

# Malinche: the Key that Unlocked Mexico

When Cortes and 500 conquistadors took on the Aztec armies they fought with more than steel: They had a woman whose words helped tear the empire apart and win allies to fight for Spain.

## Princess, slave, lover, wife, traitor

1519

The Maya chief of Potonchan gives 20 young women to Hernán Cortés. Malinalli, christened Doña Marina, is one of them.

1521

As an interpreter, and guide to native politics, geography, and culture, Marina plays a decisive role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

1524

Hernán Cortés grants Marina her freedom and marries her to fellow conquistador and nobleman Juan Jaramillo.

ca 1527

Marina dies although it is unclear when or how. Smallpox, the rigors of childbirth, and even murder have all been suggested.

In March 1519 Hernán Cortés had little notion of the extraordinary campaign of conquest he was about to launch against the mighty Aztec Empire. He had landed on the Tabasco coast, Mayan lands, and had just won a crucial battle at Cintla. The local Maya lord visited the Spanish camp one morning and showered Cortés with lavish gifts of gold, blankets, and food. He also brought him 20 young women. Nobody could have guessed that one of these, Malinalli, would prove worth her weight in gold as Cortés pitched into a life and death struggle to conquer Aztec Mexico.

Malinalli was born around 1500, possibly near the former Olmec capital of Coatzacoalcos in the southeast of the Aztec Empire, near modern-day Veracruz. Her father was the chief of Painala, and as a noble-born child she was looking forward to a promising future. That changed dramatically when her father died and her mother remarried a local lord. The couple had a son whom they made their universal heir: little Malinalli was no longer wanted. In a deception worthy of a Grimm fairytale they pretended young Malinalli had died (using the body of a dead village girl)

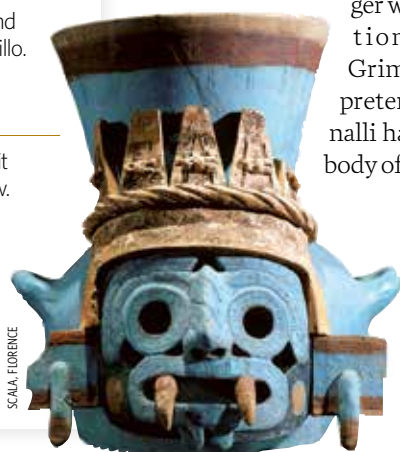
and under cover of darkness bundled their daughter into the hands of travelling merchants. These sold her as a slave to Mayan traders who sold her to the Lord of Potonchan. It was he who made a gift of Malinalli to Hernán Cortés.

This gifting of women was not unusual in the light of contemporary Maya custom. Men tended to travel with women to cook and care for them. When the Maya saw the Spaniards had no women, they effectively provided 20 young domestic servants. It was likely that these would also become concubines so Cortés ordered all the women to be baptized. This was perhaps less for the saving of their souls as to meet Castilian law that decreed only unmarried Christians could share the bed of a baptized man. And so, the following day, Malnalli stood before a makeshift altar dominated by a statue of Mary and a cross, while a friar “named the Indian lady they gave us Doña Marina.” Cortés then divided the “first Christians” among his captains. Doña Marina was given to an associate of Cortés, Alonso Hernández Portocarrero.

Cortés sailed to San Juan de Ulúa, close to Veracruz. He arrived on Good Friday and as they set up camp ambassadors arrived from the Aztec Emperor Montezuma II. Cortés brought forward Jeróni-

## Malinche spoke both Mayan and the Aztec language Nahuatl making her invaluable to Cortés.

TLALOC, THE AZTEC GOD OF RAIN AND FERTILITY AS A 15TH CENTURY CENSER



SCALA FLORENCE



MALINALLI'S FIRST meeting with Hernán Cortés as fancifully depicted in the 16th century Duran Codex.

ORONZALBUM

mo de Aguilar to translate. Aguilar was a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked in Yucatán where he had learned the Mayan language: but the Aztec spoke Nahuatl. While Aguilar was unable to understand the Aztec, it became apparent that Marina could. Nahuatl was her native tongue and she also spoke Mayan, the language of her Potonchan masters. According to a chronicle, “Cortés spoke to Aguilar, Aguilar spoke to the Indian woman and the Indian woman spoke to the Indians.”

This process, though cumbersome, made communication possible and would

play a decisive role in Cortés’s success. It allowed him to talk to natives and question them about their political situation and allegiances, assessing their fears, hopes, strengths, and weaknesses. A master politician, Cortés used this knowledge, and his own persuasive words, to exploit tensions within the empire and win allies to fight Montezuma II.

## An Ally and a Lover

Marina’s position changed immediately. Cortés told her “if she was a faithful interpreter, he would do her great kindness,

marry her and grant her freedom.” While a chronicle describes the 19-year-old Marina as being as “beautiful as a goddess,” contemporary sketches of her reveal little of this. However, Cortés wasted no time in making Marina his lover. Perhaps to make matters easier, Cortés ordered Portocarrero back to Spain bearing a letter to the king.

From now on Hernán Cortés and Doña Marina worked very closely together, so closely in fact that according to fellow conquistador Bernal Díaz, “Since Doña Marina was always in his company, they





**SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS CATHEDRAL** was built in the second half of the 17th century. The city was founded by Captain Diego de Mazariegos in 1528.

MEL LONGHURST/AGE FOTOSTOCK

called Cortés Marina’s captain or Malinche for short.” Marina’s skill with languages and her local knowledge often proved decisive. In the town of Cholula she saved the Spaniards from certain death when she exposed an Indian plot she had heard of from a local woman. In the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan she ma-

de it possible for Montezuma II and Cortés to talk with each other. Marina translated the Spaniard’s complex explanations about Christianity and his insistence that the Indians were rightfully vassals of the Spanish king Charles V. During the Night of Sorrows, a desperate and bloody scramble to escape Te-

nochtitlan, Doña Marina was in the rearguard harassed by Aztec warriors. On reaching safety, Cortés’s was anxious to discover the fate of his interpreters and “He was delighted to hear they had lost neither Jerónimo de Aguilar nor Marina.” In the final campaign to take Tenochtitlan, Marina’s help was decisive in persuading native leaders to join a powerful Spanish-Indian alliance with which Cortes crushed the Aztec army. In victory, Marina announced the Spaniards’ harsh demands: “You must present us with two hundred pieces of gold of this size,” she told the Aztec as Cortés’s described a large circle with his hands.

### Doña Marina must go

Having defeated the Aztec, Cortés settled in nearby Coyoacan. Marina stayed with him and in 1522 they had a son: He was named Martín in honor of the

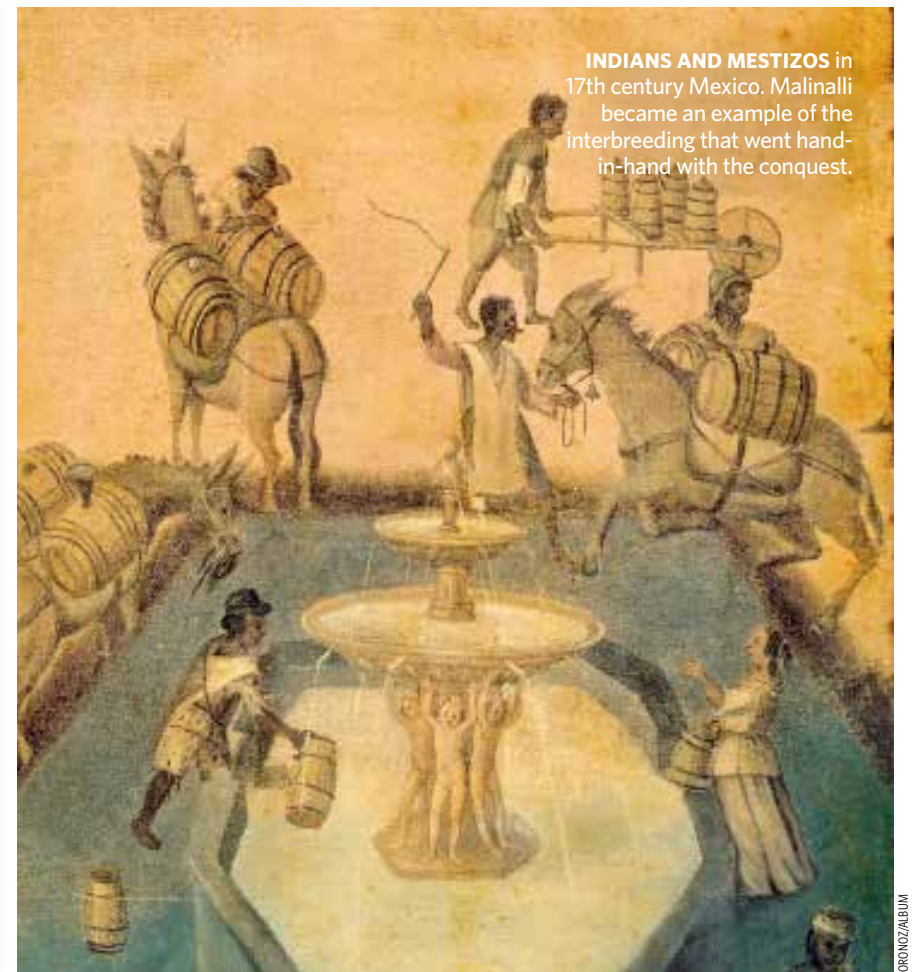
## DOÑA MARINA, THE TRAITOR

**MALINCHE** in some countries has come to mean “a person who commits treason.” This is based on the widely held belief that Malinalli betrayed her own people in siding with a foreign conquistador. However, in 1519 Mexico was not a unified nation but a land of diverse peoples often at odds with each other and resentful of Aztec rule.



**DOÑA MARINA OR LA MALINCHE** IN A MEXICAN ENGRAVING FROM 1885.

ALBUM



**INDIANS AND MESTIZOS** in 17th century Mexico. Malinalli became an example of the interbreeding that went hand-in-hand with the conquest.

ORONCZALBUM

conquistador’s father. However, the arrival of Cortés’s wife from Cuba meant it was time to find his concubine a new home and a husband.

In 1524 Cortés was obliged to travel to Honduras to crush a Spanish revolt. While undertaking this mission he arranged Marina’s marriage to a Spanish nobleman called Juan Jaramillo, an official in Mexico City who became its mayor two years later.

The chronicler López de Gómara said that Jaramillo was drunk on his wedding day and that many frowned upon the union, as Marina was an Indian single mother who had already had two Spanish lovers. However the marriage gave Marina high social standing and fulfilled Cortés’s promise to free her.

For her services Marina was also assigned estates in her native province. On passing through her hometown, Cortés

summoned local leaders, including Marina’s mother and half-brother, and had them all christened. He then told them that they now owed their fealty to Marina. The chronicle records that “they were frightened of her because they thought they were going to be killed.” Instead Marina consoled them, forgave them, and “gave them much gold, jewelry and clothes.”

### The Legacy of La Malinche

After this expedition Cortés and his young interpreter went their separate ways. On the return journey from Honduras Marina gave birth to a girl she named María. She settled with her husband and daughter in Mexico City, although she was not allowed to keep her son Martín who was raised by his conquistador father, who later took him back to Spain. Marina then all but disappears. She died

some time before 1529, perhaps of the smallpox that ravaged the natives soon after the Europeans arrived, perhaps of the exertions of the long journey from Honduras while pregnant. Whenever and however her end came, she left a lasting legacy. It was her skilled knowledge of the local languages, geography, and politics that made the conquest of Mexico far quicker and less bloody than Cortes had any right to hope. Doña Marina was the “key that opened Mexico.” — *Isabel Bueno*

#### Learn more

- La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth**  
Sandra M. Cypess, University of Texas Press, 1991.
- La Malinche**  
Jane Eppinga, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012.
- Malinche: A novel**  
Laura Esquivel, Washington Square Press, 2007.

## TRUE LOVE OR JUST A LOVER?

**THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP** between Cortés and Marina is much debated. Chronicles say she was just one of Cortés’s many lovers, and that he felt no special affection towards her. Others argue that there was definitely a romantic bond. However, there is no basis for the accusation that Cortés murdered his lover in 1529.

**AZTEC GOLD EARRINGS** WITH ANIMAL MOTIFS, MADE IN THE 16TH CENTURY

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