



Beheadings and Massacres: Andean and Mesoamerican Representations of the Spanish Conquest

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Beheadings and massacres

Andean and Mesoamerican representations of the Spanish conquest

FEDERICO NAVARRETE

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Indigenous artists in Mexico and Peru produced a series of compelling images depicting the violence that accompanied the Spanish conquest of the pre-Columbian empires of the Mexicas¹ and the Incas in the early sixteenth century. This article compares some of these Mesoamerican and Andean images with the aim of reflecting on the different ways in which the Indigenous elites reacted to and interpreted Spanish domination,² and on the different ways in which Indigenous artists and their patrons in both regions appropriated the same key Spanish political and religious symbols and concepts and incorporated them into their own visual political discourses.

These colonial images have been called “syncretic,” “hybrid,” or “mestizo,” and their cultural origins and identity as well as their authenticity have been hotly disputed. As Dean and Leibsohn have pointed out, such discussions concern not only how these cultural productions were interpreted and defined in the social and historical context of their production, but also how contemporary historians and anthropologists interpret and define them to this date (Dean and Leibsohn 2003:11–13).

This is why, instead of seeking to define these cultural products univocally and statically as either Indigenous, Western, or hybrid, it is more fruitful to conceive them as the dynamic products of ongoing processes of colonial domination, political negotiation, cultural exchange, and cultural creativity. This means that their identity was also dynamic, since they were open to different readings and interpretations, both synchronically—by the different groups that coexisted in colonial society—and diachronically—as each of these groups evolved through time and their interaction also changed.

1. In this paper I shall refer to the inhabitants of Mexico-Tenochtitlan as Mexicas, the name they used for themselves, and will use the better known “Aztecs” to name the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of Central Mexico in general, as is common practice in English texts.

2. As Cummins has proposed, the analysis of Indigenous images allows us to circumvent the hegemony of Western texts and their biased vision of the cultural exchanges that took place in the colonial context (Cummins 1995:54–56).

The negotiation of hegemony and the construction of an intercultural iconography

In order to understand the images produced in colonial contexts, it is essential to take into account the dynamics of the political dialogues and cultural exchanges that produced them, and, in this case in particular, the role that they played in the negotiation of hegemony between colonizers and colonized. Even during the conquest itself, the Spaniards attempted to demonstrate the legitimacy of their military and political actions and of the domination they were establishing over the Indigenous population. Their political arguments were directed at the different sectors of the recently dominated Indigenous societies, but particularly at the elites, whose cooperation was essential for the stability and viability of the colonial regime, since Spanish rule could not be based on coercion alone. According to their own notions of political power, these arguments were centered on the following ideological and symbolical tenets:

- a. The identification of the imposition of Spanish rule with the imposition of Catholicism, both necessary to save the souls of heathen peoples.
- b. The emphasis on the right of conquest accruing to the Spaniards from their military victories over the Indigenous empires, the Mexicas, and the Incas, whose legitimacy was questioned and undermined.
- c. The recruitment of key elements of the Indigenous elites and entire Indigenous polities as allies and collaborators of their armies and their government.

These different arguments were interconnected, and the exercise of actual and ritualized violence played an important role in all three. For instance, the miraculous participation of Catholic divine figures, particularly Santiago Matamoros (Saint James the Major, the Moor-slayer) and the Virgin Mary, in the military actions of the Spanish conquest, including the massacres of civilians, was presented as a proof both of the identification of Spanish rule and Catholicism and of the right of conquest acquired by the Spanish conquistadors as holy warriors fighting under the direct protection of God and

the saints. The divine protection and Christian charisma associated with these sacred figures were also extended to the Indigenous allies of the Spaniards.

At the same time, the Spaniards sought to demonstrate that their force during the conquest, particularly the massacres committed against civilians and the overthrow and executions of Indigenous rulers, were legally and morally justified, since these rulers had been tyrants who derived their power from force alone, and both they and their subjects routinely engaged in crimes of idolatry, including human sacrifice.

Finally, the alliances with the Indigenous polities that supported the Spaniards during the conquest, such as Tlaxcala in Mesoamerica and the Cañaris in the Andes, were sealed by their joint military victories over their mutual enemies, the Mexicas and the Incas. Afterward, these same polities, like the Tlaxcalans in Mesoamerica and the Jaujans in the Andes, emphasized the importance of their military contribution to the conquest in order to obtain and confirm a privileged status within the colonial regime, and in that way they also legitimized Spanish rule. Since violence was a central element in all these arguments, it became a fundamental topic for both Spanish and Indigenous descriptions and depictions of the conquest. As such, it was not opposed in principle to political legitimacy, but became one of its cornerstones.

These Spanish political concepts and arguments were the dominant discourses under the colonial regime, and they were actively promoted among the Indigenous population by civil and religious authorities through the use of images, public ceremonies and pageants, religious rituals, and political discourses. However, in order to be effective, they needed to be accepted by the Indigenous elites and populations and therefore they had to be open to a certain degree of negotiation. Thus, they were intercultural by necessity: The Spaniards imposed their own religious symbols and rituals, their political ideas, iconography, and ceremonies, but they also appropriated key elements of the Andean and Mesoamerican political ideologies and iconographies in order to construct discourses, images, and rituals that would be more attractive and convincing to their native audiences. At the same time, the Indigenous elites, who were negotiating their positions of relative privilege within the colonial regime, appropriated key Spanish ideas, images, and symbols and combined them with those belonging to their own tradition in order to produce similar intercultural discourses meant to convince their Spanish dominators of their loyalty and rights, as well as to confirm and redefine their

legitimacy in the eyes of the Indian population governed by them.

Therefore, these political messages were highly complex not only because they combined Andean or Mesoamerican concepts of political legitimacy with Spanish ones, but also because they were directed at different audiences. As such, they contained several layers of meaning, some of them hidden below the overt acceptance of Spanish discourse and symbols. These *hidden transcripts*, to use Scott's category (1990), were meant to be understood only by Indigenous audiences and this is why deciphering them can be an arduous task for us today.³

Images were a privileged medium for the expression of these complex and politically charged discourses. The colonial regime used them as a favored means for divulging its political discourses to the Indigenous population. Furthermore, as Cummins has proposed, they played a key role in the intercultural communications and negotiations of the truth that were an essential part of colonial life, since they were held to represent reality far more straightforwardly than verbal discourses. Despite this belief in their mimetic transparency, images, in fact, were an ideal vehicle for the expression of hidden transcripts, since they allowed for ambiguities and multilayered meanings that were not as easily conveyed in verbal discourse (Cummins 1995).⁴

It is therefore very difficult to establish clear distinctions between the Indigenous and Spanish elements present in these images, and we should not assume that the presence of the former implies a cultural continuity with pre-Columbian tradition and is a demonstration of Indigenous authenticity, and equally that the presence of the latter entails an irreversible acculturation or is a sign of subjugation.⁵ Similarly, we should not assume that the elites that produced these images were speaking for Indigenous societies, or cultures, as if they were unproblematic wholes, but

3. For analysis of the way in which these hidden transcripts were conveyed through the use of European pictorial techniques in the sixteenth century Mexica pictographic book known as *Codex Azcatitlan*, see my article in *RES* 45 (Navarrete Linares 2004).

4. Serge Gruzinski has shown how certain cultural contexts, and certain visual genres in particular, are more open to intercultural exchanges than others, which allows for a greater play between the symbols of different traditions and their meanings, and to a freer flow of interpretations from one side to the other. These "attractors" can bring together strands of meaning and iconographies from disparate cultural traditions and allow them to intermingle and exchange meanings (Gruzinski 2000:206–207).

5. Estenssoro makes a similar point about colonial religious images in the Andes (Estenssoro 2003:313–315).

we must always keep in mind that they were trying to defend and legitimize their dominant role within those societies as well as their privileged relationship with the Spaniards.⁶

The historical circumstances

The specific forms and dynamics taken by the cultural exchanges and political negotiations in New Spain and Peru depended, for starters, on the characteristics of each of the traditions that were brought into contact. In this respect, there was one essential difference between the two regions: The pictographic tradition of representation and communication in Mesoamerica was easily understood and accepted by Spaniards and was incorporated from early on into colonial historical and artistic discourses; it was also accorded a high degree of authority within them. Pictographic books and maps circulated widely in New Spain in Spanish and Indigenous circles.

In contrast, the traditional forms of visual representation of the Andean peoples were not as easily understood and accepted by the Spaniards and were much less utilized both by them and by the Indian artists that produced images about the conquest (Cummins 1994:188–190). This is why the Andean images use more European techniques and styles than Mesoamerican images do, and why they did not circulate among Spanish audiences as much. However, this does not mean that their respective contents and political messages are more Europeanized or more Indigenous.⁷

The dynamics of intercultural exchange also depended on the historical evolution of each colonial regime. In this respect, too, there was a clear contrast between New Spain and Peru. In Mesoamerica, the military conquest of the dominating polity, the Mexicas, was rapid and highly successful, thanks fundamentally to the participation of the Indian allies of the Spaniards, mainly the Tlaxcalans. After that, the Indian elites were rapidly assimilated by the Spanish regime and constructed a discourse of collaboration with it. This assimilation was facilitated by the fact that the Spaniards established their capital in the ancient Mexica capital of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Thus, the pace of the ideological elaboration behind the Tlaxcalan

and Mexica images of the conquest that we shall analyze was equally rapid, and the Indigenous visual discourses were pretty much defined by the mid-sixteenth century.

The Tlaxcalan images about the conquest are taken from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, produced in the second half of the sixteenth century and presented to the Spanish king as part of a long judicial process in which the Tlaxcalan elites defended and extended the privileges originally granted to them as the main allies and collaborators in the conquest of the Mexicas (Gibson 1991). This pictographic history was reportedly copied from, or inspired by, a set of murals that had been painted in the house of the Cabildo of the colonial town of Tlaxcala.⁸ The Mexica image we shall analyze forms part of a history produced by Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar, in collaboration with Indigenous artists and informants—the famous *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*—also in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁹ Mesoamerican artists were responsible for the elaboration of the images and the Spanish author sought to present a native vision of the events of the conquest. Besides, as Magaloni has pointed out, the images contain a discourse that is parallel to and sometimes divergent from, the written text and that seems to have a clear Indigenous origin (Magaloni 2007).

As the Mesoamerican Indigenous elites declined in power and social position shortly afterward, there was no further elaboration on these subjects, and the visual discourse on the conquest became “crystallized,” to borrow Foster’s concept. There are copies of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they represent no new ideological elaborations on the subject.¹⁰

In the Andes, the process was more complex and protracted. The conquest, which started with the capture of the Inca Atahualpa in 1532, was not truly finished

8. The paintings are described by Diego Muñoz Camargo, a local historian. He included a set of very similar drawings in the manuscript of his “Descripción de la ciudad y provincias de Tlaxcala,” written in Spanish a few years later (Muñoz Camargo 1984:47–49).

9. Other Mexica codices that depict the violence of the conquest, such as the *Codex Azcatitlan* (1995), the *Codex Aubin* (1963), and the *Historia de las Indias de la Nueva España* (Durán 1967) were produced in the same period.

10. George Foster proposed the existence of a “culture of conquest,” which combined a subset of the cultures of the Spaniards and the Indians with a clear predominance of Spanish elements, which crystallized relatively early and became the basis for the construction of Colonial indigenous cultures (Foster 1960). His model fits the historical and cultural developments in New Spain, which was the region that inspired it, but does not correspond so well to those of Peru.

6. As Ortner has pointed out, one recurring deficiency of studies of resistance is their tendency to gloss over the contradictions that exist within colonized societies (Ortner 1995:186–187).

7. The contrast between the circles of production and circulation of Indigenous images in Mesoamerica and the Andes is very clearly defined by Cummins (1995:68).

until the beheading of the last rebel Inca, Tupac Amaru, in 1571 and the reforms of Viceroy Toledo (Stern 1982). In the meantime, key sectors of the Indigenous elites from Cuzco and elsewhere collaborated with and benefited from the colonial regime, while other sectors opposed it. After the consolidation of the colonial regime, collaboration became the only path for survival, and the Indigenous elites continued playing a key role in the colonial regime until the late eighteenth century, enjoying a position of relative privilege, since they were needed as intermediaries between Spanish authorities and the Andean peasant population. The distance between these two groups remained much greater than in New Spain, since the Spaniards preferred to live in Lima and in coastal regions, while the Indigenous population remained concentrated in the Andean highlands. The political viewpoint of the elites who collaborated with the Spaniards and became increasingly Christianized and Westernized in the process was manifested in the paintings and sculptures depicting the violence during the conquest as a product of the intervention of the Virgin Mary and of Santiago, images of which were exhibited in churches in Cuzco and other towns. Though originally produced for Spanish patrons, from the seventeenth century on these images were also made for Indigenous elites in the style of the Cuzqueño school (Gisbert 1980:193–196).

As the centuries passed, the depictions of pre-Columbian Incas gained increasing popularity. These were originally European-type portraits that were appropriated by Indigenous artists and then used by Cuzco aristocrats to exalt their royal ancestors and thus confirm their exalted status within the colonial regime (Cummins 1994:188–190). The executions of Atahualpa or Tupac Amaru or both were also depicted, but much less frequently. The earliest such images date from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and are found in Martín de Murúa's *Historia general del Perú* (2005) and in Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's *Nueva corónica* (1980), and both were drawn by the latter. In the following two hundred years, the execution of the Inca became a subject for poems and plays written in Quechua (Chang-Rodríguez 1991:64–66) and was increasingly represented in public rituals (Burga 2005:426–429). The painting entitled *Degollación de don Juan Atahualpa en Cajamarca* (Beheading of Don Juan Atahualpa in Cajamarca, fig. 1), exhibited at the Museo Inca in Cuzco, Peru, was very probably inspired by those rituals.

Thus, in the Andes, the visual discourses about the conquest evolved more slowly than in Mesoamerica.

As the Indigenous elites survived and thrived as key elements of the colonial regime, they used these images to bolster their position and to confirm their Christianity. Simultaneously, the Andean peasant population turned the figure of the beheaded Inca into the mythical Inkarrí, the center of their hopes of reprieve from the colonial regime. Similarly, the intercultural exchanges in Cuzco, particularly, led to a convergence of Indigenous and *criollo* views of the Incas, which meant that the images and ideas about this subject circulated widely among different ethnic groups (Dean 1999).

The transfigurations of Santiago

Since at least the thirteenth century, Santiago Matamoros had been a key figure in the Spanish tradition of holy war against the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, and logically he became the patron saint of the conquerors in the New World, who inherited the ideology and the chivalric values of the Christian warriors (Van Herwaarden 2003:465). There are mentions of apparitions by Santiago during the conquest of Mexico and Peru, and the images of the saint were a prominent part of Catholic rituals and pageantry from the early days of the colonial regime (Choy 1979). The cult of this warrior saint soon spread among Mesoamerican and Andean populations. However, the way he was represented in New Spain and Peru was quite different.

Although the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* contains no direct depiction of this saint, it has abundant representations of unnamed Spanish horsemen vanquishing and trampling upon their Indigenous enemies. This figure first appears in the plate depicting the massacre carried out by the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans in the city of Cholula in November 1519, wielding a lance and overrunning the mutilated bodies of unarmed Indigenous civilians (fig. 2). He is accompanied, as he will be in all his further appearances, by Tlaxcalan warriors dressed in their traditional Indian costumes. Henceforth, the horseman appears in almost all the battle scenes in the *Lienzo*. This Spanish cavalryman can be interpreted as being a metonymic representation of the vanquishing Spaniards, since in the Mesoamerican pictographic tradition it was common practice to use a single character to represent a whole collective. The use of this convention emphasized the importance of the corporate identity of the *altépetl*, or city-state, over the individual identities of its members.¹¹

11. This applied even to the rulers, who were frequently depicted more as representatives of their cities than as individuals.



Figure 1. Anonymous, *La degollación de Juan Atahuallpa*, eighteenth century. Oil painting. Photo: Daniel Giannoni, courtesy of the Museo Inka, Cuzco, Peru.

The figure of the horseman can also be interpreted as a humanized version of Santiago Matamoros.¹² In the Spanish tradition, the warlike saint was usually depicted mounted on a white horse and trampling on his vanquished infidel Moorish enemies, who were shown bloodied and sometimes dismembered. He usually wielded a sword and carried a banner, but could occasionally be depicted with a long lance (Cabrillana 1999:33). Besides, the humanization of this saint had precedents in the European iconography: After his conquest of Tunisia, the Emperor Charles V was depicted as Santiago trampling on his defeated Muslim enemy in order to bolster his status as defender of the faith and vanquisher of the infidels (Van Herwaarden 2003:493–505).

Regarding the massacre in Cholula, both Spanish and Indian chronicles of the conquest confirm that the

Indigenous population of Mesoamerica interpreted it as a proof of the prowess of the Spaniards' deities, specifically Santiago, who was continuously invoked by the conquistadors in their battles, and also of the powerlessness of their own gods to protect them against the newcomers (Díaz del Castillo 1968:249). The Tlaxcalan historian Diego Muñoz Camargo, who was familiar with the images of the *Lienzo*, states:

And thus they understood and comprehended that the God of the white people was more virtuous, and that His children were more powerful. And the Tlaxcalans took to invoking our lord Santiago, and even today, if they are in trouble and danger they call upon the lord Santiago (Muñoz Camargo 1984:250).

Significantly, in the narrative of the *Lienzo*, the Santiago-like horseman appears immediately after the Tlaxcalans have been baptized.¹³ Therefore, it would

12. This idea was also proposed by Juan López Magaña in the *III Simposio internacional de Códices* at Puebla, Mexico, in 1996. I have tried to get hold of his text, but have been unable to find any printed version. The following interpretation, however, is entirely my own.

13. That they had become Christian warriors since those early days was precisely what the Tlaxcalan elites sought to demonstrate to the Spaniards in the discourse of the *Lienzo* (Llamas 2007).

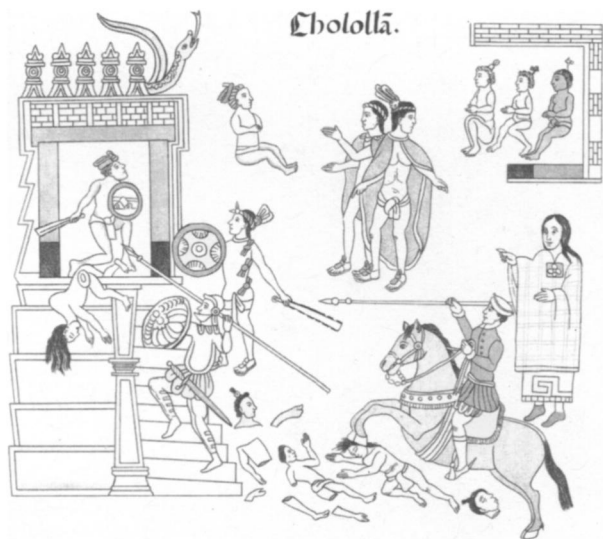


Figure 2. Massacre at Cholula from *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, nineteenth-century copy of sixteenth-century pictographical manuscript. Photo: Courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.

benefit them, as Christian warriors, to be protected by the main patron of their allies. The presence of an armed Spanish horseman trampling on defeated infidels would be recognized as an allusion to Santiago Matamoros by both Spaniards and Indians, who must have been familiar with the images of the saint, having attended pageants in which he was paraded. They also participated in the ritual dances of *Moros y cristianos*, performed all over New Spain, which celebrated his feats during the war against the Muslims in Spain and his new feats in the New World.

From a Mesoamerican point of view, the symbolism of this figure can also be associated with the awe that the horses inspired in the indigenous peoples who knew no domesticated animals of that size and physical force, and who were initially convinced that the horses ate flesh. Inga Clendinnen has pointed out that they admired the horses' courage in battle and treated them with the respect due to enemy warriors, placing their heads alongside those of sacrificed Spanish captives in their *tzompantli* skull racks. To explain this treatment of animals, she proposes an analogy with the way in which Indigenous warriors dressed as eagles and jaguars, thus appropriating the valor and fierceness of these predators (Clendinnen 1991:82–83). Thus, it can be proposed that this figure had a double significance, related to the

historical charisma of Santiago Matamoros, a central element of Spanish ideology, and to the Indigenous tradition of associating warriors with predators.

In the Andes, Santiago Matamoros, the Moor slayer, was quickly rechristened Santiago Mataíndios, the Indian slayer, thanks to his miraculous intervention on the side of the Spaniards, during a 1536 Inca rebellion that besieged Cuzco (Gisbert 1980:194–196). Although the Spaniards were the ones who first produced images of the saint's apparition, the Indians started reproducing them in the seventeenth century (fig. 3).

There is a remarkable contrast between the Tlaxcalan and the Andean iconography of Santiago. While in the latter the Indians are vanquished by the saint, and thus appear laying down under the hooves of the horse in the position of the defeated infidels, in the former, the Tlaxcalan warriors are always shown standing alongside, or behind, the Spanish horseman, and it is their mutual enemies who are trampled by the horse. This highlights the signification of the Tlaxcalan appropriation of the figure of Santiago: To demonstrate that, as in the case of other Christian warriors, the saint became their protector and companion in the holy war against other infidel Indians.

This Indigenous appropriation of the figure of Santiago in New Spain was highly successful and soon became canonical, since in the *Danzas de Moros y Cristianos* that are carried out to this date, most Indian communities have assumed the role of the conquering Christians, like the Tlaxcalans, and as such they usually vanquish a neighboring, rival group that has been cast as the defeated infidel (Warman 1972).

Massacres as a new form of sacrifice

The special relationship between the Tlaxcalans and the Spaniards, under the protection of Santiago Matamoros, was consecrated by the massacre in Cholula. The representation in the *Lienzo* (fig. 2) leaves no doubt about the brutality of that event, however this violence is not presented in a negative light but rather as a demonstration of the power and legitimacy of the victors, Spaniards and Indians, and of the superiority of their religion.

Another massacre perpetrated by the Spaniards and their Tlaxcalan allies, which took place in the Templo Mayor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in June 1520, is frequently represented in Mexica histories, such as the *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (fig. 4), though this time it is the victims, not the perpetrators, of the



Figure 3. Santiago Mataíndios from Guamán Poma de Ayala, *El primer Nueva Corónica y buen Gobierno*. Illustrated manuscript, seventeenth century. Photo: Courtesy of Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen.



Figure 4. Massacre at Templo Mayor from Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Book 12, fol. 33r. Illustrated manuscript, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Reproduced with permission of the Ministry of Cultural Patrimony and Activity.

carnage who produced the images. The Nahuatl text of the *Historia*, as translated by James Lockhart, describes the massacre in the following way:

Those whose assignment it was to do the killing just went on foot, each with his metal sword and his leather shield, some of them iron-studded. Then they surrounded those who were dancing, going among the cylindrical drums. They struck a drummer's arms; both of his hands were severed. Then they struck his neck; his head landed far away. Then they stabbed everyone with iron lances and struck them with iron swords. They stuck some in the belly, and then their entrails came spilling out. They split open the heads of some, they really cut their skulls to pieces, their skulls were cut up into little bits. And some they hit on the shoulders; their bodies broke open and ripped. Some they hacked on the calves, some on the thighs, some on their bellies, and then all their entrails would spill out (Lockhart 1993:134).

The emphasis in this verbal description, which was based on the testimony of Aztec elders, is placed on the brutality of the Spaniards and on the lethal efficacy

of their weapons. In the accompanying images, the hapless musicians seem to represent metonymically the collectivity of the-victims. But why emphasize mutilation? Maite Málaga has proposed that the effectiveness of steel swords in cutting through human flesh so impressed the Indians that it may have inspired the repeated representations of mutilations in the images we are discussing, Mexico and Tlaxcalan (Málaga 2002:94–95).

This hypothesis is bolstered by the fact that there appear to be few Aztec precedents of these representations. The known Aztec codices from the Postclassic period contain no depictions of murdered and mutilated warriors in battle scenes. This is probably due to the fact that the aim of Mesoamerican warfare was to take enemy captives, in order to sacrifice them later, and not to kill and maim them during battle (ibid.:89–91). Indeed, the customary representation for



Figure 5. Coyolxauhqui, Mexica stone sculpture, fifteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.

a military victory in Aztec iconography was grabbing an enemy prisoner by his hair. In the famous Piedra de Tízoc, for instance, the conquests of different polities by the Aztecs are represented by the figure of the Aztec ruler, dressed as the god Tezcatlipoca, holding the hair of the ruler, or patron god, of the vanquished peoples (Townsend 1979:48–54).¹⁴ A significant exception to this practice is found in the compelling sculptural representations of the dismembered body of the goddess Coyolxauhqui (fig. 5), the sister of Huitzilopochtli, the warlike patron god of the Aztecs. According to the myth that inspired these images, Coyolxauhqui and her four hundred brothers tried to attack Huitzilopochtli while he was still in the womb of their mother, Coatlicue, who lived in the sacred mountain Coatépec. Upon hearing news of the attack, the god was quickly born and he routed his elder brothers, mutilating his sister and throwing her dismembered body downhill. This victory demonstrated the power of Huitzilopochtli and marked

14. In this case, both the Mexica ruler and his defeated enemies are metonymical representatives of their respective polities. On this monument, see also Umberger 1998.

the dawning of a new cosmic era under his domination.¹⁵ The mutilation of Coyolxauhqui was more an act of sacrifice than of war, since it took place in a sacred space and is explicitly linked by several sources to the origins of the practice of ritual sacrifice (Durán 1967:33–34). Therefore, the sculpture of the dismembered goddess was placed at the feet of the Templo Mayor in Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the main sacrificial center of the Mexica, which was called Coatépec and was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli. The fact that the Spaniards and their allies perpetrated their massacre in precisely that place must have had a profound impact on the Mexicas. Inga Clendinnen has pointed out that the massacre of unarmed civilians at such a sacred place was not common in Aztec warfare and could not be interpreted as an act of sacrifice either, because it contravened the strict rules surrounding the performance of such rituals (Clendinnen 1991:81).

15. There are many versions of this myth, which was essential for defining the identity of the Mexicas and the legitimacy of their ruling elite. For a detailed analysis, see González de Lesur 1966, Graulich 1982, and Navarrete Linares, n.d. 1.

As for European precedents of these images, in sixteenth-century engravings representing battles, the corpses of the defeated warriors were usually shown whole and not dismembered (Málaga 2002:93–94), with the exception of the severed heads of executed criminals. However, in the representations of Santiago, the defeated infidels were often depicted beheaded and mutilated.¹⁶ Thus, we can propose that these representations of the massacres at Cholula and Mexico-Tenochtitlan combine key Mesoamerican and European religious and political symbols and ideas to present an original interpretation of the unprecedented acts of violence perpetrated by the Spaniards.

Within the first frame of reference, the massacres are shown as a new kind of sacrifice, which becomes the harbinger of a new political order and a new cosmic era, since acts of sacrifice were closely linked with the establishment of political power, with the foundation of new cities and dynasties, and with the beginning of new cosmic eras (Graulich 2005). Thus the Spaniards were anointed with the charisma of sacrificers, an essential element of political legitimacy in the Mesoamerican tradition (Carrasco 1999). This Mesoamerican interpretation of the massacre did not contradict the Spanish one in which such bloody acts confirmed the sacred power of Santiago Matamoros and the holiness and legitimacy of Christian warfare against the infidels, as well as the powerlessness of their deities.

While this double framework of reference applies to both the Aztec and the Tlaxcalan images, the authors and the polities they speak for assumed different positions. The defeated Aztecs took the role of the victims, identifying with the dismembered goddess Coyolxauhqui and implicitly admitting that the era of the domination of their god Huitzilopochtli was finished, and that he, and his people, had been replaced by a new kind of conquerors and sacrificers.¹⁷ In this way, the Mexicas explained their own defeat according to well-established Mesoamerican ideas about the succession of cosmic eras associated with the domination of particular ethnic groups, ideas that they had used previously to legitimize their imperial domination over the other Mesoamerican polities (López Austin 1992). At the same time, these images showcased the brutality of the

conquerors, an argument that could help them claim some kind of redress from the Spanish government. In contrast, the Tlaxcalans assumed the role of the victors and collaborators with the Spaniards in the performance of the new acts of ritual sacrifice. This could be the meaning of the constant representation of dismembered bodies in all scenes of battle, but it is particularly clear in the representation of the siege of México-Tenochtitlan included in the *Lienzo* (fig. 6).

This image reproduces, and subverts, the traditional Mesoamerican representation of the quincunx, a cosmogram that showed a cosmic, religious, or political center, surrounded by a quatrefoil representation of the cosmos. For instance, in the famous second plate of Codex Mendoza, Mexico-Tenochtitlan was depicted as the axis-mundi around which the whole cosmos was organized.¹⁸ In this case, the four cities surrounding and supporting Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and symbolizing the four corners of the world, are conquered by the Tlaxcalans and their Spanish allies (Málaga 2002:95–99), and acts of mutilation-sacrifice are performed in each of them. Thus, the conquest is presented as an act of sacrificial violence that led to the destruction of the old cosmic order, centered on Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and, implicitly, to the foundation of a new political and Christian order. The latter is beautifully represented in the main image of the *Lienzo*, which shows Tlaxcala as the political center of New Spain and as the cosmic axis of the new political and religious order of Spanish rule (fig. 7).

In the Andes, there are almost no depictions of the first massacre perpetrated by the Spaniards in Peru, in Cajamarca in November 1532, when they took the Inca Atahualpa prisoner. The only representation I am aware of is in the *Degollación* painting. In contrast, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both Santiago Matamoros and the Virgin Mary, appearing as the Señora de la Descensión, Our Lady of Descent, were frequently depicted defeating masses of Inca warriors in two miraculous apparitions in which they defended the Spaniards during the Inca rebellion of 1536 (Gisbert 1980:193–196). In some versions of these scenes produced by Indigenous artists in the seventeenth century, such as the plates of Guamán Poma's *Nueva Corónica* (figs. 3 and 8), the Andean rebels are shown prone and submitting to the power of the saint or the

16. A fourteenth-century codex at the Biblioteca Catedralicia de Santiago de Compostela shows the warrior saint riding over the dismembered bodies of his enemies (Cabrellana 1999:213).

17. Magaloni demonstrated how the images of the Conquest in the Florentine Codex present these events as the beginning of a new cosmic era (2007).

18. The toponymic glyph of Tenochtitlan was a sacrificial symbol, since the red cactus fruits stood for the hearts of sacrificed warriors, and an enemy warrior was sacrificed during the foundation of the town (Navarrete Linares n.d. 1).

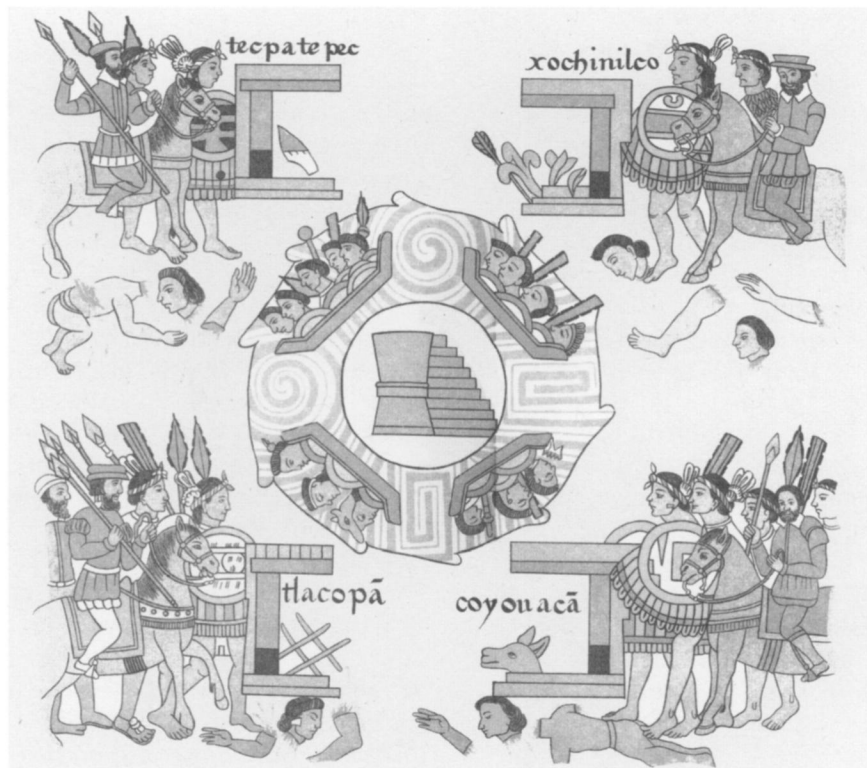


Figure 6. Quincunx of the Conquest from *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, nineteenth-century copy of the sixteenth-century pictographical manuscript. Photo: Courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.

Virgin, but appear neither bloody nor dismembered. Besides, the Spaniards are frequently absent from these scenes, even though they were the direct beneficiaries of these miraculous apparitions and their first promoters.

This exclusion can be interpreted as an attempt to establish a direct link between the natives and these very important divine figures. Dean has proposed that it may have served to provide a supernatural causation to the defeat of the rebel Incas (Dean 1996:172), and Estenssoro has argued that it could have been used to legitimize the ulterior Christianization of the Cuzqueño elites (Estenssoro 2005:114). We can propose that the miraculous apparition of the Virgin and Santiago and their defeat of the rebel Incas became a founding miracle for the Christian Indigenous elites, since it delegitimized violent resistance to the colonial regime and provided a supernatural sanction to their acceptance of Christianity and of Spanish domination. Thus, the Andean interpretation of the massacres that accompanied the Spanish conquest would be quite similar to the one constructed by Mesoamerican elites, since in both cases

sacralized violence became one of the foundations of the legitimacy of the Spanish regime and of Indigenous collaboration with it.

Executions

Over the centuries, the executions of the Incas gained increasing importance in Andean interpretations of the conquest. To understand this process of elaboration, however, some historical clarifications are needed. Atahualpa, the first Inca to be executed, was the acting ruler of the Tawantinsuyu, the Inca Empire, but had not been formally crowned. Though he was the son of the late Inca Huayna-Capac, he hailed from Quito, and was not the son of a *colla*, a sister-wife of that ruler. Therefore he faced the opposition of the Cuzqueño nobility and had just won a civil war against Huascar, another son of Huayna-Capac and the head of the royal lineages from that city (Hemming 1970:28–29). When he was captured by the Spaniards in Cajamarca, he was on his way to Cuzco to be crowned. After Atahualpa ordered the

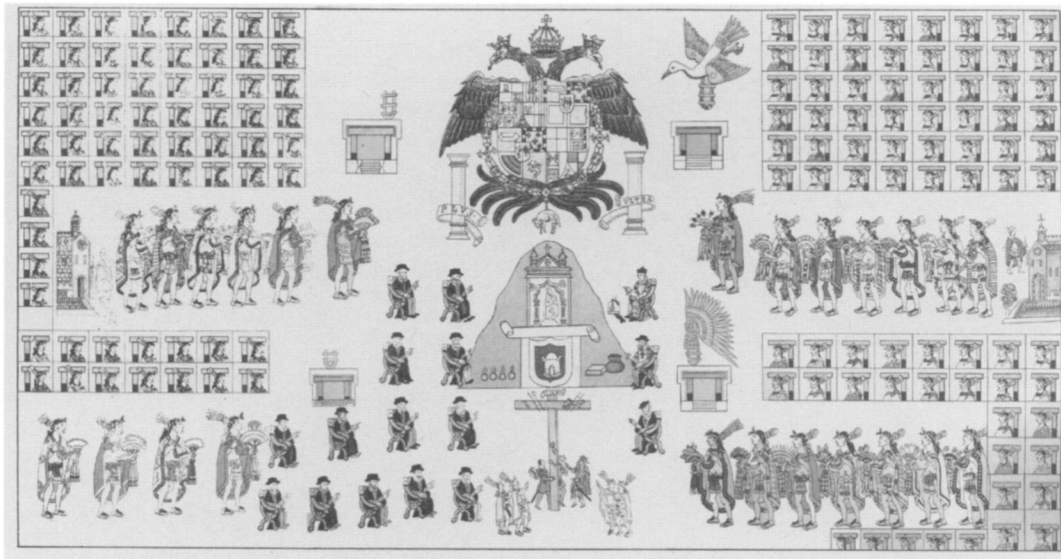


Figure 7. Quincunx with Tlaxcala from *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, nineteenth-century copy of the sixteenth-century pictographic manuscript. Photo: Courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.

death of Huascar, he was executed by Francisco Pizarro in July 1533, but was garroted, not beheaded (ibid.: 78–79). He agreed to be baptized right before his execution to avoid being burned, since the preservation of his body was essential for his becoming a *mallqui*, a mummified ancestor, and possibly even to come back to life, as he promised he would do (MacCormack 1988:962–963).

Because he was not yet a crowned Inca, and his legitimacy was not recognized by the powerful Cuzqueño elites, his execution was not considered very significant by that group in the following years. In contrast, the Spaniards emphasized the importance of his legal death, presenting him as a legitimately invested ruler and asserting that his execution had transferred his sovereignty to the Crown (Estenssoro 2005:100).

In 1534, the Cuzqueño nobility, particularly the descendants of Huayna-Capac, accepted Spanish authority but then led a rebellion against the new rulers. After they could not take Cuzco, thanks to the miraculous apparitions of Santiago Mataíndios and the Virgin Mary, they took refuge in the remote city of Vilcabamba. In 1572, Tupac Amaru, the last of the rebel Incas from Vilcabamba, was taken prisoner and beheaded in the main square of Cuzco. His execution is dramatically described by a Spanish witness:

When the executioner, a Cañari Indian, brought the knives that were to be used to behead Tupac Amaru, a marvelous thing happened. The throng of Indians cried out with such

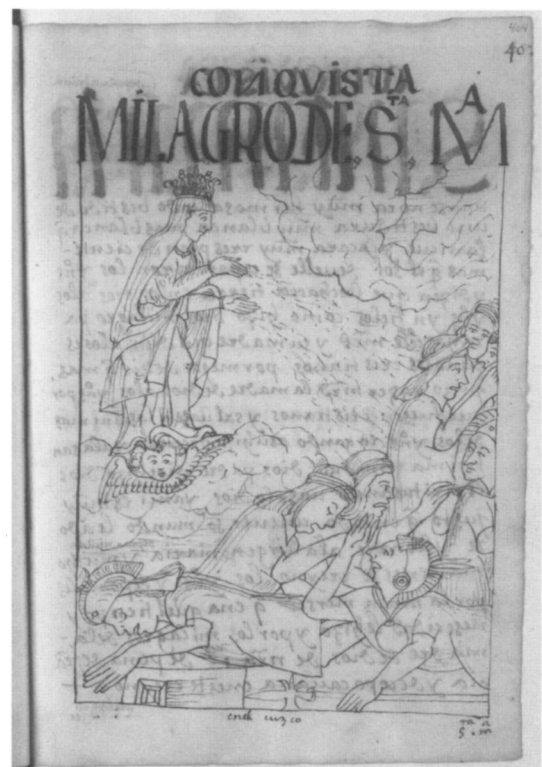


Figure 8. Virgin of the Descent from Guamán Poma de Ayala, *El primer Nueva Corónica y buen Gobierno*. Illustrated manuscript, seventeenth century. Photo: Courtesy of Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen.

pain that it seemed that the Day of Judgment had arrived. The Inca, having received his last rites from the priests that were beside him, placed his head on the beheading place like a lamb. The executioner came forth and taking his hair in his hand cut off his head with a single blow and raised it for all to see. In the same instant in which the head was cut, all the bells in the cathedral started ringing as well as all the bells in all the monasteries and churches in town. The execution caused a great pain and brought tears to the eyes of everybody. The head was placed in a lance near the gallows. Every day it became more beautiful, since the Inca had a beautiful face when he was alive. One dawn, Juan de la Sierra looked out of the window by chance and witnessed the idolatries being perpetrated by the populace. The viceroy was informed and ordered the head to be buried alongside his body in a chapel in the cathedral (Ocampo 1955:8–10).

This second execution was witnessed by many more people than the first, and marked the end of any attempt by the Indians to challenge the rule of the Spaniards. As such, it had a much greater impact on the Indian imagination than the garroting of Atahualpa. It was a highly fraught political statement by Viceroy Francisco de Toledo and, as the colonial regime evolved, it was represented and interpreted in changing and unpredictable ways by the Andean elites and peasants.

Under Spanish law, death by beheading was the legal punishment reserved for a rebel against his legitimate lord, the King of Spain, and thus the execution was meant to show that the last Inca's claims to be a sovereign were illegitimate.¹⁹ Following the European logic of torture, beheading sought to make the punishment equivalent to the crime and thus could be interpreted as a kind of inverse crowning (Foucault 1984:61; Bertelli 2001:248). In the European tradition, the bodies of tyrants and usurpers were dismembered and then exhibited, or even eaten, as a repudiation of their illegitimate rule and as a way of casting them away from the human community (Bertelli 2001: 242). However, the cult of the severed head of Tupac Amaru, as described by Ocampo, would suggest that the Indigenous population of Cuzco rejected this political message as Andean.²⁰

To understand the Indigenous interpretation of this execution, it must be remembered that in the Andes

there was a long tradition of sacrifice by beheading and of the public display of the severed heads of enemies who had been defeated in battle (Benson, 2001:4–9).²¹ In the Inca culture, some *keros*, ceramic or wooden vessels used for ritual toasting, have been interpreted by Cummins as stylized representations of severed human heads. These vessels may represent the heads of defeated rebel leaders that were given as presents to their successors in order to demonstrate the power of the Incas to punish their enemies and to bring order and prosperity to those subject to their rule (Cummins 2002:93–95).

Thus the military and political power of the Incas was demonstrated through the exhibition of trophy-heads, and Guamán Poma also shows an Inca warrior displaying the severed head of a defeated enemy. The same association seems to inspire a seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century Cuzqueño painting of a pre-Columbian ñusta, or princess, called "El gran ñusta Chanan Coricoca . . .", (The great princess Chanan Coricoca . . .) (fig. 9). According to the Inca tradition, this woman fought valiantly against their powerful Chanca enemies and helped defeat them, thus initiating the imperial rule of the Incas in the early fifteenth century. In the painting she is shown standing alongside a character that may be the future Inca Pachacutic, and holding the severed head of a defeated Chanca enemy (Urton 1990:54–57). The whole scene is framed by a rainbow, a symbol of the cosmic upheavals, called *pachacutic*, associated with the beginning of new cosmic eras. Thus the message of the painting is that the defeat of the Chancas produced a *pachacutic* that led to the beginning of the era of the Incas (Millones 1987:108–110). There is ample evidence that the same interpretation was made of the execution of the Inca (Zuidema 1973). From an Andean perspective, the public exhibition of his severed head could have meant that the Spaniards were assuming the cosmic and political powers that used to belong to the Inca, however the worship of this sacred relic by the local population can be interpreted as an attempt by the Indians to preserve these powers for themselves. Thus, from the beginning, there was no intercultural agreement around the meaning of the execution of the Inca and no consensus around the legitimacy of Spanish rule.

19. Indeed, Toledo and his official historian, Sarmiento de Gamboa, made a concerted effort to undermine the legitimacy of the dynasty of the Incas by attempting to prove that they were tyrants.

20. In the European tradition, too, when the victim of an execution was not considered a tyrant, the pieces of his body could become objects of public cult on the part of those who defended his legitimacy (Bertelli 2001:258).

21. In the Nazca culture, which flourished in the first millennium A.D., there is abundant evidence of the ritual use of "trophy-heads" as symbols of rebirth and regeneration, linked with rituals of fertility. Plants are shown growing from the mouths of these severed heads and sometimes the heads themselves take the place of plants (Proulx 2001:134–136).

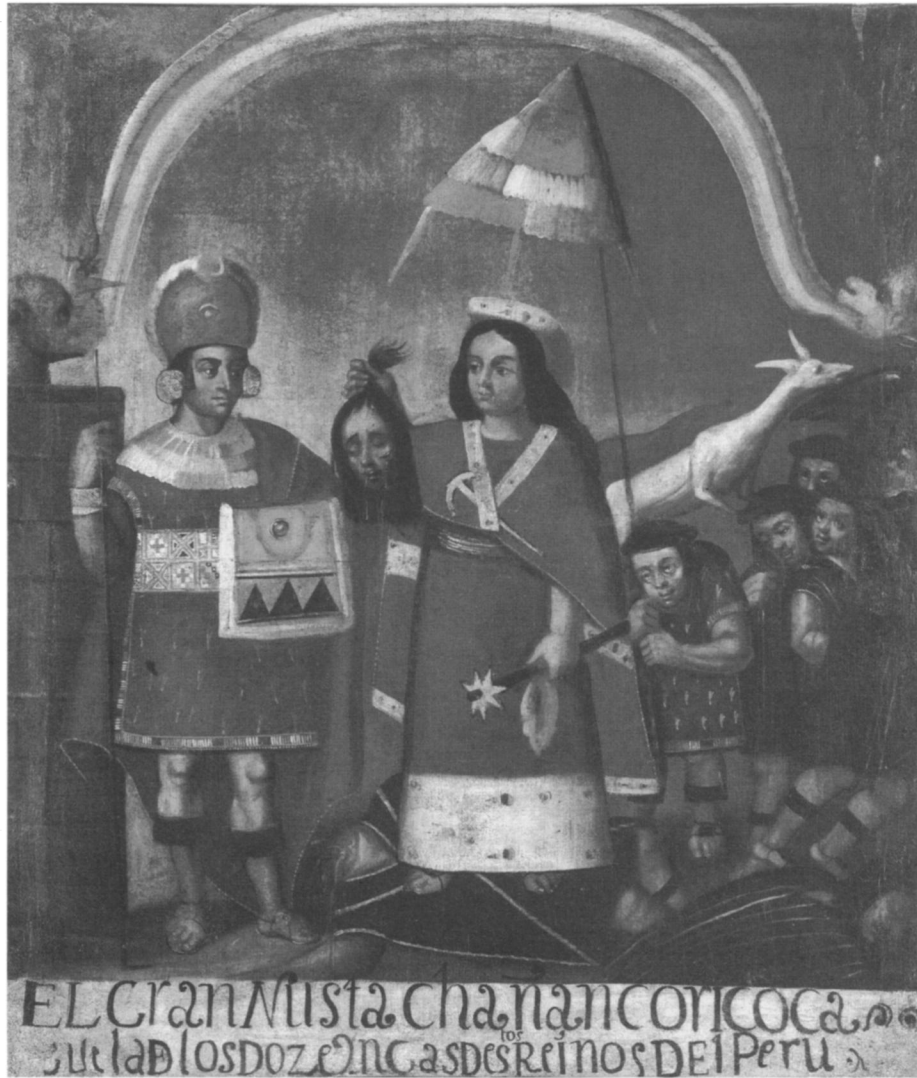


Figure 9. Anonymous, *El gran ñusta Chanan Coricoca*, seventeenth century. Oil painting. Photo: Daniel Giannoni. Reproduced by Courtesy of the Museo Inka, Cuzco, Peru.

Very soon after the events, the executions of Atahuallpa and Tupac Amaru began to be conflated by the Andeans.²² In the famous drawings of these events by Guamán Poma from the early seventeenth century, both rulers are beheaded in the same fashion (figs. 10 and 11). However, this author still marks a distinction between Tupac Amaru, who in previous images was shown wearing full Inca regalia, and Atahuallpa, who is deprived of it (Estenssoro 2005:127–128). Nevertheless,

22. In 1573, two witnesses to the death of Atahuallpa swore solemnly that he had been beheaded (Estenssoro 2005:124–125).

at the moment of their execution, both rulers are shown wearing the *mascaipacha*, the traditional Inca crown. That this was significant is proved by the fact that in an earlier image of the beheading of Tupac Amaru, included in the chronicle of Martín de Murúa and also drawn by Guamán Poma, the Spanish author did not show Tupac Amaru wearing a *mascaipacha* when he was being executed.

Also, with the passing of time, the decapitated sovereign was transformed into Inkarrí, a god-like figure, who was expected to come back to earth to end Spanish domination. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly



Figure 10. Execution of Atahualpa from Guamán Poma de Ayala, *El primer Nueva Corónica y buen Gobierno*. Illustrated manuscript, seventeenth century. Photo: Courtesy of Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen.

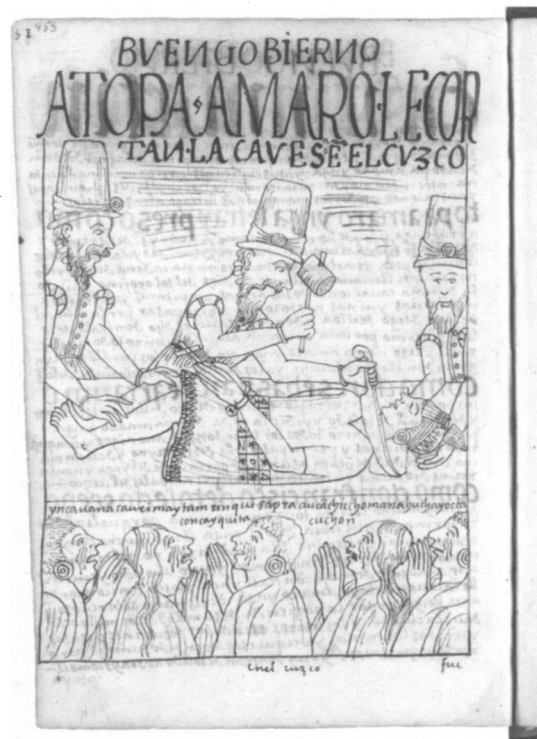


Figure 11. Execution of Tupac Amaru from Guamán Poma de Ayala, *El primer Nueva Corónica y buen Gobierno*. Illustrated manuscript, seventeenth century. Photo: Courtesy of Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen.

how this was supposed to occur. The discovery in the twentieth century of a series of oral narratives about Inkarrí has led to a retrospective interpretation.²³ Most authors have emphasized the deep roots of this mythical-historical construction in Andean cosmology while recognizing the Western influences on its millennial expectations, which conflate the return of the Inca with the Last Judgment (Pease 1973). Alberto Flores Galindo (1993) and Manuel Burga (2005) have established a genealogy that links the exaltation of pre-Columbian Incas in the works of Garcilaso de la Vega and Guamán Poma, the popular feasts that reenacted the execution of the Inca in the eighteenth century, and the contemporary myths of Inkarrí. According to their interpretation, these elements are at the core of an “Andean utopia,”

23. This discovery was made by Efraín Morote, and later other versions were discovered by José María Arguedas (1973), among others.

an anticolonial Indigenous ideology that has been the backbone of Indigenous resistance and cultural continuity since colonial times up to the twentieth century.²⁴

This historical elaboration took different forms among the elites in Cuzco and the peasant masses. In the former case, the reference to the Incas was used to establish and confirm the noble status of their direct descendants and their right to a privileged status as aristocratic collaborators of the colonial regime.²⁵ Thus

24. More recently, some authors have criticized this vision of the continuity of Andean resistance as too static and essentialist (Mallon 1995). Estenssoro has proposed that the figure of the Inkarrí has Christian roots and therefore is intimately linked with the millennial expectations of the Last Judgment and that it may have originated among the Catholic priests evangelizing the Indians (2003:353–354).

25. The Jesuits played an important role in the elaboration of these historical arguments according to European parameters and expectations (Dean 1999:112–113).

the figures of the Incas were continuously represented in public parades and spectacular paintings, a practice that became stronger in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, creating a veritable "Inca renaissance" (Wuffarden 2005). Among the peasants, the figure of the Inca became invested with more supernatural characteristics and was associated with a just and harmonious pre-Columbian society, free of all the injustices of the colonial regime. This alternative became more compelling as the *mita* system of forced labor maintained a brutal exploitation of peasant communities (Spalding 1984) and delegitimized Spanish rule in the eyes of these lower-class Indians (Szeminski 1987), making them feel that they lived in a disorderly and unjust world.²⁶ The contradictory social and political positions of these different Andean social groups were nevertheless dissimulated by their common exaltation of the figure of the Inca and the condemnation of his violent execution. In late colonial times, many *criollos* and mestizos also identified with the idealized Incas and rejected their violent demise (Flores Galindo 1993).

These complex ideas seem to be expressed in the painting of the beheading of Juan Atahualpa (figs. 1 and 12). The image is organized as a historical tableau centered on the execution of the Andean sovereign, and representing the main episodes leading to it and, afterwards, to his burial. The narrative begins with a depiction of the massacre at Cajamarca when the Inca was taken prisoner, showing Spanish foot soldiers, dressed in armor, shooting unarmed Indians as if they were a firing squad.²⁷ Around the scene of the execution are the portraits of Huascar, the rival of Atahualpa in the fight for the Inca throne, and Huayna Capac, their father. Both characters are shown carried in litters and wearing full Inca regalia. To the left stands the figure of Mama Ocllo, the first *colla*, or Inca queen, and founder of the royal dynasty at Cusco, and in the upper right corner we see the mother of Atahualpa. The presence of these four characters in the four corners of the painting emphasizes the royal lineage of the executed sovereign, and his

investiture is confirmed by the *mascaipacha* placed on the table where his beheaded body is laying.²⁸ There is also an image of an empty throne, with a dwarf carrying an umbrella, a common iconographic convention for the Inca seat of power, which could be a signal that the Inca throne was left vacant by the execution of Atahualpa.

The scene of the execution of the Inca is surrounded by the portraits of Spanish dignitaries, including the Pizarro brothers, in the role of the tribunal who ordered the execution, thus establishing their direct responsibility (fig. 12). To the left of the executed Inca stands the priest Vicente Valverde, holding a cross. This could indicate that the Inca died as a Christian (fig. 12).

The beheading is carried out under a rainbow. This symbol was intimately linked with the power of the Incas: A rainbow blessed the foundation of Cuzco, and in that city it was associated with the sun and therefore with the figure of the Inca. In colonial times, the rainbow became a symbol of the Inca empire and was incorporated into many coats of arms (Cummins 1998:104). In Cuzqueño paintings, rainbows were associated with the Last Judgment (MacCormack 1988:998–1001), a cosmic upheaval not unlike the Andean *pachacutic*, which was also linked with the expectation of the return of the beheaded Inca. Therefore, the framing of the execution by this symbol seems to imply that it produced a *pachacutic*.²⁹ Beneath the rainbow, there is a brown backdrop with white spots that have been interpreted as a starry night (López-Baralt 1990:55–56) or a hailstorm (Gisbert 1980:199–200). Hailstorms were interpreted as very bad omens in the Andean tradition and were mentioned in colonial texts narrating the execution of the Inca.³⁰

The fact that the painting calls the beheaded Inca Juan Atahualpa is striking, since the sixteenth-century histories assert that he was baptized as Francisco (Hemming 1970:78–79). Perhaps, the painting is alluding

26. As early as 1602, Andean peasants were expecting the return of the Inca to redress the injustices and abuses committed by the Spaniards. Urton cites the testimony of a Spaniard traveling in Jauja who was told by a peasant that they were keeping *quipu* records of all the tribute paid to the Spaniards in order to present them to the returned Inca (2003:40).

27. This depiction does not correspond to the accounts of the massacre found in the written sources, which emphasize the role played by the horses in the attack on the Indians (Hemming 1970:41–43).

28. Chang-Rodriguez proposed that the four characters could be a representation of the Tawantinsuyu itself (1991:50–59), however, Zuidema argues that visual representations of quincunces are scarce in the Andean tradition (1997).

29. The link between the rainbow and the *pachacutic* cosmic upheavals is confirmed by the fact that in contemporary Andean communities this meteorological phenomenon is associated with snakes, or *amaru* in Quechua (Urton 1981:88–89), which are also closely linked with this concept.

30. López-Baralt proposes that this painting depicts a "black rainbow," a symbol of cosmic cataclysm and cultural disruption described in an eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century Quechua poem entitled *Apu Inca Atawallpa* (López-Baralt 1990:54–60).



Figure 12. Detail of the beheading of Atahualpa from *La degollación de Juan Atahualpa*, eighteenth-century. Oil painting. Photo: Daniel Giannoni. Reproduced by courtesy of the Museo Inka, Cuzco, Peru.

to Juan Santos Atahualpa, a mid-eighteenth-century Indian political leader who claimed to be a descendent of the Inca and led several Indigenous groups in the *montaña* region of the Peruvian Amazon forest, as well as some Andean communities, in a rebellion against Spanish rule (Stern 1987). These elements are evidence that this painting was produced late in the colonial period and that the elaboration of the complex political symbolism surrounding the decapitation of the Inca was a slow process.

In contrast to Peru, in New Spain the violent death and the execution of two Mexica rulers, Moteuhczoma Xocoyotzin and Cuauhtemoc, did not merit as much attention in Indigenous images and imagination. There is a depiction of the former in the *Codex Azcatitlan*, but as part of the massacre of *Templo Mayor*, and of the latter in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, though it is not given much importance.³¹ This lack of attention can be attributed to the fact that Indigenous identity in Mesoamerica was more collective, centered on the

corporate body of the *altépetl* and not so much on the individual figure of the sovereign. Besides, the figures of the dead Mexica rulers did not become symbols either of the identity of the Indigenous elites, or of popular indigenous resistance to Spanish rule, which was not as strong in Central Mexico as it was in the Andes. Interestingly, it was the *criollos* who later recovered these figures as emblems of the nascent Mexican nationalism (Brading 1980:39–40).

Negotiation and cultural control

As I have shown, the images of the conquest were the historical products of the development of the colonial regimes in New Spain and Peru. In Mesoamerica, after the dissolution of the native elites in the first half of the seventeenth century, the conquest lost its importance as a historical reference for the Indigenous peasant communities. Instead, they constructed their historical discourses around the foundation of their colonial towns, emphasizing their collaboration with prestigious Spanish authorities and the direct relationship they established with the Christian saints who became their patrons (Navarrete Linares n.d. 2). The fact that these themes were already present in the images of the

31. Regarding the *Códice Azcatitlan*, I have proposed that the violent death of Moteuhczoma at the hands of the Spaniards is presented as a just retribution for the earlier death of the Tlatelolcan ruler Moquihuix at the hands of the Tenochca (Navarrete Linares 2004).

conquest produced in the sixteenth century can be seen as an evidence of the success of these early ideological elaborations and of the resilience of the consensus that was negotiated through them with the Spanish regime.

In the Andes, the figure of the executed Inca who would return to reclaim his throne became the inspiration for resistance against colonial domination. The cycle of rebellions in the second half of the eighteenth century made constant reference to this theme (Stern 1987), and the great uprising led by the second Tupac Amaru and by Tupac Katari in 1781 sought to make the return of the Inca a reality. Its failure can be attributed, in great part, to the contrasting interpretations of this figure among the Andean elite and the peasant masses.³²

It is quite evident that the assimilation of Spanish elements into the visual discourses produced by the native populations did not necessarily imply their acceptance of Spanish domination and hegemony or the loss of their "cultural control," that is, their capacity of building their own interpretation of the events of the conquest and of constructing their own political strategies to adapt to, negotiate with, and even resist the colonial regime (Bonfil 1995). Therefore, the formal characteristics of the images do not correlate univocally with the message they are transmitting. Andean images of the conquest are more Westernized formally, but that does not prevent them from conveying a counterhegemonic message; the Mesoamerican images transmit a message of accommodation, even though they are closer to pre-Columbian models.

The negotiation of hegemony created complex and dynamic realms of cultural exchange in both regions, and images were particularly propitious for the expression of overt discourses of assimilation and hidden transcripts of resistance and redefinition of cultural identities. The evolution of these exchanges was not predetermined, nor was it linear: It depended on the transformations of the political relationship between the Spanish powers and the Indigenous elites and populations, and thus was open to continuous reelaboration and reinterpretation. Even today, historians and anthropologists continue reading and reinterpreting these visual discourses in order to construct their own interpretations of the nature of colonial Indigenous identities and cultures and their degrees of cultural control.

32. During this rebellion, contradictions between the popular and elite views of the Incas became apparent. See O'Phelan Godoy (1995) and Szeminski (1987).

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