PART ONE

1

MESOAMERICANS AND SPANIARDS IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

"Here I shall write a few histories of our first fathers and ancestors, those who engendered the men of ancient times, before these mountains and valleys were inhabited, when there were only hares and birds."

Thus begins one of the great native histories of Mesoamerica, the Annals of the Cakchiquels (excerpted further in Chapter 3). The quote evokes three important introductory topics. The first and second, discussed in this chapter, are that of the geography and settlement of Mesoamerica. The third theme, which stems from the simple fact that Mesoamericans wrote, is the subject of Chapter 2.

Mesoamerican Diversity

The term "Mesoamerica" describes a geographical and culture area stretching from present-day central and southern Mexico down through much of Central America, tapering out in Honduras and Nicaragua. The geography of Mesoamerica features a remarkable diversity of environments, from the volcanoes of highland central Mexico and Guatemala to the tropical Pacific and Atlantic coasts, from the rain forests of Chiapas to the subtropical flatlands of Yucatan. Such environmental diversity made Mesoamerica not only one of the richest and most varied regions of the planet in terms of its plant and animal life but also determined a complex and varied pattern of human settlement.

Many tens of thousands of years ago, there were indeed "only" animals in Mesoamerica, as throughout the Americas; but by the time Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century, the region had developed an array of cultures and language groups that can be as bewildering to us as it was to those early European invaders. Despite differences of language, culture, and sociopolitical organization, Mesoamerican societies had so many cultural traits and practices in common that modern scholars and students may consider them as part of a single civilization. This was especially true of those who lived in the fully sedentary societies of the Mesoamerican core. In general, most

peoples of the area lived in temperate climates, where water and rich soils made the practice of permanent agriculture possible. Most of the population cultivated the soil on a regular basis, utilizing terraces, irrigation, and land reclamation techniques. Mesoamericans lived in ethnic states ruled by hereditary nobilities. They had well-organized markets, marked social distinctions, writing or recordkeeping systems and calendars, systems of taxation, military organizations, state religions, and priesthoods. The sedentary peoples of Mesoamerica also practiced monumental architecture and metalworking and produced fine textiles, ceramics, and sculptures, among many other crafts.

Although Europeans tended to lump native peoples together as "Indians" (as the Americas were called "the Indies" by Spaniards in this period), and in this volume we make some general comments about "Mesoamericans," in fact the peoples of Mesoamerica were neither unified politically nor shared a common identity. Mesoamericans' geographical awareness tended to be limited to the particular regions in which they lived, with the exception of a few long-distance traders, and individuals primarily identified themselves with their local ethnic state. Mesoamericans never adopted the term "*indio*" ("Indian") imposed by the Spanish. They did, however, share the experience of Spanish conquest and its consequences and developed comparable strategies of living under colonial rule.

The native men and women featured in this volume lived in the core regions of Mesoamerica; we shall be reading words written by Nahuas from central Mexico, Mixtecs from Oaxaca, and Mayas from Yucatan, as well as a few contributions from Zapotecs of Oaxaca and Mayas from highland Guatemala. The Nahuas were the dominant ethnic group in central Mexico. They spoke the Nahuatl language, as they continue to do so today. They lived in thousands of ethnic states called *altepeme* (*altepetl*, singular). Each altepetl consisted of several constituent parts called *calpolli* or *tlaxilacalli*, which were important in organizing and delivering on a rotational basis tribute payments of goods and labor to the dynastic ruler (called a *tlatoani*) and in managing lands within its borders. Perhaps the most famous altepetl was the home of the Aztecs, called Mexico-Tenochtitlan, located on an island in Lake Tetzcoco in the Valley of Mexico. Although they are best known as the Aztecs, in reference to their legendary origins from a place called Aztlan ("place of the white heron"), the people who lived on the island altepetl of Mexico-Tenochtitlan (a double name, sometimes referred to as "Mexico" and other times as "Tenochtitlan") when the Spaniards arrived called themselves Mexica ("people from Mexico") or Tenochca ("people from Tenochtitlan"). But the Mexica were just one group of Nahuatl-speaking peoples. Other prominent altepetls in or near the Valley of Mexico included Xochimilco, Tlatelolco, Tetzcoco, Chalco, Amecameca, Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, and Cholula.

In the Mixteca region of western Oaxaca, the local state was called a *ñuu*. Like the Nahua altepetl, the Mixtec ñuu was further subdivided into

different parts called *siqui* (in some regions called *siña* or *dzini*). Mixtec refers to both the people and the language that they spoke (there are approximately three hundred thousand Mixtec speakers today). Actually, "Mixtec" is a term derived from the Nahuatl word for the people of the region *mixteca*, meaning "people of the cloud place." But in their own language, people referred to themselves as *tay ñudzahui* "people of the rain place" or "people from the place of *Dzahui*," the rain deity. Both males and females could rule and represent a ñuu; a male ruler was called an *yya toniñe* and a female was called an *yya dzehe toniñe*. When a male and female ruler married, they temporarily united their two ñuu in an alliance called a *yuhuitayu*.

In Yucatan, the Maya called their ethnic state a *cah*. Like each Nahua altepetl or Mixtec ñuu, each cah had a specific name, ruling nobility, tribute system, market, origin legend, deity, and separate identity. However, unlike the altepetl or ñuu, the cah was not further subdivided into constituent parts. The Yucatec Maya (which refers to both the people and their language) lived in many hundreds of *cahob* (plural of cah) when Spaniards first arrived; there were about two hundred in colonial Yucatan. The cah was ruled by a hereditary ruler called a *batab*. Other prominent language groups in Mesoamerica included the Otomis of central Mexico, the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, the Purépechas of Michoacan, the Tzeltal and Tzotzil Mayas of Chiapas, and the Quiché and Cakchiquel Mayas of Guatemala.

Over the centuries a number of ethnic states in central and southern Mexico and Guatemala achieved impressive size and economic and political influence over large regions. But none came close to imposing political unity on Mesoamerica, including the last of them, the Aztec empire. What we refer to as the Aztec empire was more accurately a loose confederation of a patchwork of territories across central and southern Mexico that were conquered between 1428 and 1521 by the Triple Alliance of the three altepetls of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco, and Tlacopan. Those subject to the Triple Alliance paid tribute and provided troops and supplies for further conquests. In this way the Triple Alliance, headed by the Mexica, built a power base that extended into southern Mexico and unified the regional economy to a large extent. However, in most cases, peoples of the ethnic states conquered by the Triple Alliance continued to rule themselves and retained their own local identity. Furthermore, some large altepetls, like Tlaxcala, were never conquered by the Triple Alliance and forced to join their empire.

There are therefore two themes that were central to the colonial period in Mesoamerica and are central to the documents presented here: (1) Mesoamerican diversity and the persistence of local identity; and (2) the historical experiences and ways of doing things that were common to Nahuas, Mixtecs, and Mayas alike. For centuries, Spaniards and other Europeans, including professional historians, argued that the Conquest and colonial rule of what became New Spain was possible because Mesoamericans were either barbarians or, at the very least, less civilized than Europeans. It is now clear, however, that

it was the very depth and diversity of Mesoamerican civilization that made the colonial period possible, and that New Spain was as much indigenous as it was Spanish – if not more so. This volume is testimony to that fact.

The Spanish Invasion

For thousands of years, human societies on either side of the Atlantic remained isolated from each other and unaware of each other's existence. In the fifteenth century, southern Europeans, led by the Portuguese, explored and expanded into the Atlantic, partly with a view to finding a sea route to Asia. The Americas were discovered as an accidental by-product of this process, but whereas the Portuguese continued to focus primarily on Asia and Africa, a newly formed Spanish state made the Americas a target of its imperial ambitions.

In the wake of the transatlantic voyages of Columbus and others in the 1490s, Spaniards established a network of colonies in the Caribbean. After the first Spanish settlement in Santo Domingo, on the island of Española, Cuba became the base for a series of exploratory expeditions in the 1510s, culminating in the 1519 expedition led by Hernando Cortés. Motivated more by the desire for profit than a commitment to spread Christianity, Spaniards under Cortés initiated a bloody war against the Mexica and their allies as they made their way from the Gulf Coast to Mexico-Tenochtitlan. The Spaniards had distinct advantages that allowed them quickly to subdue the indigenous resistance that they encountered. Steel, horses, and gunpowder gave the Spaniards tremendous military advantages. Indigenous weapons, which consisted mainly of obsidian-blade clubs, bows and arrows, and spear throwers, could not seriously harm someone equipped with a sword, helmet, and body armor; horsemen with lances were unstoppable because they could fight for hours without tiring. Native fatalities often numbered in the thousands, whereas the Spaniards escaped with minor injuries. Firearms were used mostly for effect but were especially important in the siege of Tenochtitlan, when cannons were rigged to boats and guns were fired into crowds. Mesoamericans also had different military tactics than the European invaders; rather than kill their enemies on the battlefield as the Spaniards did, indigenous warriors customarily took captives. In addition, the Spaniards, who were few in number, also benefited from the aid of thousands of native allies that they drew from enemies of the Mexica (such as the Tlaxcalans) and from the places that they conquered as they marched toward Tenochtitlan. Finally, the Spaniards brought new diseases, including smallpox, to the Americas, which ravaged the native population. By the time the Spaniards reached Mexico-Tenochtitlan, epidemics had already weakened the Mexica. In 1521, after two years of stiff resistance and very near defeat after having been driven out of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards and their native allies

finally defeated the Mexica. The Spaniards founded their own capital city of Mexico, but it was Mexicas and other Nahuas who rebuilt the city and were the majority of its residents; within Mexico City, Tenochtitlan survived, although in a very different form.

Over the two decades following 1521, the Spanish presence in Mesoamerica increased slowly but surely, as Cortés and others who had fought with him against the Mexica, such as Pedro de Alvarado and Francisco de Montejo, sought to consolidate and spread colonial control throughout the region. In relay fashion, each conquered place became a source of spoils, funds, and supplies, and a base for future expeditions. Because Mesoamericans did not share a common political identity – even groups within Mesoamerica, such as the Yucatec Mayas, lacked such an identity – there was little precedent for adopting a common front against the foreign enemy. Thus, for most of Mesoamerica, the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 was the beginning, not the end, of a protracted Conquest period. The central Mexican valley and especially Tenochtitlan/Mexico City remained the most important Spanish settlement in Mesoamerica, but it was gradually joined by regions to the north and south – most notably, and most relevant to this volume, the southern areas of Oaxaca, highland Guatemala, and Yucatan.

One of the crucial factors that permitted Spaniards to establish permanent footholds in Mesoamerica was disease. Mesoamericans had little or no immunity to epidemic diseases that had not been present in the Americas before 1492. Such epidemics were immediately devastating, reducing native populations dramatically and hindering their ability to organize resistance. We shall never know exactly how many people lived in Mesoamerica before Europeans arrived there, but it is estimated that a century after smallpox and other diseases were introduced into the region the native population had been reduced by as much as 90 percent, from as many as twenty-five million to about five million.

As tragic as this demographic disaster was, however, native peoples still vastly outnumbered Europeans in New Spain. As the documents in this volume demonstrate, Mesoamerican communities and cultures were far from destroyed by the events of the sixteenth century. On the contrary, for most of the colonial period, most Mesoamericans lived in their own communities and continued to do many things as they had done before the arrival of the Europeans – even though they were forced to adapt to colonial circumstances, to convert to Christianity, and to face the growing demands and influence of the Spanish-speaking population.

Colonialism in Mesoamerica

Conquest and settlement went hand in hand in Mesoamerica. The conquerors were not merely fighting men, but immigrants and businessmen. Those

who participated in the conquest of a given region were rewarded with *encomiendas*, grants of tribute and labor (but not land) from one or more indigenous communities to a particular Spaniard.

Representatives of Spain's two major institutions – the Crown and the Church – arrived quickly on the scene of newly conquered regions to establish their presence. Mexico City served as the capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which would eventually encompass the territory of the present-day U.S. southwest, California, Mexico, and all of Central America. Central Mexico, and especially Tenochtitlan / Mexico City, attracted the greatest number of Spaniards because of densely settled and wealthy native populations. For the most part, native populations were the basis of Spanish settlements. Spaniards gravitated to central Mexico, especially after the discovery of incredibly rich silver mines to the north of Mexico City.

The Spaniards brought to the Americas an incredible tradition of legalism based on Roman law, which depended heavily on a collection of competing agencies united under the rule of the Crown in Madrid. At the head of the viceregal government was a viceroy, who served as the Crown's representative in New Spain. His power was held in check by a high court (*audiencia*), which acted on local matters but was responsible to the Council of Indies (in Seville) and the King of Spain. Cities had municipal councils called *cabildos*, staffed with elected officials from the Spanish nobility. Spanish officials with wide-ranging administrative and judicial powers (*alcaldes mayores* and *corregidores*) bought offices, usually for a five-year period, to collect taxes and act as judges (with access to legal advisors) within jurisdictions in the largely indigenous countryside.

Despite the visible presence of the Crown, especially in Mexico City, the Spanish system of ruling the indigenous population was indirect. Mesoamericans so vastly outnumbered the Spaniards that they had little choice but to rely on the well-structured organization and traditions of the local ethnic state and its ruling nobility. Native communities established their own town councils or cabildos, based loosely on the Spanish model, headed by a native governor who was often descended from a local dynasty that had ruled before the Conquest. The community elected local noblemen (never women) as *alcaldes* (judges) and *regidores* (councilmen), according to the Spanish model; these political titles can easily be found in the documents in Part Two. But local indigenous traditions and practices influenced the election process, the number of such offices, their relationship to sociopolitical units based on pre-Conquest settlements, and the responsibilities and privileges of office. The cabildo was responsible for organizing and paying tribute to the alcalde mayor and reporting major crimes or disputes to him. The cabildo also functioned as a judicial body in its own right, solving local disputes and dispensing justice. Mesoamerican communities, represented by the cabildo, had access to the colonial legal system, which they used, for example, to pursue cases against local Spaniards for some perceived abuses

or against neighboring communities over land disputes. When they received an unfavorable judgment, they could appeal cases to the audiencia. The colonial legal system acknowledged native cabildos as legal and judicial bodies, recognized documents written by notaries in Mesoamerican languages, and under some circumstances provided legal counsel.

Friars and secular priests lived in urban and rural parishes, following in the footsteps of the conquistadors. They referred to the work of evangelizing the indigenous peoples as the "spiritual conquest." Parishes were organized based on the local native communities. Thus, a Nahua altepetl, Mixtec ñuu, or Maya cah would become the basis of a parish, just as it was the basis of an encomienda. A percentage of the community's labor and tribute was directed toward building the church and maintaining the priest – an issue that often divided friars and encomenderos over who would get what, especially as the population began to decline. Local native authorities were expected to oversee church construction and attendance, but they could not become priests or nuns. All the lesser church and parish posts were filled by local native men – usually from the same families who controlled the cabildo. Churches were located right in the middle of native communities, often built from the same stones and on the same site as the preconquest temple. And because the Mesoamericans had a great tradition of building temples and pyramids, they also had the resources and skills to build magnificent churches in the colonial period.

The vast majority of Spanish officials, including priests, did not live in native communities, nor were there Spanish feudal lords. Rather, Spanish administrators had regional jurisdictions and tended to congregate and live in the few Spanish cities founded in New Spain. The colonial economy was exploitative; native governors collected tribute and other taxes from their own people, keeping some of it for community expenses and for the maintenance of the local nobility but passing much of it on to Spanish officials and priests.

The encomienda system, and the separation of Spaniards and Mesoamericans in their own communities, began to dissolve within a generation after the Conquest – quickest in and around Mexico City, slower in the rural hinterland of Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Guatemala. As the colonists grew in number, more Spaniards demanded access to native labor, leading to other arrangements including a system of temporary labor grants of native workers called the *repartimiento*. As native men and women migrated into Spanish cities and towns to live and work, Spaniards also began to make individual wage labor arrangements. Spanish urban households soon became centers of cultural contact not only between Spaniards and Mesoamericans but also between them and the thousands of Africans brought into the colonies as slaves. Cultural interaction and change occurred initially in the cities and eventually in smaller towns and villages as *mestizos* (persons of mixed European and indigenous descent), mulattoes (persons of mixed African and European descent), Africans (both enslaved and free), and small numbers of Spaniards

became part of the rural, mainly indigenous population. Nevertheless, these changes did not destroy the integrity of the colonial Mesoamerican community. Each altepetl, ñuu, and cah maintained a distinct native and local identity; as the documents here reveal, in the vast majority of cases, the Mesoamerican cabildo neither included nor represented people of Spanish or African descent – or even native peoples from outside that particular community.

The sixty documents presented in this volume bear witness to the numerous ways in which Mesoamericans interacted with nonnatives, accommodated the demands and innovations of conquest and colonialism, and persisted in doing things according to custom while also absorbing Spanish influences. This can be seen in material culture, for example, in the types of household possessions, tools, and properties that Mesoamericans sold, inherited, and sometimes fought over in the colonial courts (see Chapters 5 and 6). It can be seen in the way that Mesoamericans participated in a global money economy while also maintaining aspects of local trade (see Chapters 4–6). It also can be seen in naming patterns, as Mesoamericans adopted Christian names and, in some regions (such as central Mexico), Spanish surnames, too, making Nahuas look at first glance like Spaniards (see Chapter 6). And it can be seen in the ways that Mesoamericans expressed their views on the Spanish invaders of the sixteenth century (Chapter 3), on religious matters (Chapter 8), and on the moral conduct and responsibilities of children, politicians, and priests (Chapters 4 and 7–9).

It is also important to recognize that Mesoamericans and Spaniards had a great deal in common. Many of the characteristic Mesoamerican cultural traits and modes of organization discussed earlier had close parallels in Europe. Despite many significant differences, Mesoamericans and Europeans saw a number of similarities that they would immediately recognize. This recognition was crucial for many types of interactions between both sides and for the continuity of many Mesoamerican lifeways in altered but still recognizable forms.

No civilization or culture is static; for Mesoamerican cultures, processes of change were profoundly influenced by the Spanish invasion. We may lament the burning of native codices and the leveling of ancient pyramids, and we should be aware of the exploitative nature of a colonial system that chiefly benefited the colonizers – an awareness aided by some of the petitions presented in this volume. But colonial Mesoamerica cannot be properly understood if viewed through an entirely negative lens, as if all the people in this part of the world succumbed to European hegemony. In this long period of more than three centuries, Mesoamericans lived and toiled under varied and complex circumstances and conditions. This volume presents glimpses of Mesoamerican experiences under colonial rule, relying primarily on their own written words, carefully translated into English. These writings represent Mesoamerican voices that deserve to be heard.

2

LITERACY IN COLONIAL MESOAMERICA

By the 1530s, Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian friars were beginning to teach the art of alphabetic writing to members of the indigenous elite. Between the 1540s and the end of the colonial period in the early nineteenth century, Mesoamericans produced great quantities of written records in their own languages using the Roman alphabet.

The first group to adopt the alphabet were the Nahuas of central Mexico, but they were soon followed by the Mixtecs, Yucatec Mayas, and other Mesoamericans. Nahuatl has survived in greater quantities than sources in other languages, but significant numbers of documents also have been found in Mixtec, Zapotec, Chocho, and the Mayan languages of Yucatec, Chontal, Cakchiquel, and Quiché. Otomí, Purépecha and no doubt other Mesoamerican languages also were written in colonial times. This chapter primarily discusses the nature and content of only those sources that to date have been studied in detail – those in Nahuatl, Mixtec, and Maya.

Pre-Conquest Precedents

The indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica had their own systems of written communication, ranging from the hieroglyphs of the Maya and Zapotec to the pictographs and painted codices of the Mixtec and Nahua. The earliest examples of such writing are painted or carved on stone and pottery; those from the immediate pre-Conquest period are also painted on deer hide or native paper. The texts recorded everything from histories and origin legends to divinatory and cosmological information and approached an extended narrative form of expression. Literacy was presumably a privilege of the priestly and noble classes.

Indigenous writing combined pictorial representation (direct depiction by images) with a numerical and calendrical system, logograms or images (which conveyed a word or idea), and phonetic representation of individual syllables or roots of words. The possibilities of phonetic expression were expanded by the use of homonyms or "tone puns." All three fundamental