We, the King

We, the King challenges the dominant top-down interpretation of the Spanish Empire and its monarchs’ decrees in the New World, revealing how ordinary subjects had much more say in government and lawmaking than previously acknowledged. During the viceregal period spanning the post-1492 conquest until 1598, the King signed more than 110,000 pages of decrees concerning state policies, minutiae, and everything in between. Through careful analysis of these decrees, Adrian Masters illustrates how lawmaking was aided and abetted by subjects from various backgrounds, including powerful court women, Indigenous commoners, Afro-descendant raftsmen, secret saboteurs, pirates, sovereign Chiriguano Indians, and secretaries’ wives. Subjects’ innumerable petitions and labor prompted – and even phrased – a complex body of legislation and legal categories demonstrating the degree to which this empire was created from the “bottom up.” Innovative and unique, We, the King reimagines our understandings of kingship, imperial rule, colonialism, and the origins of racial categories.

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We, the King

Creating Royal Legislation in the Sixteenth-Century
Spanish New World

ADRIAN MASTERS
University of Trier
In loving memory of Ilir Hoti, Burhan Hoti, Ahmet Zhabjaku, Graciela Valverde, and Félix David Huertas Salazar.
Contents

List of Figures page viii
List of Tables ix
Acknowledgments x

Prelude: A Peruvian Mestizo at the Spanish Court 1
Introduction: The Collective Making of an Empire 6

1 Paper Ceremonies for a Global Empire: Gobierno Petitions and the Collective Work of Voluntad 47

2 The Cocreation of the Imperial Logistics Network 78

3 Distant Kings, Powerful Women, Prudent Ministers: The Gendered Creation of the Council of the Indies 109

4 Lawmaking in a Portable Council: Gobierno Decision-Making Technologies Before 1561 155

5 “Bring the Papers”: Royal Decision-Making and the Power of Archives in Madrid, 1561–1598 180

6 Creating the Royal Decree: Format, Phraseology, and Petitioners’ Transformation of Indies Law 221

Pedro Rengifo’s Epilogue: Subjects of Chance 257

Conclusions 261

Glossary 270

Bibliography 274

Index 311
Figures

0.1 A 1578 royal decree barring *mestizos* from the priesthood, dispatched by the council to each Indies bishop (pictured is the decree for Mexico)  page 3

0.2 A map of the Spanish Indies, ca. 1570  10

1.1 A 1524 petition by Hernán Cortés, Mexico  55

1.2 A ca. 1543 petition by Bartolomé de las Casas, then Bishop of Chiapas  56

1.3 A priest in Peru helps Indian leader don Juan Pilcone draft a petition against a corrupt field justice (*corregidor*)  67

4.1 a) An example of a petition capítulo and the council’s decision; b) The council’s rejection of one of Las Casas’ proposals; c) An example of Las Casas’ 1542 petition  166

6.1 A 1532 decree signed by Regent Queen Isabella of Portugal, in response to the petition of Spanish lay sisters in Mexico  226

6.2 Destinations of 2,506 *de oficio* decrees (mostly *gobierno*), early 1567–mid-1576  254
### Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Royal decisions and the new council archive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Six royal decrees de gobierno with recognitions of Indian petitioners</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Seven decrees the Crown attributed to nonelite petitioners, demonstrating how these groups categorized others</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Cacique don Pedro Henao of Laloma’s entry in the petition registers and 1586 decree</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>The Archdeacon’s petition chapter and the 1564 decree</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>A 1578 petition by the High Court of Santa Fé, its relación, and 1576 decree</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>A 1550 contract, petition, 1551 consulta, and resulting 1551 decree</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

In Italo Calvino’s 1979 novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, a Reader seeks to reveal the identity of the author of a mysterious manuscript. He approaches a publisher, Mr. Cavedagna, who recounts how a client once swindled him by misrepresenting a manuscript for publication. “What does the name of an author on the jacket matter?” the fraudster had objected (p. 101). The Reader, initially uneasy with this answer, soon begins to ponder if the swindler was somehow right. Surely, what we claim as “our” writing is never fully ours. That, if nothing else, is the argument of *We, the King*: underneath a misleading jacket sleeve, which claims a single person responsible, hides many others’ hard work – many authorships.

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xii

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