

MEXICO

THE COLONIAL ERA

ALAN KNIGHT

St. Antony's College, Oxford University



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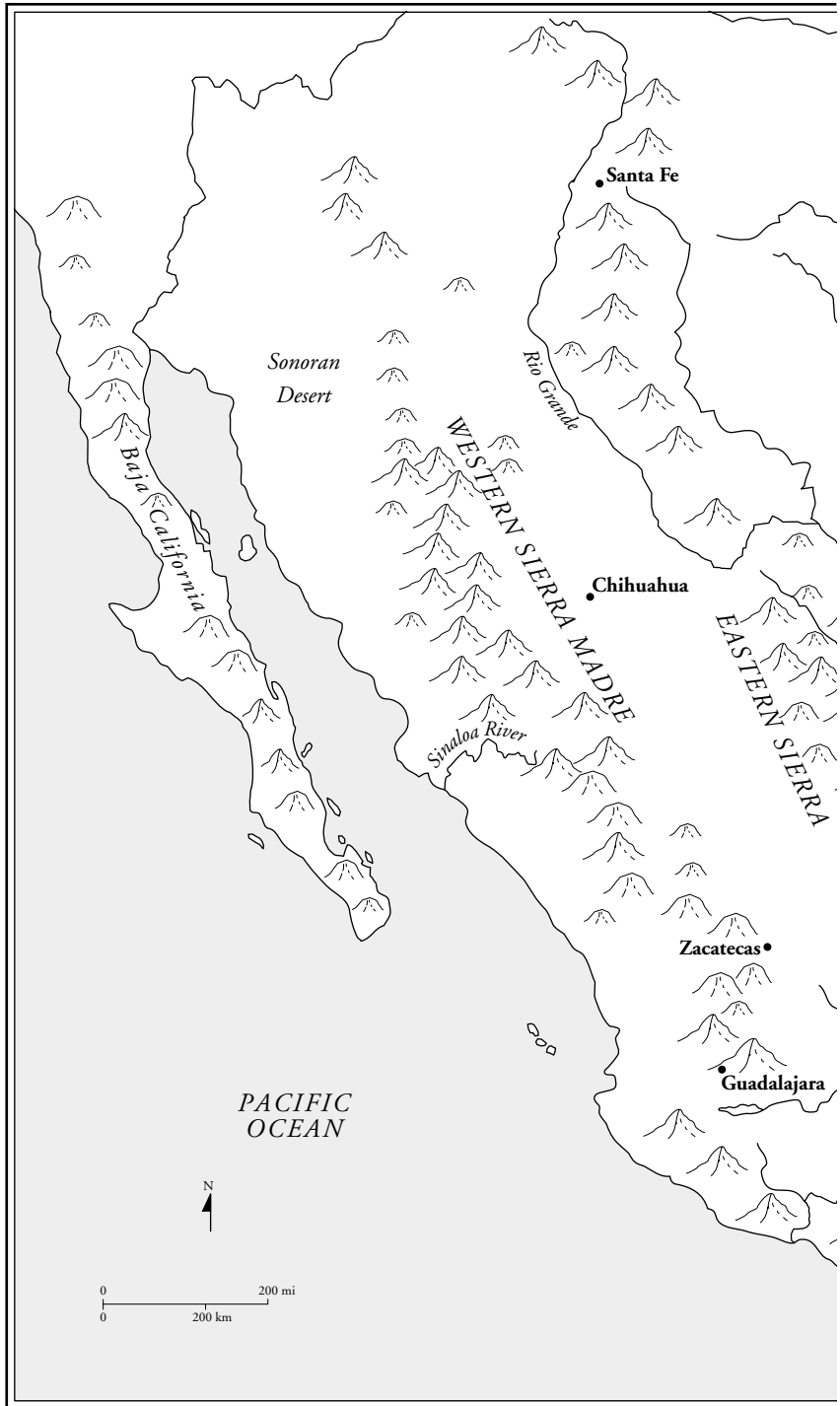
ONE. The Habsburg Colony

I. Military and Material Conquest

Following the fall of Tenochtitlán a small force of Spaniards¹ 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.



Map 1

Mexico Physical



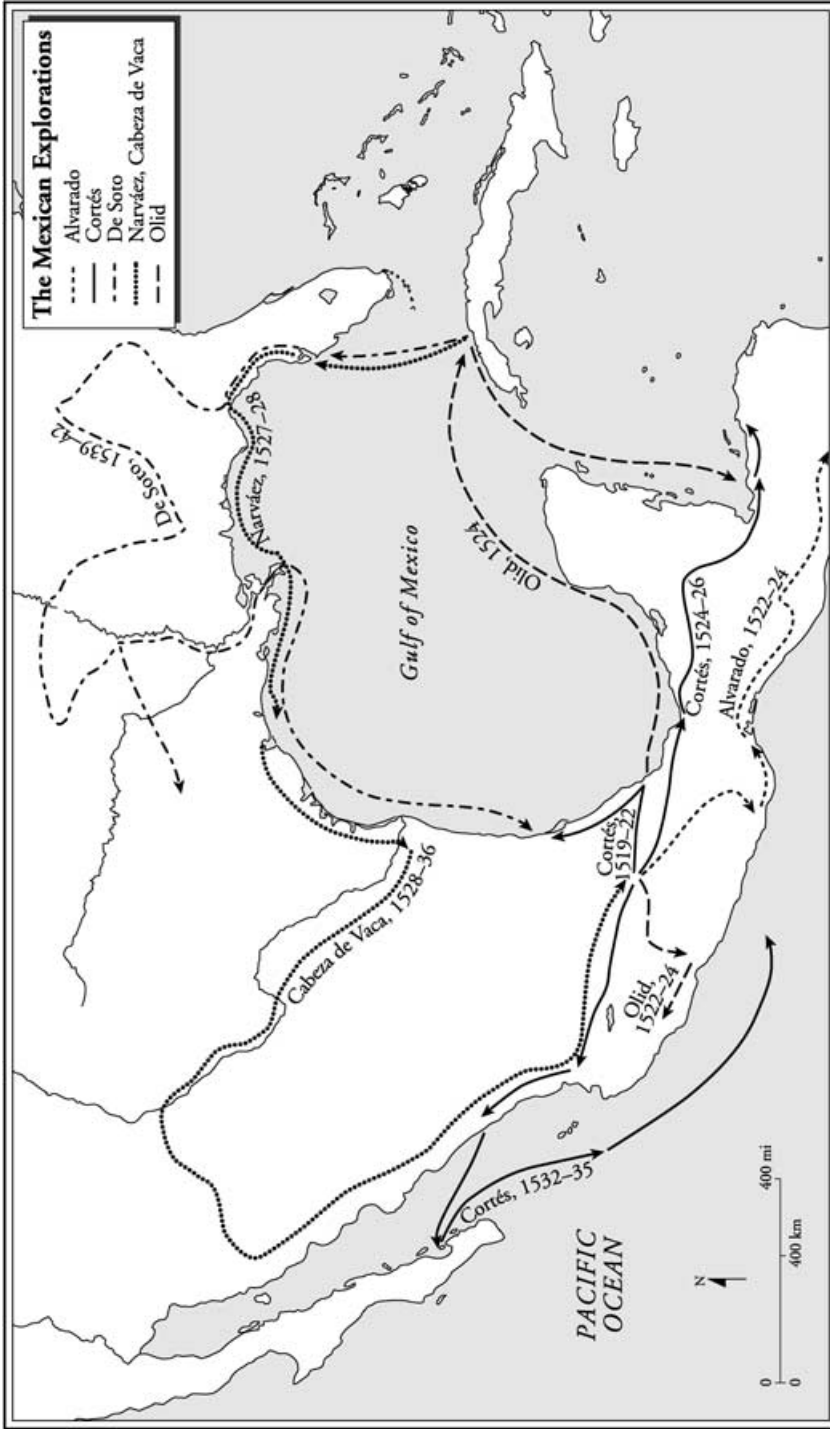
Isthmus, as well as to the Huasteca, northeast of the Valley of Mexico – both zones of relatively recent and insecure Aztec hegemony. After 1521, the conquistadors – Cortés included – ranged farther, asserting Spanish control over Moctezuma's erstwhile dominions and, before long, penetrating beyond their 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 pacified 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 publ. 1937, translated by William Gates from the 1566 original), pp. 24–5.



Map 2

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.

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.

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.

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 publ. 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.

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 formaciones sociales y los modos de producción de Tecali del siglo XII al XVI* (Mexico, 1978), p. 125.

at Tuxtepec (Oaxaca), incurred Cortés's wrath for thus sinking to 'breeding birds and planting cocoa'?²¹

The Spaniards' objection was not simply to manual labour but also to direct farm management. Their aim was to be supported – in comfortable if not lavish style – by the direct producers, chiefly Indian peasants, and thus to be released, like Aristotle's slave-owning Athenian citizens, for the good life of luxury and culture, warfare and public service. The good life usually meant urban life. 'No-one can be found', a Spaniard lamented in 1599, 'who wishes to go to the country'; the rustic immobility of the English colonists of North America amazed their Spanish counterparts in Mexico.²² Thus, in the mid-seventeenth century, 57 per cent of Mexico's Spaniards lived in ten cities, each of which was laid out, according to the architectural fashion of the day, in gridiron fashion, with central plaza, rectilinear streets and outlying (often Indian) barrios.²³

Eschewing the countryside – and, above all, direct cultivation in the countryside – the Spaniards conceded a measure of rural autonomy to the Indian population, at least so long as the Indians rendered tribute and obedience. Thus, while the Aztec imperial state was decapitated – and the priestly caste was entirely eliminated – the remaining organs of Indian society survived, albeit traumatized. Collaborators in Tlaxcala or Oaxaca were guaranteed their lands and native rulers; the Maya of Yucatán, displaying a 'creative optimism' and faith in their old and tested powers of assimilation, proved capable of Mayanizing the new Spanish invaders as they had the Spaniards' Toltec predecessors.²⁴ Neither the Tlaxcalans nor the

²¹ Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain* (Harmondsworth, 1981; first publ. 1963), p. 269.

²² D. A. Brading, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763–1810* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 6; Chevalier, *Land and Society*, pp. 41–2, citing Gage. The Spaniards 'had not come to Yucatán to farm... they had come to subjugate the Indians and find riches': Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, p. 24; see also Farriss, *Maya Society*, p. 30.

²³ George C. Kubler, *Mexican Architecture of the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven, 1948), vol. 1, pp. 75, 92–4. One architect, Alonso García Bravo, was responsible for the lay-out of Mexico City, Veracruz and Antequera (Oaxaca): Chance, *Race and Class*, p. 34; Thomas, *Conquest of Mexico*, p. 51, which notes the rigour of García Bravo's plan for Mexico City (houses were 'built so regularly and evenly that none varies a finger's breadth'). This model of town-planning did not, of course, represent European urban reality – which was cluttered and chaotic – but rather European neoclassical fashion, which could now be deployed in a compliant colonial context, especially in places, like Mexico/Tenochtitlán, where the previous settlement had been razed to the ground.

²⁴ Gibson, *Tlaxcala*, pp. 62–3, 161ff.; Taylor, *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, 1972), p. 36; Farriss, *Maya Society*, pp. 96–7.

Maya were typical. But, like any rambling pre-industrial empire, that of Spain required extensive use of collaborators and systems of 'indirect rule': 20 leagues outside Mexico City, a Spaniard reported in 1545, the king's writ scarcely ran; the Indians were subject to Spanish *encomenderos* and Indian *caciques*.²⁵ *Caciques* were vital cogs in the imperial machinery. They governed, taxed and administered justice; at the same time, many learned Spanish, dressed in European style and acquired special (even noble) privileges. Some intermarried; at Tecali they drank chocolate and carried swords; one high-living *cacique* in Puebla went preceded by a Spanish page who carried his gloves.²⁶

Caciques also creamed off a significant economic surplus. Responsible for tribute collection, they could take a slice (some even acquired formal rights to tribute); they received rent, in labour and kind, from Indian commoners (*macehuales*); they were also to be found, active and entrepreneurial, 'in whatever branch of the Spanish economy impinges on their area, whether *obrajes* (workshops) in Tlaxcala, pig raising in Toluca, or petty commerce in Texcoco'.²⁷ Like their subjects, they did not abjure the money economy. The Conquest thus had a significant impact on Indian political society, even where it left it formally intact. Processes already under way before 1519 were briskly accelerated: the expropriation of communal land by *caciques*/aristocrats probably quickened, and, in some cases, the power of the Indian elite/aristocracy was enhanced by the opportunities which the new Spanish state afforded for the accumulation of power, at least on a local level and in

²⁵ Liss, *Mexico under Spain*, p. 126; note also Robert W. Patch, *Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1648–1812* (Stanford, 1993), pp. 45–6.

²⁶ Olivera, *Pillis y macehuales*, pp. 162–4 (Tecali); Chevalier, *Land and Society*, p. 208; for the Valley of Mexico, see Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519–1810* (Stanford, 1964), pp. 155–6, 198; for Morelos, Robert Haskett, *Indigenous Rulers: An Ethnohistory of Town Government in Colonial Cuernavaca* (Albuquerque, 1991), pp. 161–2; and for Oaxaca, Taylor, *Landlord and Peasant*, pp. 46–8; Joseph Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs: Princes, Priests, and People* (Norman, Okla., 1984), pp. 185–8, 202; and Ronald Spores, *The Mixtec Kings and Their People* (Norman, Okla., 1967), p. 178–9.

²⁷ James Lockhart, 'Introduction', in Ida Altman and James Lockhart, eds., *Provinces of Early Mexico: Variants of Spanish American Regional Evolution* (Los Angeles, 1976), p. 21. Arij Ouweneel, *Ciclos interrumpidos. Ensayos sobre historia rural mexicana, siglos XVIII–XIX* (Toluca, 1998), pp. 285, 294, 304–5, 317, stresses *cacical* power to the extent of depicting colonial (central) Mexico as a quasi-feudal society comparable to medieval Europe, in which 'siegneurial *caciques*' lorded it over their Indian 'vassals'. This, for reasons that will be given, remains unconvincing.

the short term.²⁸ At the same time, however, the chief beneficiaries may have been smart, upwardly mobile parvenus – even a few go-getting plebeians – rather than blue-blooded magnates. For, although the Conquest preserved Indian elites and self-government, it did so in conditions of unprecedented flux and upheaval, which affected old practices. The endemic warfare of pre-Conquest Mesoamerica was brought to an end, bringing derogation of the old warrior/noble ethos; traditional noble privileges were either ended (e.g., polygamy), or generalized (eating meat and drinking pulque). In this new Darwinian world, elites were constituted more on the basis of opportunism and struggle than of ancient legitimacy.²⁹

The initial upheaval of the Conquest was soon compounded by demographic collapse. By the late sixteenth century, many Indian *caciques* had fallen on hard times, especially in regions (like lowland Puebla) where Spanish settlement and control were strongest. They lost control of land and – perhaps more important – of labour; their prestige declined; they were eclipsed by new officials (such as the *gobernador*, who, though usually an Indian, occupied a position created and controlled by Spaniards).³⁰ So, too, in the Valley of Mexico years of colonial rule exerted a levelling effect on Indian society, such that the late colonial *cacique* was ‘hardly distinguishable from the mass of the Indian population’.³¹ In contrast, in regions of lesser Hispanization, such as Oaxaca or the Puebla highlands, *caciques* survived, some in sumptuous style.³² Either way – elevated

²⁸ Chevalier, *Land and Society*, pp. 207–8; Israel, *Race, Class, and Politics*, pp. 42–3.

²⁹ On social mobility: Gibson, *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, p. 156; Gruzinski, *Conquest of Mexico*, p. 64; Cheryl English Martin, *Rural Society in Colonial Morelos* (Albuquerque, 1985) p. 50; James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, 1992), pp. 111–12. On changing mores (which will be further analysed later): Farriss, *Maya Society*, p. 174; Gruzinski, *Conquest of Mexico*, pp. 95 (food), 216 (polygamy).

³⁰ Gibson, *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, pp. 165, 168–72, 177; Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs*, pp. 188–91; Lockhart, *The Nahuas*, pp. 31–5; Bernardo García Martínez, *Los pueblos de la sierra. El poder y el espacio entre los indios del norte de Puebla hasta 1700* (Mexico, 1987), pp. 203–4.

³¹ Gibson, *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, p. 165.

³² Chevalier, *Land and Society*, p. 214; Olivera, *Pillis y macehuales*, p. 124; Taylor, *Landlord and Peasant*, pp. 49–55, which sees the derogation of Oaxaca’s *caciques* as a post-1650 phenomenon. In the remote Mixteca of Oaxaca, Indian *caciques* survived relatively successfully throughout the seventeenth century; their old theocratic authority waned (as the new Catholic dispensation demanded), but, in the absence of a powerful Spanish presence, they acquired economic assets (land and control of labour), while playing the role of political mediators within a system of indirect colonial rule: Rodolfo Pastor, *Campesinos y reformas: La Mixteca, 1700–1856* (Mexico,

or ground down – the Indian *cacique* was a vital agent of Spanish hegemony, who mediated between state and people, who channelled surpluses from producers to consumers and who sustained the structure – while also sometimes alleviating the burdens – of colonial rule.

As their hopes of immediate bonanzas faded, the Spaniards had to look to their own sustenance in a strange land. Hardly had they been founded when the new Spanish towns faced the threat of dearth and began to clamour for guaranteed food supplies.³³ Guaranteeing the urban food supply was, after all, one of the chief functions of early modern government.³⁴ The principal device to which the Spaniards resorted was an import from the Antilles, which traced back to Reconquista policy: the *encomienda*. Under this system, groups of Indians were assigned to Spanish *encomenderos* who were required to protect and convert their charges; in return, the Indians would provide labour and tribute (tribute being payable in goods as well as in cash).³⁵ In addition, it should be noted, some Indians, located in ‘Crown towns’ paid tribute directly to the Crown, thus to the colonial bureaucracy.³⁶ Though forms of Indian slavery existed (after the 1540s illegally), *encomienda* Indians were not chattel slaves: they more resembled European serfs, especially those Russian serfs who, by imperial decree, owed labour dues to a servitor aristocracy.³⁷ They remained in their communities as direct producers, yielding up goods, money or labour to their supposed paternalist overlords. The *encomenderos* therefore enjoyed quasi-seigneurial rights rather than direct ownership of land; what is more, *encomiendas* were not heritable, unless so stipulated by the Crown.

1987), pp. 81–5. In Yucatán, in contrast, the Maya *caciques* were more rapidly reduced to ‘agents of colonial rule (and) not even junior partners’: Farriss, *Maya Society*, pp. 101, 176–7, 235.

³³ Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion*, pp. 17–18; Leslie Byrd Simpson, *The Encomienda in New Spain: The Beginnings of Spanish Mexico* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 149, quoting the viceroy to Charles V in 1553 on the continued provisioning problems of Mexico City.

³⁴ Charles Tilly, ‘Food Supply and Public Order in Modern Europe’, in Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 380–455.

³⁵ Simpson, *The Encomienda*; Gibson, *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, ch. 4; Chance, *Conquest of the Sierra*, pp. 23–4.

³⁶ Enrique Semo, *The History of Capitalism in Mexico: Its Origins, 1521–1763* (Austin, 1993), pp. 38–9.

³⁷ Cf. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1979), p. 330ff.

The *encomienda* represented a means to support the Spanish conquistadors – who clamoured for reward and livelihood³⁸ – while exploiting, but not destroying, existing Indian communities, lands and social practices. For tribute, of course, had been the basic means of transferring surplus under Mesoamerican regimes. Indian *caciques* could now be charged to deliver up tributary payments to new masters.³⁹ The *encomienda* was thus a contrived, convenient response to circumstances – the first of many such adaptations of old institutions to new Mexican realities. It was also a reluctant response, in that Cortés, who had witnessed the destruction wrought by the *encomenderos* in the Antilles, was initially unenthusiastic; so, too, were the Crown and – we shall note – the clergy. But for the moment there was no viable alternative. Within a few years of the fall of Tenochtitlán, therefore, the *encomienda* was well established as the chief exploitative device of the new colony, with Cortés's companions figuring as the principal beneficiaries – albeit within a stretched hierarchy ranging from the modest to the lavish. Chief within this hierarchy was Cortés himself who, his initial scruples overcome, became the privileged overlord of a vast tributary population centred upon Oaxaca, which made him 'the wealthiest person in the entire Spanish world'.⁴⁰ In addition to such tributary rights, Cortés and his heirs were invested with ample lands and jurisdictional powers, which together constituted 'a distant replica of the Duchy of Burgundy in the heart of New Spain'.⁴¹ Even this munificence, however, did not satisfy the Great Captain's princely ambitions; nor, we shall see, were his offspring content with their lot.

Initially concentrated in the old Aztec heartland, where the Indian population was densest, the *encomienda* soon spread to newly

³⁸ As early as 1521 Cortés's lieutenants were grumbling about the Great Captain's supposed fortune, which contrasted with their own slim pickings; graffiti to this effect appeared on the whitewashed walls of Cortés's palace in Coyoacán, to which Cortés replied in kind, writing: 'a blank wall is the paper of fools': Thomas, *Conquest of Mexico*, pp. 544–5.

³⁹ Olivera, *Pillis y macehuales*, pp. 163–4; Farriss, *Maya Society*, p. 271; Gibson, *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, pp. 195–6; James Lockhart, 'Capital and Province, Spaniard and Indian: The Example of Late Sixteenth-Century Touca', in Altman and Lockhart, *Provinces of Early Mexico*, pp. 102–4.

⁴⁰ Charles Gibson, *Spain in America* (New York, 1966), p. 55. See also Chance, *Race and Class*, pp. 36–9; G. Michael Riley, *Fernando Cortés and the Marquesado in Morelos, 1522–1547* (Albuquerque, 1973).

⁴¹ Chevalier, *Land and Society*, pp. 127–8.

conquered provinces like New Galicia and Yucatán – wherever, in fact, a settled Indian peasantry could be subjugated. For the essence of the *encomienda* was its exploitation not of land but of labour: labour which could either directly serve the Spanish rulers or, more often, yield up a quota of goods; labour, too, which was usually mediated and organized through the authority of Indian *caciques*. Thus it was Indian labour which cultivated the land and fed the cities, which built both the massive convents of the friars and the ornate town houses of the conquistadors and which made possible the Herculean transformation of Mexico City from a city of causeways and canals to one of streets, plazas and aqueducts.⁴²

Though technically hedged about with restrictions and obligations, the *encomienda* became – especially in the chaotic and piratical years which immediately followed the Conquest – a licence for robbery and extortion, unredeemed by paternalist solicitude and accentuated by the fall in Indian numbers. Indian collaborationism was, at times, strained to the limit, while the Spaniards justified their extreme conduct in terms of dire necessity.⁴³ Those who settled in remote zones – such as Compostela, on the far frontier of New Galicia – lamented the lack of Indians, which condemned them to hard work and poverty.⁴⁴ During these initial, chaotic years, too, thousands of Indians (200,000 according to Motolinía's estimate, which was not the highest) were reduced to outright slavery; many were shipped great distances, even to the Antilles, where they were traded for the cattle and horses which New Spain needed.⁴⁵ Nuño de Guzmán

⁴² Gibson, *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, p. 119 (clerical use of forced labour); according to Motolinía, the rebuilding of Tenochtitlán/Mexico City represented 'the seventh plague' in terms of Indian mortality: Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz, 'The Population of Colonial Spanish America' in Leslie Bethell, ed., *Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 2, *Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 9; see also Thomas, *Conquest of Mexico*, pp. 560–2, and Serge Gruzinski, *Histoire de Mexico* (Paris, 1996), pp. 226–7.

⁴³ Gibson, *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, pp. 77–8, sees 'generalized abuse and particular atrocities' and, p. 196, demands which 'strained to the full the native capacity to pay'. Simpson, *The Encomienda*, p. 63, quotes a contemporary view that maltreatment reflected the *encomenderos'* uncertain status; the Indians were 'borrowed goods', to be exploited to the full while the opportunity remained.

⁴⁴ Parry, *The Audiencia of New Galicia*, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Enrique Florescano, 'La formación de los trabajadores en la época colonial, 1521–1750', in Florescano et al., *La clase obrera en la historia de México*, vol. 1, *De la colonia al imperio* (Mexico, 1980), pp. 52–3; Warren, *Conquest of Michoacan*, pp. 134–5, 182, 195, 200–2; Simpson, *The Encomienda*, p. 69.

rounded up slaves for export from the conquered Huasteca (for each change of masters, the slave acquired a new facial brand: the Spanish chronicler Diego Durán, writing in the 1570s, recalled as a boy seeing such branded Indians in the streets of Mexico City); and by the 1540s the conquistadors of Yucatán had begun slave shipments to the islands of the Caribbean, inaugurating an odious commerce which would again flourish three centuries later.⁴⁶

This resort to *de facto* – but illicit – Indian enslavement was further encouraged by the growth of legal *de jure* black slave imports. Black slaves, though expensive, guaranteed a work force for the early, labour-intensive enterprises of the colony, chiefly the mines and the sugar plantations.⁴⁷ These required a permanent and, to a degree, skilled labour force which *encomienda* Indians could not adequately provide; so, between 1521 and 1594 some 36,500 black slaves were shipped to Mexico, the first batch of 200,000 who would be imported throughout three centuries of colonial rule. Many – perhaps 40 per cent in the 1570s – lived in Mexico City, where they graced rich households as servants and drivers; others became hacienda and mining foremen; while in coastal Veracruz and Guerrero, black and mulatto communities sprang up, where they have remained to this day.⁴⁸ This repertoire of colonial coercion was completed by the system of forced labour – of blacks, mestizos and Indians – which served the *obrajes* (workshops) and *presidios* (forts), of which more later.⁴⁹

The *encomienda*, however, enjoyed only a brief supremacy. It faced three challenges; those of church, crown and demographic collapse. First, the Church denounced it as an instrument of conquistador exploitation (the *encomendero's* reciprocal duty of evangelization, the clergy noted, was rarely fulfilled). This attack formed part of a broader clerical campaign against conquistador abuses, a campaign which antedated the Conquest of Mexico but for which the Conquest

⁴⁶ Chipman, *Nuño de Guzmán*, pp. 198–9, 209–10; D. A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Creole Monarchy and the Liberal State, 1492–1867* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 284; Farriss, *Maya Society*, pp. 24–5.

⁴⁷ Liss, *Mexico under Spain*, pp. 136–9; Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity and Regional Development* (Austin, 1991), p. 28ff.

⁴⁸ Lesley B. Rout, Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America: 1502 to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 77–8, 279–82; Cope, *Limits of Racial Domination*, pp. 13–14; Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*; Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Población negra de México* (Mexico, 1972).

⁴⁹ See pp. 87, 98, 164–5.