

From the Valleys to the Highlands, Nahua Conquistadors in Sixteenth Century Guatemala

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The New Conquest History and the Guatemalan Highlands

Traditionally, the historical narrative of the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest in the Americas has primarily centered on the Iberians and their so-called inevitable triumph over indigenous communities in military campaigns and colonization. With Iberians accounts vastly preserved in print, the interpretation of the conquest has been first and foremost perceived from a Eurocentric perspective. This connotation ultimately marginalizes indigenous voices. Despite the reiteration of these biased accounts, contemporary scholarship have questioned these traditional triumphalist narratives. From their findings in archival materials, specifically indigenous language texts, scholars have revised and altered the portrayal of Americas' conquest to highlight multiple participants and accounts, primarily indigenous peoples. This study became known as the New Conquest History, which has allowed scholars to uncover and amplify indigenous perspectives during the conquest, promoting indigenous agency.

Matthew Restall's research best observes the study of the New Conquest History.¹ His monograph, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, addresses unique issues about the Spanish conquest in places like Cuba, Central Mexico, and Peru that have intrigued scholars in recent years. Each of the book's chapters focuses on a particular conquest myth that contrasts false and accurate genres. Among the myths, Restall turns his attention to the fallacy that white Spanish conquistadors alone initiated and completed the conquest campaigns. In the book, Restall argues that there was no doubt that the Americas' indigenous military forces outnumbered the Spanish conquistadors on the battlefield. So, how was it that the Spanish triumphed against the odds to defeat some of the Americas' most powerful civilizations? Adding to his argument, Restall

claims that the Spaniards heavily relied on the contribution of indigenous allies, who are referred to as invisible warriors since they are often ignored or forgotten in Iberian accounts.²

Initially, the scope of New Conquest History has geographically aligned with the perspectives of indigenous groups in Central Mexico and Peru. However, one of the initiatives of the New Conquest History is to research the Americas' understudied regions. These regions include Central America, specifically in the Guatemalan highlands, as the Spanish-indigenous alliance made their way south, invaded, and conquered much of the land during the sixteenth century.



“Colonial Vision of the Guatemalan Highlands, home to the indigenous Maya. Most of the sixteenth century conquest campaign occurred in this mountainous region. Places include Quetzaltenango, Tecpan, Iximche, Q’umarkaj, and Atitlan.” Image was taken from W. George Lovell, Christopher H. Lutz, Wendy Kramer, and William Swezey. *Strange Lands and Different Peoples: Spaniards and Indians in Colonial Guatemala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 118.

Strange Lands and Different Peoples: Spaniards and Indians in Colonial Guatemala

Many indigenous communities participated and contributed to conquest campaigns in the highlands. According to Laura E. Matthew in “Whose Conquest?” the most notable illustrated

indigenous allies in Guatemala were the Nahua, from Central Mexico.³ The invasion of the Guatemalan highlands saw Iberian interpretations marginalizing the efforts of Nahua allies. However, the Nahua proved themselves more than just allies. This paper discusses the participation of Nahua communities during the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest in Guatemala. I have investigated their contributions from their vast numbers and their military and noncombatant responsibilities. Moreover, I observe their intentions in aiding the Spanish. Using a diverse selection of primary sources from Nahuatl language texts and pictorials, I argue that the Nahua styled themselves as conquistadors as they journeyed south to Guatemala, conquered the land, and legitimized themselves in the new colonial order.

The Invasion in the Highlands (Historical Background)

The conquest of the Guatemalan highlands splits into two phases. The first phase took place in 1524 under the command of Spanish Captain Pedro de Alvarado, one of Hernan Cortes's top lieutenants during the conquest of Mexico. With ambitions to expand the Spanish domain, take control of new lands, and fill his demanding appetite for treasures, Alvarado, alongside his men and indigenous allies, entered the lands of the indigenous Guatemalans known as the Maya. There were several Maya groups in Guatemala, like the K'iche, Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, and Mam. Upon their entrance into Guatemala, the Spanish realized that some Maya groups had internal rivalries just like the Nahua in Central Mexico. With the help of several indigenous allies and taking advantage of the internal situation, the conquistadors subjugated and colonized a large portion of the highlands. By 1527, Guatemala was at war again, marking the second phase of conquest. Several previously conquered Maya areas begun to rebel. Pedro de Alvarado had left for Spain before the occasion. So, Pedro's brother, Jorge, took the leadership role and would see the complete invasion of the highlands in 1537. However, none of this would have been done

without the aid of Nahua allies as both Alvarado brothers journeyed alongside them since Central Mexico.

Tlaxcaltecas and Quauhquecholtecas: The Nahua Conquistadors

Various Nahua communities participated in the Guatemalan conquest campaigns. However, the indigenous record in the highlands identifies and distinguishes two Nahua groups. These groups were the Tlaxcaltecas and Quauhquecholtecas. Both of these Nahua communities came from altepetls (city-states) in Central Mexico. The Tlaxcaltecas resided in Tlaxcala, while the Quauhquecholtecas occupied Quauhquechollan, a small town in modern-day Puebla. Before the Spaniards' arrival and the invasion in Guatemala, these Nahua communities were in warfare against the Mexica (Aztec) Empire that dominated Central Mexico since the fifteenth century.

The Tlaxcaltecas were recognized as the Mexica's archrivals since Tlaxcala remained one of few independent altepetls from Mexica subjection. Restall claims that while the Tlaxcaltecas were able to fight off Mexica forces, their efforts were precarious.⁴ Interestingly, leaving Tlaxcala independent was partially by design. The Mexica left Tlaxcala unconquered to wage war against them to capture warriors for sacrificial purposes in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. This gave the Tlaxcaltecas an added reason to join the Spaniards against the Mexica. They would then later join them in Guatemala during the initial phase of the conquest. The Quauhquecholtecas had a much different experience than their counterparts as Quauhquechollan fell into Mexica subjection. Florine G. L. Asselberg's monograph *Conquered Conquistadors* observes the situations that this Nahua community experienced from their origins to the conquest campaigns in Guatemala.⁵ In her findings, Quauhquechollan saw a massive presence of Mexica warriors unleashing violence on its citizens and destroying seasonal harvests. These issues motivated the Quauhquecholtecas to seek help from the Spaniards, who made their way to the altepetl with

several indigenous allies.⁶ Among the allies, most were Tlaxcaltecas. The battle between the two sides in Quauhquechollan ended with a Tlaxcalteca-Spanish alliance victory. After recognizing the alliance that the Tlaxcaltecas formed with the Spanish, the Quauhquecholtecas eventually followed the exact blueprint, which would later play out in Guatemala.

Legitimizing the Conquistador Status through Images

The significance of these Nahua allies can be observed through a series of Nahuatl language accounts. While some of these indigenous records consist of alphabetical texts, there is no other account that sheds more light on these Nahua conquistadors than *lienzos*, which were cloth sheets that contained cultural information in pictorial writing. According to Asselbergs in “The Conquest in Images,” Nahuatl *lienzos* reflected the Nahua vision of historical events. This included the Nahua’s participation and contributions to the Spanish conquest. Moreover, *lienzos* display the Nahua vision through a medium that they developed, felt at ease with, and knew how to utilize thoroughly.⁷ The most recognized pictorials that represented the Tlaxcaltecas and Quauhquecholtecas communities were the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* and the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*.⁸ Each Nahua script displayed its unique characteristics. However, they share one common goal: these pictorials were presented to the local and crown officials as petitions known as *probanzas de merito* (proof of merit). With a *probanza* in hand, conquistadors gained special colonial privileges.

Susan Schroeder argues in “The Genre of Conquest Studies” that the employment of pictorials as *probanzas* intentionally validated the Nahua as conquistadors. At the same time, it also maintained their ethnic and cultural identities.⁹ One example that observes this argument is the Habsburg coat of arms in each of the *lienzos*.

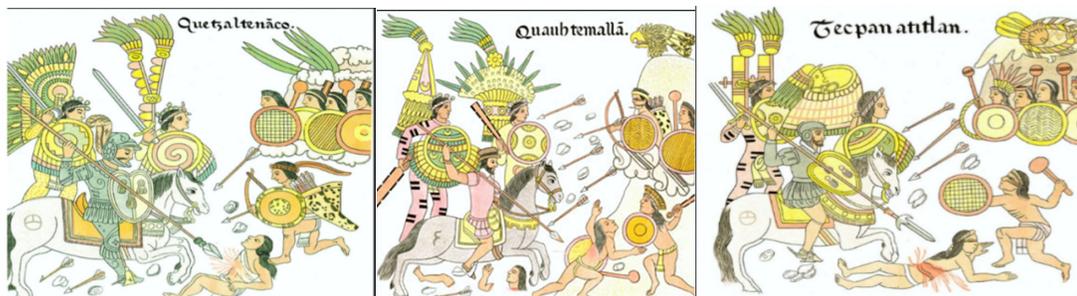


“Habsburg Coat of Arms from the Nahuatl lienzos. The one on the left was adopted by the Tlaxcalteca in their pictorial, while the right one was created entirely by the Quauhquecholtecas.” Digital images were provided “Lienzo de Tlaxcala.” *Mesolore.org: A research & teaching tool on Mesoamerica*. Accessed May 21, 2021. <http://www//mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>. and “Lienzo de Quauhquechollan.” *Quauhquechollan: A Chronicle of Conquest*, Universidad Francisco Marroquin. Accessed May 21, 2021.

In the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, the coat of arms centers at the top, just above the place sign of Tlaxcala. The location of these symbols is significant because it shows the Tlaxcaltecas’ loyalty to the Spanish crown, thus eligible for a special privilege in the colonial period. The Quauhquecholtecas took a much different approach as the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*’s coat of arms was styled in a syncretic fashion that appealed to Spanish officials and Nahua identity. Unlike the Tlaxcaltecas’ pictorial, the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan* did not directly adopt the Spaniards’ version of the coat of arms. Instead, they created a new one that holds a Spanish sword and a *macuahuitl* (indigenous sword) on each side, thus distinguishing the alliance between the Quauhquecholtecas and the Spanish¹⁰. In addition, to this emblem, the place sign of Quauhquechollan centers with the coat of arms. Furthermore, the Quauhquecholtecas depicted in this *lienzo* are white-skin and are holding European steel swords just like the Spanish. These modifications by the Quauhquecholtecas signified their equality to the Spanish conquistadors meaning they should receive special privileges.

From their Numbers to their Responsibilities, Nahua Contributions in Guatemala

One of the most significant Nahua contributions during the invasion in Guatemala was the high provision of participants. According to Restall and Michel R. Oudijk in “Mesoamerican Conquistadors,” indigenous warriors from each side of the aisle consistently outnumbered the Spaniards during the conquest period.¹¹ The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* supports this argument as the Tlaxcaltecas provided the Spaniards large numbers of their warriors.



“Three cells from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala that represent the campaigns in the Guatemalan highlands. Locations include Quetzaltenango, and Tecpan. From these cells, we can see the contribution of high Tlaxcalteca participants and the outcome of their military capability.” Digital images were provided by “Lienzo de Tlaxcala.” Mesolore.org: A research & teaching tool on Mesoamerica. Accessed June 21, 2020. <http://www/mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>.

As seen on the cells, there are two participant groups: the Tlaxcalteca-Spanish alliance on the right side and the Maya opponents on the left. The sole Spaniard in the *lienzo* represent Pedro de Alvarado. Looking at each cell that depicts a military campaign in Guatemala, Alvarado is accompanied by more Tlaxcalteca warriors than his men as the ratio displays a two-to-one scenario.

The number of indigenous participants was so massive that Spanish leadership tempered. This transition led many Iberians to omit the numbers of these indigenous conquistadors. In Guatemala, Pedro de Alvarado’s letters to Cortes made no mention of indigenous allies during the conquest campaigns until he slipped their numerical presence in his second letter¹². However, other forms of petitions from the Nahua describe their numerical support in Guatemala. Restall and Asselbergs provide one Nahuatl language account in *Invading Guatemala* that counterargues

Alvarado's initial intentions to ignore indigenous support.¹³ That account was a transcript of a 1564 testimony from Francisco Oçelote, a Tlaxcalteca warrior who participated in the conquest campaigns from Central Mexico to Central America. Based on the transcript, the questions addressed to Oçelote were about the campaigns that took place in Guatemala. In one of the questions, Oçelote was asked if he knew if Cortes sent Pedro de Alvarado and some Spaniards to conquer the providence of Guatemala. In his answer, Oçelote claims that he did know the details. However, when he saw Alvarado, Oçelote claims numerous Tlaxcalteca conquistadors accompanied him.¹⁴

Besides their numbers, the Nahua also carried out various roles on and off the battlefield in Guatemala. The most notable role that they contributed was their military capability as both *lienzos* demonstrate the Nahua's outstanding and impressive attire. This included headgear, shields, and weapons like bows and arrows, spears, and swords. The *lienzos* also depict the outcome of the Nahua's military capability as some cells show traces of blood from stabbed and beheaded Maya bodies.



“A fragment from the Lienzo de Quauhquechollan depicting the roles and attire of the Quauhquecholteca warriors.” Digital image was provided by “Lienzo de Quauhquechollan.” *Quauhquechollan: A Chronicle of Conquest*, Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Accessed May 21, 2021.

While this role is frequently recognized, the Nahua also provided noncombatant allies equally crucial as the Spanish relied on indigenous supply and support networks. Restall and Oudijk identify one reasonably recognized position: the *tamemes* (porters), illustrated in the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*. This group of Nahuas was responsible for carrying supplies and food with no expectations of award nor recognition. In some instances, *tamemes* would risk their lives to carry wounded Spaniards away from the battlefield.¹⁵ Asselbergs also mentions the significance of merchants known as *pochtecas*. These merchants would travel to local marketplaces called *tianquiztils* for trade purposes. At times, they would hear intel about upcoming events during the conquest. With that intel, these Nahuas also served as spies and guides.¹⁶ They were able to warn the Spaniards about possible ambushes and traps, which would prevent severe casualties among the conquistadors.

Conclusion

There is no doubt among scholarship that the Spanish heavily relied on the support of Nahua allies in the conquest of the Guatemalan highlands. However, this was only one piece of a puzzle that is continually being built together as Restall demystified other myths that the Spanish perpetuated during the sixteenth century. While indigenous allies like the Nahua highly contributed to the conquest campaigns in Guatemala, disease, European weaponry, and indigenous disunity also played a role in a successful invasion. Because of these factors, Spanish and indigenous forces continued south into other Central American regions like Honduras and El Salvador. Moreover, Iberians accounts have marginalized indigenous perspectives in these campaigns. However, scholarship has now centered on indigenous texts and other fundamental sources from Anthropology and Geography to promote indigenous agency in their works, which continues to build off the New Conquest History.

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- ¹ Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ² Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 45.
- ³ Laura E. Matthew, "Whose Conquest: Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Mixteca Allies in the Conquest of Central America," in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, ed. Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 102-126.
- ⁴ Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 46.
- ⁵ Florine G. L. Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan, A Nahuatl Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008).
- ⁶ Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors*, 44-45.
- ⁷ Florine G. L. Asselbergs, "The Conquest in Images: Stories of Tlaxcalteca and Quauhquecholteca Conquistadors," in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, ed. Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 65-101.
- ⁸ "Lienzo de Tlaxcala." *Mesolore.org: A research & teaching tool on Mesoamerica*. Accessed May 21, 2021. <http://www/mesolore.org/viewer/view/2/Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>. and "Lienzo de Quauhquechollan." *Quauhquechollan: A Chronicle of Conquest*, Universidad Francisco Marroquin. Accessed May 21, 2021. <http://lienzo.ufm.edu/view-the-lienzo/view-the-lienzo>.
- ⁹ Susan Schroeder, "Introduction: The Genre of Conquest Studies," in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, ed. Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 5-27.
- ¹⁰ Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors*, 76 and 132.
- ¹¹ Michel R. Oudijk and Matthew Restall, "Mesoamerican Conquistadors in the Sixteenth Century," in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, ed. Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007). 28-64.
- ¹² Pedro de Alvarado and Sedley J. Mackie, *An Account of the Conquest of Guatemala in 1524* (New York: The Cortes Society, 1924).
- ¹³ Florine G. L. Asselbergs and Matthew Restall, *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahuatl, and Maya Accounts of the Conquest Wars* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).
- ¹⁴ Asselbergs and Restall, *Invading Guatemala*, 85-93.
- ¹⁵ Oudijk and Restall, "Mesoamerican Conquistadors in the Sixteenth Century," 38-39.
- ¹⁶ Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors*, 124.
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