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978-0-521-81474-4 - Mexico: From the Beginning to the Spanish Conquest

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MEXICO

FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE SPANISH CONQUEST

This book is the first in a three-volume history of Mexico, a major work that conveys the full sweep of Mexican history in all its social, economic, and political diversity, from the first human settlement of Mesoamerica down to the post-PRI politics of our day.

Beginning with the first entry of men and women into the Americas, Volume I charts the development of Mesoamerica from roughly 25,000 B.C. down to the Spanish Conquest in 1519–21. Analysing the principal periods and ethnic groups – Olmec, Zapotec, Maya, Toltec, Teotihuacano, and Aztec – Alan Knight seeks to explain the basic processes of preconquest history: the formation of states and social hierarchies, the rise and fall of empires, the role of religion, “markets,” migration and ecology, patterns of settlement and consequent regional differentiation. Clear, comprehensive, and gracefully written, Knight’s analysis illustrates the rich diversity of Mesoamerican history, while locating that history within a broader comparative framework of historical change. The book concludes with the trauma of the conquest, the destruction of the Aztec empire, and the birth of colonial New Spain.

Alan Knight is Professor of the History of Latin America at Oxford University. He is the author of the two-volume *The Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge, 1986), which was awarded the Beveridge Prize by the American Historical Association and the Bolton Prize by the Conference on Latin American History.

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ALAN KNIGHT

St. Antony's College, Oxford University



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In memory of Carole

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Preface

I should like to thank the three anonymous readers of this book (then manuscript), who did their job scrupulously, sensitively, and with remarkable speed. I should also like to thank the people of Cambridge University Press – Frank Smith, Alia Winters, Camilla Knapp and Susan Greenberg – who helped bring this book to fruition. Needless to say, any faults are of my making, not theirs.

It is usual in these prefaces to list a roll call of individuals and institutions who made it all possible. In fact, the trend within British higher education – faithfully, even enthusiastically, repeated in my own university, Oxford – has been towards a narrow (and misconceived) utilitarianism, a diminution of real resources dedicated to research, and relentless bureaucratic overload (evident in the endless round of evaluations, assessments, management gimmicks, reforms of ‘governance’, etc.). All of this – horribly reminiscent of the ill-fated Bourbon Reforms of the late eighteenth century (see Vol. II of this trilogy) – served, certainly in my experience, to impede rather than to advance research and scholarship.

However, I would like to acknowledge the supportive camaraderie of three groups, who in their different ways have all helped counteract this institutional drag: my colleagues in (or associated with) the Oxford Latin American Centre; the handful of Mexican historians based in the U.K. who have kept the flame alight in far from easy times (Professors Brading, Hamnett and Thomson in particular); and, last but not least, the many Mexicans – scholars, students, librarians, archivists and many others – who have helped me along the way, as I have tried to learn about their fascinating country.

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Series Introduction

This is one volume in a three-volume series which charts the history of Mexico from the beginning – that is, from the initial human settlements in North America – down to the present. It is, therefore, a sort of ‘national’ history: it takes what is now – notwithstanding certain internal and external challenges – a clearly constituted nation-state, Mexico, and treats the history of that entity: the geographical space in which Mexico sits and the thousand or so generations of ‘Mexicans’ who have lived since the first settlers crossed the Bering land bridge from Asia and headed south. Of course, the nation-state of Mexico came into being only in 1821 (the concluding point of my second volume), and, even then, it was a fragile entity, destined for severe mutilation at the hands of the United States some twenty-five years later. Nevertheless, the Mexican nation-state (whose post-1821 history will be the subject of a third volume, now in preparation) was created on the foundations of the colony of New Spain, which in turn had been built on the detritus of the Mesoamerican polities (above all, the Aztec empire) which flourished prior to 1519. ‘Mesoamerica’ – the cultural-cum-chronological entity which embraced what would later become ‘Mexico’ (as well as some of Central America) – was, of course, no nation-state; rather, it was a congeries of empires, city-states and stateless peoples. But by virtue of historical processes which involved both deep continuities and sharp ruptures, Mesoamerica metamorphosed into colonial New Spain; and New Spain provided the foundation of the independent

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republic of Mexico. Those continuities and ruptures form the basis of this study.

National histories are not the staple of historiography that they once were. True, scholars may make a killing with a successful 'national' textbook; but, in doing so, they garner no critical acclaim from their peers. Textbooks, by definition, are succinct and synthetic, uncontentious and undemanding. (That may not stop them being more influential than most works of history, of course.) This book is not a textbook, although it was first conceived as a succinct, synthetic survey of Mexican history, from the beginning to the present (a present that is now quite a few years in the past). With time the survey grew, and I became aware that I was not up to writing a textbook. The result is this three-volume study. Volume I covers the history of Mesoamerica/Mexico from 'the beginning' – that is, from the first human entry into the Americas, c. 20,000 B.C., to the Spanish Conquest in 1519–21. (The first twenty thousand years or so are, however, peremptorily despatched in a matter of pages.) Volume II deals with the colonial period, from Conquest to Independence (1821), and Volume III tells the story of Mexico since Independence.

If national histories are at a discount these days, why hazard this grand and perhaps quixotic survey? A personal justification is that I wanted to educate myself about pre-Independence Mexican history, thus to emancipate myself from the narrowly modernist view I had acquired on the basis of my previous work (which focused on the Mexican Revolution of 1910). Because of the heavy pall of history which hangs over modern Mexico, it seemed to me both necessary and interesting for a historian of modern Mexico to retreat in time, to note the continuities and ruptures previously mentioned and thus to prime oneself against those vendors of historical snake oil who – be they politicians, social scientists, journalists, 'organic intellectuals' or cheapskate historians – exploit and traduce the past in the narrow interests – personal, political or pecuniary – of the present.

While this may offer a (personal) reason for writing these books, it does not justify anyone's reading them. Here, I think, two justifications can be entered. The first is obvious: Mexico, like Mount Everest, is there; hence it is worthy of study, not least by those who may visit the country or who may nurture some nugget of historical information – Cortés's meeting with Moctezuma in 1520; Juan Diego's meeting with the Virgin of Guadalupe eleven years later – which

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they wish to contextualize. While it would be overly subjective and invidious to compile league tables of national histories, it cannot be denied that Mexico's history is – like the history of Greece or Italy, China or Iran – unusually 'long', rich and culturally diverse, as well as being particularly violent and at times tragic. It is littered with arresting episodes and images (like the two meetings just mentioned). 'May you live in interesting times', says the Chinese curse; the Mexicans/Mesoamericans have had more than their fair share of 'interesting times'. Thus, to the extent that history embodies a genuine 'romantic' appeal – by which I mean the appeal of presenting momentous events and processes, located in radically unfamiliar and intellectually challenging contexts¹ – Mexico/Mesoamerica is a prime candidate for historical study.

The second justification is that Mexico offers ample scope for 'scientific' history, by which I mean history which engages with the social sciences – history which, some would say, is 'nomothetic' as well as 'idiographic', which is concerned with generalities (e.g., processes of religious conversion) as well as with particularities (like the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe). 'Scientific' – or, if you prefer, 'analytical' or 'reasoned'² – history involves comparing and contrasting, assembling data and marshalling arguments, drawing upon relevant theory for useful explanatory concepts. While narrative, particularist ('idiographic') history and scientific/analytical/reasoned ('nomothetic') history employ different 'rhetorics' and may appeal to different intellects, they are, in my view, complementary and not antithetical. They both depend, for their cogency, on similar rules of evidential inquiry and presentation;³ and, taken together, they capture

¹ Mexico may be, for me, a foreign country; but, as the old adage says, 'the past is a foreign country', hence modern Mexicans, too, face an intellectual challenge when they grapple with their own remote (and maybe not so remote) history.

² Stephen Haber, 'Anything Goes: Mexico's "New" Cultural History', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 79/2 (1999), pp. 310–11, following Fogel and Elton (a decidedly odd couple), contrasts, I think excessively, 'social science' and 'traditional' history; Pierre Vilar, *Iniciación al vocabulario del análisis histórico* (Barcelona, 1980), pp. 9, 11, favours 'reasoned' (*razonada*) history, although he goes on to recall how, when asked 'do you believe that history is a science?', he 'replied, irritated, that if I did not so believe I would not devote myself to teaching it'.

³ I mention this in part to join together what others might wish to put asunder; in part to rebut, should rebuttal be required, the whimsical notion that history involves free-floating texts, detached from any 'reality', hence incapable of reasoned debate on the basis of empirical evidence: a notion which, if less prevalent than some positivistic scaremongers would have us believe, does nevertheless have its proponents, especially among the Lotophagi of literary criticism: see Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997), ch. 4.

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two powerful justifications of historical research – the (idiographic) interest in compelling narrative and the (nomothetic) concern for understanding broad processes of social change.

‘National’ histories, even though they seem *passé* in the eyes of many historical professionals,⁴ offer perfectly adequate vehicles for these complementary rhetorics. It is a mistake to believe that a focus on national history precludes comparison or ensures superficiality: not only can ‘nations’ be compared to each other but also, more importantly, ‘nations’ (not to mention grand non-national entities like ‘Mesoamerica’) are themselves composites which have to be disaggregated so that the parts can be analysed comparatively. Thus, historians of Mexico largely agree that there are and always have been ‘many Mexicos’ and that to understand the loose aggregate ‘Mexico’ (again, not to mention ‘Mesoamerica’) we have to disaggregate – not only by region or locality, which, given Mexico’s huge size and corrugated landscape, is often crucial, but also by class (e.g., landlord or peasant), ethnicity (Indian, mestizo or creole), ideology (Catholic, ‘syncretic’ or ‘pagan’) and sector (market or subsistence; mining, agriculture or manufacturing). Thus, national history requires comparison and – today at least – in no sense implies the contemplation of a flawless national monolith. In this respect, the difference between ‘national’, ‘regional’ and ‘local’ history is purely one of degree and should not be elevated to a ruling shibboleth. Regional and local history, which has rightly proliferated and prospered in recent years, also involves a good deal of aggregation and may, despite its narrower focus, still display superficiality. Furthermore, national history offers a potential context for regional and local histories (plural), hence may help to sort out the typical from the aberrant, just as global or continental history offers a potential context for national studies.

Mexico is also fertile terrain for ‘scientific’ history. Many of the most weighty questions which historians (and other social scientists) confront have their distinctive Mexican embodiments: the Neolithic revolution and the origins of ‘civilization’; the formation of states

⁴ Hence this argument is directed primarily at the professionals (including budding students of history); the lay reader may see nothing archaic in national history, hence little of relevance in this argument.

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and class societies; empire-building, both European and extra-European; the expansion of Europe and the onset of Latin American 'dependency'; the role of religion – again, both European and extra-European; the rationale of ritual practices (including sacrifice) and religious conversion; the dynamics of colonial government, 'native' resistance and accommodation, ethnic miscegenation, migration and cultural syncretism; the genesis of nationalism and the conquest of independence, within the broad context of the 'Atlantic Revolution' of 1776–1821.

Thus, the study of Mexico should shed light on much wider processes of historical change, and therefore without, I hope, losing sight of the specificity of the Mexican experience, I have paid some attention to those processes and to the concepts and explanations which help make sense of them. This has involved some theoretical detours which, in this day and age, may also seem *passé* and even quaint. I have, for example, reprised the old argument about the 'feudal' or 'capitalist' character of Spain and the Spanish empire: an argument which was, in a sense, shelved long before it either achieved resolution or lost all utility. Historians, social scientists and others readily talk about the triumph of capitalism – today more triumphant and triumphalist than ever – and such usage must imply something or (better) somethings (plural) which went before which were not capitalist. Elucidating the difference is therefore a matter of some importance, which cannot be left to mere intuition or common sense. It is particularly important in a broad synthetic study such as this since, as a general rule, the broader the historical sweep is, the more crucial are the 'organizing concepts' used to make sense of the sweep. As Voltaire queried: 'If you have nothing to tell us except that one barbarian succeeded another on the banks of the Oxus and Jaxartes, what is that to us?'⁵ Or, we could echo, on the banks of the Lerma and the Usumacinta?⁶ Gibbon, of course, told the story of riverside barbarians (*inter alia*), but he linked his magisterial narrative to 'philosophical' inquiries – concerning, for example, the rationale of Christian conversion.⁷ Braudel, too, linked specific stories

⁵ Quoted in E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 88.

⁶ Not that I mean to suggest that those living on the banks of the Lerma and Usumacinta were 'barbarians'.

⁷ Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 5.

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and other 'idiographic' particularities to a grand vision and quasi-theory of history. Without claiming to scale the heights of Gibbonian or Braudelian history, I would plead the legitimacy of asking big questions and trying to marshal the big concepts necessary to make sense of them.

Of course, big concepts are a matter of subjective choice. We can all agree that Cortés made landfall on the Gulf of Mexico in 1519 and entered the smoking ruins of Tenochtitlán as a conqueror in 1521. When it comes to explaining why that happened – why Cortés overcame Moctezuma and not vice versa⁸ – interpretations will differ and will not be easily adjudicated according to shared criteria. Was the religious conversion of Mexico's Indians in the sixteenth century a glorious 'spiritual conquest' or a sordid story of oppression, coercion and dissimulation? Was Mexican independence the result of endemic social, ethnic and nationalist tensions, or an almost accidental by-product of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1808 – without which the colony would have remained in Spanish hands, content with a modicum of 'home rule'? Did the Aztecs slaughter prisoners *en masse* because they were avid for protein? Did the Classical Maya cities fall victim to war, revolution, disease or starvation? Was New Spain feudal or capitalist?

When it comes to asking – and tentatively answering – these big questions, personal inclinations cannot be avoided. I find these questions interesting, even if they are in some cases old (but nonetheless unresolved). Some historians find them irrelevant or tedious, and there is nothing I can do about that. Meanwhile, there are questions – of a somewhat different sort – which, I concede, are neglected in these pages. These might be loosely summed up as 'cultural' questions: a catch-all category which includes both traditional historical themes, such as 'high' culture (e.g., painting, literature, architecture), and 'new', and certainly fashionable, themes, such as popular culture (religion, ritual, recreation), gender, signs and signifiers. To put it bluntly, this history may seem overly materialist, concerned more with the Mexican political economy than with the Mexican psyche.

⁸ This question is a complex one, involving not only superior Spanish technology, logistics, morale, or luck but also Spanish motivation – why, in other words, did a Spanish fleet sail to Mexico, rather than an Aztec fleet to Spain?

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Beyond pleading subjective inclination – which is a plea of limited validity⁹ – I would enter three modest considerations.

First, it should be recognized that some of the supposedly ‘new’ cultural history involves a semantic repackaging of older ideas and topics. ‘Subalterns’, for example, were once called workers and peasants (among other things). I have tried to give a good deal of attention to ‘subalterns’, even though I have not used the term, at least not systematically. So I think I write ‘subaltern history’ just as I write prose, but I do not make an issue of it. At any rate, there is a fair amount of ‘bottom-up’ (popular) history in these pages, not least because ‘top-down’ (elite) history cannot be understood in isolation; the two are dialectically related. It is true, however, and quite deliberate, that my ‘subalterns’ are seen more at work than at play, more in acts of protest than in moments of recreation, more on the streets and in the fields than in their own homes. Subjective inclination and constraints of space aside, there are a couple of reasons for this, which have to do with the availability, status and relevance of the evidence.

Second, some of ‘new cultural history’ is still incipient (it is contesting for acceptance in the ‘market-place of ideas’), and anyone who tries to write a general synthetic history should beware of the dictates of fashion. I have therefore stitched this story together from fairly traditional material, not the latest fashionable fabrics, however eye-catching. Caution is particularly in order when, given the novelty of some themes, there is – as yet – no conclusive evidence, no sign of scholarly consensus. For example, the impact of the Spanish Conquest on Mesoamerican gender relations appears to

⁹ ‘Subjective inclination’ is of limited, but not negligible, validity. All historians – irrespective of whether they work on national, regional, local or thematic topics – have to select themes, facts and arguments from a huge range of possibilities. The bigger the topic, roughly speaking, the greater the range of possibilities and the problems of selection. The process of selection, in turn, will reflect the historian’s own interests and priorities. The finished work is therefore open to criticism on two fronts: sins of commission (getting the facts, argument or internal logic of the work wrong) and sins of omission (leaving out important topics which deserve attention). The first criticism, being more focused, is more conducive to objective debate; the second is necessarily more subjective. Yet – as readers of academic reviews, regular seminar-goers and doctoral candidates will attest – the second is often the easiest and commonest form of criticism: ‘the author/paper/candidate neglected . . .’. While this criticism can sometimes be substantiated in terms of the overt claims and logic of the book/talk/thesis, it is often just a countersubjective claim: it means, ‘if I had written this book/paper/thesis I would have done it differently and would have said more about . . .’; and, in turn, it begs the question, ‘given that time and space are finite, what would you have left out instead?’

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be a matter of considerable disagreement, but disagreement based, it seems, on a scarcity, rather than a surfeit, of hard data and mature debate.¹⁰ In comparison, we know a lot about the make-up of the colonial hacienda or the character of the Bourbon Reforms; and, while knowledge does not guarantee consensus, it does provide the national historian with the material with which to attempt an informed synthesis.¹¹ I do not doubt that, in the years to come, as recent research is consolidated and incorporated into synthetic studies they will mutate accordingly, and for the better.

Finally, the relevance of some 'cultural' themes is not always clear. I work on the assumption that a history of Mexico/Mesoamerica ought to explain the main dynamics of change in a large and complex society. Necessarily, this means heroic (or stupid) aggregation, and the omission of much that might be interesting in itself, but which is of limited relevance to the big story. For example, I have paid relatively little attention to elite culture (literature, 'high' art and architecture), save where it seemed to me that elite culture clearly intertwined with economics or politics, broadly defined. Thus, the lay-out of the sacred city of Teotihuacan or the severe neoclassical architecture of the late Bourbon period clearly carried powerful sociopolitical significance. But this is not true of all products of 'high culture';¹² and I did not want to go the way of some textbooks, which, within the

¹⁰ Compare Arthur J. O. Anderson, 'Aztec Wives', pp. 77, 84–5, for whom 'the Aztec world, after the conquest as well as before, was a man's world', hence, 'nothing in the position of Aztec wives had altered much' as result of the Conquest, and Susan Kellogg, 'Tenochca Mexican Women, 1500–1700', pp. 133, 139, who sees an 'eventual and marked decline in the status of Mexican women': both in Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman, Okla., 1997).

¹¹ Hence, by way of explanation and apology, the colonial volume in this series is heavily foot-noted: in order (a) to point the reader to relevant sources and (b) to engage in debates, qualifications and clarifications which would clutter the text but which are important for conveying the scope and complexity of colonial scholarship.

¹² Some might wish to make a tight, even deterministic, connection between high culture and social, political and economic forces, which they see marching in lockstep through defined historical stages or periods. Recent literary criticism (again) inclines to this view; as did Harry Lime (*The Third Man*), with his famous association between, on the one hand, Renaissance political violence and high artistic achievement, and, on the other, Swiss sociopolitical stability and – the cuckoo clock. Such a view probably exaggerates Swiss sociopolitical stability and (more important) assumes that high culture is a reflex of social forces, whereas I would see it – as some choose to see the state – as 'relatively autonomous' of those forces. And, since those forces are my chief concern in this book, it follows that high culture need make only an occasional appearance in its pages. A similar argument can be made for popular culture, if narrowly defined to denote *aesthetic* practices (music, dance, textile and ceramic styles) rather than broader *collective* activities (e.g., fiestas, drinking, riots).

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grand structure of national history, create tiny token compartments for 'poetry', 'music', 'architecture' and so on. This is not a history of Mexican poetry, music or architecture. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for popular, as opposed to elite, culture: I introduce the industrious Indian potters of Tonalá (Jalisco), or the exalted religious insurgents of Cancuc (Chiapas), both of them exemplary cases of broad trends in colonial society; but I do not claim to present a thorough analysis of, say, popular artisan styles and ritual practices throughout New Spain.

Indeed, critics might say, and they might be right, that this is a mainly materialist history, concerned with forms of economic production and exchange, as well as with the political structures which made those forms possible. Thus, its primary themes are population, agrarian production and labour systems; villages and haciendas, mines and cities; political and clerical authority; state- and empire-building; warfare, rebellion and repression. The Mesoamericans/Mexicans, having lived in 'interesting times' for a good two millennia, have yielded a vast body of evidence under these diverse headings. Hence, in seeking to do them – both the themes and the people – historiographical justice, I have necessarily neglected some other themes, whose omission, whole or partial, may be lamented by those less tarred with the brush of materialism. In conclusion I would ask: given the story told in these pages, what is omitted that is crucial to explaining its course and outcome? There are no doubt plenty of possible answers, and plenty of historians capable of filling the blanks.