**Sebastian Toral**

Sebastián Toral was one of the earliest black conquistadores in the New World. He helped the Spanish to conquer the southern Mexican state of Yucatán in the 1530s and 1540s. Although historians do not know much information about his life, Toral was most likely born in Africa and came to the Spanish colonies as a slave. He fought with Francisco de Montejo in his second and final attempt to subdue the Maya peoples of Yucatán (1541). Montejo had been granted a license in 1533 to import one hundred slaves, so Sebastián Toral was not alone. At least one black conquistador learned a Mayan language during the campaign. For his service, Toral received manumission and was exempted from tribute collections, but he had to petition the Spanish crown at least twice to ensure the latter.

Although there is only scant information about black conquistadores like Sebastián Toral, their presence at the beginning of the Spanish colonial era in the New World suggests that people of African origin played an important but still understudied role in relations between Europeans and indigenous peoples of the Americas during first contact.

A century before some Africans were taken to Virginia in 1619, the Spanish had enlisted hundreds of Africans as conquistadores to help them win wars. Over 500 Africans helped in the establishment of New Spain. Africans in Spanish America were taught to read and write and pursue careers. Toral was also taught to read and write. That helped him to study the Bible and take a Christian name upon baptism — Sebastián Toral. He would then help Spanish conquistador Montejo fight.

In 1541, he was part of Francisco de Montejo’s forces that fought the second and final attempt to conquer the Maya people of Yucatán. It is believed that Toral was not the only person of African descent as Montejo was granted a license to import one hundred slaves. At least, the fact stands that there was one Black conquistador who learned a Mayan language during the campaign.

History says that Montejo had his own challenges though he was credited as a successful leader. He strengthened the base of his forces with the 100 slaves in his campaign against the Yutacans. Toral was deployed to assist him but he failed in his expedition to subdue the Yutacan.

Toral was with Montejo on his expeditions in Mexico despite the setbacks. Given the same task as Pedro de Alvarado, Montejo would be passed over by the Spanish crown in favor of de Alvarado. Toral married in 1542 when Montejo established Merida. Historians say Toral’s place in history is cemented because every commander he associated with was successful.

Montejo however encountered failures as compared to other captains in the New World. When his career ended, Toral also drew the curtains on his.Toral was brought from West Africa during the 1533 and was made a part of Francisco de Montejo’s forces. He wasn’t an unsuccessful leader overall but definitely unlucky and overlooked at times. Having lost chunks of his forces in an earlier Yutacan campaign, he bolster his forces with 100 slaves. Sebastian Toral was included in this expedition and as expected de Montejo failed here as well.

He would follow de Montejo is other expeditions in Mexico. Given the same task as Pedro de Alvarado, he would be passed over by the Spanish crown in favor of de Alvarado. Eventually, he would establish Merida in 1542 where Sebastian Toral settled and married. With his conquistador days behind him, he worked as a guard.

What stands out about Sebastian Toral is how successes in his life are tied to those of his commander. Since Francisco de Montejo experienced failure often, he isn’t as heavily documented as other captains in the New World. As his career winded down, so did Toral’s as a conquistador. In contrast, fellow Black conquistadors like the mentioned Juan Garrido and Juan Valiente worked under successful commanders and were rewarded well for their service.

Black men like Toral worked to better their own circumstances under Spanish control, often at the expense of indigenous people, and also due to racism, found themselves in similar circumstances as indigenous people—occasionally reproducing with them. Eventually, Toral settled in the newly founded state capital of Mérida with his family, and he worked in one of the few occupations open to blacks in New Spain. He became a portero or doorkeeper/guard. By the late colonial period pardos (mixed race with black heritage) and negros (blacks in Spanish) comprised ten percent of Yucatán’s population.

The role Toral played at the beginning of the Spanish colonial era tells of the services of conquerors like him who helped the Spanish crown in getting the New World to submit to its authority. In the case of Toral, whatever service he rendered to the Spanish crown was to improve his standard of living under Spanish control. As a result of racism, the people of African descent had to intermarry with the indigenous people because they shared a common destiny at the time.

Toral was given manumission after his meritorious service. He was exempted from paying tribute collections but he had to petition the Spanish crown at least twice to remind it of its commitment to him.

Toral relocated to Merida where he settled with his family and worked in one of the few occupations that allowed Blacks. He was employed as a doorkeeper or a guard. By the late colonial period, the Black population and mixed race made up ten percent of Yucantan’s population.