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CHAPTER FOUR

The Renaissance World from the West: Spanish America and the “Real” Renaissance

MATTHEW RESTALL

At the heart of the Renaissance and its scholarship is the relationship between intellectual (re)innovation and physical reality. The former has usually been viewed as the driving force that changed the latter, a force given the face of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian cultural and intellectual innovators and recyclers of the classic past. Privileged with this geographical and chronological primacy, these Italians and *their* Renaissance have persisted as *the* Renaissance, rendering as marginal or derivative the contributions of other Europeans and the development of other intellectual movements (or movements with major intellectual implications, such as the conquest of the Americas).

Yet there were other southern Europeans poised in the fifteenth century to participate fully in the great intellectual and cultural stock exchange of the Renaissance – to float ideas and see how they fared on the open market. This chapter is concerned in particular with the Castilians and their neighbors, who in the fifteenth century turned their Iberian kingdoms into Spain and then in the sixteenth century turned Spain into the largest empire the world had ever seen. My core argument is that these Spaniards, the native Americans they sought to rule, and the dynamic of interaction experienced by both groups, best embodied the Renaissance adage of Marsilio Ficino: “Nothing is incredible; nothing is impossible.”¹ Put another way, the change in physical reality and its perception by Europeans effected by Spaniards and their New World subjects was the true driving force of the Renaissance; it was in Spanish America, therefore, that the “real” Renaissance was created.

This argument is presented through discussion of two topics. The first is urban planning: specifically, the attempts by Spaniards in the Americas to realize in street and structure a city ideal that was to some extent Renaissance in origin but which was also, I argue, heavily influenced by native American urban landscapes. The second topic is literacy, a phenomenon traditionally viewed by the Renaissance industry as a cornerstone of civilization, with the early-modern increase in literacy and literary production taken as one of the cornerstones of the Renaissance itself. I argue below

that literacy in Spanish America – manifested in many forms and in many genres of literature, both in native writings and in foundational scholarship by Spanish clergy – produced a quality and quantity of literature that reflected, better than parallel developments in Europe, the Renaissance spirit of expanding possibilities.

The Best-planned City

Since the city was founded in our own time, there was opportunity to plan the whole thing from the start. Thus was it laid out with ruler and compass, with all the streets being carefully measured, and as a result, Santo Domingo is better planned than any city I have seen.²

In January 1542, Francisco de Montejo the younger founded what would become the capital of the colonial province of Yucatan (today part of Mexico), a city he named after the Spanish city of Mérida. The new city's layout, however, was not to imitate the medieval jumble of old Mérida. Instead it was to conform to an ideal, for which purpose Montejo had brought with him "a large sheet of paper upon which the city was drawn" (*un pergamino grande, donde traía dibujada la ciudad*).³ As the city did not yet exist, this was presumably the model city plan that accompanied the conqueror's license and other such legal documentation that conquistadors were required to carry, and which Montejo the elder had acquired in Spain almost two decades earlier. What that plan contained is clear from the basic layout of Mérida's center, which consists of a square plaza from whose corners eight streets fan out to form the city's rectilinear grid. The initial city core was three blocks by three blocks, so that a ring of eight blocks surrounded the open plaza "block," but probably within a few years (as Spaniards "pacified" the Mayas of the surrounding region and began to settle in the new city) another ring of blocks was laid out, creating a five-by-five block grid. Each block was originally divided into four urban lots (see figure, (d) (e)).⁴

Neither the Montejos nor the Mérida they founded were unique. Spaniards arrived in the New World armed with plans on paper that reflected some deep-rooted and fairly specific notions as to what new colonial cities should look like. Historians have tended to assume that such notions originated entirely in Europe. Certainly, the idea of rectilinear urban planning has deep historical roots in the Mediterranean, going back to such prominent advocates of plazas and grids as the fifth-century BC Greek architect Hippodamus and the first-century BC Roman architect Vitruvius. Nevertheless, although a copy of Vitruvius's *De architectura* was in a Mexico City library at least as early as 1550, there is no evidence that his work or that of Renaissance Italians such as Alberti (who published a commentary on Vitruvius in 1485) directly influenced the Spaniards who planned colonial cities in the first few decades of the sixteenth century.⁵

Another possible Renaissance influence was Thomas More, whose *Utopia* was published first in 1516 in Latin and was thus accessible to educated Spaniards. Scholars have noted in particular the impact of More upon two prominent Spanish ecclesiastics in early-colonial Mexico: Juan de Zumárraga, the colony's first bishop, whose copy of a 1518 edition of *Utopia* is still extant; and Vasco de Quiroga, the

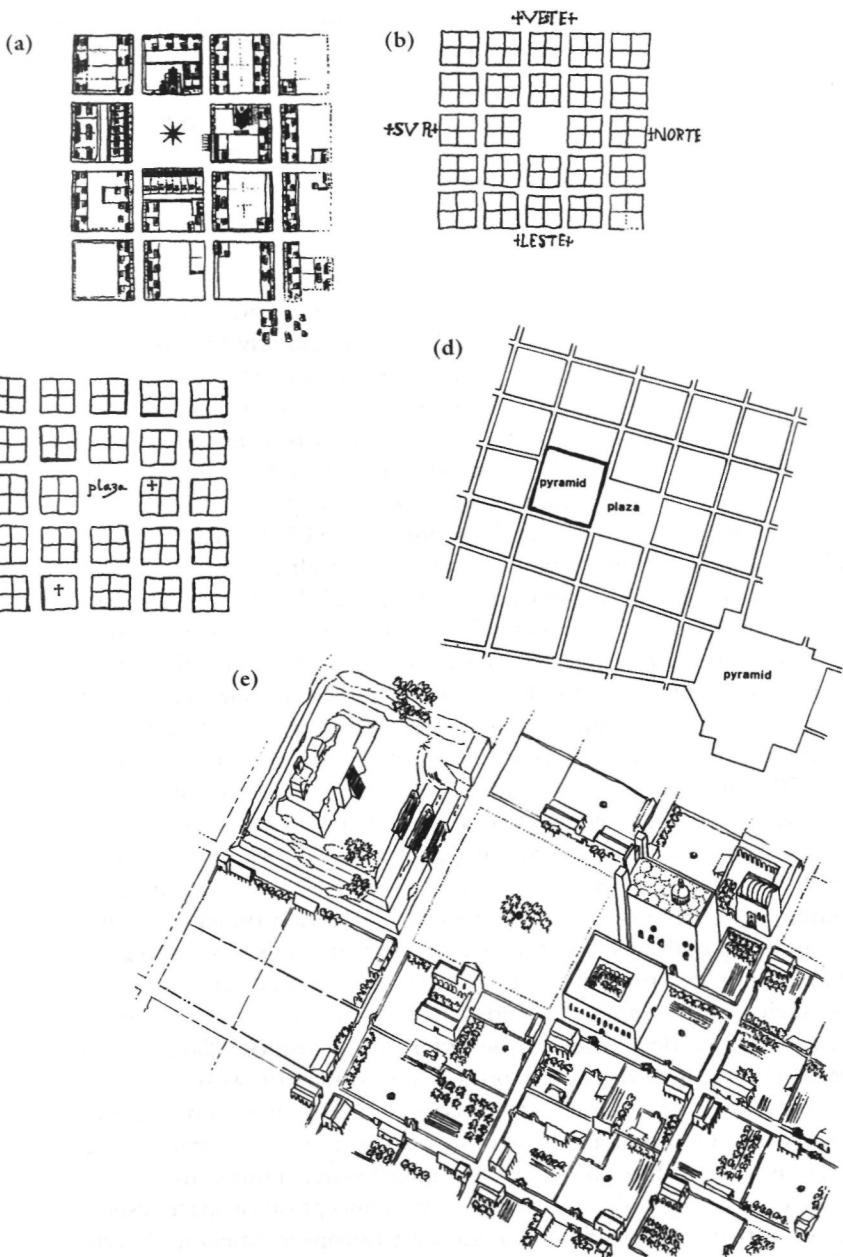
founder of two putatively utopian village hospitals in Mexico and Michoacán in the 1530s. However, More's utopian towns simply "all look exactly alike" and are "all built on the same plan," which is "practically square."⁶ This is an urban vision that reflects the Renaissance ideal of an ordered layout in outline only, and while More's widely read book may have contributed to the Spanish embrace of order as the first principle of city planning it could not have been a direct and detailed influence – especially not upon the Mexico City and other colonial settlements that Zumárraga and Quiroga saw constructed.

Potentially more relevant is the theme found in classical theories (by Vitruvius and others) and in classical cities of the importance of building well-ordered settlements in colonies – including the Iberian peninsula. However, although early-modern Spaniards were well aware of the Roman underpinnings to many of their cities (and Montejo even gave Mérida in Yucatan its name because the buildings of the Maya site upon which he founded the city reminded him of the Roman ruins of Mérida in Spain), Roman city grids had for long been buried under medieval layouts that followed the irregular and crowded settlement patterns of the Islamic *medina*. The Iberian city that would have been familiar to most Spanish colonists, as it was in effect their imperial capital, was Seville; its cathedral was built on the site of an earlier mosque in the *middle* of a would-be central plaza, thereby breaking up that space into several lesser spaces that could never compete as social foci with the major winding streets of the city. This side yard-plaza design can also be seen in Córdoba, where the most plaza-like space is the famous Patio de los Naranjos, which runs *alongside* the mosque-turned-cathedral known as the Mezquita.

Although Roman influences on early-sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors seem therefore to be muted, there is evidence of a direct line of influence running to a specific Spanish American city. In late-medieval France, and in its Pyrenean neighbor, Navarre, a number of new towns were built along the lines of Roman colonial cities to impose or consolidate royal rule in peripheral areas. The urban plan of these towns, which feature central plazas and gridded streets and are usually called *bastides*, was also used by Castilians in 1491 to build the fortress town of Santa Fe, the headquarters of the *reconquista* campaign against the Muslim kingdom of Granada that culminated in Granada's capture on New Year's Day, 1492.

It was in Santa Fe, in April that year, that Christopher Columbus signed the *capitulaciones*, his agreement with Queen Isabel over his first voyage across the Atlantic. Santa Fe also appears to have been the model for the first city built by Spaniards in the Americas: Santo Domingo, on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. Although Columbus and his brother Bartolomé built short-lived settlements on Hispaniola in 1492 and 1496, it was the Spanish colonial governor fray Nicolás de Ovando who in the following decade established Santo Domingo in its permanent site as a gridded city centered on a plaza. As in Córdoba and to some extent Seville, and as in the *bastide* model used in Santa Fe, Granada, the plaza was laid out as a side yard to the cathedral.⁷

The evidence above suggests that during the first generation of Spanish settlement in the Americas (1492 to the late 1510s), the Spanish sense of the ideal urban plan in a colonial setting was, loosely speaking, a Renaissance one, formed by a mix of classical, southern European, and southern Iberian influences. However, neither the Renaissance notion of gridded and centered urban order, nor the example of its first



Urban layout of Spanish American cities:

(a) Perixá, Venezuela; (b) Mendoza, Mexico; (c) Caracas, Venezuela; (d) Mérida, Yucatan; and (e) an aerial view of Mérida, Yucatan, ca. 1600

Sources: drawings by the author: (a) based on a drawing of 1751 reproduced in Vegas, *El Continente*, p. 69; (b) based on the drawing in the foundation charter of 1563, reproduced in Kostof, *The City Assembled*, p. 124; (c) based on a drawing of 1578 reproduced in Vegas, *El Continente*, p. 55; (d) based on Lindsay, "Spanish Merida," Figure 3.1 and Restall, *The Maya World*, p. 32; and (e) based on Lindsay, "Spanish Merida," Figure 3.2.

Spanish American application in Santo Domingo, are enough to explain the layout of Spanish cities on the mainland from the 1520s on. Certainly, as one Spanish chronicler implied in the quotation that began this section, the American colonies were a location better suited than Europe for turning the ideal city plan into bricks and mortar. This was to some extent because colonial cities were being founded from scratch and built from the ground up (such as Santo Domingo), or were constructed upon native centers often ruined or damaged or demographically drastically reduced (the native population of the Americas declined dramatically during the sixteenth century).⁸ But, more significantly, both the opportunity to build entirely new cities and the experience of seeing and (re)building upon native cities did not simply give expression to Renaissance urban ideals but profoundly influenced them. Not only were native cities in Mesoamerica (and to a lesser extent in the Andes) the most significant influence upon the development of Spanish urban planning ideas, but they thereby heavily influenced Renaissance urban ideas in general. In other words, the real Renaissance city was built in Spanish America because the experience of Spaniards in the Americas helped create the image of that city.

The turning point to this development was 1517–21. The first two of these years saw Spanish exploration along the Yucatec and Gulf coasts and thus the first siting of Mesoamerican towns; the second two years (1519–21) saw the invasion of Mesoamerica in the form of the Cortés-led destruction of the Mexica (or Aztec) Empire. The major native American cities encountered by Spaniards then and for decades to follow were centered on rectilinear plazas formed by surrounding platforms, pyramids, and other monumental structures that were typically temples and the palaces of the elite. Although this pattern occurred in the Andes, as the Spanish observed from the 1530s onwards – in the Inca imperial capital of Cuzco, for example – it was particularly well developed in Mesoamerica. The best known example of native urban design is Tenochtitlán, the Mexica imperial capital upon which Mexico City was built. Tenochtitlán was also one of the most fully developed examples of native urban planning, partly for geographical reasons (its location on an island in a lake resulted in canals being built in straight lines across the city, thus forming a grid for streets and buildings) but also for cultural reasons (Venice’s canals, after all, did not produce a gridded city on that series of islands). In Mesoamerican culture, the city center was a sacred space intended to reflect the order of the cosmos. Plazas were often oriented towards the cardinal directions on a heliocentric east–west axis, while settlements were located where water could be accessed and their pyramids conceived as sacred echoes of nearby mountains (the term for town in the central Mexican language of Nahuatl is *altepetl*, from *atl-tepetl*, meaning “water-mountain”).

Spaniards were greatly impressed by this conception of space, especially the urban orderliness that contrasted so strongly with European cities. In describing Tenochtitlán to the king of Spain, Cortés emphasized its order – its four equally wide “artificial causeways,” its “very wide and very straight main streets,” its well-made bridges and aqueducts, its many plazas, and so on – and its favorable comparison to Spanish cities, being “as big as Seville or Córdoba” and centered on “a plaza twice as big as that of Salamanca.” In an oft-quoted passage the conquistador-chronicler Bernal Díaz struggles to compare the Mexica capital with any European city, resorting instead to medieval romantic fiction, so that the city and its neighbors, “great towns and pyramids and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an

enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream.” Like Cortés, Díaz gives a detailed description of Tenochtitlán that emphasizes its order, straight lines, symmetry, and the use of open spaces, especially its central plaza.⁹

Tenochtitlán was the first major site on the American mainland that Europeans explored, conquered, partially destroyed and then rebuilt. But other native settlements were seen by Spaniards in the years immediately before the discovery of Tenochtitlán, and in the decades after its fall Spaniards encountered hundreds of smaller sites in Mesoamerica that likewise featured a central plaza delineated by buildings that were religious, political, social, and economic in significance and function. Although virtually none of them were gridded beyond the central plaza as extensively as Tenochtitlán, larger sites often contained secondary plazas that reflected and reinforced the order at the core (the Maya city of Piedras Negras is a good example). Furthermore, the clusters of non-elite residential compounds that spread out from city centers were of less interest and concern to Spaniards; it was the native elite with whom Spaniards needed to deal, through the violence-inflected negotiations and accommodations of colonial imposition, and it was the urban centers with which Spaniards were most impressed and where they wished to place themselves – both physically and metaphorically.

A good example of this process is Tihó, one of a myriad of Maya sites with its characteristic central pyramid-bound plaza, and the Yucatec city upon which Spaniards founded the Mérida discussed above. Mérida’s basic outline was the product of three influences. The first and second were deeply rooted but somewhat vague European ones and more recent and more specific Mexica ones. The third influence was Tihó, specifically the alignment of its plaza and the location of its two largest pyramidal structures (see figure, (e)). As a result, Mérida’s plaza was overlaid on Tihó’s, bound on the West side by its large principal pyramid, and oriented (as was typical of Maya settlements in Yucatan) roughly twelve degrees east of true north. The considerable size of the principal pyramid meant it was not torn down for almost a century, producing three features to the city center: the cathedral was built across the plaza from it, where a smaller Maya structure had been, rather than on the pyramid’s base and site; while it remained standing, the pyramid blocked one of the central streets running out of the plaza; and its dimensions forced Spaniards to lay out oversized city blocks all down the West side. Furthermore, the location of two other pyramids in the southeast corner of Mérida’s five-by-five grid, and the probable existence of raised Maya roads called *sacbeob* (literally “white roads”) converging on those pyramids, likewise forced an irregularity onto the city plan as it evolved (see figure, (d) (e)).¹⁰

Mérida-Tiho is an example, then, of Spanish adaptation to Mesoamerican precedent. But it is also an example of how the Spanish experience of native urban patterns created a renaissance in Spanish urban concepts in the early sixteenth century. The date of Mérida’s founding (1542) is significant not just because it came two decades after Mexico City began to be built over Tenochtitlán’s outline, but also because it fell within the crucial decade of 1533–44, when some of the most important Spanish American cities were established: Santiago de Guatemala, Bogotá, Quito, Lima, Buenos Aires, and Santiago de Chile. During these same years, and in the decades that ensued, dozens more cities were founded by Spaniards in the Americas (see

figure, (a) (b) (c)). The colonists tended, not surprisingly, to be blithely or determinedly unaware of native influences on any of their colony-building activities. The process whereby Spaniards and natives alike viewed their accommodations to each other through their own cultural lenses, dubbed “double mistaken identity” by one historian, applies very much to colonial city planning.¹¹ If the colonial endeavor was indeed, in the words of one sixteenth-century Spaniard, “to mix the world together and give to those strange lands the form of our own,” the result involved far more mixing and far less Spanish form-giving than the colonists admitted.¹² (See the essay by Peter Burke below.) The new cities, strictly gridded and centered on large plazas bounded by the façades of important buildings, carry the post-Tenochtitlán influence of Mesoamerican city center planning far more clearly than they do the European influences of ancient Rome, fifteenth-century Italy, and the medieval *bastide*.¹³

Indeed, the flow of influence had begun to move east across the Atlantic by the late sixteenth century, when the Mesoamerica-inspired Spanish American city plan started to materialize in Spain itself. The two most obvious manifestations of this pattern are the layout of the new Spanish capital at Madrid, initiated by Philip II in 1561, and the 1573 Laws of the Indies, which included instructions on how colonial cities should be designed. The influence of the Mexica emphasis on pivot and symmetry in their capital’s location and layout can even be seen in the choice of Madrid as capital, for “the town’s only real claim to this particular honor lay in its geographical position as the mathematical center of Spain.”¹⁴ The emphasis in both the new Madrid and the 1573 laws on grids and large plazas (not as side yards but delineated by building façades, as was specifically mandated in 1573) has typically been taken by historians as evidence of the urban vision that Spaniards took *to* the Americas.¹⁵ Hence the importance of chronology, for this was a vision taken *from* the Americas.¹⁶

Indeed the vision soon spread beyond Spain, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries transformed European notions of how cities should be laid out. There is a contrast between Europe’s pre-Tenochtitlán city plans, such as the new Italian plazas mentioned above, and later ones with their Spanish American-style plazas and grids. The fifteenth-century Italian plazas are each unique in shape, rather than uniformly square or rectangular; they lack the symmetry and relationship to a surrounding grid that can be seen in Madrid, in some of the new or redesigned seventeenth-century Scandinavian cities, in the new plazas built in Paris and London in the seventeenth century.

The so-called residential square is usually assumed, in accordance with the Italo-centrism of Renaissance studies, to have originated with such examples as the Sforza square begun in Vigevano in the 1490s (even though one such advocate admits it is an “imperfect specimen”).¹⁷ Yet the inclusion of a residential component in the central plaza is fundamental to its native American manifestation, particularly in Mesoamerica, and this component was strongly reinforced by the early Spanish colonists for the same reasons that churches were built on the ancient temple sites lining these plazas. Just as native nobles had once lived on such squares, so did conquistadors and their descendents; a good example is the Montejo palace built on Mérida’s south side (see figure, (e)). This style of plaza – square-shaped, as much as possible creating a surrounding grid, and featuring elite housing – can be traced from early-sixteenth century Spanish America, to late sixteenth- and seventeenth-

century Spain (good examples are *plazas mayores* in Valladolid and Madrid, the latter built in 1617–19). From Spain the form spread to other parts of Europe, beginning in 1587 with Ferdinando de' Medici's Piazza Grande in Livorno; later examples include Turin's Piazza Reale of 1621, London's Covent Garden (begun in 1631 by Inigo Jones), and the Parisian Place des Vosges (originally laid out in 1605–12 as the Place Royale), and the Place Vendôme (developed from 1685).

In the same century, having spread from Spanish America to Europe, the new planned plaza moved yet further east, appearing in Islamic cities such as Samarkand and Isfahan. Later, this plaza-grid model also spread back west to the Americas, in the form of English colonial cities such as Savannah and New Haven. The contrast between the earlier and later European styles can be seen in Boston, with its meandering seventeenth-century core and gridded nineteenth-century South End.¹⁸

The Oft-handled Quill

In many *pueblos* of Mexico the quill was handled as often as and perhaps better than in the villages of Castile or Europe in the same period.¹⁹

Just as Spaniards – and most of the scholars that have written of their imperial endeavors – saw the Americas as a blank slate upon which to lay out ideal cities, so did they see native Americans as a cultural slate that could be wiped clean and newly inscribed. Natives were seen as illiterate or effectively so, as they either lacked any writing tradition or had not developed an alphabet; the Franciscan Pedro de Gante, who first arrived in Mexico in 1524, told the king of Spain that the Aztecs were “people without writing, without letters, without written characters and without any kind of enlightenment.”²⁰ Issues of literacy were viewed by Europeans largely in religious terms, as the Church in medieval Europe enjoyed a virtual monopoly on education and it was typically Spanish Franciscan friars and other churchmen who were concerned with matters of native literacy in the early-colonial Americas. Thus by bringing literacy to natives, Europeans were both civilizing barbarians and saving their souls.

However, the realities of both native and Spanish literacy were very different from this tidy image of the alphabet as a medium of salvation. There was, indeed, a flourishing of literacy and literary production in sixteenth-century Spanish America that rivals that of Europe during this time. One definition of a writing renaissance might be the proliferation of systems of literacy, the creation of new genres of text, the spread of new texts and the ideas therein, and a heightened sense of the importance of writing. Viewed through this definition, the “real” renaissance in writing was across the Atlantic.

My argument focuses on two topics, discussed briefly and in turn. The first is the nature of native literacy in the Americas in the period before the Spanish invasion and the decades during and immediately after it. The second topic is the nature of literary production by Spaniards in their American colonies, primarily regular clergymen (friars) in the sixteenth century.

Because Europeans were so concerned with classifying non-Europeans as one kind or another of barbarian or savage, and because they tended to lump native Americans

together as “Indians,” the vast majority of Europeans failed to appreciate both the vast diversity among native peoples and the complexity of native civilizations. Most natives lived within the two broad geographical and civilizational regions that we call Mesoamerica and the Andes, regions where two distinct systems of literacy had evolved many centuries before the arrival of Europeans.

Andeans had developed a unique form of literacy, the *quipu* system, that has for long been derided as non-literate and primitive because it used pieces of string rather than a set of written or carved symbols that conveyed language. In fact, the location of cords on strands or sticks, their colors, and the location of knots in the cords, combined to act as a complex mnemonic system for conveying information and knowledge; they encoded narratives not simply by listing raw ingredients, but by conveying relations of syntax between narrative elements. *Quipus* were thus effectively “written” when they were made and were later “read” as though they were a text.²¹

Perhaps less unique but more sophisticated were the four related writing systems of Mesoamerica: the Aztec, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya. The Aztec and Mixtec were more pictographic, the Zapotec and Maya systems more logosyllabic. Of these, the latter was the most complex, featuring some 800 symbols usually called hieroglyphs. Some 200–300 Maya hieroglyphs were in common use at any one time and place, most of them phonetic-syllabic in function; that is, each symbol or glyph represented a sound made up of a consonant and vowel. Maya hieroglyphic texts were aesthetically more attractive than European alphabetic texts while being no less elegant and equally capable of conveying anything the writer wished to communicate. Scribes, who were also painters (Maya culture recognized no distinction between the two), were members of the elite – in many cases royalty – but literacy was not confined to the elite; the Maya majority were in all likelihood semi-literate (and some scholars argue that most would have been more literate than that).²²

The conventional wisdom on native literacy is that it was destroyed by the Spanish Conquest. The Mayas, typically the poster people for native literacy, are usually depicted as suffering the immolation of their hieroglyphic tradition in the bonfires set by fray Diego de Landa during his famous campaign against “idolatry” in the summer of 1562 in Yucatan; as evidence, scholars point to the fact that only four Maya books are extant today.²³

In fact, native literacy and systems of writing survived far beyond the Conquest and deep into the colonial period, and in some cases into modern times. There are only four surviving Maya books because the climate in the Maya area is not conducive to the long-term survival of paper, because Spaniards continued to find and destroy hieroglyphic books for at least a century and a half after Landa’s campaign of 1562, and because Mayas took to rewriting hieroglyphic works in alphabetic form (the best known examples are the “Books of Chilam Balam” in Yucatec Maya and the “Popol Vuh” in Quiché Maya). The significance here of the fact that Spanish priests continued to find works written in hieroglyphs (and in a combination of hieroglyphs and alphabetic letters) is that Mayas continued to produce such books; indeed, at least one of those four extant Maya hieroglyphic books was written *after* the Conquest.

In other regions of the large area dubbed New Spain by the invaders, Mesoamericans continued to produce manuscripts featuring pre-Columbian writing techniques. The Mesoamerican conception of writing and painting as aspects of a single medium

of communication meant that alphabetic script was rapidly adopted as an accompaniment to pictorial text. From when the Spanish arrived in the 1520s, into the seventeenth century, Mixtec pictorial manuscripts were produced with glosses either in glyphs or in alphabetically written Mixtec, Nahuatl, or Chocho; Mixtec documents that are exclusively alphabetic survive only from the late-1560s.²⁴ Thus in sixteenth-century Oaxaca native peoples were producing texts that were pictorial, glyphic, and alphabetic, in local languages such as Mixtec and Zapotec and in the lingua franca of Nahuatl and Spanish – a veritable explosion of multifaceted literary expression.

Meanwhile, in the Andes, because Spaniards did not initially recognize the *quipu* as an effective medium of communication, let alone a writing system, sets of strings were neither banned nor destroyed until late in the sixteenth century. Even then, *quipus* tended to receive negative Spanish attention only in brief and irregular bursts following such perceived threats to the colonial order as the Taqui Onkoy movement of the 1560s. In the long run, the spread of alphabetic literacy meant that *quipus* were needed and used less, while their creators, *quipucamayocs*, became or were replaced by native community *escribanos* (notaries). But *quipus* continued to be created throughout the colonial period, while, arguably, their cultural significance was altered rather than diminished; *quipu* sets survive to this day as ornamental but powerful symbols of status rather than “texts” communicating specific information.

Not only did pre-Columbian forms of literacy survive the sixteenth century, but native societies took up alphabetic writing too, often with remarkable rapidity and effectiveness. Tens of thousands of documents written alphabetically in Mesoamerican languages during the Spanish colonial period are still extant in archives and collections in Mexico, North America, and Europe. This material, whose study has dramatically gathered pace in recent decades in part owing to the development of the New Philology school, is surely the merest tip of the iceberg of notarial production during these centuries. Most surviving manuscripts are in Nahuatl, but Mixtec and several Maya languages are well represented, and there are examples in Chocho, Cuicatec, Mixe, Otomí, Tarascan, Totonac, Zapotec, and other Mesoamerican tongues. While numerous genres are represented in these documents, most of them were corporate products – written by a native community notary and signed by the local elders – intended to defend community interests and thus reflecting the persistence of Mesoamerican literary traditions.

It is likely that literacy levels in Mesoamerica and the Andes were higher in early colonial times than before the Conquest. This was due in part to the dramatic demographic decline of the sixteenth century (leaving the literate as a higher percentage of the total population), in part to Spanish clerical efforts to alphabetize native nobles, in part to the devolution of native political authority from regional centers to the local level (where every village generated its own written records), and in part to the parallel persistence of native writing systems.²⁵

Thus the long century following the Spanish invasion, from the early sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century, saw a florescence in native literacy in the Americas. Not only did pre-Columbian systems and techniques of writing survive, even while natives enthusiastically embraced alphabetic writing in native languages as well as in Spanish, but the Spanish emphasis on the importance of the written record reinforced the native sense of the utility and potency of literacy in Mesoamerica and (in a somewhat different sense) in the Andes. In turn, Spaniards increasingly came to see writing as a

tool of empire as vital as the sword and compass. The latter two are famously depicted on the 1599 frontispiece to Vargas Machuca's *Milicia y descripción de las Indias* ("Soldiery and description of the Indies [i.e. the Americas]"), in which the author grips his cutlass with one hand and with the other holds a compass to a globe. By implication, the pen is the equally vital third tool, for it is the means whereby the Spanish captain has written his *descripción* and disseminated its motto, *A la espada y el compas, Mas y mas y mas y mas* ("To the sword and the compass, more and more and more and more").²⁶

This acquisitive spirit presented Spaniards with more and more of a challenge in their efforts "to give to those strange lands the form of [their] own." Beyond the formidable tasks of imperial administration, profitable exploitation, and the logistics of supply and communication, this challenge was a dual one of description and dissemination.²⁷ At all stages of the Conquest, from early exploration to colonial consolidation, Spaniards struggled to describe what they saw and experienced, how they responded, why, and what others might do in their turn. In the process, they generated millions of manuscripts (anybody who suspects hyperbole here need only visit the General Archive of the Indies in Seville, created in colonial times to house these documents). By 1590 Joseph de Acosta could write that "the New World is no longer new, but old, as so much has been said and written about it."²⁸ Much of this documentation conformed to traditional genres of account, report, and petition, but others – through innovation and subsequent repetition – created new genres of literature and ultimately contributed to new disciplines of intellectual investigation. For having attempted to describe this new and different world, Spaniards sought to disseminate their interpretations and compilations (an old genre that saw a renaissance of its own in the Americas was the *recopilación*) to audiences ranging from the king to native New World parishioners.

Priests played a crucial role in this process. Indeed, the indigenous writing renaissance was paralleled by a related renaissance in literary production by colonial clergymen, mostly by the friars of the Franciscan order who in the wake of the Conquest had planted alphabetic literacy among Aztec, Maya, and other native nobles. At root, such friars were motivated by a dual ambition: to discover all they could about pre-Columbian native culture in order to destroy it and replace it with Christian "civilization"; but at the same time to detect and preserve what was laudable in native societies. Regardless of how we might judge such motives as far removed from those of modern scholars (and surely the friars' attitudes are closer to those of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars than we may care to believe), the clerics produced a remarkable and unprecedented body of ethnographic scholarship long before ethnography (or even anthropology) existed as a professional discipline.

Notable among these friars were the Dominicans Diego Durán and Bartolomé de las Casas (who has been called "perhaps the most monumental figure in the history of the Americas"),²⁹ and the Franciscans Toribio de Benavente (known as Motolinía), Gerónimo de Mendieta, Alonso de Molina, and Andrés de Olmos. This is just to name a handful from the sixteenth century whose work on central Mexico can be found in print today; dozens of other such ecclesiastics, in this and the succeeding centuries, toiled away at native languages and cultures in colonies ranging from New Mexico to Chile. I should like to mention in modest detail just two, both Franciscans

who devoted their late-sixteenth century lives to a people and region within Mesoamerica: Bernardino de Sahagún; and Diego de Landa.

The best-known today of all the colonial scholar-friars, and no doubt deservedly so, is Sahagún. His twelve-volume study of central Mexican (or Nahuatl) culture and history, known as the Florentine Codex, exemplifies both forms of sixteenth-century literacy discussed here, as it was conceived and compiled by the Franciscan but executed over three decades by his noble Aztec informants and assistants – in both Spanish and Nahuatl, with copious illustrations in a hybrid Mesoamerican-European pictorial style. The result is an encyclopedic 2,500-page study of almost every imaginable aspect of Nahuatl culture, from religion and astronomy to rhetoric and gender relations. Its method and ambition make it a supremely Renaissance creation unequalled in early-modern European scholarship. Indeed, a recent study of Sahagún's work argues persuasively that the friar's medieval scholasticism was so compromised by Nahuatl culture – his intellectual tools and concerns forced to accommodate native ways of thinking and doing things – as to exemplify “the transition to modernity.”³⁰ Admittedly, Sahagún follows Pliny's organizational categories much of the time, and his purpose is openly to garner “weapons at hand, in order to go out and meet” the devil. But he also adopts an extraordinarily modern approach to native culture, seeking to comprehend it on its own terms and through its own logic – above all through the logic of the Nahuatl language, lending his project an empirical and philological method and bent that was unprecedented in European intellectual history.³¹

In contrast, the ethnographic reputation of Landa rests on one slim volume, his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* or “Account of the Things of Yucatán,” ostensibly written in Spain in 1566 after the Franciscan had spent a decade and a half studying the Mayas and working to convert them. Landa's fame rests partly on his brutal campaign against idolatry in the summer of 1562, in which four thousand Mayas were interrogated under torture, partly on the contrast between that campaign and the pastoral tone of his *Relación*, and partly on the importance of the book to Maya scholars since its rediscovery in the 1860s. Nevertheless, Landa's book, like the Florentine Codex, projects an ethnographic vision that gives it the feel of a work ahead of its time – an intellectual endeavor of foundational dimensions.

Close study of the *Relación* taken by scholars for well over a century to be a single, brief work, reveals it to be a late-colonial compilation of excerpts from several Landa manuscripts or from a far larger multi-volume work in the vein of the Florentine Codex. In my view, Landa's ambition to uncover and describe in dispassionate detail every aspect of Maya culture was even greater than has been assumed. This extended to an attempt to create a Rosetta stone for the reading of a writing system only very recently deciphered, that of the Maya hieroglyphs.³² Landa's ambition, his unswerving commitment to the notions that thoroughness was a necessity and discovery a duty, allow us to reconcile his *Relación* (in whatever form it may originally have taken) with the violence he unleashed in the summer of 1562, and make him a larger-than-life Renaissance figure.³³

Landa and Sahagún are “real” Renaissance figures, then, because their lifelong ambitions and their legacies on paper embody a set of Renaissance contradictions: the quest for knowledge for its own sake, and the quest to understand something in order to destroy it; the desire to create model, Christian communities, and the embrace of

compromises that permitted native cultures to accommodate Spanish culture rather than be replaced by it; the interaction of medieval notions of scholasticism and religiosity, including millenarianism, with principles of investigation and pedagogy that were innovative and anticipated modernity; the recognition and celebration of the new, and the emphasis upon forcing the new into established frameworks of understanding. The Paduan philosopher Lazzaro Buonamico first articulated in 1539 a theme that would be repeated over and over by commentators from his day to the present, that the era's most notable achievements were "the invention of the printing press and the discovery of the new world; two things which I always thought could be compared, not only to Antiquity, but to immortality."³⁴ My argument has been that what was so momentous was the *combination* of these two phenomena (for printing press, read literature in all forms and systems), but with a twist. That twist assigns equal agency to native Americans and places emphasis on cultural interaction, for out of the New World encounter came a renaissance in both native and Spanish literary production – a writing (re)birth indeed.

A Singular Virtue

At one point, during the afternoon, I found myself chatting with three cardinals, one of whom, Cardinal Magalón, told me that my only fault was that I was a Spaniard.

To this I replied, "With all due respect, your Holiness, that is my only virtue."³⁵

The two topics discussed above, city planning and literacy, have been selected because they have a clear Renaissance relevance that does not require the kind of elaborate argument and copious citations that space would not permit here. They also combine both Spanish and native contributions in a way that is core to my assertion that only across the Atlantic could the "real" Renaissance be realized.

Other, trickier, topics are equally apposite, however, and I should like to conclude with a parting mention of a couple of them. The Spanish Inquisition, for example, has had its image denigrated in a Black-Legend tradition running from Las Casas to Monty Python as decidedly medieval and un-Renaissance (or even anti-Renaissance). This image may have much to do with the European witchcraze, the Iberian persecution of Jews, and the Catholic reformation in southern Europe. But it has little to do with the Spanish American manifestations of the Inquisition and the various ways in which the New World offered inquisitors an opportunity to explore all-too-Renaissance notions of social engineering. Inquisitors in the Americas were simply well-connected friars and secular priests. They seldom persecuted Jews or witches, and rarely employed violence after the initial Conquest decades; after 1570 jurisdiction over native peoples was removed from the Holy Office and placed with a new and separate body (the *Provisorato de Indios*, sometimes referred to as the "Indian Inquisition").

This left Inquisition officials to function more or less as social workers, resolving domestic disputes, investigating accusations of bigamy, adultery, homosexuality, blasphemy, and slander, attempting to police the clergy themselves, and in a myriad other ways trying to understand, categorize, and control human passions and unorthodox expression. The sum of all of this was a decidedly disorganized attempt to regulate social behavior, a sort of Spanish American version of Calvin's Geneva and

More's Utopia. The Inquisitors of the New World were thus far removed from the dungeons and devices of torture that adorned the Black Legend. Rather these were men working on the rough edge (it was not quite the cutting edge) of the applied social sciences, attempting in a very Renaissance fashion, that at times seems medieval and at times modern, to forge from seemingly incompatible ingredients a coherent, Christian, civic society. The Inquisition in Italy and other parts of Europe, likewise beginning in the late sixteenth century, also took on a less violent and broader social role.³⁶ The difference in Spanish America was the persistence of a multifaceted and dynamic cultural interaction, the same force that underpinned the development of city planning and literacy, but with an added component not discussed above, that of West African cultures.

This brings me to the final topic to be mentioned, which falls loosely into the category of race and gender. It really deserves book-length attention, but I shall try here to offer a tantalizing hint as to its relevance and potential by referring to a work of Spanish colonial literature that is increasingly well known and which suggests something of the complex nature of personal identity in Spanish America. That work is the autobiographical memoir of Catalina de Erauso, the Catalan woman who escaped from a convent before taking her final vows in order to pursue a conquistador's life dressed as a man in Spanish South America. On the one hand, such a quintessentially (even stereotypically) male existence was only available to a woman if disguised as a man; on the other hand, Erauso's male-female identity and other people's awareness of it is highly ambiguous in her account. In short, categories of gender – and my argument, if fully developed, would be that ethnoracial categories were comparable in their definition and treatment – were not nearly as clear and tangible as they might at first appear.³⁷ Nor were they as clearly defined as they appear to have been in Europe, which is why Erauso's adventures had to take place in the New World. Spanish American society, in other words, embraced and embodied paradoxical conceptions of the social and definitional boundaries between men and women and people of different ethnoracial backgrounds – these boundaries being sharply delineated and yet at the same time blurred and porous. In this sense, only in Spanish America was Erauso's life possible; only there, was nothing really impossible.

Indeed, in numerous ways the physical reality of the Spanish American colonies and the native cultures that persisted within them offered a New World of intellectual and conceptual possibilities. Manifestations of that reality ranged from the awesome urban landscape of Tenochtitlán to pages of hieroglyphs and bundles of *quipus* to the confusing multiplicity of ethnoracial types that began to develop before the dust had settled from the Spanish invasion. As complex and multifaceted as it was, the European Renaissance experience could not match its Spanish American counterpart. The latter, to be sure, was confusing and contradictory (which is partly why its Renaissance contribution has been ignored or understated); but – to borrow a twist from Catalina de Erauso – that may have been its greatest virtue.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror*, p. 84.

- 2 The Spanish chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, writing in 1535 of Santo Domingo on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (from his *Historia general y natural de las Indias*; see Fernández de Oviedo, *Natural History*, p. 11; also quoted in Low, *On the Plaza*, p. 98 and cited in Lindsay, “Spanish Merida,” p. 72).
- 3 Cogolludo, *Historia de Yucatán*, vol. I, p. 271; also quoted in Rubio Mañé, *La Casa de Montejo*, p. 2, and in Lindsay, “Spanish Merida,” p. 23.
- 4 Rubio Mañé, *La Casa de Montejo*, pp. 1–16; Restall, *The Maya World*, pp. 31–7; Lindsay, “Spanish Merida,” pp. 39–61. For a brief account of the conquest of Yucatan, see Restall, *Maya Conquistador*, pp. 4–18, 26–8.
- 5 In addition to writing about urban grids, late-fifteenth-century Italians were also redesigning some of their cities on these principles; new rectangular plazas were built in Pienza in 1462 and Vigevano in 1492, for example. Low, *On the Plaza*, pp. 86–9.
- 6 More, *Utopia*, p. 70, 72.
- 7 Low, *On the Plaza*, pp. 89–90, 95–9; Kostof, *The City Shaped*, p. 109. The term *bastide* is from the medieval French verb *bastir*, “to build.”
- 8 Franciscan millenarianism embodied the most extreme expression of the opportunities represented by new colonial cities; for example, Motolonía (whom I shall mention again below) saw Puebla, Mexico, as the new Jerusalem anticipated by St. John the Evangelist (Rabasa, *Inventing America*, p. 155).
- 9 Cortés, *Letters*, pp. 102–10; Díaz, *The Conquest*, p. 214, 216–41.
- 10 Lindsay, “Spanish Merida,” pp. 58–71; Restall, *The Maya World*, pp. 31–7.
- 11 Lockhart, “Double Mistaken Identity.”
- 12 Hernán Pérez de Oliva, quoted in Elliott, “A World United,” p. 648.
- 13 Extant plans of twenty Spanish American cities, all built or expanded between 1561 and 1598, show fourteen to be symmetrical, mostly square, and plaza-centered; Lindsay, “Spanish Merida,” p. 52. Colonial Venezuelan city plans also illustrate well the Spanish American urban layout (see figure, (a) (c), for two examples); Vegas, *El Continente*.
- 14 In the words of Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, p. 254.
- 15 Low, *On the Plaza*, p. 85, cites fifteen works published between 1947 and 1982 contributing to a “Eurocentric narrative of the evolution of this urban form” (i.e. Spanish American plaza-centered cities).
- 16 Spanish architectural historian Jesús Escobar has argued that not only Madrid’s Plaza Mayor but other features of the city were strongly influenced by colonial cities and their native antecedents (Low, *On the Plaza*, p. 94). The 1573 Laws of the Indies, which reworked various laws from earlier in the century, has been described as “a genuine product of Renaissance thought. Its inspiration is ultimately... Vitruvius” (Kostof, *The City Shaped*, p. 114); I would argue that such a summary ignores the differences between Vitruvius and the 1573 laws and the ways in which native-inspired Spanish American cities explain many of those differences. The 1573 laws are ultimately inspired by the colonial experience and are a genuine Renaissance product in the sense that I am defining the “real” Renaissance in this essay.
- 17 Kostof, *The City Assembled*, p. 161.
- 18 Kostof, *The City Shaped*, pp. 46, 98–115; *The City Assembled*, pp. 161–3, 174. Northern Italian city planning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries still emphasized order and geometry, but each example represented a distinct expression of that order, with plazas evolving as L-shaped (e.g. the one along the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence), or rectangular with an important building in the middle (e.g. the Palazzo Pretorio in the plaza of San Giovanni Valdarno), or T-shaped (e.g. the two “Ideal City” oil panels probably painted in Urbino and Florence, ca. 1480–1500); Kemp, “The Mean and Measure,” pp. 96–100, 249–51. None of these Italian variations match the Spanish American model (see figure, (a)–(d)), or the non-Italian examples mentioned above. Even Alberti opposed strict grids

- that made every city street straight; see the long quote in Kostof, *The City Shaped*, p. 70. Inigo Jones is a good example of an important early-modern European architect whose absorption of native American and Spanish American models has been ignored or understated by historians. The Place Vendôme varies the Spanish American model in that its streets enter the mid-point of the north and south façades, rather than the corners. An example of European urban grid reinforcement is the rebuilding and extension of Lisbon's lower town grid after the earthquake of 1755 (Kostof, *The City Assembled*, p. 248).
- 19 Gruzinski, *The Conquest*, p. 4.
 - 20 Quoted by Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, p. 4. Hill Boone (pp. 4–5) cites more than a dozen sources, ranging from sixteenth-century Spaniards to prominent living scholars such as Jack Goody, who ignore or deny the Aztecs and other native Americans their literacy. Also see Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, pp. 18–26.
 - 21 Urton, “From Knots to Narratives”; Cummins, “Representation,” pp. 192–3; Salomon, “Testimonies,” pp. 22–3.
 - 22 Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems*; Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, pp. 262, 269–70; Miller, *Maya Art*, pp. 187–9, 197–206; Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*.
 - 23 Cummins, “Representation,” p. 188, cites such mid-century authorities as George Kubler and Donald Robertson, but there is a more recent and subtle version of this perspective exemplified by the work of Enrique Florescano, Jorge Klor de Alva, and Walter Mignolo.
 - 24 Terraciano, “Ñudzahui History,” pp. 36–79.
 - 25 Since 1976 the New Philologists have used native-language sources to reconstruct colonial Mesoamerican culture and society: Restall, “Heirs to the Hieroglyphs”; “A History of the New Philology.”
 - 26 Frontispiece reproduced in Elliott, “A World United,” p. 647.
 - 27 Two words used in a similar context by Elliott, *The Old World and the New*, p. 18.
 - 28 Quote in Rabasa, *Inventing America*, p. 210 (translation mine).
 - 29 Rabasa, *Inventing America*, p. 164.
 - 30 Browne, *Sahagún*.
 - 31 Sahagún quote, translation mine, in Rabasa, *Inventing America*, p. 162.
 - 32 Landa, *Yucatan*, p. 83; Coe, *Breaking the Code*, pp. 104–5.
 - 33 Restall, *Maya Conquistador*, pp. 144–63. John Chuchiak and I are currently working on a new edition of the *Relación* from the manuscript in Madrid.
 - 34 Quoted in Elliott, *The Old World and the New*, p. 10.
 - 35 Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun*, p. 79.
 - 36 Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, p. 9.
 - 37 For an elegant discussion of how gender and ethnoracial conceptions interacted in colonial Mexico, see Kellogg, “Depicting *Mestizaje*.”

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