

Cortés vs. the Anthropophagi: Two Trilogies about the Conquest of Mexico and the Coming into Being of The Modern World

By [Guido Mina di Sospiro](#) (April 2021)



The Conquest of Mexico, Ross Moffett, 1930

Human beings are good.—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Human beings are good.—A popular saying among cannibals

Graham Hancock and Juan Carlos Sánchez Clemares have authored two trilogies about the conquest of Mexico; respectively: *War God: The Epic Novel of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico*, which consists of *Nights of the Witch* (volume 1); *Return of the Plumed Serpent* (volume 2); *Night of Sorrows* (volume 3); and *Crónicas de un Conquistador*, which consists of *Un nuevo mundo* (volume 1); *México-Tenochtitlan* (volume 2); *Un mundo nuevo* (volume 3).

Cumulatively, Hancock's trilogy numbers 1,476 pages, while Sánchez Clemares's, 1,811. They are two colossal and monumental works, "monumental" in the original etymology that derives from *monere*, Latin for "to remind". These two great works are a reminder not only of a successful conquest, and of one of the most incredible series of military feats in recorded history, but of the coming into being of the modern world, for reasons that will be explained shortly.

Ever since the now classic *Fingerprints of the Gods* I have been a keen reader of Graham Hancock. With that book he essentially invented a new literary genre: narrative nonfiction. He was among the first to have the idea of writing nonfiction with the technique of (engaging, fast-paced) fiction. As a result, he produced a page-turner, and several more after it. Not only did he adopt the technique of novel-writing, but many, and I among them, felt that, if he tried his hand at it, he would be a terrific novelist—and so he is. The premise for the *War God* trilogy is the creation of two fictional characters amidst the vivid background of historical characters and occurrences: Tozi, a local young girl with magical gifts who tries to save those she loves; and Pepillo, a Spanish orphan who is taken under the wing of Hernán Cortés, and learns what it takes to be a *conquistador*. Another peculiarity of Hancock's interpretation of the conquest is magic: he enters the head of Aztec Emperor Montezuma and stays inside it until he is killed, showing the reader how much

religion, or some may call it idolatry, had to do with the fall of the Aztec Empire (though "Mexica" is the correct word, which I shall be using henceforth).

Indeed, because of Hancock's interest in esoterica, there is a lot of pertinent magic in his trilogy: Moctezuma's and Tozi's, as well lengthy explorations of the mind of Cortés, who is depicted as being very devoted to Saint Peter. It is important for the contemporary reader to appreciate that religion featured very prominently in both the Mexica and the Spanish Empire; its influence was all-pervasive for both, thus dictating beliefs and actions alike. But the two religions were strikingly different from one another, which exacerbated the clash of cultures.

Despite such lengthy digressions into "magic", what I enjoyed above all were the battles.[\[1\]](#) Hancock proves to be a master at describing them, and there are many; in all of them the odds were absurdly against the Spaniards, and yet... I wonder, for example, what other beleaguered, hungry, thirsty and exhausted remnant of an army in recorded history would have been able to win the Battle of Otumba, and right after the hecatomb of the *Noche Triste*? I confess to having gone back to this trilogy recently specifically to reread the battle scenes, which are superbly rendered.

Another characteristic of the work is the portrait that gradually emerges of Cortés as an Odysseus in the flesh: cunning, fearless, astute, risk-taking, overflowing with confidence and versatility (*polytropos*), and so charismatic that, five centuries after the facts, his charisma exudes from the pages of both novels. To give an example: most of you have heard about Cortés's order to burn all ships—which is akin to burning one's bridges, in the military sense of cutting off one's own retreat intentionally—to force his men to survive through conquest, though he had no idea what he and they may have to face. He actually did better than that: he gathered his captains and told them that there was a *broma* in the

ships, an insect that was eating away all the wood. It was better to dismantle the ships and keep what wood could be salvaged to build a city, incidentally, La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, today's Veracruz. And the ships were duly dismantled. In addition to that, in Castilian the word *broma* also means "joke".

In *Cronicas de un Conquistador*, Sánchez Clemares resorts to a single fictional character—Diego de la Vega Hurtado y de Velasco—a professional soldier from ancient and illustrious nobility, but penniless, who, after distinguishing himself as a great warrior in Italy, ends up in Cuba, and boards one of the ships of Cortés's fleet. Being Diego well-schooled, but not a writer by any stretch of the imagination, Sánchez Clemares does not incur the mistake of making Diego write flowingly and engagingly, as the latter is merely compiling a chronicle, devoid of literary velleities. While this is stylistically appropriate, it inevitably slows down the pace. The writing chugs along without the artful *crescendi* and *decrecendi* in intensity and pace to be found in Hancock's trilogy. But the magisterial thing that Sánchez Clemares pulls off is that he very gradually, almost imperceptibly renders Diego's prose increasingly flowing and engaging, so much so that by the end of volume 2 it is no less than riveting: the initial (and deliberate) chugging along morphs into an unstoppable narrative thrust. The wealth of details about the Mexica and all the other nations is stunning and, much as in Hancock's work, the events narrated are historically accurate, as are the settings and all characters involved except for the two created by Hancock and the one by Sánchez Clemares, as mentioned.

And what to say of the language Sánchez Clemares employs? An ancient, at times archaic Castilian, with conjugations and sequences of tenses unusual for my eyes and ears but, oh, so wonderful. This lends even more credibility to the story: one feels as if he were among the

conquistadores, listening in as they plot the next move—or the next betrayal. They were no saints, but their greed for gold and thirst for fame were equal to their religious faith, and from the start the clergy was on the side of the natives, protecting them from abuse, much to the chagrin of the more ruthless *conquistadores*.

Of the many *conquistadores* described other than Cortés, all historically accurate, the most striking—ruthless and badass—is Pedro de Alvarado, whose deeds, including those *after* the Conquest of Mexico, which the interested reader will have to find elsewhere, seem equally impossible to achieve. He deserves a novel of his own.

The Mexica were convinced that the Spaniards were gods (*teules*), and some of their inconceivable military accomplishments would suggest that they were at least... titans. Incidentally, from long conversations I have had with the bundle-carrier of the Miccosukee nation of Florida and with a shaman from the Navajos, in Arizona, the reality has surfaced that to this day they consider Italians and Spaniards different from the rest of the Europeans, special people at least favored by the gods. And the Mexica had many prophecies vaticinating the arrival of the *conquistadores*. That said, the Spanish army back then was probably the most disciplined and well-trained in the world, and Spanish steel was the strongest.

Both trilogies make clear that the Mexica were *conquistadores* as much as the Spaniards. The nations the former had conquered—and from which they exacted a heavy tribute of agricultural produce, metals, gems, feathers (which they considered very valuable), slaves as well as people to use in their sacrifices and then eat—all unreservedly hated them. Various nations readily allied themselves with Cortés against the Mexica and, after the *Noche Triste*, when Cortés was intent on recapturing Tenochtitlan, Mexica ambassadors tried to persuade their neighbors to strike an alliance with

them against the Spaniards, but mostly in vain.

Moreover, the women, usually daughters of important dignitaries who were given as gifts to high-ranking *conquistadores* to become their wives, were immediately happier among the Spaniards, as the condition of a woman among the Mexica and the other nations was dreadful. Such intermarrying, which got underway in earnest, led to the *mestizaje*, the racial and cultural mixing of Amerindians with Spaniards that began the modern world. The English, on the other hand, were racist, and never really intended to settle down in their colonies. But the Spaniards readily settled in the New World, and readily married local women.

The human sacrifices and the subsequent anthropophagy, a constant accompaniment to life then among the Mexica and all the nations around their empire, were most shocking to the Spaniards, and continue to be so for our modern sensibility, to the point that for a long time they were outright denied by *bien pensant* historians. Well before the conquest of Mexico, the founding fathers of Christianity had decided to explain Christ's ultimate sacrifice—his death on the cross for the redemption of humankind—in the most shocking and abominable terms they could think of: the ritual eating of Christ's flesh and drinking of his blood during the Holy Communion (which, in pre-ecclesiastical Christianity, was presumably more about *agape* or, more tantalizingly, what my co-author Joscelyn Godwin and I describe in our novel *Forbidden Fruits*). Clearly anthropophagy was singled out as early as then as the most extreme and aberrant of all possible human behaviors, which sinful and undeserving humankind had meted out to their Savior. And these very Catholic *conquistadores* arrived in what today is Mexico to discover to their horror that every nation they fought against chronically engaged in anthropophagy. There was no doubt in their mind: it was the work of the devil. Even when some of these native nations became allies of the Spaniards they could not stop sacrificing humans and

eating them. Toward the end of the conquest, when Cortés and his army were besieging Tenochtitlan so successfully that no food could reach the Mexica inside the city, the Spaniards wondered how could their enemies keep on fighting so fiercely for months. As it transpired, they were eating all the casualties they could find, be they their enemies or their own soldiers: good protein there, and plenty of nutritional value.

In his book *Los Invencibles de América*, Jesús Á. Rojo Pinilla maintains that, far from committing genocide against the Mexica, Cortés and his *conquistadores* saved them from a self-inflicted holocaust. Animal husbandry being unknown to the Mexica, they and their neighbors were essentially eating each other to the brink of extinction. Not only did they commit tens of thousands of human sacrifices every year for religious motivations, and thereafter ate the thighs of the sacrificial victims, but their anthropophagy was widespread because of the scarcity of food. The contemporary western canon, still a staunch supporter and propagator of the *Leyenda Negra* (the British/American propaganda that demonizes Spain and all things Spanish), in the face of historical *and* archeological evidence teaches us the opposite: that pre-Columbian Mexico was the Garden of Earthly Delights and that the conquistadors proceeded to exterminate everyone. DNA testing on contemporary Mexican population reveals that 30% of them are of pure Mexica or Maya descent; 60%, *mestizo*