

Module 6, Discussion 1: Doña Marina and the Spanish Conquest of Mesoamerica

Main Topic

Doña Marina is remembered as being a translator, counselor, negotiator and cultural mediator to Cortés and the Spaniards from 1519 to 1526. She was also Cortés's concubine, bore him a child, and traveled by his side across Mexico. In 1524 she married the conquistador Juan de Jaramillo and then gave birth to her second mestizo child. She was deeply entangled in the events of the time. Her assistance to the Spaniards played a significant role in their logistical ambitions and political endeavors.

Early 16th century depictions and accounts of doña Marina communicate her bravery and sophistication at adapting to the turmoils of Mesoamerica during Spain's conquests. Many of these accounts come from Spaniards, where she is described as being beautiful and intelligent, and had strong linguistic abilities, speaking both Nahuatl and Maya. However, some condemned her as a traitor and collaborator for aiding those who conquered her people.

In 20th century depictions, doña Marina is often presented in ways that exemplify the cultural shifts occurring at the time. In the painting "La Malinche" by Santa Barraza, she is presented as a giver of life, holding a newborn, while images of the strife caused by Spanish conquests loom in the background. In modern works, she has become regarded less in terms of "traitor" or "brave woman" and more as a survivor: a product of the difficulties of the time.

Because so few women appeared in indigenous representations of the conquest, doña Marina's multiple appearances in artwork help to confirm the importance of her roles in both cultures.

Source: Cortés, Hernán. Hernán Cortés to Emperor Carlos V., 1522. In Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico.

A letter from Hernán Cortés to Charles V regarding an encounter with some of Montezuma's officials while staying in Tenochtitlan where he discovered, through translations by doña Marina, that his company was about to be attacked and destroyed. Instead, he launched a preemptive attack on those that were secretly planning to kill him, with the aid of five thousand Indians from Tascalteca and four hundred from Cempoal.

Source: "Cortés Greets Xicotencatl." Mid-16th century. Detail from Lienzo de Tlaxcala.

An image of Xicotencatl of Tlaxcala greeting Hernán Cortés. They would become allies to defeat Montezuma. Doña Marina is shown emphasizing her role as a translator and cultural mediator.

Source: Barraza, Santa. "La Malinche." Oil paint on metal, 8 x 9".

A painting with doña Marina holding a baby, being depicted as a giver of life. References to the Spanish conquest and the introduction of Christianity are also included and portray a world where beauty and violence coexist.

Re: RE: Dona Marina Mod 6-1 (by Linda Larsen)

If we had more sources that revealed what her thoughts and feelings were, relating to the Spaniards, we might have known what her reasons and motives were for her actions then, too.

I remember from our previous readings that many peoples of Mesoamerica were unhappy being ruled over from Tenochtitlan. Doña Marina's assistance to Spaniards in ending the Aztec Empire might have been a noble action and, in some way, deemed necessary in order to try to help her people.