Malintzin

*c. 1500–c. 1530*

**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Malintzin led a short life filled with dramatic change. When the Spanish arrived in present-day Mexico, she was a slave. Within a year she had become one of the most influential women in Aztec society. She helped the Spanish as they struggled to conquer the Aztec empire.

As you read the biography below, think about how Malintzin’s knowledge of language changed the course of history in the Americas.

Malintzin was a woman of many names. She is known as Malintzin, Malinche, and Doña Marina. Her many names come from different translations of her *Nahuatl* name, Malinal. While not much is certain about Malintzin’s early life, historians believe that she was the daughter of a Nahua chieftain in what is today Veracruz, Mexico. Her family spoke Nahuatl, which was also the language of the Aztec Indians. When Malintzin’s father died, she was either sold into slavery or taken as a prisoner of war. The people she lived with spoke Maya, so Malintzin learned that language as well.

In 1519 Hernán Cortés and his soldiers arrived on the coast of Mesoamerica. Local leaders gave the Spaniards 20 women as a gift. Malintzin was one of those women. At first, Cortés ignored her. However, when he learned of her language skills, the conquistador made Malintzin a translator. Malintzin would talk to Nahuatl speakers. She would translate the Nahuatl into Maya. A Spaniard, Gerónimo de Aguilar, who spoke Maya, then translated the conversation into Spanish for Cortés. Over time, Malintzin learned Spanish. She was able to speak

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**VOCABULARY**

*Nahuatl* language spoken by the Aztec and other peoples of central Mexico

*ambush* an attack by surprise
directly with Aztec leaders such as Moctezuma and tell Cortés what they were saying.

Malintzin proved to be an important member of Cortés’s expedition. On one occasion, some native women told Malintzin that their leaders were planning an ambush of Cortés and his men. Malintzin passed on this valuable information, and Cortés and his men escaped harm. In addition to her work as a translator, she also explained native customs to the conquistador and his men. Malintzin benefited from her relationship with the Spanish. She rose to a position of authority that was very unusual for women in Native American societies.

Over time the Aztec learned Spanish. Some Spaniards learned Nahuatl. Malintzin was no longer needed. In 1524 she married Juan de Jaramillo, a conquistador from Spain. As a gift, Cortés gave the newlyweds some land in her home of Veracruz. Sadly, Malintzin died just a few years later.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. **Recall**  What languages did Malintzin speak?

2. **Draw Conclusions**  How did Malintzin assist in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire?

**ACTIVITY**

3. Imagine that you are a historian studying the history of Mexico. Write a brief encyclopedia article about the life of Malintzin. Write your article on a separate piece of paper.