

*Seven
Myths
of the
Spanish
Conquest*



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By insisting on the completeness of the Conquest in the face of massive evidence to the contrary, Spanish colonists bequeathed an identity crisis to their Mexican descendents. In 1862 Lord Acton wrote that Mexican national identity was unattainable. Because Mexico was made up of “races divided by blood . . . fluid, shapeless, unconnected” it was “therefore neither possible to unite them nor convert them into the elements of an organized State.”¹³

Time would seem to have proved the Englishman wrong, but nineteenth-century Mexicans were almost as pessimistic and divided themselves over how to interpret the Mexican past with a view to forging a national identity. The conservative position was simply to apply the term “nation” to the sixteenth-century Spanish view of the Conquest. Thus 1521 saw the providential dawn of civilization in Mexico, with Cortés as founding father, and the spiritual conquest symbolized by the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe a decade later. The political opponents of the conservatives placed more emphasis on the Virgin of Guadalupe and less on Cortés. Indeed, many liberals demonized the conqueror as a symbol of colonial tyranny and idolized as “national” heroes the last Mexica emperor, Cuauhtémoc, and early friars such as Las Casas and Motolinía, along with iconic Independence figures such as Hidalgo and Morelos.¹⁴

The evolution of Mexican nationalism, and the debate over it in the nineteenth century, was of course more complex. Anticlericalism and hispanophobia would wax and wane, a love-hate relationship would develop with the United States and its culture, and few of the (in)famous figures of the

Mexican past would be left undisputed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But one element remained constant throughout, one rooted in the sixteenth century and still showing remarkable vitality—the assumption that 1521 was a monumental turning point in Mexican history, the end of one era and the beginning of another. Had such assumptions been questioned, Mexicans might have found solutions to the riddle of national identity.

Similar debates over national and regional identity were waged in all the new republics of nineteenth-century Latin America. The debaters seldom questioned the accuracy or implications of using dates such as 1492, 1521, 1535 (the founding of Lima), 1541 (the founding of Santiago de Chile), or 1542 (the founding of Mérida) as milestones that marked the completion of the Conquest and the start of colonial rule. In doing so they perpetuated the perspectives of the conquistadors for their own political and practical reasons, and helped lead modern historians into the same traps.¹⁵

A classic statement along these lines is Prescott's comment that "the history of the Conquest of Mexico terminates with the surrender of the capital."¹⁶ While such a statement conforms with the vast majority of what has been written on the Conquest, from the sixteenth century to the present, in the wake of the destruction of Tenochtitlán the Spaniards had not conquered Mexico; they had simply dismembered the Mexica empire. In a note appended to Cortés's second letter to the king, an official in Spain, despite his optimistic tone, revealed the precariousness of the situation in 1522: "They found little treasure . . . but the Spaniards, of whom there are at present fifteen hundred men on foot and five hundred men on horseback, are very well fortified in that city, and they have more than a hundred thousand Indian allies in the countryside."¹⁷

Here we have the conquistadors, a year after the supposed completion of the Conquest, still searching for war booty, needing to be fortified in the ruins of the city they had destroyed, and dependent upon vast numbers of native allies. Meanwhile, the Spanish presence in the rest of the region covered by the Mexica empire was minimal, and Spanish control over the larger area that would become modern Mexico was virtually nonexistent. Indeed, Spaniards had yet to even set foot in most of the regions of what would become colonial New Spain (roughly the civilizational area called Mesoamerica). In the early 1520s, Cortés apparently believed the Spanish assertion that Michoacán was conquered and under Spanish rule. Yet the native Tarascan government remained intact and the Tarascans viewed their empire as the region's dominant power.¹⁸ Twenty years later the wars of conquest in northern Mexico were still sufficiently extensive to warrant the viceroy of New Spain himself leading Spanish-native forces into battle.¹⁹ So while 1521 was the end of the two-year war against the Mexica empire, it was the beginning of the wars of conquest in most of greater Mexico and Mesoamerica, wars that would persist into the twentieth century.

The incompleteness of the military conquest of Mexico in 1522 is, of course, merely one piece of the puzzle. The full picture of incompleteness features seven dimensions, each one corresponding to one aspect of the myth of completion. The first dimension of incompleteness is that of the rapidity of the Conquest in the core areas of native and subsequent colonial settlement. In addition to the tenuous Spanish grip on central Mexico in 1521, Spanish control over Peru was almost nonexistent in 1532, despite Atahualpa's capture and execution, and tenuous in 1536, after the lifting of the Inca siege of Cuzco. An independent Inca state persisted until its ruler, Túpac Amaru, was executed by the Spanish in 1572, and significant portions of the Andes remained outside direct colonial rule even after that.²⁰ Similarly, when the Spaniards founded Mérida in 1542, Mayas continued to rule the vast majority of the Yucatan peninsula. Independent Yucatec Maya polities still existed in 1880, when Bishop Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona asserted that "the conquest [of Yucatan] was completed entirely with the victory gained in the battle of San Bernabé of June 11, 1541, against the army of Cocom, king of Sotuta, who was the only one who had not offered obedience."²¹

The second dimension of incompleteness relates to the protracted nature of the military conquest of the so-called fringe or marginal regions of what gradually became Spanish America. Above all else Spaniards sought native settlements upon which to construct their colonies. But outside Mesoamerica and the Andes, they found sparse populations of semisedentary and nomadic natives who were not amenable to colony building. In such regions it took decades to establish toeholds and these remained unstable, poor, and attractive to few colonists. Writing in 1701, Juan de Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, author of the official account of the Spanish conquest of the Itzá Maya in the previous decade, admitted that Spanish expansion had left "great portions" of the Americas partially or entirely unconquered—and he recognized that this was due to the intractability of some natives and to the difficult terrain in some regions. But most of all, argued Villagutierre, it was because God was saving some natives for subsequent generations of Spaniards. So much for secular explanation!²² As Villagutierre predicted, the colonial frontiers of northern New Spain, Yucatan, Peru, and other regions would gradually expand, but that process included periodic contractions of frontiers and frequent military activity.

For example, early attempts at conquest and settlement at two ends of Spanish America—Florida and the River Plate basin—were disastrous. At least six expeditions to Florida failed dismally between 1513 and the 1560s, when a permanent Spanish settlement was finally established. The first founders of Buenos Aires in the late 1520s were reduced to cannibalism and the town was not permanently refounded until the 1580s, while lasting Iberian settlement on the northern bank of the River Plate (now Uruguay) did not come until a century later. New Mexico was conquered at the turn of the

seventeenth century, but was then lost to the Spanish empire in 1680 and had to be reconquered in the 1690s. The Sambos-Mosquitos were able to push back the colonial frontier in Nicaragua during the seventeenth century. The seventeenth-century subjugation of the Tule of Panamá was never consolidated and then reversed in a revolt in the 1720s, necessitating a protracted reconquest beginning in 1735. Chocó and Petén were not conquered at all until the 1680s and 1690s, respectively, but the Spanish presence in Petén declined rather than grew in the early eighteenth century.²³

Looking at Spanish America in its entirety, the Conquest as a series of armed expeditions and military actions against Native Americans never ended. Florida's Seminoles were still fighting Spaniards when the colony was taken over by the United States (to whom they have never formally surrendered either). The Araucanians of Chile—who fought for decades and eventually killed the black conquistador Juan Valiente—resisted conquest into the nineteenth century, when they continued to fight the Chilean republic in the name of the monarchy they had previously defied. The Charrúa of Uruguay were not finally subdued until the new nation's president organized their massacre in the 1830s.²⁴ Argentines also faced—and eventually slaughtered with machine guns—unconquered native peoples in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Guatusos-Malekus of Central America were enslaved and slaughtered in the late nineteenth century. Yaqui resistance in northern Mexico also lasted into the modern period, while at Mexico's southern end, the Maya of Yucatan pushed the colonial frontier back in 1847 to its sixteenth-century limits, and a string of Maya polities persisted there into the early twentieth century.²⁵

The third aspect of the myth of completion is that of the *pax colonial*, the peace among natives and between them and the Spanish colonists that supposedly came in the Conquest's wake. The flip side to this—the corresponding dimension of incompleteness—is the fact that Spanish America was rife with native revolts against colonial rule. As one prominent historian has observed, “then and now the colonial era has typically been thought of as a peaceful time,” despite “apparent endemic violence.”²⁶

There is a pair of possible reasons for this. One is the localized nature of colonial revolts, which made them relatively easy to put down and therefore appeared to colonial and modern observers insignificant compared to the kinds of wars that swept Europe during the same centuries and would ravage much of modern Latin America. The other relates more closely to the myth of completion. Despite periodic Spanish hysteria over real or imagined revolts by natives and enslaved Africans, Spaniards believed that their empire was God's way of civilizing natives and Africans in the Americas. Colonial rule was thus seen as peaceful and benevolent, an interpretation that relied upon the Conquest's being complete. Ironically, although the native perception was almost the opposite—that the Spanish presence was a protracted invasion that required

a mixed response of accommodation and resistance—it also contributed to the illusion that the *pax colonial* was real. The willingness on the part of native leaders to compromise, to find a middle course between overt confrontation and complete capitulation, helped give the impression of a colonial peace.

The impression of a colonial peace overlooks the ubiquity of everyday forms of resistance—the fourth dimension of incompleteness. Historians tend to look for dramatic revolts and miss less obvious patterns of resistance, even if they are more pervasive and often as violent.²⁷ Everyday resistance manifested itself in numerous ways, ranging from individual acts of violence by natives against Spaniards to workplace ploys such as footdragging, sabotage of equipment, and theft. The ongoing existence of unconquered regions—often referred to by the Spaniards as *despoblados* (uninhabited areas)—and shifting colonial frontiers gave natives a further option. As individuals, families, or entire communities, they could resist Spanish rule by temporarily fleeing or permanently migrating out of the empire.

The fifth dimension of the Conquest's incompleteness was the degree to which native peoples maintained a degree of autonomy within the Spanish empire. This was in part an autonomy permitted and sanctioned by Spanish officials, and it was nurtured by native leaders through illegal means and legal negotiations. As a general rule, Spaniards did not seek to rule natives directly and take over their lands. Rather they hoped to preserve native communities as self-governing sources of labor and producers of agricultural products. This practice had precedent in Islamic-Iberian custom, as it developed in the eighth-century Muslim invasion of the Iberian peninsula and during the subsequent centuries of the *reconquista*.²⁸ But it was also a practical response to Spanish-American realities. The new settlers were not farmers, but artisans and professionals dependent upon the work and food provided by native peoples who greatly outnumbered them.

This colonial system worked best where organized, sedentary agricultural communities already existed—that is, well-fed city-states—and it was in such areas, primarily in Mesoamerica and the Andes, that Spaniards concentrated their conquest and colonization efforts. Although it is unlikely that any native community escaped the ravages of epidemic diseases brought across the Atlantic, native regions unevenly experienced direct conquest violence. For centuries after the arrival of Spaniards, the majority of natives subject to colonial rule continued to live in their own communities, speak their own languages, work their own fields, and be judged and ruled by their own elders. These elders wrote their own languages alphabetically (or, in the Andes, learned to write Spanish) and engaged the colonial legal system in defense of community interests skillfully and often successfully. The native town, or municipal community, continued to be called the *altepetl* by the Nahuas of central Mexico, the *ñuu* by the Mixtecs, the *cah* by the Yucatec Mayas, and the *ayllu* by Quechua-speaking Andeans.²⁹

Only very gradually did community autonomy erode under demographic and political pressures from non-native populations. From the native perspective, therefore, the Conquest was not a dramatic singular event, symbolized by any one incident or moment, as it was for Spaniards. Rather, the Spanish invasion and colonial rule were part of a larger, protracted process of negotiation and accommodation. From such a perspective, as long as the *altepetl* and *ayllu* still existed, the Conquest could never be complete.

The sixth dimension of incompleteness is that of the spiritual conquest. Amidst the complex sixteenth-century debates among Spanish priests and friars regarding the efficacy of different conversion methods and the spiritual state of native peoples, there emerged a myth regarding their Christianization. This myth held that while native people remained superstitious and prone to recidivism, they had essentially been converted in the early days of evangelization. As the vanguards of that process, the Franciscans were the greatest proponents of its myth; their perspective fared well over the centuries and was given renewed vigor in the early twentieth century by Robert Ricard, whose *La Conquête Spirituelle du Mexique* (The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico) was a widely read paean to the success of Franciscan conversion campaigns.³⁰

In recent decades, scholars have painted a more complex picture of native reaction to Christianity. While some have argued that native religion survived behind a veneer of Christianity, and others have proposed that native and European religions blended into a set of unique regional American variants on Catholicism, the most sophisticated interpretations recognize that a combination of both processes occurred. With variations right down to the level of the individual Andean, Chibcha, Muisca, Maya, and Nahuatl, natives accommodated and understood Christianity and its place in their world in ways that we are only just beginning to grasp.³¹

Franciscans and other Spanish friars and clergy hoped to utterly destroy all traces of native religions, to wipe the slate clean and establish a new church free of the pagan accretions of both sides of the Atlantic. They certainly succeeded in bringing Catholicism to native America, but if the purpose of the spiritual conquest was to install a Christianity free of local cultural variation, that conquest was not completed in the sixteenth century. In 1598 the Archbishop of New Granada (colonial Colombia) lamented in a letter to the king that six decades of Christianization efforts had left the native Muisca as "idolatrous" as ever.³² Nobody would accuse Latin Americans of being idolatrous today, but few would disagree that the spiritual conquest, as conceived almost five centuries ago, remains very much incomplete.

The final dimension of incompleteness concerns the persistence of native cultures. The aspect of native culture of greatest concern to Spaniards was religion, as Christianization provided the empire with a rationale and justification that transcended and was supposed to disguise the mundanely self-

serving realities of colonial expansion. Other aspects of native culture were of secondary importance. There was no campaign to force natives to learn Spanish, for example. In fact, Spanish priests were encouraged and periodically required to preach in native tongues, while the church generated an extensive religious literature in local languages. And although the lack of a preconquest writing tradition in the Andes meant that Quechua-speaking lords and other local Andean rulers learned to write legal documents in Spanish, Mesoamerica community leaders learned to write their own languages alphabetically.³³

Another example of native cultural persistence is dress. Where native clothing was deemed overly scant by the church, a change was imposed. Men's loincloths were replaced by loose cotton trousers, for example. But by and large, native dress remained unaltered by the Conquest, changing only gradually over the centuries. Some of the more practical styles of native dress were even adopted by Spaniards, especially at home. Like other aspects of native culture, native dress survived, not in any "pure" form, but by very gradually absorbing European influences, and to some extent influencing the evolving culture of the colonists.

Beyond aspects of culture with religious implications, Spaniards were not concerned with the wholesale Hispanization of native peoples. Not until the nineteenth century did such issues become a major governmental concern and the subject of debates among the dominant classes. This underscores once more that the cultural conquest, if we can talk of such a thing, was so incomplete that three centuries after the Spanish invasion the descendants of the conquistadors, from Mexico to Argentina, were debating ways in which their nations's "Indians" could be made into true citizens of the republics—that is, less "Indian" and more European.³⁴

Thus the Conquest of the core areas of the Andes and Mesoamerica was more protracted than Spaniards initially claimed and later believed, and when warfare did end in these areas it was simply displaced out to the ever-widening and never-peaceful frontiers of Spanish America. Conquest violence was also displaced internally, taking on myriad forms of domination and repression, but met continually by an equally diverse set of methods of native resistance. The spiritual and cultural conquests were equally complex and protracted, defying completion to the point of rendering the very concept of completion irrelevant.



Spaniards insisted on the Conquest's completion not only for reasons of political expediency or because it conformed to a developing imperial ideology to which they were increasingly exposed; they also presumed that events

were unfolding in a way that was familiar to them within their own traditions. They doggedly insisted the Conquest was complete until it looked to them as though it was. And they were unaware of native perspectives that blurred the division between conquest and colonization, seeing the two as a single, interminable negotiation and likewise presuming to find familiar forms and concepts.

Historian James Lockhart has called the process of cultural interaction in colonial Mexico one of Double Mistaken Identity. According to his interpretation of this process, “each side of the cultural exchange presumes that a given form or concept is functioning in the way familiar within its own tradition and is unaware of or unimpressed by the other side’s interpretation.”³⁵ Lockhart’s focus is the Nahuas of central Mexico, but Double Mistaken Identity as an analytical tool is broadly applicable to the Conquest and its aftermath in the Spanish colonies—and specifically relevant to the myth of completion. Spaniards thought natives were all firmly “under the lordship of the king.” Natives saw themselves as much subject to their own lords as any distant Spaniards. In their own ways, they were both correct and both mistaken.