the principal avenue of achieving other objectives. But on a personal level, there can be little doubt that such hope excited the passions of those who enlisted in conquistador expeditions.

Further, what is missing from this argument over the importance of gold is recognition of the difference between the first generation of

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conquistadors that flourished during the early sixteenth century and the ensuing second- and third-generation conquistadors such as Coronado and Oñate. In *No Settlement, No Conquest*, Richard Flint lists 132 major Spanish-led expeditions.<sup>7</sup> The Conquistador Period lasted essentially from Columbus in 1492 past Oñate in 1598, providing more than a full century in which generations, and world conditions with them, changed.

These first expeditions embarked from Europe largely to explore, discover, and conquer land and seek gold but not principally to colonize or Christianize. In the main, the head conquistadors were out to find wealth and conquer territory for Spain and to gain fame and position for themselves, and they suffered little restraint from the state or the church as to how they got them. In addition to discovering an entirely new land mass on the earth that humankind knew, through his exploitations Columbus also excited the European world to the potency of a new land rich with gold.

While Spanish conquistadors of ensuing generations were likewise contaminated by exotic myths of lost riches, their missions were conducted largely as colonizing efforts. Discovered wealth was essential to that purpose. Well-positioned members looked to obtain grants for estates among the Indians (called *encomiendas*), while others hoped to improve their fortunes in the new colony through their occupational skills and trades. At the same time, they, too, fantasized about finding “lost cities of gold.”

The earlier conquistadors had gained a wide reputation for cruelty and brutality that had been labeled the “black legend.” In April 1549, following a vigorous debate regarding Spanish morality between las Casas and Spanish humanist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, the king mandated a new set of rules for conquistador expeditions.<sup>8</sup>

By edict, conquistadors were to act more humanely than their predecessors had toward American natives. Such edicts, however, were far removed from the fields of contest in the Americas. The later expeditions did improve some on past conquistador behavior toward native people, but both the Coronado and Oñate Expeditions featured their own excesses.

Other factors, of course, motivated all of the conquistadors. Columbus’s discovery of America had opened great vistas of curiosity that were irresistible to adventurous men. A mysterious New World of unlimited wonders and potentially unlimited wealth awaited discovery and exploitation. Spaniards of both generations were similarly affected. Most of them nourished a fierce zeal to serve the Spanish Crown and to advance

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its empire and, yes, Christianity but also to advance the world presence of the Catholic Church through the process of discovery, conquest, and colonization.

The answer, therefore, to the question of what brought the conquistadors to America—and to North America in particular—was a mixture of motives. But evidence clearly indicates that, for the most part, conquistadors chose gold and empire over godly pursuits.

In 2003 Penn State professor Matthew Restall published his revealing *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* regarding misconceptions of the historical image of the Spanish conquistadors. The erroneous views he points to are those that evolved from early literary accounts in both formal histories and popular writings. They can rightly be classed as “literary myths.” In contrast, myths referred to in this study are those of Old World origin that came from Europe to America, as well as those generated by Indians in the New World to act upon the conquistador period of discovery. Here they will be called “gossip myths.”

Restall appropriately reveals several erroneous views of the conquistador that have developed over time in today’s United States: the misleading view that expeditions were sponsored and soldiered by the state, the false mystique regarding the conquistador leaders’ exceptional military experience and ability, and the validity of the Spanish “requirement” for Indian submission. On one point, however, Restall stands to be challenged. In making his argument regarding the role of gold in conquistador quests, he cites the instance of Francisco Pizarro in Peru: “The ‘most important thing’ to Pizarro was not gold, but the governorship [of Peru]. However, he needed to find gold in order for there to be a governorship worth having. *Put in the larger context, Spaniards had no interest at all in the metal per se, any more than we treasure credit cards as objects*” (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

Because the Spanish hunger for gold is so blatantly clear, both in official Spanish records and in literature of the day, the conclusion drawn in this statement requires further consideration. During the sixteenth century, as it had been for the Roman Empire and others before, gold was a dominating concern of kings and queens (e.g., Isabella of Spain), as well as of the men they sent afar to search out the New World. It was a craving that infested the European world. The day of the Spanish conquistador featured a predominant mind-set on gold, even as American society today is fixated on sex or automobiles.<sup>10</sup>

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Throughout world history, gold has been the base value item upon which empires were built and by which nations functioned. Indeed, gold may have served the purpose of obtaining the governorship for Pizarro, but that was not its sole attribute. To most people of that day, gold held much of the intrinsic quality of jewels. The metal, precious in the arena of trade, gleamed and sparkled, and it could be used to adorn other things. Significantly, its presence gave off the aura of wealth and social distinction.

From the advent of early civilizations, the metal has been coveted not only for trade purposes but also for its inherent beauty as adornment, whether for household dressings; armament such as helmets, sword hilts, and spurs; the trappings of horse gear; or other objects where the glittering metal added a special allure and beauty. Gold not only “held” wealth; it “symbolized” such.

It is not by happenstance, therefore, that gold was the ultimate promise of many myths. By the time the Spanish began exploring the New World, the desire for gold, inflamed by the ultimate promise of mythical lost cities where gold abounded freely, was a foremost impulse of adventurous men.

In the main, Restall’s statement makes the same error in reverse that earlier historians committed in disregarding other motives for wanting gold. It is equally fallacious to deny gold in favor of other conquistador motivations.

Spaniards of the sixteenth century were heirs to a heroic generation that had just driven the Islamic Moors from Spain. Their great victory at Granada came in 1492, the same year Columbus discovered America. Inspired Spaniards set forth with national and religious fervor to explore and conquer the New World. For them, and for the generation that followed, the call of Spanish heraldry was a potent force that impelled men forth to seek *hidalgo*, *caballero*, or even *adelantado* (governorship) status and position.

It was a general assumption that conquistador parties would conduct military conquests of Indian settlements and confiscate any accumulated wealth they might find. But conquistador ventures were not state-supported, with either money or soldiers. As privately financed ventures, conquistador expeditions required the recruitment of members. Men to win the conquest and others to colonize with their women or entire families were enticed to enlist in expeditions largely through the promise of sharing in the rewards.

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Once a settlement was subdued, a system known as the *encomienda* (or *repartimento*) grant (a grant of authority) was instituted. Under this mandate, certain Spaniards of position were given the right to lord over a community of native people. The *encomendero* could then demand of the natives “tributes” in terms of labor or material wealth. In turn, the Spanish overlord was required to provide military protection for his charges and see to their indoctrination in the Christian religion by friars of the Catholic Church.

The practice of *encomienda*, which had been brought to the New World by Columbus, fit well with the purposes of both the Crown and the church. Though certain aspects were different, the *encomienda* functioned much the same as the American plantation in keeping a body of people in servitude to the financial advantage of an overlord and a dominant race at large. The system, which for many years featured abject slavery, served the cause of Spanish colonization well, with little cost to the Crown.

While *encomiendas* promised the reward of tributes, they were only one way expeditionary rewards were won. The first and most enticing reward was the discovery prize. Under Spanish law, it was fixed that when discoveries of great wealth occurred, as with Cortés in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru, the discovering party would reap four-fifths of the prize and the state one-fifth.<sup>11</sup>

Discovery prizes had to be divided among the conquistador party. Sometimes this was done on a service basis, such as rewarding the horsemen more than the footmen in the expedition. Generally, the expedition commander chose whatever method pleased him—which was whatever he could get away with. There was no official rule for dividing the four-fifths of the looted prize among a conquistador party. It was achieved by various methods, including status of rank. The conquistador leader and his principal lieutenants always took their share first.<sup>12</sup>

Cortés had recruited his Spanish fighting men on the promise of potential reward once victory was achieved. Assembling his force to make the divide, he first put aside the government’s royal fifth and gave another fifth to himself as captain general. He then set apart other large sums to cover costs of his fleet, for personnel horses killed during his conquest, and to reward the *procuradores* in Spain. After all this he gave special shares to the priests who had accompanied his army, to his captains, and to archers and men with firearms and crossbows. The lesser rank-and-file members of his expedition received far smaller shares. When his looted

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treasures ran out, Cortés turned to *encomiendas* as a way of rewarding followers.<sup>13</sup>

Certain expedition members' hope to obtain *encomiendas* did not preclude the pervasive hope of everyone on a given expedition to find the lost treasures repeatedly promised by prevailing myths. *Encomiendas* and gold were not mutually exclusive goals. Sometimes they were so interrelated, in fact, that it becomes difficult to determine which was primary and which was secondary. Coronado scholar Richard Flint speaks to this essential relationship in *Great Cruelties Have Been Reported*: "The ultimate aim of most members of the [Coronado] expedition was enrichment from precious metals. They were expecting, however, that those precious metals would already be exploited by a sophisticated native population. Tribute and *encomienda* were the means the expedition had for tapping into that expected wealth."<sup>14</sup> From this, the question arises: was taking forced tributes from impoverished natives through the *encomienda* any less "lustful" than looting the coffers of a tribal sachem?

Throughout history, the much desired yellow metal has been a prime medium of exchange, an exalted symbol of material value by which other wants of life can be obtained. At times it became even more, a mind- and soul-consuming craving in itself. Such historic moments include the gold rushes to California in 1849, to Colorado in 1859, and to Alaska in 1898—all of which are known instances in which the desire to find gold mounted to the level of mass obsession. Why should we think that the conquistadors, having often heard the exalted tales—both fictional-based and real—of golden treasures in the New World, were an exception to such human compulsions? Evidence of an impelling desire specifically to find golden wealth is replete throughout the records of Spanish conquest.

Both Coronado and Oñate were men of wealth even before they set forth on their quests, and both saw the achievement of conquistador status as a steppingstone to a governorship in Nueva Mexico. But, as with Pizarro, finding new wealth was an absolute necessity for maintaining a new Spanish province. The immediate hope was to find that wealth pre-accumulated by some Indian leader. But if not, there was always the potential of gathering it, as in the Indies, through gold or silver from mines worked by Indian labor.

Flint observes that "the Coronado expedition was decidedly not a prospecting and mining endeavor."<sup>15</sup> Expedition members, he notes, took with them very little of the equipment or tools required to mine, conduct

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assays, or work gold. Expedition members' mining experience was scarce or nonexistent. Many were artisans of various practices, and others had no interest whatever in digging for metals or gems. But still, this does not say that they had no passion for discovering a fabulous booty of gold as promised by the prevailing myth of lost cities of gold.

The Oñate Expedition, on the other hand, did look to mining prospects if the need arose. Juan de Oñate y Salazar and the Zaldívar brothers, Juan and Vicente, who were officers in his expedition, had long operated silver mines in Mexico prior to marching north. Records of Oñate's expedition reveal that its baggage included mining and assay needs such as quicksilver.<sup>16</sup> Members of the expedition, however, marched north with exalted dreams of discovering great stores of wealth already accumulated, as in Mexico City and Peru. They, too, looked with great hopes to the mythical promise of Quivira.

Nothing better illustrates the Coronado Expedition's fervor to find gold than the instance of Bigotes, the friendly and helpful Cicuye (Pecos Pueblo) warrior who was held in captivity. He was dragged about in an iron collar and suffered having dogs set on him while manacled, all because Coronado and his captain, Hernando de Alvarado, suspected (almost surely erroneously) that Bigotes possessed a gold bracelet.<sup>17</sup>

The two men were fully determined—no matter the moral cost—to do anything to anyone to obtain the bracelet. Whether they had in mind the reward of *encomiendas* or of a potential city of gold is anybody's guess, but both spoke to the same intense purpose of obtaining great wealth.

The Indian slave Jusepe told Juan de Oñate that the fugitive expeditionary captains Francisco Leyva de Bonilla and Antonio Gutiérrez de Humaña had been “lured forth by extravagant tales [myths] of gold which abounded in the many towns in those regions [of northern Mexico].”<sup>18</sup>

In his *History of New Mexico*, essentially a personal account of the Oñate Expedition, Captain Gaspar de Villagrà, a prominent member of the expedition, wrote of the exasperation that existed when they did not find riches. “Because they did not stumble over bars of gold and silver immediately,” Villagrà observed scornfully of the colonists, “they cursed the barren land and cried out bitterly against those who had led them into such a wilderness.”<sup>19</sup> This testimony to the Spaniards' passion to find riches in the Americas—even six decades after Coronado—was again expressed by Rodrigo del Rio de Losa, Knight of the Order of Santiago and former governor of Nueva Galicia, who wrote in 1602, “We may well

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believe that there are people [in Tierra Nueva] who bear a metal crown like our kings, there are walled houses of five, six, or seven storeys [*sic*] and silver and gold as in other lands and in the Indies. For the greed of these riches, we Spaniards came to these parts, which is the main bait that attracts us here.”<sup>20</sup>

The Coronado and Oñate Expeditions from deep in present Mexico to the American Southwest were elaborate *entradas* (excursions) from Spanish-controlled New Spain (Nueva España as of 1518) to Tierra Nueva (North America), the wilderness lands to the north. The first was conducted by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in 1541 and the second sixty years later by Don Juan de Oñate in 1601.

Though neither expedition discovered a golden city, these ventures from Mexico and their expeditionary searches in New Mexico, to the West Coast, and eastward onto the Central Plains awakened recorded history of the southwestern United States as it existed prior to European influence. The two expeditions are at the very beginning of our national experience.

Interestingly, the “grand reward” of the golden myth was always just beyond reach. If not found on one of the Antilles Islands, then perhaps on the America mainland; if not in the Brazilian jungle or the mountains of northwest Mexico, then at Cibola; if not at Cibola, then at Quivira. But even when no city of gold was found on the plains of Kansas, some members of the Coronado and Oñate Expeditions felt they had simply not searched far enough. Surely they would find gold, some thought, if only they would push on to Harahey or Enchuche.

## ABBREVIATION KEY

H/R-DJO = Hammond and Rey, eds., *Don Juan de Oñate*

## NOTES

1. Bancroft, *History of Mexico* 2: 2, 4.
2. Wellman, *Glory, God, and Gold*, 18.
3. Weber, *Spanish Frontier*, 23; Flint, *No Settlement, No Conquest*, 36–38.
4. Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (abridged edition of the *Biblioteca enciclopédica popular*, 77 [Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1977]), paragraph 16; cited in Leonard, *Books of the Brave*, 1.

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5. Weber, *Spanish Frontier*, 23.

6. Descola, *Les Conquistadors*, 10.

7. Flint, *No Settlement, No Conquest*, 261–266.

8. Hemming, *The Search for El Dorado*, 138–139.

9. Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 22. Richard Flint concludes as well that: “*The [Coronado] expedition was not in a literal [i.e., actual or real] sense looking for gold*” (emphasis added). Flint, “What They Never Told You,” *Kiva: The Journal of Southwestern Archaeology and History* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 204; Flint, *No Settlement, No Conquest*, xv.

10. Though seldom mentioned by historians, the pleasures of native women also ranked high as a prize of conquistador conquest. But gold and other treasure was often the prize that inspired expedition members.

11. Cortés’s royal four-fifths was described as consisting of 32,400 and odd *pesos de oro*, or melted gold; 100,000 ducas’ worth of unbroken jewels, feathers, and similar items; and 1,000 or more *marcos* of silver. Bancroft, *History of Mexico* 1: 343n31.

12. *Ibid.*, 343. Many of the jewels and much of the gold, including that belonging to the king, were lost during the Spaniards’ desperate retreat from Mexico City in June 1520. Some of Cortés’s men were drowned by the weight of the gold they carried, while others threw their treasure into the lake they were crossing in an attempt to survive the battle. Aztec Indians came later, many believed, and dragged the lost fortune from the lake. *Ibid.*, 475–477, 483.

13. Thomas, *Rivers of Gold*, 490.

14. Flint, *Great Cruelties*, 540.

15. Flint, “What They Never Told You,” 208–209.

16. “Ulloa Inspection,” H/R-DJO 1: 136; “Salazar Inspection,” *ibid.*, 225.

17. In *No Settlement, No Conquest*, 137–138, Flint calls attention to Coronado’s denial that he ordered that the dogs be set onto Bigotes.

18. Villagrà, *A History of New Mexico*, 58–59.

19. Flint, *No Settlement, No Conquest*, 148.

20. “Rio de Losa to Viceroy,” H/R-DJO 2: 764.