

Introduction

Bartolomé Dias was living in Mexico City in March 1629.¹ He sold fine *sinabafa* cotton in the Main Square from an assigned spot where he stacked bolts of cloth on a wooden box. Dias called out to passersby. “Touch this material,” he would say, “see how soft it is, and I will give you a good price, at whatever length you need.” He would point to his ruler and hold up the scissors. The plausible scene matches the observations of a Genoese merchant, who noted the cloth’s popularity. Sinabafa was “white and easy to wash,” good for bedding and clothing, and relatively inexpensive, some three feet sold for about two *reals*.² Nahua men purchased it to use as a cape tied with a knot over one shoulder.³ Dias was from the Philippines; the cloth was from China; his customers included Native Americans who paid with silver coins or cacao beans. Thinking about these particulars – the origin of its residents, the availability of imported goods, and the persistence of commerce on Indigenous land – suggests that Mexico City was a unique place during the seventeenth century. It was America’s first colonial metropolis: a seat of commercial and political power with global ties. Once Tenochtitlan, capital of the Mexica empire, the city was now capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, a jewel in the Hapsburg Crown.⁴

To get there, Dias followed maritime and terrestrial routes that linked the Spanish empire. He endured a months-long journey from Manila to Acapulco on board a ship of the Manila Galleon, a royal fleet. Sinabafa cloth made the transpacific crossing in tightly packed crates on the same ships. From the port, Dias headed northward, walking some 235 miles to Mexico City, which was like the hub of a wheel with routes as spokes reaching in all directions.⁵ Another road ran eastward

for a similar distance over mountainous terrain to reach Veracruz, the gateway to the Atlantic's commercial world.⁶ Dias's travels mirrored the circulation of people and goods across the far-reaching networks that connected the city to the world.

Now imagine his everyday interactions.⁷ Early in the morning, Dias stopped for breakfast at the stand of an African woman selling warm drinks and bread. He chatted with Nahua carters who delivered goods to the square. He went to see a barber for a shave and companionship after closing his stand. And when he got home, he counted silver coins kept hidden in a box; coins were the city's most precious commodity, valued by silversmiths. Dias relied on the work that occupied his neighbors all day, to eat, to transport his goods, to care for his body, and to secure his livelihood. All the people he met were equally interdependent, as they needed each other to provide essential services that enabled them to do their own work.

Perhaps it seems obvious that resourceful people sustained Mexico City, but how and why did they do so? What do their stories reveal about the experience of living in early modern cities? His experience shows where local trade and global commerce met: at a stand on the Main Square where Dias resold Chinese cloth purchased in Asia with silver coins minted in Mexico City.⁸ The invitation here is to observe the local: to follow people such as Dias across the city as they pursued opportunities in a wealthy, yet deeply unequal city. For it was through these efforts, their daily work, that residents made the city.⁹

I.1 A TOUR OF THE CITY

The city in 1629, when Bartolomé Dias was selling cloth in the Main Square, looked a lot like a plan drafted a year earlier by the architect Juan Gómez de Trasmonte (Color Plate 1, Figure I.1).¹⁰ The two men may have crossed paths. Trasmonte gained intimate knowledge of the city's topography by surveying public works, which he used to good effect in composing this work.¹¹ The plan, one of the few that survive from the seventeenth century, presents a stunning vista.¹² It is a visual expression of the characterization of the city's size and unique location made by a contemporary visitor from England: "Mexico is one of the greatest cities in the world in extension," meaning its size.¹³ The cityscape spanned 2.1 miles east-to-west and 1.3 miles north-to-south in the late 1630s.¹⁴ Dias must have been similarly impressed when he first approached its environs. Everyone who moved there or visited

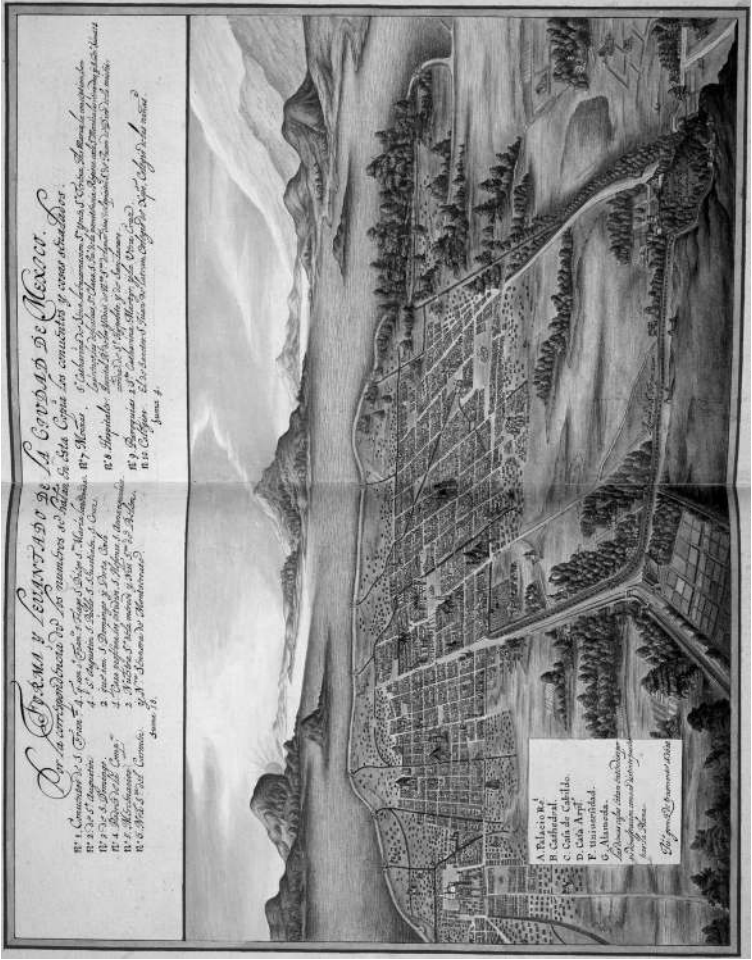


FIGURE 1.1 Mexico City in 1628

Source: “Mexico City aus der Vogelperspektive” by Johannes Vingboons (1660), from *Atlas Blaeu* – *Van der Hem*. Based on “Forma y levantado de la ciudad de México” by Juan Gómez de Trasmonte (1628). Sign. E 34.414-C. Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the color version, please refer to the plate section.

throughout the century seemed to remark that the built environment “in the middle of a lake” was a site to behold.¹⁵

Mexico City was crisscrossed by streets and canals, surrounded by water, and connected to overland routes by great causeways. It was an aquatic and terrestrial space. Trasmonte’s plan depicts this reality. The city grew on an island located in the fresh and saltwater lakes complex that once existed in the Valley of Mexico.¹⁶ It retained an island character, even as residents reclaimed more land from the water over the course of the century. The plan is a bird’s eye view, flying in from the west; the sun rises in the east on the top.¹⁷ The mounds and peaks on the plan’s upper register represent the mountain ranges and volcanoes that surround the valley and embrace the city.¹⁸ The salty water of Lake Texcoco stretches below this mountainous scape, while the city’s agricultural hinterland extends in the plan’s lower register.

Trasmonte offers a guide to this landscape, yet the city’s residents are absent. A metropolis is both. The Nahuatl word *altepetl* for city refers to the community of people who live there and contains the elements for water (*atl*) and hill (*tepetl*). Similarly, the Latin word *urbs* for city refers to its people as well as its buildings and streets. Residents’ stories provide a worm’s eye view, revealing what it would have been like to be part of this political community and live in this place.

Maps in the chapters based on a graphic rendering of the plan zoom in and out of the vista (Figure I.2). They locate the spaces where residents worked and experienced community, say at the city’s public park, the *Alameda*, G on the map. Pictorial works and narrative accounts from printed materials contribute to this imagining of space. So do descriptions drawn from court cases and property records, which are the main sources for this new telling of Mexico City’s history. The aim is to have readers visualize the city from the perspective of the historical actors who sustained it over the course of the century.

The cityscape extended outward from the Main Square, a main stage for historical actors, as shown in a graphic rendering of Trasmonte’s map (Figure I.3). They worked in a space long claimed by Native Americans, as well as newcomers such as Bartolomé Dias. His rented quarters were in a building next to the Convent of Jesus Mary, a short walk away. In the mornings, he headed to Coin Street, where he took a left, passing the House of Coins, to enter the square on the corner of the Viceroyal Palace, A on the map.¹⁹ He was feet away from where the Mexica’s Great Temple stood more than a century earlier.²⁰ From his stand, Dias watched as the space filled with vendors who opened the doors of their

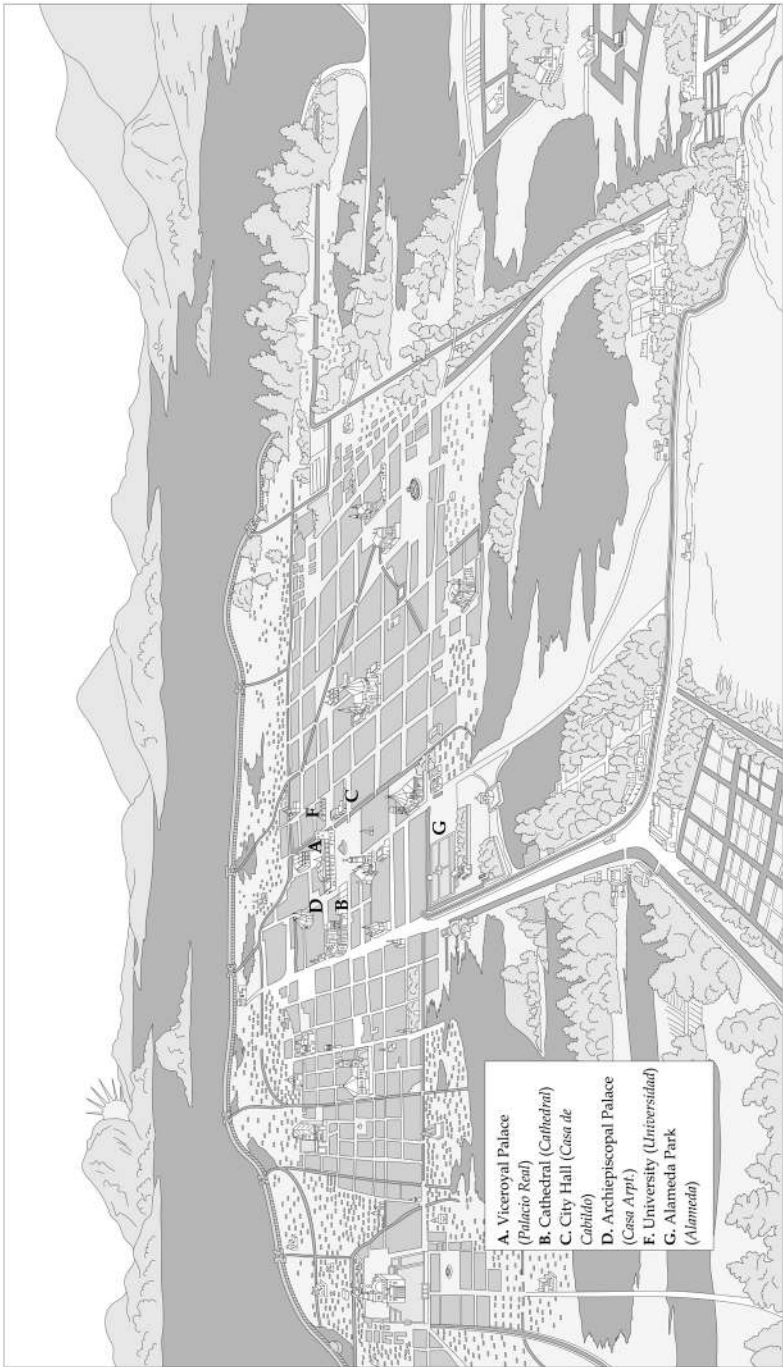


FIGURE 1.2 The cityscape

Source: Graphic rendering of “Mexico City aus der Vogelperspektive” by Johannes Vingboons (1660), from *Atlas Blaeu* – *Van der Hem*. Based on “Forma y levantado de la ciudad de México” by Juan Gómez de Trasmonte (1628). Sign. E 34.413-C. Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. Image by Matilde Grimaldi.

The rendering crops Trasmonte’s map on the bottom and right sides. It includes the original legend names and lettered places in the same location, with the exception of F, the University of Mexico, which is repositioned to its actual location.

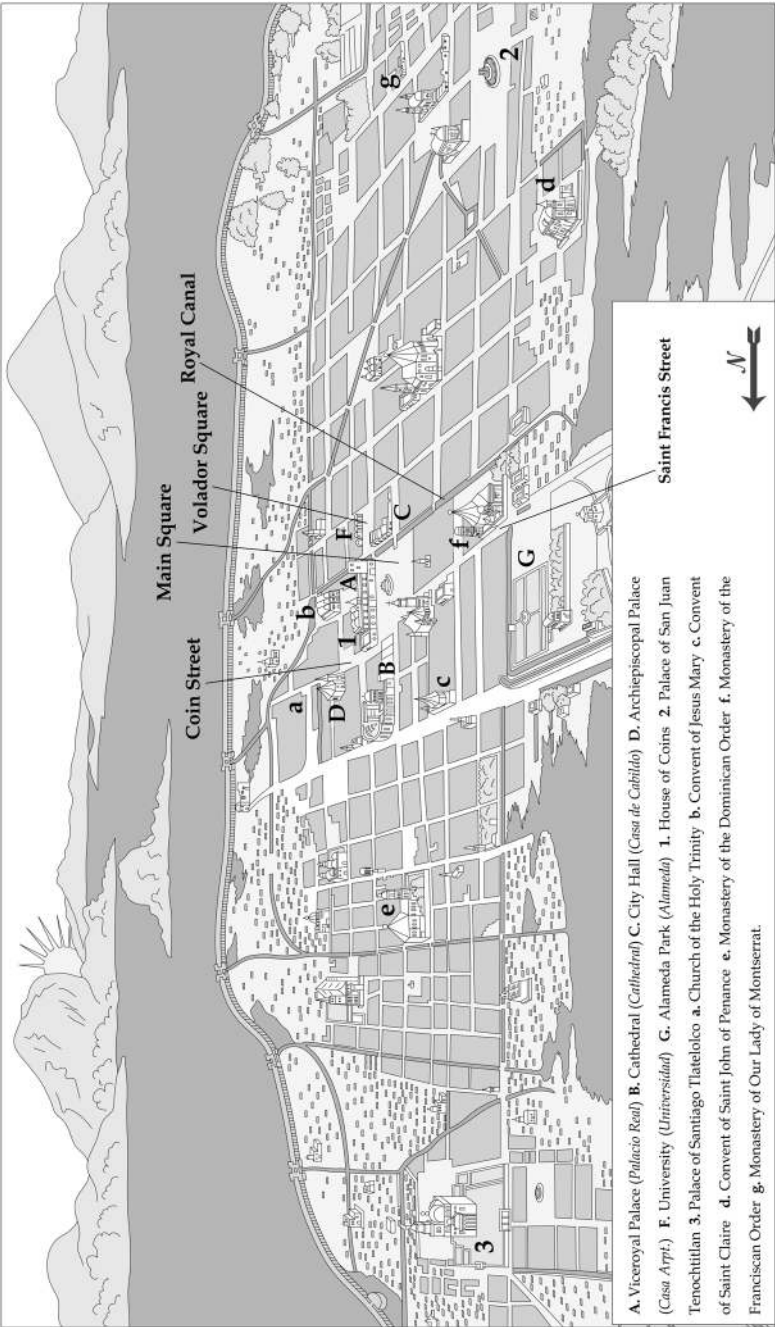


FIGURE 1.3 The residents' city

Source: Graphic rendering of a detail of “Mexico City aus der Vogelperspektive” by Johannes Vingboons (1660), from *Atlas Blaeu – Van der Hem*. Based on “Forma y levantado de la ciudad de México” by Juan Gómez de Trasmonte (1628). Sign. E 34-413-C. Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. Image by Matilde Grimaldi.

The rendering has locations mentioned in the Introduction.

wooden stalls, including barbers. The viceroy's coachmen approached the palace from streets laid out as a chessboard. Silversmiths headed to their shops on Saint Francis Street, which began on the square's western side. Their stories unfold in the chapters, each dedicated to showing how residents in these professions transformed the city.

I.2 CHAPTERS

Short chapter titles name the economic activities of residents who fed, transported, and cared for their neighbors and helped them value their possessions. This activity had working people feeding, transporting, caring, and valuing the city's silver. *American Metropolis* reconstructs their history for the first time.²¹

Tomato sellers arrived at the Main Square on canoes with their produce and set up their stands along the Royal Canal. Poultry vendors arranged their cages in preparation for their first customers at Volador Square. The smells of fresh and cooked food wafted through the air. *Feeding the City* is about the previously untold history of the rise of the central market food complex over the course of the century.²² Nahua market women fiercely defended their privilege as Indigenous vassals to sell what they called "fruits of the earth." Residents conceived of privileges as advantages or concessions accorded by the crown, often in relation to their rights.²³ Recent migrants secured a space for their wooden-stall eateries by paying rent at city hall. Market women from Upper Guinea obtained trading licenses at the Viceroyal Palace and negotiated credit arrangements with purveyors at their warehouses. They all came together to create a food complex that straddled Main and Volador Squares. A reconstruction of their political actions shows that they convinced officials to support their efforts by reminding them that they had a royal mandate to secure provisions as part of their governing responsibilities. As the crown told one viceroy, the city had to have "an abundance of all necessary foods," for without it "people would not be able to sustain themselves."²⁴ Food vendors used these very same words.

The carters who dropped off wine barrels at the food court in the market complex were part of a transportation network that enabled movement within the city and connected residents to the hinterland and further afield. *Transporting the City* articulates a new history of motion based on the lives of residents who pushed carts over small bridges and steered horses and mules across the city's streets.²⁵ A detailed description of the city's byways locates this movement. Carters gained concessions

from city officials by creating new businesses that supported government efforts to maintain public order, defined at the time as building and maintaining the city's infrastructure. Coachmen created safe havens across the city in response to officials' attempts to regulate the movement of enslaved and formerly enslaved people at night. During their daily traversals, they made contacts and gathered information about the latest happenings to earn money on the side. The possibility of making such deals enabled enslaved coachmen to purchase their freedom, which was unique in comparison to people who lived in other imperial settings where self-purchase was nearly impossible. Their history shows that residents took over the city's streets to sustain themselves, and in doing so, facilitated commercial activity.

Like food vendors, barbers claimed the Main Square for themselves, setting up stands, sometimes simply a stool, to cater to people who streamed in and out of this space. They also worked at shops across the city. *Caring for the City* recovers the previously unknown history of men from the Philippines who opened new businesses called blade-and-scissors shops to separate themselves from traditional barber surgeons.²⁶ They forged their own path by challenging members of the established professional association, the Barbers and Surgeons Guild, who tried to shut down their competitors for decades. The history of public health provides context for their economic achievements because they had to deal with officials and doctors who regulated caregivers. They hid that they offered an alternative wellness experience in their shops and suggested instead that residents only patronized their businesses for grooming, which did not concern doctors.

The Main Square stood between Saint Francis Street and the House of Coins. Silversmiths stopped at a food stall or visited a barber as part of their daily routine, which took them from their shops to that building to have officials hallmark their objects. *Valuing the City* demonstrates for the first time that silversmiths served as the arbiters of value in Mexico City. They persuaded officials to trust them, to allow them to govern their affairs, by preserving the silver standard. It was their way of protecting the crown's money, reals minted at the House of Coins that served as a global currency during the seventeenth century.²⁷ Examining the lives of silversmiths shows how residents used silver locally in an economy that operated on credit and with cash, which was not the case in other early modern cities. A food vendor rented a wooden stall on the square; when he sold his business in 1617, the buyer paid him "400 pesos in reals," in coins, for the equipment and

I.3 Residents' Economy

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inventory.²⁸ Silversmiths made objects that had intrinsic and monetary value, so residents relied on them for investment advice and to understand the crown's complicated fiscal policy. Their experience closes the history of working people, for they were the ones with the closest tie to the one thing – silver – that everyone else worked to have, to buy things and to save it in the form of silver coins or wrought silver.

I.3 RESIDENTS' ECONOMY

A silversmith described his friend's inheritance as “the means to seek out his life”; he said it was “capital for trade and commerce.”²⁹ He meant that having money would enable his friend to pursue opportunities and make more money. His friend was fortunate; other residents had to earn it by working. What do I need to do to secure a livelihood? The silversmith may have asked himself this question when he was a young man. He was clearly able to pick his profession, not true for everyone, which made it possible for him “to seek out his life.” The silversmith was talking and thinking about his friend's and his own economy.

At the time, contemporary writers discussed the economy in terms of the responsibilities people had to one another, and the actions they took to meet them. Economy was what people did to have resources and how they managed them, be they a king or a silversmith. The king needed “to write down with his hand the intake and outlay of imperial rents”; he managed (accounted for, budgeted, and spent) money from taxes to sustain the empire.³⁰ Individuals bore the same responsibilities; they had to acquire money and manage it to be able to buy a sack of maize for the people with whom they shared their meals. They also earned and saved it for themselves, say to buy a pair of silver earrings.

American Metropolis recovers people's actions and choices to examine their economic lives.³¹ Working meant “doing useful things” for the “self and the republic.”³² Residents worked to support themselves and their families, but the contemporary understanding was that they also worked to be useful for the republic. This dual understanding relates to residents' political achievements. They got officials to protect their businesses precisely because they did useful things that sustained the city.

Working involved a range of economic activities. Market women traded, described as the “buying and selling of merchandise.”³³ They did the hard labor evoked by the untranslatable word *trafago*, which was the sound made when “moving goods from one place to another” to sell them.³⁴ Silversmiths “made” things.³⁵ They fashioned objects, wrought

silver, a term that conjures the physical energy, the heating, bending, and polishing, that these men spent on their work. Coachmen reined mules and horses to convey passengers from place to place; barbers wielded combs to coif their customers' hair. People in these occupations assisted other people, doing something for them that they could or would not do for themselves. All these individuals did "useful things."³⁶

They would not have used the phrase working people. Residents did not refer to themselves as workers, and they certainly did not say they were laborers or plebs.³⁷ Instead, they specified their profession. They said they were food vendors, carters, and silversmiths. They made it clear that what they did was distinct and that they had different, often opposing, interests than residents in other occupations.

The experiences of residents such as Bartolomé Dias reveal that they exerted economic agency. Beyond securing food and shelter, they acted to achieve financial goals in the face of considerable obstacles. Their motivations were as varied as they were: a desire to change their legal status; a longing for comfort; an easier tomorrow. As people noted in their wills and testaments, they aspired to leave something for their families, even if it was just enough "for them to be able to eat all the days of their lives."³⁸

1.4 RESIDENTS' POLITICAL WORK

A return to Trasmonte's map situates where residents exerted political agency (Figure 1.3). Working people entered buildings with legislative and judicial requests. They asked officials to change local ordinances, to grant them licenses, and to demand justice. These appeals to government were part of their work, in the sense that making a living often required the involvement of officials, or at least their implicit support. Working people were thus political, which meant being litigious. This form of political activism was characteristic of vassals of the Hapsburg empire, known for its responsiveness, immense bureaucracy, and devotion to the law and legal practice.³⁹ The crown charged the viceroy with the "administration of justice equally to all royal subjects and vassals."⁴⁰ Residents took that directive to heart; they interpreted the law in creative ways to serve their purposes. They petitioned the viceroy directly, as well as the judges and officials of the city's myriad tribunals and councils, including at the Viceroyal Palace, the palaces of the Indigenous polities, city hall, and the archbishopric palace.⁴¹

Bartolomé Dias navigated these political bodies to protect his interests. By this point, he had arranged to become part of the polity of San Juan