

Conquistadors & Slavery

"Glory & Gold"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

Lyric: The year is 1519

Imagine that you're living with your tribe in the Amazon rainforest and you've never had contact with the outside world. Suddenly, one day a loud, giant metal dragonfly comes roaring out of the sky. There seem to be people in it, but they don't look like people. They have weird, pale skin, and their bodies are covered in cloth. This isn't fiction. It's real, and it still happens today. In 2007, officials in Brazil estimated that there were 67 uncontacted tribes living in the region. What would be going through your mind if you saw people videotaping you from an airplane when your whole life you had seen only your small village and your jungle?

This was what it was like for the Native Americans who greeted the first explorers on the coast and, later, the conquistadors who came inland. It would almost be like meeting an alien today. You'd be interested, amazed and scared. Who would know how these far-traveling aliens would behave?

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Lyric: Conquistadors



How were they different from earlier explorers?

When the earlier explorers landed, they returned home to brag. But the conquistadors wanted to stay. **Conquistador** is related to the words *conquer* and *conquest*, which are used when someone takes something over with threats or violence. So the conquistadors didn't care that people were already living in the newly discovered countries. They did not respect the authority of the advanced civilizations that had developed in those lands over thousands of years. Instead, they saw the current citizens as standing in their way. The conquistadors wanted land. They wanted gold. And they didn't mind killing to get it.

Lyric: Europe's quest for gold and glory

So were the earlier explorers peaceful?

To be clear, the explorers Prince Henry the Navigator, Bartholomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama were not saints. Their desire to chart the unknown was born from a desire for riches. They were not exploring just to experience a romantic sense of adventure or help their countries better understand other cultures. They wanted gold. Almost as soon as Prince Henry arrived in Africa, he set the ball in motion for Portugal to take part in the slave trade. Though Columbus set out looking for trade routes, when he arrived in the Caribbean islands, he realized that he could easily enslave the people who lived there.

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Lyric: soy Hernán Cortés



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Who was the first conquistador?

You and eleven men on warhorses disembark from your ship in a new land. You ride into unknown mountains and volcanoes of incredible height. You have a few weapons and dogs. You have no idea what you're about to find. Maybe a few people living in the wilderness? Maybe nothing? Nobody? Instead, you find a massive city, with everything from zoos and botanical gardens to planned streets and plumbing. This is Tenochtitlán, 1519. Two years later, you've killed the leader, conquered the city, and changed the course of history. Your name is **Hernán Cortés**.

Lyric: Tenochtitlán will be my stronghold.

What did Cortés find when he arrived in the Americas?

When **Hernán Cortés** arrived in the Americas, he thought he might have to conquer unorganized, undeveloped tribes. But he was not ready for the fully formed civilization of the Aztecs. His awe at the wonders of Tenochtitlán, the major city of the **Aztec** empire, quickly gave way to desire for ownership of this advanced city on a lake.

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Lyric: you've met your match in Montezuma,

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Who was Montezuma?

Cortés met his match in **Montezuma**, the leader of the Aztec empire. Montezuma lived in a palace, wore gold sandals, and was generally treated like a God. He was a feared warlord in what became Latin America. But when Cortés arrived, Montezuma treated him well. Only afterward did the Aztecs realize that Cortés had bad intentions. Intentions to conquer. Suddenly, the Aztecs didn't want these outsiders around anymore. So the Aztecs drove the Spanish out.

But Cortés would not be stopped. Cortés returned with thousands of soldiers and destroyed the city in two years of bloody war. He killed Montezuma. He brought down the empire. Spain violently won control over the Aztecs.

Lyric: thought you were a god

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Did the Aztecs expect Cortés?

Cortés didn't expect to find the Aztecs, but they had expected him. Well, not Cortés, exactly. But they knew something bad was coming. The Aztecs believed in omens, or signs, that could predict the future. Bad omens in the years leading up to his arrival, ranging from a flame in the sky like "a flaming ear of corn" to the supposed spotting of a two-headed man, gave the civilization warning. Because of these omens, some Aztecs also believed that Cortés and his men were gods. Of course, they were just men, with the human failing of greed.

Lyric: Bringing your germs

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How did people die?

Even though conquistadors such as Cortés and Pizarro rode in on horses and shot with guns, the bullets ultimately did not kill most of the Aztecs, Incas and other Native Americans. In addition to the supplies that the explorers carried with them on their ships, secret passengers also sailed the choppy seas of the Atlantic: **germs**. The Native Americans had never been exposed to germs from smallpox, measles and influenza, so their bodies had not learned to fight them off.

To understand how powerful of a weapon these diseases were, compare population numbers. When Columbus arrived in Haiti in 1492, approximately 100,000 people lived there. By 1570 there were only 300 people left! Before the conquistadors arrived, 25 million people lived in Mexico. Within a hundred years, there were only 3 million people left. The losses were terrible.

Lyric: my girl, Malinche

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How did the conquistadors communicate with the native civilizations?

If Cortés had never even seen Aztec civilization before, how did he talk to Montezuma? Cortés spoke Spanish, and Montezuma spoke the ancient Aztec language of Nahuatl. And yet, they had much communication. Well, Cortés had a secret weapon—a woman named Malinche.

On an earlier conquest, the native tribe of the Chontal Maya had given 20 slave women to the Spanish. One of these women was named Malinche. When Cortés realized that Malinche spoke the native languages, he kept her close by (very close—Malinche was his mistress). But she was also his translator. Through Malinche, Cortés was able to communicate with the Aztecs.

Modern Mexicans consider Malinche to be a traitor for leading Cortés to the Aztecs. Nowadays, if you call someone "La Malinche," it is an insult—you are saying that he or she is a traitor to Mexico.

Lyric: she told me everything

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A depiction of Cortés and Montezuma's meeting, with Malinche in the middle

Lyric: I inspired Francisco Pizarro,

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How did Cortés set an example for others?

Now Spain knew that it was possible to defeat the natives. So why not continue? Cortés inspired **Francisco Pizarro** to take down the great Inca empire. Pizarro wanted to go after the Inca empire because they were known for their massive mountains of gold. Pizarro and his men were obsessed with gold. The Incas actually found that strange—they mainly used gold for art and didn't consider it to be all that valuable. Even though Pizarro had a small army of only 200 soldiers, they had the advantage of guns and horses. And they also were liars. Near the end of battle, Pizarro and his men captured Atahualpa, the Inca king.

Lyric: I just filled up a room full of gold

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What happened after Atahualpa was captured?

So King Atahualpa thought he had the perfect way to get released. The king told Pizarro he'd have his men fill a room with gold in exchange for his freedom. Pizarro agreed, and the Incas melted down much of their gold art to fill the room. But do you think Pizarro kept up his end of the deal? No. Pizarro killed Atahualpa. Out of a leader and out of gold, the Incas could not fight back. So the Spanish took over the empire, which was in modern-day Peru. The Incas revolted and assassinated Pizarro in 1541. But by that point, the Spanish held a strong grip on the area and wouldn't let go.



What does it mean that explorers and conquistadors explored for God, Glory and Gold? It is said that the explorers and conquistadors explored for "God, Glory and Gold." We already know about the Gold and Glory. But God? On top of wanting the glory of discovery, and the riches from the New World, the conquistadors considered themselves very religious. Therefore, once they conquered lands, they looked to convert the native people to Christianity. They believed that they were doing God's work by converting natives to the religion. In fact, just before the Age of Exploration, Spain held the great Inquisition, where the government forced non-Christians to convert or be killed.

Lyric: with a god

How did the conquistadors convert people?

Once the Spanish had control of Latin America, they wanted to spread Spanish culture and religion. People who spread Christianity were called **missionaries**. Spain was a Catholic country, and the Spanish settlers wanted to spread their religion. Missionaries believed they were on a holy mission from God to convert the Native Americans to Catholicism. The church was part of the government of the new land.

If you want to see how far the missionaries spread, look at a map. Cities that begin with *San* or *Santa* were named after Catholic saints—which means that the missionaries reached there. You can tell that the missionaries crossed the entire land, since the West Coast is peppered with cities named for saints.