

“The ‘Conquest of Mexico’ or the ‘Spanish Mexica War’? Approaching the Quincentenary of an Event and Looking Forward”

The study of the Conquest of Mexico has undergone tremendous change in the last few decades. There has been a notable shift in focus from the adventures of a few colorful leaders, to a close analysis of the roles of all the participants, in the aspects of Mexica culture that survived the encounter, and in a new orientation towards the role of sub-alterns of various stripes. This paper will take a broad overview of the scholarly work done on the conquest over the last forty years in order to both look back at questions and trends that dominated the conversation and then to consider how best to move the conversation forward. Based on my work, and that of María del Carmen Martínez, I will look at the role of the members of the Spanish expedition in the war. As well, drawing on recent work by a range of Mexican and United States based scholars, I will also look at research done on the Mexica at the eve of the conquest, their participation in the war, and the literature on the lives and culture of natives in the aftermath. Lastly, I will consider the large number of works that look at specific details of the war and its aftermath on culture and society at large. This paper should be both a summary of what has come before and an argument about how we might best discuss the events of the period and give suggestions for future research.