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ONE. The Habsburg Colony

I. Military and Material Conquest

Following the fall of Tenochtitlán a small force of Spaniards[1] usurped the political hegemony of the Aztec state, which had dominated a million and a half Indians in the Valley of Mexico and as many as twenty millions in its tributary provinces. This demographic imbalance did not inspire caution; on the contrary, the conquistadors at once pressed ahead with further explorations and conquests. They sought, first, to incorporate the outlying reaches of the empire they had overthrown (one of Cortés's first acts was to appropriate the Aztec tribute rolls); second, to find fresh sources of bullion, those of Tenochtitlán having been seized and squandered; and, third, to provide gainful employment for those many conquistadors who felt deprived of sufficient spoils.

Thus, even before the final victory of 1521, Spanish expeditions had penetrated southwards to Oaxaca and the Gulf coast of the

[1] Concerning the chapter title, it is sometimes objected that New Spain was a kingdom (*reino*) under the Habsburg Crown; part, therefore, of a 'composite monarchy', along with the kingdoms of South America and the Peninsula; hence not strictly a colony (see Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* [Berkeley, 1980], p. 96). Some (idealistic) contemporaries said as much (e.g., Peter of Ghent: Peggy K. Liss, *Mexico under Spain, 1521–1556: Society and the Origins of Nationality* [Chicago, 1975], p. 72). Although the argument has some relevance to the final collapse of the empire in 1808–21, it is, for most purposes, a narrowly juridical, excessively formal and therefore potentially misleading point of view. During the three preceding centuries, it is clear, Mexico – New Spain – was subject to Spanish control, was exploited in the (perceived) interest of Spain, and experienced a regime different from that which prevailed in the peninsula.

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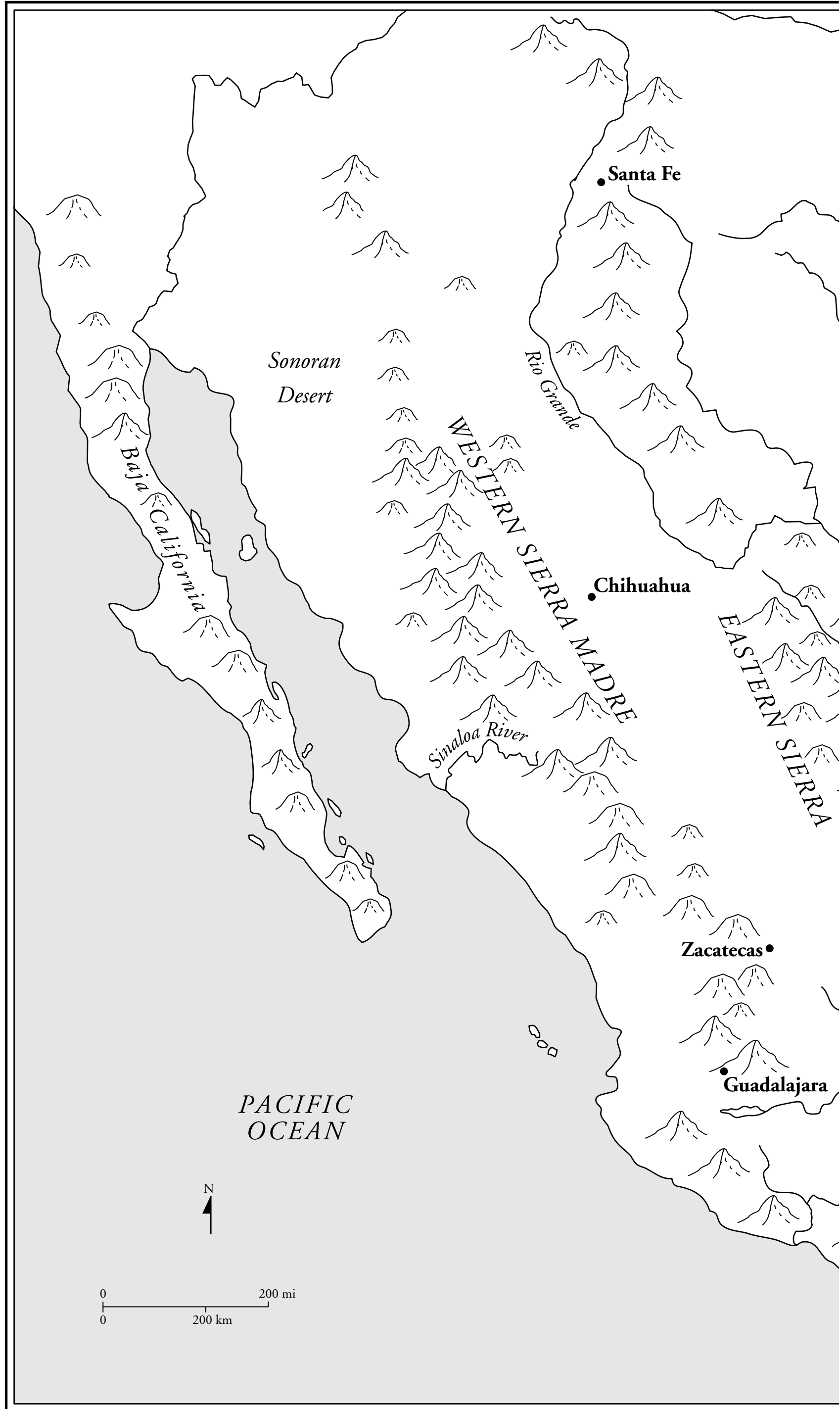

Map 1

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Isthmus, as well as to the Huasteca, northeast of the Valley of Mexico – both zones of relatively recent and insecure Aztec hegemony. After 1521, the conquistadors – Cortés included – ranged farther, asserting Spanish control over Moctezuma's erstwhile dominions and, before long, penetrating beyond their loose perimeter. Like the Aztecs before them, the Spaniards were drawn to the rich and densely populated zones of southern Mesoamerica. During the early 1520s the Mixtecs and Zapotecs of Oaxaca were overcome: once again, internal divisions aided the conquerors; some *caciques* treated with the Spaniards, rather than resist; and, in consequence, the conquest was briefer, less bloody and traumatic, than the defeat of the Aztecs.[2] But it was also more conditional and uncomplete. Further south, a Spanish expedition to Chiapas failed in 1524, but, four years later, a second effort succeeded – despite strenuous opposition – and the Spaniards established a partial and contested control over Chiapas.[3]

Such conquests – facilitated by Indian divisions – were also complicated by Spanish dissensions. Having initially defeated the Huastec Indians of the Province of Pánuco to the northeast (1522), Cortés had then to confront the challenge of Francisco Garay, newly arrived from Cuba; Garay's expedition collapsed, but Cortés now faced a major Huastec revolt, which resulted in hundreds of Spanish casualties. This, the worst Spanish reverse since the Noche Triste, was overcome and bloodily revenged. The Huastec elite was decimated, and the now pacificied province was given over to the callous rule of Nuño de Guzmán.[4] In the south, meanwhile, Pedro de Alvarado penetrated

[2] Especially in lowland Oaxaca – the Valley of Oaxaca and the Isthmus – and in the Mixtec highlands (western Oaxaca). However, the northern sierra – rough country, inhabited by simpler and more egalitarian communities – offered both fewer incentives and stiffer resistance to Spanish domination (in which respect Oaxaca constituted a kind of microcosm of Mexico as a whole): see John K. Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, 1978), pp. 30–1; and John K. Chance, *Conquest of the Sierra: Spaniard and Indian in Colonial Oaxaca* (Norman, Okla., 1989), pp. 16–20.

[3] Victoria Reifler Bricker, *The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual* (Austin, 1981), pp. 43–6.

[4] Donald E. Chipman, *Nuño de Guzmán and the Province of Pánuco in New Spain (1518–1533)* (Glendale, 1967), pp. 59–82. Not that Guzmán's abuses were unique. Compare those of Luis de Berrio in Oaxaca (1529–31): Chance, *Conquest of the Sierra*, p. 18; or of Gaspar Pacheco in Yucatán: Diego de Landa, *Yucatán Before and After the Conquest* (New York, 1978; first pubd. 1937, translated by William Gates from the 1566 original), pp. 24–5.

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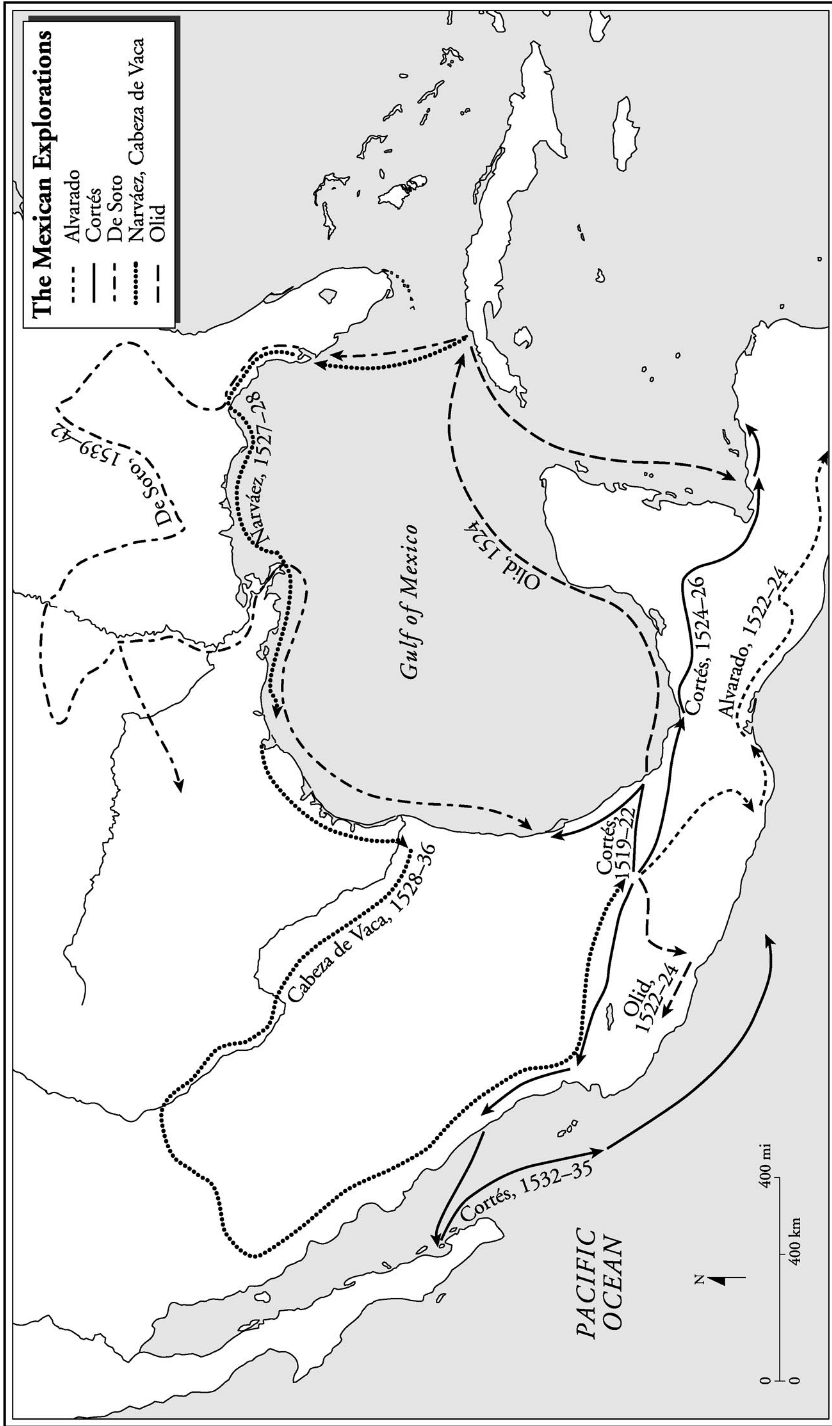

Map 2

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Guatemala and Salvador, carving out an independent captaincy; and Cristóbal de Olid, sent to conquer Honduras, repudiated Cortés's authority – much as Cortés had Diego de Velázquez's five years before – and obliged Cortés to mount a punitive mission, complete with Indian auxiliaries, which involved prodigious losses and privations.[5] Among the casualties was the Aztec prince Cuauhtémoc, taken as hostage and executed for alleged rebellion.[6]

To the southeast, the Spaniards established footholds on coastal Yucatán. But Maya society, lacking the 'overarching imperial structure' of the Aztecs, was less vulnerable to a concentrated knock-out blow; furthermore, it proved capable of limiting – and at times reversing – the Spanish advance.[7] Maya literature therefore lacked the 'grief-stricken anguish of the Aztec elegies for a world that had been suddenly and irrevocably shattered'; indeed, the Maya, with their cyclical view of the world and their old experience of external conquest, nurtured hopes that Spanish dominion would prove temporary.[8] For a generation the Spanish settlements, clinging to the coast, enjoyed a precarious existence, threatened by Maya counterattack. A major revolt shook the incipient colony in 1546–7; it was bloodily put down, eastern and southern Yucatán suffering severe devastation. Not until mid-century, therefore, did the Spaniards consolidate their coastal position (even then, 'Lutheran corsairs' remained a threat). Meanwhile, the great Maya hinterland remained largely under Maya control for a further century and a half (the last redoubt of the Itzá kingdom was defeated in 1697); Yucatán's definitive conquest was an achievement of the eighteenth – and nineteenth – centuries, of Bourbon rather than Habsburg imperialists.[9]

The Spanish advance to the west was also stoutly, though less successfully, resisted. Here, where the Tarascan kingdom had blocked Aztec expansion, the Spaniards were motivated by the old lure of

[5] Bricker, *The Indian Christ*, ch. 3; Hugh Thomas, *The Conquest of Mexico* (London, 1993), p. 596; Liss, *Mexico under Spain*, p. 125.

[6] Liss, *Mexico under Spain*, p. 121; Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 273.

[7] Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, 1984), p. 12; Bricker, *The Indian Christ*, ch. 2; Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517–1570* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 2.

[8] Farriss, *Maya Society*, pp. 20–5, 70.

[9] Bricker, *The Indian Christ*, p. 19; Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, pp. 40–1; Farriss, *Maya Society*, pp. 16, 18.

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Asia: Cortés himself envisaged reaching the Pacific and kitting out an expedition to sail to the Moluccas (indeed, a fleet finally sailed in 1527, inaugurating the trans-Pacific trade which would play a significant role in New Spain's mercantile economy).[10] Old enemies of the Aztecs, the Tarascans were fully acquainted with the fate of Tenochtitlán; they, too, were smitten by smallpox, alarmed at the supernatural powers of the Spaniards and wracked by internal political dissensions. The invaders, soldiers and priests, soon penetrated the Tarascan dominions, imposing their new secular and religious authorities. Tarascan resistance was sporadic rather than sustained, and it was met by repression and enslavement.

Late in the 1520s, as Nuño de Guzmán sought to carve out a personal satrapy in the west and northwest of New Spain, Spanish repression increased and abuses mounted. The Tarascan king, Cazonci, accused of fomenting sedition, was seized, tried, tortured, garroted and burned. Guzmán – 'a natural gangster' – cut a swathe through Michoacan and penetrated beyond Sinaloa before his egregious actions forced his recall (1533).[11] But the province of New Galicia, which he had helped establish, lived with the legacy of its founder. In 1540 the Cascan Indians, who inhabited the northern borderlands of New Galicia, rose in revolt, provoked by Spanish abuses. Fiercely independent nomadic people, inspired by the cult of Tlatol, the Cascanes had never submitted to either the Tarascan or the Aztec yoke; now they halted the Spaniards' advance and began to roll back their scattered settlements. Three successive Spanish expeditions were defeated in this, the Mixtón War (1540–2). Finally, Viceroy Mendoza himself led a large army of Spaniards and Indian auxiliaries against the Cascanes and ensured their defeat.[12] But the Chichimec frontier, which demarcated the dense, sedentary,

[10] J. Benedict Warren, *The Conquest of Michoacán: The Spanish Domination of the Tarascan Kingdom in Western Mexico, 1521–1530* (Norman, Okla., 1985), pp. 116, 118–19.

[11] Warren, *Conquest of Michoacan*, pp. 47, 69, 211–34; J. H. Parry, *The Audiencia of New Galicia in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1948), p. 19 ('gangster').

[12] Nathan Wachtel, *The Vision of the Vanquished: The Spanish Conquest of Peru through Indian Eyes, 1520–1570* (Hassocks, 1977), pp. 184–6, sees the Mixtón War as a millenarian movement, analogous to contemporaneous Peruvian rebellions. Certainly the Cascanes were religiously inspired and repudiated Catholicism; whether they were 'millenarians' is another matter. We will note later that such root-and-branch, religious-cum-political resistance to the Spaniards was much rarer in Mexico than in Peru.

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Spanish-ruled society of central and southern Mexico from the scattered, mobile Indians of the north, remained fragile and porous.

Not until the mining discoveries of the mid-sixteenth century would the Spaniards mount a sustained – though still patchy and selective – colonization of the north. For the first thirty years after the initial conquest, however, the north remained *terra incognita*, penetrated only by intrepid – and foolhardy – explorers who probed its remote expanses in search of fabled cities and mythical treasure. The old dreams which had motivated the first conquistadors still cast their spell (even Cortés, advanced in years, volunteered to fight the infidel in Algiers), and there were plenty amid the restless, mobile society of New Spain who succumbed; indeed, continued immigration from Spain, coupled with miscegenation in the new colony, created a swelling class of 'white vagabonds', covetous of the privileges of *hidalguía*.[13] Since central Mexico itself could not satisfy their aspirations, they looked elsewhere (even as far afield as Peru); they joined the veteran captains in their expeditions south or west; or they followed northwards the great explorers of the 1530s and 1540s – men whose celebrated individual feats were seconded by an 'infinite number of wanderers' of lesser fame and rank.[14]

Pánfilo de Narváez, cheated of his glory in New Spain, explored Florida and the Gulf, losing his life in a storm off the Mississippi delta (1528). But his lieutenant, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, survived, fell in with friendly Indians and eventually trekked overland across Texas to the Pacific coast, where he encountered the new Spanish outpost of Culiacán (1536). The vague reports of rich northern cities brought back by Cabeza de Vaca and his men stimulated further efforts, now of a more official kind. In 1540 the governor of New Galicia, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, crossed New Mexico – where the mythic city of Cíbola failed to live up to expectations – and penetrated Kansas, where the mythic land of Quivira proved entirely elusive. At the same time, Hernando de Soto chased similar chimaeras in the southeast. From Florida he advanced up to the Appalachians, then doubled back and died on the banks of the Mississippi. The remnants

13 Thomas, *Conquest of Mexico*, pp. 599–600 (Cortés); J. I. Israel, *Race, Class, and Politics in Colonial Mexico, 1600–1670* (Oxford, 1975), p. 11 (vagabonds).

14 François Chevalier, *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley, 1970), p. 28, quoting Martín Cortés, son of Hernán.

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of his expedition sailed down the great river back to the familiar Gulf coast.[15]

For all their daring and heroism, none of these expeditions achieved material gain or permanent conquest. Myths were punctured; reports of 'shaggy cows' (buffalo) did not compensate for the lack of gold. And the northern Indian peoples – though they cohered in dense, complex communities in regions like New Mexico – did not constitute rich empires, ripe for looting (though they were looted nonetheless).[16] Thus, although the Crown of Spain laid claim to extensive regions to the north of New Spain, effective control was lacking. For centuries, these vast tracts were crossed – if they were crossed at all – as if they were oceans, by tiny forces whose wagon-trains resembled fleets of sea-going ships (they were even termed *flotas*), and whose ports of call were the isolated mining and mission settlements, strung out like scattered, archipelagian islands: Monterrey, founded in the 1570s, Sante Fe (New Mexico) in 1609.[17]

We will resume the story of this slow northern advance later. Around 1550, a generation after the Conquest, the advance had barely begun. At this time, Mexico consisted of a three-tier entity: the old Aztec heartland of the central highlands, securely held and governed (the means of government will be discussed shortly); recently conquered peripheral provinces, some still threatened by Indian rebellion (New Galicia, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Yucatán); and a yet vaster outer periphery, ranging from the forests of the Petén to the high expanses of northern mountain, desert and prairie, where independent Indian populations survived, defiant yet respectful of Spanish power. As this sketch suggests, the Spaniards' Mesoamerican empire was squarely built on Aztec foundations, just as the new Spanish churches were constructed upon – and even with – the rubble of native temples. Conquest correlated with proximity and civilization: it was the more developed, central and *centralized* Indian polities (chiefly, Aztec, Tlaxcalan, Tarascan and Totonac; to a lesser degree, Mixtec, Zapotec and Huastec) which were most fully and firmly

15 David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 41–55, offers a good summary of the northern expeditions; on the Cíbola myth, see Luis Weckman, *La herencia medieval de México* (Mexico, 1996; first pubd. 1984), pp. 51–4.

16 Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, 1991), pp. 41–5.

17 Chevalier, *Land and Society*, p. 8; Philip Wayne Powell, *Soldiers, Indians and Silver: The Northwards Advance of New Spain, 1550–1600* (Berkeley, 1952), p. 65.

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incorporated into the new empire and which yielded the most numerous, docile and profitable subjects; conversely, acephalic, scattered societies – atomized in bands, tribes or chiefdoms – resisted with greater success, in the Maya south or the vast Gran Chichimec of the north. Even where modest states existed – for example, in New Mexico – they were protected by the intervening distance and a *cordon sanitaire* of inhospitable terrain and peoples. And, until these remote societies were shown to possess desirable resources (chiefly, precious metals), the Spaniards lacked the incentive to embark on what could only prove costly campaigns of conquest.

Given the marked numerical imbalance in the early colony, Spanish rule depended on the exploitation of existing Indian rulers, communities and resources. Indian auxiliaries served in their thousands in campaigns of conquest and repression: the Tlaxcalans, pioneers of such tactical collaboration, fought against Tenochtitlán, followed Alvarado in his Central American expedition and played an important role in the later conquest and colonization of the Gran Chichimec.[18] The Otomíes, the supposedly boorish butts of Aztec ethnocentrism, celebrated their new role as martial conquerors.[19] Indian *caciques*, in particular, not only figured as military auxiliaries (Don Carlos Ixtlilxochitl of Texcoco was a key ally) but also served as vital intermediaries between Spanish rulers and Indian subjects. And those subjects, in their tens of thousands, laboured to support New Spain's new elite: 'la tilma del indio a todos cubre', as a Spanish priest later put it – 'the Indians' cloak covers us all'; or, as Viceroy Juan de Ortega baldly stated: 'while the Indians exist the Indies will exist'.[20] Indeed, the ethic of *hidalguía* required nothing less. Had not one errant conquistador, prematurely setting himself up as a planter

18 Chevalier, *Land and Society*, pp. 197, 218–19; Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (Stanford, 1967), pp. 182–9. Farriss, *Maya Society*, p. 230, notes a (probable) Tlaxcalan diaspora as far afield as Yucatán; however, these migrants were Mayanized, whereas the northern settlers clung to their Tlaxcalan identity: Gibson, *Tlaxcala*, pp. 187–8.

19 Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 133–5.

20 William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979), p. 120; R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720* (Madison, 1994), p. 11. Variations on this theme are common: 'let no one make your majesty believe that the mines can be worked without Indians', wrote Viceroy Luis Velasco to the king, 'rather, the moment they raise their hands from labour the mines will be finished': James Lockhart and Enrique Otte, *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies: The Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 191; note also Mercedes Olivera, *Pillis y macehuales. Las formacione sociales y los modos de producción de Tecali del siglo XII al XVI* (Mexico, 1978), p. 125.

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