

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07790-3 - Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain: Volume 2

Alexander Von Humboldt Translated by John Black

Excerpt

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POLITICAL ESSAY

ON THE

KINGDOM OF NEW SPAIN.

CONTAINING

Researches relative to the Geography of Mexico, the Extent of its Surface and its political Division into Intendancies, the physical Aspect of the Country, the Population, the State of Agriculture and Manufacturing and Commercial Industry, the Canals projected be-

tween the South Sea and Atlantic Ocean, the Crown Revenues, the Quantity of the precious Metals which have flowed from Mexico into Europe and Asia, since the Discovery of the New Continent, and the Military Defence of New Spain.

BY ALEXANDER DE HUMBOLDT.

WITH

PHYSICAL SECTIONS AND MAPS,

FOUNDED ON ASTRONOMICAL OBSERVATIONS, AND
TRIGONOMETRICAL AND BAROMETRICAL
MEASUREMENTS.

—
TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL FRENCH,

BY JOHN BLACK.

—
VOL. II.

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STATISTICAL ANALYSIS
OF
THE KINGDOM OF
NEW SPAIN.



Territorial extent: 118,478 square leagues,* (2,339,400 myriares.)

Population: 5,837,100 inhabitants,
or 49 inhabitants per square league, (2 1-2 per myriare.)

* Of 25 to the degree. *Trans.*

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NEW SPAIN comprehends

A. *Mexico Proper (el Reyno de Mexico.)*

Territorial extent: 51,280 square leagues, (or
1,015,640 myriares.)

Population: 5,413,900 inhabitants,
or 105 inhabitants per square league.

B. *Las provincias internas orientales y occidentales.*

Territorial extent: 59,375 square leagues, (or
1,323,760 myriares.)

Population: 357,200 inhabitants,
or 6 inhabitants to the square league.

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STATISTICAL ANALYSIS.	Population in 1803.	Extent of Surface in square Leagues.	No. of Inhabitants to the square League.
I. Intendancy of Mexico.	1,511,800	5,927	255

THE whole of this intendancy is situated under the torrid zone. It extends from the $16^{\circ} 34'$ to the $21^{\circ} 57'$ of north latitude. It is bounded on the north by the intendancy of San Luis Potosi, on the west by the intendancies of Guanaxuato and Valladolid, and on the east by those of Vera Cruz and La Puebla. It is washed towards the south by the South Sea, or Great Ocean, for a length of coast of 82 leagues from Acapulco to Zacatula.

Its greatest length from Zacatula to the mines of the Doctor* is 136 leagues; and its greatest breadth from

* The extreme points are properly situated to the south-east of Acapulco, near the mouth of the Rio Nespa, and to the north of the Real del Doctor, near the city of Valles, which belongs to the intendancy of San Luis Potosi. Places of note being seldom situated on the very boundaries, we have preferred naming those which are nearest to them. A glance

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Zacatula to the mountains situated to the east of Chilpansingo, is 92 leagues. In its northern part, towards the celebrated mines of Zimapan and the Doctor, it is separated by a narrow stripe from the Gulf of Mexico. Near Mextitlan, this stripe is only nine leagues in breadth.

More than two thirds of the intendancy of Mexico are mountainous, in which there are immense plains, elevated from 2,000* to 2,300† metres above the level of the ocean. From Chalco to Queretaro are almost uninterrupted plains of fifty leagues in length, and eight or ten in breadth. In the neighbourhood of the western coast, the climate is burning and very unhealthy. One summit only, the Nevado de Toluca, situated in a fertile plain of 2,700 metres‡ in height, enters the region of perpetual snow. Yet the porphyritical summit of this old volcano, whose form bears a strong resemblance to that of Pichincha near Quito, and which appears to have been formerly extremely elevated, is uncovered with snow in the rainy months of September and October. The elevation of the Pico del Fraile, or the highest summit of the Nevado de Toluca, is 4,620 metres§ (2,370 toises.) No mountain in this intendancy equals the height of Mount Blanc.

The valley of Mexico, or Tenochtitlan, of which I publish a very minute map, is situated in the centre of the Cordillera of Anahuac, on the ridge of

bestowed on my general map of New Spain will serve to justify this mode of indicating the boundaries of the intendancies.

* 6,561 feet. *Trans.*† 7,545 feet. *Trans.*‡ 8,857 feet. *Trans.*§ 15,156 feet. *Trans.*

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the porphyritical and basaltic amygdaloid mountains, which run from the S.S.E. to the N.N.W. This valley is of an oval form. According to my observations, and those of a distinguished mineralogist, M. Don Luis Martin, it contains from the entry of the Rio Tenango into the lake of Chalco, to the foot of the Cerro de Sincoque, near the Desague Real of Huehuetoca 18^{1.3} leagues in length, and from S. Gabriel, near the small town of Tezcucu, to the sources of the Rio de Escapusalco, near Guisquiluca, 12^{1.2} leagues in breadth.* The territorial extent of the valley is 244^{1.2} square leagues, of which only 22 square leagues are occupied by the lakes, which is less than a tenth of the whole surface.

The circumference of the valley, reckoning from the crest of the mountains which surround it like a circular wall, is 67 leagues. This crest is most elevated on the south, particularly on the south-east, where the great volcanoes of La Puebla, the Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl, bound the valley. One of the roads which lead from the valley of Tenochtitlan to that of Cholula and La Puebla passes even between the two volcanoes, by Tlamanalco, Ameca, La Cumbre, and La Cruz del Coreo. The small army of Cortez passed by this road on his first invasion.

Six great roads cross the Cordillera which encloses the valley, of which the medium height is 3,000 me-

* The maps of the valley of Mexico hitherto published are so false, that in that of M. Mascaro, annually repeated in the almanack of Mexico, that the above distances are 25 and 17 instead of 18 and 12 leagues. It is from this map undoubtedly that the archbishop Lorenzana gives the whole valley a circumference of more than 90 leagues, while the amount is almost one-third less.

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tres* above the level of the ocean. 1. The road from Acapulco to Guchilaque and Cuervaracca by the high summit called la Cruz del Marques; † 2. The road of Toluca by Tianguillo and Lerma, a magnificent causeway, which I could not sufficiently admire, constructed with great art, partly over arches; 3. The road of Queretaro, Guanaxuato, and Durango *el camino de tierra adentro*, which passes by Guautitlan, Huehuetoca, and the Puerto de Reyes, near Bata, through hills scarcely 80 metres ‡ above the pavement of the great square (*place*) of Mexico; 4. The road of Pachuco, which leads to the celebrated mines of Real del Monte, by the Cerro Ventoso, covered with oak, cypress, and rose trees, almost continually in flower; 5. The old road of La Puebla, by S. Bonaventura and the Llanos de Apan; and, 6. The new road of La Puebla by Rio Frio and Tesmelucos, south-east from the Cerro del Telapon, of which the distance from the Sierra Nevada, as well as that from the Sierra Nevada (Iztaccihuatl) to the great volcano, (Popocatepetl,) served for bases to the trigonometrical operations of MM. Velasquez and Costanzo.

From being long accustomed to hear the capital of Mexico spoken of as a city built in the midst of a lake, and connected with the continent merely by dikes, those who look at my map will be no doubt

* 9,842 feet. *Trans.*

‡ It was a military position in the time of the conquest. When the inhabitants of New Spain pronounce the word *el Marques*, without adding a family name, the name of Hernan Cortes, Marques de el Valle de Oaxaca, is understood. In the same way, *el Almirante* designates, in Spanish America, Christopher Columbus. This naive manner of expressing themselves proves the respect and admiration which they preserve for the memory of these great men.

† 262 feet. *Trans.*

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astonished on seeing that the centre of the present city is 4,500 metres* distance from the lake of Tezcuco, and more than 9,000† from the lake of Chalco. They will be inclined, therefore, either to doubt the accuracy of the descriptions in the history of the discoveries of the new world, or they will believe that the capital of Mexico does not stand on the same ground with the old residence of Montezuma:‡ but the city has certainly not changed its place, for the cathedral of Mexico occupies exactly the ground where the temple of Huitzilopochtli stood, and the present street of Tacuba is the old street of Tlacopan, through which Cortez made his famous retreat in the *melancholy night* of the 1st of July, 1520, which goes by the name of *Noche triste*. The difference of situation between the old maps and those published by me arises solely from the diminution of water of the lake of Tezcuco.

It may be useful in this place to lay before the readers a passage from a letter addressed§ by Cortez to the Emperor Charles the Fifth, dated 30th October, 1520, in which he gives the description of the valley of Mexico. This passage written with great simplicity of style, gives us at the same time a very good idea of the sort of police which prevailed in the old Tenochtitlan. “The province in which the re-

* 14,763 feet. *Trans.* † 29,527 feet. *Trans.*

‡ The true Mexican name of this king is *Moteuczoma*. There are two kings of the name in the genealogy of the Aztec sultans. The first was called *Huchue Moteuczoma*, and the second who died prisoner of Cortez *Moteuczoma Xocojotzin*. The adjectives before and after the proper name signify older and younger.

§ *Lorenzana*.

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STATISTICAL }
ANALYSIS. } I. *Intendancy of Mexico.*

sidence of this great lord *Muteczuma* is situated," says Cortez, "is circularly surrounded with elevated mountains, and intersected with precipices. The plain contains near 70 leagues in circumference, and in this plain are two lakes which fill nearly the whole valley; for the inhabitants sail in canoes for more than 50 leagues round." (We must observe that the general speaks only of two lakes, because he knew but imperfectly those of Zumpango and Xaltocan, between which he hastily passed in his flight from Mexico to Tlascala, before the battle of Otumba.) "Of the two great lakes of the valley of Mexico, the one is fresh and the other salt water. They are separated by a small range of mountains; (the conical and insulated hills near Iztapalapan;) these mountains rise in the middle of the plain, and the waters of the lakes mingle together in a strait between the hills and the high Cordillera, (undoubtedly the eastern declivity of Cerros de Santa Fe.) The numerous towns and villages constructed in both of the two lakes carry on their commerce by canoes, without touching the continent. The great city of Temixtitlan* (Tenochtitlan) is situated in the midst of the salt-water lake, which has its tides like the sea; and from the city to the continent there are two leagues whichever way we wish to enter. Four dikes lead to the city: they are made by the hand of man, and are of the breadth of two lances. The city is as large as Seville or Cordova. The streets, I merely

* 262 feet. *Trans.*† Temistitan, Temixtitlan, Tenoxtitlan, Temihtitlan, are all vitious alterations of the true name of Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs, or Mexicans, called themselves also *Tenochques*, from whence the denomination of *Tenochtitlan* is derived.