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University of Nevada, Reno

The Expression of Status in Sixteenth Century Tlaxcala

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS, HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

by

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Abstract

The Tlaxcalans were Mesoamericans who allied with the Spanish conquistadors during the Conquest of Mexico. Due, in part, to their alliance with the Spaniards, the Tlaxcalans' experiences in the early colonial period were unique. The Tlaxcalans capitalized successfully on their military service by petitioning for and receiving certain privileges from the colonial Spanish authorities. This campaign was successful because the Tlaxcalans chose to communicate their identity and status to the Spanish government in a Hispanized manner. In sixteenth century Tlaxcala traditional ideas about the communication of identity, social rank, and prestige quickly incorporated newly introduced Spanish cultural norms. This thesis examines sources such as *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, or municipal council records, to discern the ways in which Tlaxcalans – as individuals, a community, and a corporate entity – attempted to express their status and improve their position in the sixteenth century through adoption of Spanish ideas about status expression.

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On June 5th, 1566, a notary of the municipal council of the province of Tlaxcala in New Spain read aloud the last will and testament of Don Julián de la Rosa, native noble of the district of Ocotelulco and member of the council since 1547.¹ The will, written and read in Nahuatl - the language of the Nahuas, or native people of central Mexico - outlined the distribution of Don Julián's estate, including his land, livestock, and personal property. Of his possessions he ordered that his horse and four cloaks – one plaited, one made with duck feather, one of cotton with floral design, and one of yellow cotton – to be sold and that the proceeds be charitably donated to the Catholic Church. He bequeathed other possessions, such as quetzal plumes, a feathered shield, a coyote headdress, and a feathered monkey uniform with a pheasant head device to his two brothers, Bautista and Diego Amiztlatlo.² In pre-Hispanic Tlaxcalan society, ownership of such high-quality cloaks and other finery was an indicator of high social rank, and, there is evidence within the will that this tradition continued into the post-Conquest era; Don Julián's feather cloak was apparently made with the feathers of the European domestic duck.³ In the will, however, these traditional status symbols intermingled with those of Spanish origin: Don Julián's adoption of a Spanish name with the honorific title of "don" was an indicator of rank in Hispanic society.⁴

1 Arthur J. O. Anderson, Frances Berdan, and James Lockhart, *Beyond the Codices: The Nahuatl View of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 53; James Lockhart, Frances Berdan, and Arthur J. O. Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545-1627* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1986), 138.

2 Anderson, Berdan, and Lockhart, *Beyond the Codices*, 44-53.

3 Robert Haskett, "Living in Two Worlds: Cultural Continuity and Change among Cuernavaca's Colonial Indigenous Ruling Elite," *Ethnohistory* 35, no. 1 (1988): 34-59; James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 199.

4 James Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards: Postconquest Central Mexican History and Philology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 125; Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan*

The post-Conquest era was generally a time of upheaval in Tlaxcala. The native ruling class reacted to the new colonial system in a number of ways. To what degree did acculturation occur? What actions did the elite take to defend the pre-Conquest social order? What new institutions were they quick to adopt and eager to benefit from? How did they distinguish themselves and create a new identity for Tlaxcala within the new societal framework? The communication of status in a particular culture is a language unto itself. In sixteenth century Tlaxcala, the language of status became more and more Hispanized as traditional ideas about the communication of identity, social rank, and prestige quickly incorporated newly introduced Spanish cultural norms and status symbols. The opportunistic adoption of these Spanish forms of status expression allowed elite Tlaxcalans to both communicate their perceived elevated status and defend their autonomy within the newly introduced colonial system.

According to James Lockhart, “the Nahuas accepted the new in order to remain the same.”⁵ Tlaxcalan decisions to adopt newly-introduced Spanish sociopolitical elements in government, in society, and as individuals stemmed from a need to find ways to preserve their preexisting status and autonomy in the post-Conquest era. The people of Tlaxcala were proud of their pre-Conquest history and culture.⁶ Prior to 1519, they had managed to maintain a “precarious independence” while beset on all sides by the Aztec empire.⁷ This pre-Hispanic heritage was the foundation of colonial Tlaxcala's ideas about

Actas, 21.

5 Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, 22.

6 According to Lockhart in *Nahuas and Spaniards* “patriotism and historical consciousness” were noticeable features of all central Mexican communities (168-9).

7 Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 76.

“prestige, honor, and status.”⁸

The Tlaxcalans saw the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519 as an opportunity to better their position and thus chose to ally with the Spanish conquistadors during the Conquest of Mexico.⁹ This alliance with the Spaniards would become the main tool used by the Tlaxcalans in the colonial political arena to distinguish themselves from the other indigenous groups of Mesoamerica. The alliance with the conquistadors greatly benefited Tlaxcala in the colonial era as the Spanish Crown and colonial government chose to recognize and reward the Tlaxcalans' loyalty.¹⁰ The special legal status the Tlaxcalans received translated into a “sense of distinctness and privilege” that was reflected in the Tlaxcalans' pursuit of Spanish symbols of status.¹¹

“Hispanization was both a symptom of authority and a method of maintaining authority.”¹² The Nahua nobility in the post-Conquest era had to fight to hold on to their social position in a time of rapid change – this struggle drove the acculturation process, wherein the Nahua elite in Tlaxcala adopted Spanish dress, names, honorifics, and other items of prestige for themselves; European coats of arms, technologies, religious organizations, and other improvements for their communities; and, a Spanish format for their government and diplomacy. This process was made easier by the level of similarity between the social hierarchies of both parties – Tlaxcalans and Spaniards. According to

8 Peter B. Villella, “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen: The Salazars of Colonial Tlaxcala,” *The Americas* 69, no. 1 (2012): 4.

9 Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 241.

10 Villella, “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen,” 4.

11 Villella, “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen,” 7.

12 Charles Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy in Colonial Mexico,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (1960): 181.

Robert Haskett, the Conquest

brought together two complex cultures whose attitudes toward nobility and the maintenance of elevated social status were often surprisingly similar on a very basic level... [People were] eager to adopt as many of those [Spanish] intrusive material trappings that were equated with position and authority as possible... Yet much of this was only a very superficial alteration of traditions that originated long before the coming of Spaniards to the New World.¹³

Sean Francis McEnroe agrees: “both Spanish and Nahuas belonged to societies ordered in one way by the distinction between noble and commoner, and in another by hierarchies of patronage and military service.”¹⁴ Where structures and values were similar (for example, the communication of an individual's status through name, dress, and other status symbols), Nahuas more quickly adopted the Spanish version of those structures and values because they were seen as an extension of their own traditions.¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that pre-Hispanic structures and values, as themselves or under new Spanish names, often co-existed or mingled with the newly introduced Spanish elements.

There are a number of extant sources that indicate the choices the Tlaxcalan elite made in the sixteenth century. *The Tlaxcalan Actas* were a series of records produced by the cabildo, or indigenous municipal council, of the province of Tlaxcala. These native-language documents included the minutes of various cabildo sessions – fragments from 1545 and 1627 and a more complete series from 1547-1567. Together, the documents contained in the *Actas* represent the “bulk of all the mid-sixteenth century minutes ever

¹³ Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 53.

¹⁴ Sean Francis McEnroe, “Spain's Tlaxcalan Vassals: Citizenship and State Formation on Mexico's Northern Frontier” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009), 20.

¹⁵ Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, 21.

written.”¹⁶ Subject matter ranged from problems with Spaniards to taxation levels to church building campaigns. The ways in which the members of the indigenous government discussed and chose to address each issue over this mid-century period give insight into how the Tlaxcalan elite dealt with the changes and challenges brought by the Spanish colonial system.

While the *Actas* tend to be the most detailed and (for the middle years of the century) complete sixteenth century records, there are a number of additional surviving native-language and pictorial primary sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Traditional pre-Conquest Mesoamerican year-counts – documents depicting a pictorial timeline – transformed into a genre of alphabetic Nahuatl annals produced by members of the educated indigenous nobility in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁷ *Here in this Year: Seventeenth-Century Nahuatl Annals of the Tlaxcala-Puebla Valley* contains two of these documents: they recorded plagues, environmental disasters, the development of the cities of Tlaxcala and Puebla de los Angeles, and various events that affected the community.¹⁸ Don Julián de la Rosa's will in *Beyond the Codices* was a very specific, personal record of the identity-related choices made by a single, individual member of the Tlaxcalan elite.¹⁹ Tlaxcalan historian Diego Muñoz Camargo wrote about Tlaxcala and Tlaxcalan history in the late sixteenth century, producing a number of documents, some illustrated.²⁰ Travis Barton Kranz discusses Camargo's *Descripción de*

16 Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, 33.

17 Camilla Townsend, *Here in this Year: Seventeenth-Century Nahuatl Annals of the Tlaxcala-Puebla Valley* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 11-12.

18 Townsend, *Here in this Year*, 21

19 Anderson, Berdan, and Lockhart, *Beyond the Codices*, 44-53.

20 Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1952), 238.

la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala de la Nueva España as well as the surviving Tlaxcalan pictorials produced in the sixteenth century including the Texas Fragment and the Lienzo de Tlaxcala.²¹ These various documents are useful in providing examples of the choices the native nobility made on the individual, community, and corporate levels.

A number of Spanish-language sources mention Tlaxcala. The writings of conquistadors like Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo discussed the Spaniards' alliance with the Tlaxcalans and the ways in which each group benefited during and after the Conquest.²² The works of priests like Fray Diego Durán and Fray Toribio Motolinía discussed Tlaxcalan history.²³ Motolinía – who lived in Tlaxcala in the 1530s – also had a lot to say about religion and daily life in Tlaxcala.²⁴ These outsiders' writings demonstrated how Tlaxcala was perceived by Spaniards and how the Tlaxcalans fit into the Spanish colonial system.

The Pre-Columbian Era

The Tlaxcalans were Nahuas: they shared a common language (Nahuatl, of the Uto-Aztecan family of languages) as well as a common culture with the majority of the peoples in central Mexico. Tlaxcala, as an independent entity, existed for over two hundred years prior to the arrival of Cortés. Early pre-Conquest Tlaxcalan history is

21 Travis Barton Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents on the Conquest of Mexico,” In *Sources And Methods For The Study Of Postconquest Mesoamerican Ethnohistory, Provisional Version*, ed. by James Lockhart, Lisa Sousa, and Stephanie Wood, last modified Feb 10, 2010, <http://whp.uoregon.edu/Lockhart/>.

22 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Bernal Díaz Chronicles: The True Story of the Conquest of Mexico*, trans. by Albert Idell, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956); Hernán Cortés, *Five Letters, 1519-1526*, trans. by J. Bayard Morris, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962).

23 Diego Durán, *The Aztecs: the History of the Indies of New Spain*, Trans. by Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas, (New York: Orion Press, 1964).

24 Toribio Motolinía, *The Indians of New Spain*, trans. by Elizabeth Andras Foster, (Berkeley, CA: Cortés Society, 1950).

characterized by the development of Tlaxcala's four city states and by its system of sociopolitical organization. Later Tlaxcalan pre-Conquest history is characterized by the province's antagonistic relationship with the expanding Aztec, or Mexica, empire.²⁵ This history is important for two reasons: firstly, Tlaxcala's pre-Conquest sociopolitical organization carried over to the Hispanic period and fueled efforts to reconcile newly introduced Spanish forms of government and social stratification with traditional Mesoamerican precedents. Secondly, the Tlaxcalans' historical relationship with the Mexica was a deciding factor in the role they chose to play during the Conquest and was ultimately vital to the development and maintenance of Tlaxcala's particular sense of self in the colonial era and beyond.

The dominant unit of sociopolitical organization in central Mexico was called, in Nahuatl, the *altepetl*. The term referred to an indigenous sovereign state or entity: at its most basic, it could be applied to any territory of any size and shape controlled by a particular ethnic group.²⁶ The large '*altepetl*' of Tlaxcala was technically a confederacy of four smaller *altepetl* of similar origin: Tepeticpac, Tizatla, Quiyahuitzlan, and Ocotelulco.²⁷

Like many other Nahua groups (including the Mexicas) the Tlaxcalans' primordial

25 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 1. Scholars currently prefer to use the term "Mexica" to refer to the people and culture belonging to the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán (where Mexico City is today) rather than the antiquated "Aztec."

26 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 14. Lockhart notes that in general the dimensions of these Mesoamerican *altepetl* were comparable to those of the early Mediterranean city-states.

27 There is some debate over whether the concept of the four dominant Tlaxcalan *altepetl* was in actuality a post-Conquest development. Gibson in *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* argues that "a greater role was played by outlying towns in the Tlaxcalan social composition prior to 1519 than has ordinarily been supposed." (11). Lockhart in *Nahuas and Spaniards* and others, however, assert that the subdivision of political entities by twos or fours was a common practice in much of pre-Conquest Mesoamerica and conclude that pre-Conquest Tlaxcala was no different (168).

ethnic origins lay mainly in the semi-mythical Aztlán, in Chicomoztoc, or the The Place of the Seven Caves, to the north and west (in what is today believed to be northern Mexico or the southwest of the United States).²⁸ The story of their migration is similar of to that of the Mexicas: upon leaving their homeland around the time of the eleventh century, the Tlaxcalans adopted a nomadic, or *Chichimec* lifestyle, wandering south for an undetermined number of years before reaching Mexico's central valley region.²⁹ The first Tlaxcalan migrants, finding the Basin of Mexico already inhabited, traveled to and settled in today's Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley to the east, displacing and/or mingling with the area's existing non-Nahua population.³⁰ At this point, a pair of lords founded the first *altepetl*, Tepeticpac, in the mountainous region to the north of the valley and the second and largest *altepetl*, Ocotelulco, further to the south in the lowlands adjacent to the river Zahuapan. Three generations later, a revolt in Ocotelulco led to the creation of Tizatla to the east. In the meantime, the arrival of a second group of migrants resulted in the founding of Quiyahuitzlan in the west.³¹ Thus in the pre-Conquest era the make-up of the province or *altepetl* of Tlaxcala consisted of the four sub*altepetl* – Tepeticpac, Tizatla, Ocotelulco, and Quiyahuitzlan in the north, east, south and west - with four respective capitals clustered in the center of the province and with additional outlying communities scattered throughout.³² In 1519, the entire province covered an area of roughly twenty-

28 Delia Annunziata Cosentino, "Landscapes of Lineage: Nahua Pictorial Genealogies of Early Colonial Tlaxcala, Mexico" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2002), 166-167.

29 Cosentino, "Landscapes of Lineage," 166; Durán, *The Aztecs*, 348.

30 Cosentino, "Landscapes of Lineage," 168; Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 2. Tlaxcala is located between Mexico City and the Gulf Coast. The non-Nahua population included the Otomí as well as earlier Olmec and Zacatec groups.

31 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 3.

32 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 4. Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson describe the political organization of Tlaxcala as an abstract "Maltese Cross" with "four divisions radiating from an

five square kilometers, smaller than the present-day state.³³ A range of mountains including the volcano Popocatepetl separated Tlaxcala from the central valley – because of this Tlaxcalans were called *tlatepotzca*, or “behind the mountains,” by the residents of the Basin of Mexico to the west.³⁴ Like many Nahua groups the Tlaxcalans took pride in their *Chichimec* history; according to Muñoz Camargo clear ties to a nomadic past, such as a name linked to a nomadic ancestor, could be a sign of status in pre-Conquest Tlaxcala.³⁵

Each individual *altepetl* of the quadrupartite confederacy shared a system of political organization and social stratification. Each *altepetl* was headed by a dynastic ruler, or *tlatoani*. In each generation, the four *altepetl* selected one of these rulers to serve as the ceremonial representative of the whole.³⁶ Each *altepetl* possessed a number of *tecalli*, or lord-houses, in which a noble *teuctli*, or lord, ruled over his kin group's estate.³⁷ There were a number of *tecalli* in each *altepetl*: an indigenous document dating to the mid-sixteenth century recorded fifty-two in Tizatlan, forty-eight in Ocotelulco, twenty-nine in Quiyahuitzlan, and fourteen in Tepeticpac.³⁸ The *tecalli* was primarily made up of *pipiltin*, or nobles related to the ruling *teuctli*: the *pipiltin* enjoyed a high social position as the inheritors of “noble properties, goods, and other benefits.” *Macehualtin*, or

imagined center.”

33 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 10.

34 Cosentino, “Landscapes of Lineage,” 106.

35 Cosentino, “Landscapes of Lineage,” 167-8

36 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 21. Spaniards conceptualized the individual *altepetl* as *cabaceras*, or head towns, ruling outlying subject towns called *sujetos*.

37 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 23; Cosentino, “Landscapes of Lineage,” 174. Lockhart also discusses the *calpolli*, a subunit of the *altepetl*. Both Lockhart and Cosentino note that *tecalli* are “shadowy” in nature and not entirely understood.

38 Frederic Hicks, “Land and Succession in the Indigenous Noble Houses of Sixteenth-Century Tlaxcala,” *Ethnohistory* 56, no. 4 (2009): 584.

commoners, were bound to a particular *tecalli* and worked its land as well as carried the “burdens of service, labor, and tribute for that house as a matter of civic duty.”³⁹ The Tlaxcalan *tecalli* also had *teixhuihuan*, an intermediary social group that shared traits of both nobles and commoners.⁴⁰ Pre-Conquest Tlaxcalan society was highly stratified: the nobility controlled both politics and society.

For the “first of two centuries of Tlaxcalan growth,” writes Charles Gibson, Tlaxcalans enjoyed “a period of increasing wealth” and burgeoning trade.⁴¹ Each of the *subaltepetl* governed itself independently. Despite a shared origin and history, there wasn't yet a reason for the four city-states to invest in a strong union.⁴² The rise and expansion of the Mexica empire ultimately changed the political climate in Tlaxcala.

There is no doubt that the Mexicas engaged in intermittent hostilities – called “Flower Wars” with the Tlaxcalans and other native groups. The interpretation of these hostilities, however, can differ. Gibson argues that they were a ceremonial institution – that is, not fought with the aim of destroying or conquering Tlaxcala but rather with the aim of practicing warfare and capturing sacrificial victims.⁴³ Other authors, like Barry L. Isaac, assert that they were almost certainly real Mexica campaigns fought with the goal of subjugating Tlaxcala.⁴⁴ Whatever the reason for the conflict, the continual Mexica

39 Cosentino, “Landscapes of Lineage,” 187.

40 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 98. There are a number of additional classes and divisions but this particular handful is most relevant to Tlaxcalan life in the colonial era.

41 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 14.

42 Townsend, *Here in this Year*, 5.

43 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 14.

44 Barry L. Isaac, “The Aztec 'Flowery War': A Geopolitical Explanation,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39, no. 4 (1983): 428. Isaac suggests the ceremonial explanation was fabricated by the Mexica to prevent their having to “admit military weakness” after repeatedly failing to conquer Tlaxcala.

incursions and the necessary Tlaxcalan resistance efforts had far-reaching consequences for the Tlaxcalan people. According to Gibson the conflict “reduced the province from a position of opulence and flourishing trade to a state of comparative poverty and constant military preparedness.”⁴⁵ Lands controlled by the Mexica empire eventually surrounded Tlaxcala entirely. Tlaxcala became a “bounded state” with the Mexica essentially blockading the import and/or export of both luxury and staple goods.⁴⁶ Tlaxcala's territory tended to be resource poor: there were, for example, no salt mines in pre-Conquest Tlaxcala so there was no production of salt. The cold climate of Tlaxcala prevented the cultivation of cotton. Tlaxcalans, without the ability to purchase cloth, were forced to make clothing from the fibers of cacti. The blockade also caused shortages in traditional Mesoamerican luxury goods such as “gold, silver, precious stones, cacao, and feathers.”⁴⁷

The long struggle between the Mexicas and Tlaxcalans and its societal consequences generated an extreme amount of resentment on the part of Tlaxcala. The two nations had by all accounts a long-standing antagonistic relationship to which both parties contributed. Durán wrote that the Tlaxcalans, to “demonstrate their enmity,” used subterfuge in addition to direct hostility to “harass” the Mexicas. For example, the Tlaxcalans encouraged Cuetlaxtla, a Mexica vassal-state, to rebel against Tenochtitlán, assassinate the Mexica ambassador, and cease sending tribute.⁴⁸ Motolinía wrote that the two groups were “deadly enemies” - he and others often cited this animosity as the

45 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 15.

46 Bradley Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest: The Shifting Terrain of Indigenous Agriculture in Colonial Tlaxcala, Mexico” (PhD diss., York University, 2010), 246.

47 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 15; Isaac, “The Aztec 'Flowery War,’” 427. Isaac tends to disagree with Gibson; he argues that Tlaxcalan shortages of goods, excepting salt, were exaggerated.

48 Durán, *The Aztecs*, 125. The Mexica response to this chain of events was not kind to Cuetlaxtla.

catalyst behind the Tlaxcalans' choice to ally with Cortés during the Conquest.⁴⁹

However, resistance in the face of Mexica hostility also molded the Tlaxcalan *altepetl* from a loose confederacy into a cohesive unit with a shared identity. The Tlaxcalans were able to maintain their independence in a time of adversity and this experience shaped their sense of self into the colonial era.⁵⁰ The glorification of the concept of a proud, independent, never-subjugated Tlaxcala greatly affected the choices that the Tlaxcalans made in the sixteenth century, especially during the events of the Conquest.

The Conquest

“In foreign affairs and war, [Tlaxcala] functioned as a cohesive unit, able to resist repeated efforts by the Mexica to subjugate it.”⁵¹ By the beginning of the sixteenth century, however, Tlaxcala was an island amongst a sea of Mexica-controlled territory. They had been marginalized; cut off from the larger Mesoamerican society and culture, the Tlaxcalans were “a military state” - “reduced in circumstances... sensitive to every threat of external attack,” and characterized by hatred and resentment towards the Mexicas.⁵²

It was this animosity that actually led the Spanish to Tlaxcala in the first place; natives from Cempoal advised Cortés to travel through Tlaxcala on the way to Tenochtitlán because the Tlaxcalans “were friendly, since they were enemies of the Mexicans.”⁵³ The conquistadors – a company of around 500 men under the leadership of

49 Motolinia, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, 39.

50 Hicks, “Land and Succession,” 570.

51 Hicks, “Land and Succession,” 570.

52 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 15.

53 Díaz, *The Bernal Díaz Chronicles*, 95. Díaz was a member of the group of conquistadors who conquered much of Mexico and Guatemala. Díaz's account of the Conquest had flaws: for example, he wrote it many years later, in his old age (10). Nevertheless, it remains the “most nearly complete” of the

Cortés – had landed in the region they chose to call Vera Cruz in April of 1519. Four months later, they began to move inland, towards Tenochtitlán, and entered Tlaxcalan territory.⁵⁴

Both Cortés and Díaz wrote about the Spaniards' first encounter with the Tlaxcalans. According to their accounts, Cortés sent envoys to the Tlaxcalans with gifts, then, after several days with no news, advanced into Tlaxcalan territory. Natives attacked the group of conquistadors several times during their approach.⁵⁵ After the Spaniards and their native allies repelled the attacks, the Tlaxcalan nobility arrived and arranged peace, giving the Spaniards gifts and offering noble Tlaxcalan women as marriage partners.⁵⁶

Cortés, writing in 1520, described the series of events that led to his alliance with the Tlaxcalans:

I had come to [the Tlaxcalans'] land thinking that I was coming among friends, for so the Cempoalans had assured me they were and desired to be. I had therefore sent my messengers ahead to let them know that I was coming and that I desired their friendship: but without replying to me they had attacked me as I came all unsuspecting along the road and had killed three of my horses and wounded others: on top of this, having first fought with me they then sent messengers saying that what had been done was without their license and consent, certain tribes having taken the offensive unknown to them: but they themselves had punished them and desired my friendship. I, thinking it true, had told them that it pleased me well... but they again had waylaid me and fought against me throughout the day until nightfall... Finally they offered themselves as subjects and vassals of your Majesty in his royal service, and offered likewise their persons and fortunes, and this service they did and have done up to the present, and I think they will ever do so, from what I have to relate to your Majesty hereafter.⁵⁷

available sources on the Conquest. Díaz's *Chronicles* and Cortés's *Five Letters* (which were written much earlier, within the same time-frame as the Conquest) generally tend to agree on the overall chain of events leading to the Spanish-Tlaxcalan alliance.

54 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 16.

55 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 16-17.

56 Díaz, *The Bernal Díaz Chronicles*, 99-106; Cortés, *Five Letters*, 49-50.

57 Cortés, *Five Letters*, 49-50.

Thousands of Tlaxcalan warriors – now serving as ad hoc vassals of the Spanish crown – joined the conquistadors on their journey to Tenochtitlán.⁵⁸ They participated in large numbers in all of the major events of the Conquest: Tlaxcalans accompanied Cortés as he entered Tenochtitlán, helped protect the Spanish during the retreat from the city during *La Noche Triste*, and sheltered and aided them as they recovered from the ordeal and formulated a new plan of attack.⁵⁹ An estimated twenty-thousand Tlaxcalans participated in the final battle for Tenochtitlán in 1521.⁶⁰ The defeat of Tenochtitlán, however, did not bring an end to the military alliance between Spain and Tlaxcala; Tlaxcalans furnished additional aid on Spanish expeditions to Central Mexico, the Yucatán, Chiapas, Guatemala, Honduras, Michoacán, and the Chichimeca frontier to the north.⁶¹

The story of the arrival of the Spaniards, from the Tlaxcalan perspective, was slightly different. The Tlaxcalan forces that opposed Cortés in the brief Spanish-Tlaxcalan war were led by Xicoténcatl *el mozo*, the son of Xicoténcatl *el viejo*, the *tlatoani* of Tizatlan.⁶² The Tlaxcalans, after receiving Cortés's envoys, decided to outwardly offer peace to the Spaniards while secretly deploying their military to engage

58 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 22.

59 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 22. The Spaniards, soon after entering the Mexica capital, took the Mexica ruler Moctezuma prisoner. The situation deteriorated until either the Spaniards or Mexicas killed Moctezuma. At this point, the Spaniards fled the city with their allies, including the Tlaxcalans, who helped to cover their retreat. This event, in which many of the Spaniards and their allies lost their lives, was called *La Noche Triste*, or the Night of Sorrows. Tlaxcalans also assisted the Spaniards with their new plan, which involved the construction of “brigantines” used in the final attack.

60 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 22.

61 Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest,” 312.

62 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 15. The younger and the older. Xicoténcatl *el mozo* (the younger) was also called Xicoténcatl Axayacatzin.

the conquistadors and test their defenses.⁶³ The Tlaxcalans were impressed by the Spaniards' performance in the resulting skirmishes and, after some debate, chose to ally themselves with Cortés.⁶⁴ “Nahua alliances were ephemeral, existing only to serve the interest of an *altepetl* at a given time.”⁶⁵ The Tlaxcalans likely saw the conquistadors as no more than another group “seeking to gain political dominance in central Mexico,” and recognized an opportunity to antagonize the Mexica by supporting the Spaniards' ambitions.⁶⁶ Subsequent to *La Noche Triste*, however, the Tlaxcalans' choice to continue supporting the weakened Spaniards was more of a gamble – one that ultimately paid off.⁶⁷

It should be noted that the Tlaxcalans were not the sole indigenous allies of the Spanish; a number of other native groups participated in various Spanish campaigns. Tlaxcalan achievements may seem exceptional, but Tlaxcala was, in many ways, a very average polity. Like the Tlaxcalans, all Mesoamerican groups were patriotic and were proud of and loyal to their *altepetl*, and again, like the Tlaxcalans, many Mesoamerican groups were quick to take advantage of the opportunities that the Conquest provided.⁶⁸ The Tlaxcalans were, however, viewed as the most highly rewarded group: in short, “they seemed to get all the credit for doing the same thing everyone else was doing all over the

63 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 18.

64 Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 241-42.

65 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 17.

66 Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 242.

67 Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 241. According to Gibson in *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, a faction of Tlaxcalans including Xicoténcatl Axayacatzin opposed the alliance from the start. Xicoténcatl abandoned the field of battle prior to the final attack on Tenochtitlán and, for this act of treason, was executed in 1521 (25-26). The Tlaxcalan decision to ally with the conquistadors was not made without some amount of internal dissent.

68 Robert Haskett, “Paper Shields: The Ideology of Coats of Arms in Colonial Mexican Primordial Titles” *Ethnohistory* 43, no. 1 (1996): 111. Even in colonial times indigenous groups rarely adopted the all-inclusive generic term “indian” applied by the Spanish: “each *altepetl* viewed itself as the center, all else the periphery.” An individual was a member of his or her *altepetl* first and foremost.

country.”⁶⁹ Many other Mesoamerican city-states joined Cortés and other conquerors when the opportunity arose. These states also sought favors as a reward for their service to Spain.⁷⁰ Some, such as the state of Xochimilco, specifically referred to Tlaxcala's disproportionate recompense in their petitions: “and since your majesty gave great boons and privileges to Tlaxcala, it is only fair that your majesty should show the same favors to us, who have served no less.”⁷¹

The Tlaxcalans viewed themselves as “Nahua conquistadors;” as a result of their timely alliance with Cortés, they were not among the “defeated subordinates in Catholic New Spain” but were rather among “its victorious architects.”⁷² As Susan Schroeder asserts, the Conquest was “in many ways” the “best thing that could have happened” to Tlaxcala.⁷³ Capitalizing on their image as “the preeminent indigenous allies of Cortés,” the Tlaxcalans were able to use their clout to secure favors from the Spanish crown and create a foothold for themselves within the sixteenth-century colonial system.⁷⁴ The Tlaxcalans' success in the post-Conquest era was based on the ability of the Tlaxcalans – especially the noble class - to quickly adapt to newly introduced ideas about status and the communication thereof. They chose to leverage their reputation as “loyal and faithful subjects in the conquest of this country” to create a powerful new identity for Tlaxcala in

69 Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, 25.

70 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 176.

71 Matthew Restall, Lisa Sousa, and Kevin Terraciano, *Mesoamerican Voices: Native-language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Guatemala* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 67; Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 18. Kranz provides excerpts from the text of a petition from Huexotzinco that expressed similar sentiments.

72 Matthew Restall and Florine Asselbergs, *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahua, and Maya Accounts of the Conquest Wars* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 82; Villella, “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen,” 4.

73 Susan Schroeder, ed., *The Conquest All Over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and Painting Spanish Colonialism* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 11.

74 Haskett, “Paper Shields,” 105.

the new society.⁷⁵

The Colonial Period: Tlaxcala and the Spanish Government

Any discussion of the lives of native people in the immediate post-Conquest era must be prefaced with a discussion of the effects that diseases of European origin had on the native population. Native Americans, including Nahuas, were highly susceptible to smallpox and the other infectious pathogens that traveled with the Spaniards to the New World. Tlaxcala's population, due to high birth and immigration rates, was not as greatly affected by disease as other Nahua polities.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Tlaxcala, like the rest of central Mexico, suffered a series of epidemics – nine in total – between 1520 and 1595, with each epidemic killing between 10 and 50 percent of the population.⁷⁷ The devastating 1545 epidemic (possibly a hemorrhagic fever) “caused the quick and bloody death of at least 50 percent of the Tlaxcalan population, killed adults more than children, and terminated the lives of more than 150,000 persons in Tlaxcala alone.”⁷⁸

This loss of life – termed the demographic disaster – greatly affected Tlaxcalan society in the sixteenth century. For example, the demographic collapse of the indigenous population meant that lands lay idle and that the labor needed to sustain the estates of the indigenous nobility disappeared.⁷⁹ The surplus land and economic consequences led to conflict between nobles and commoners.⁸⁰ However, according to Haskett, “although demographic loss in central Mexico was indeed great, enough indigenous people survived

75 Durán, *The Aztecs*, 11.

76 Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest,” 238.

77 Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest,” 238.

78 Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest,” 283.

79 Villella, “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen,” 8.

80 Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest,” 295. Skopyk estimates that the 1545 epidemic in Tlaxcala “contributed to the abandonment of approximately sixty thousand hectares.” (284).

to carry on their customs in some fashion.”⁸¹ The population of Tlaxcala, though greatly diminished by the demographic disaster, survived to face the new challenges of the colonial era.

In the realm of government and politics, Tlaxcalans first focused on cultivating and subsequently leveraging their reputation as important indigenous allies to “lay claim to a comparatively high degree of local autonomy and ethnic dignity within the Spanish crown.”⁸² The Tlaxcalans wanted to carve out their own, privileged space in the developing colonial system. They quickly adopted Spanish forms of petition and actively projected an identity that they believed favorable to the Spanish authorities while aggressively campaigning for recognition of their deeds during the Conquest. By making their role in the Conquest an integral part of their corporate identity Tlaxcalans were able through a propaganda campaign to accrue favors granted by all levels of Spanish government. This strategy delivered a number of concrete benefits that helped Tlaxcala protect and improve upon its position and brought with it a number of opportunities offered as a result of Tlaxcala's outstanding reputation.

The Tlaxcalans' military service had an important and immediate impact on their *altepetl*'s fortunes in the beginning of the colonial era. Cortés rewarded the province for its service by having it placed under direct crown rule (i.e. under the administration of royal governmental officials), in the belief that “Indian welfare would be better served under the crown.”⁸³ This arrangement prevented the establishment of an *encomienda* – a

81 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 53.

82 Villella, “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen,” 4.

83 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 62-63, 161.

(usually exploitative) system in which a Spaniard, or *encomendero*, gained control of the labor and tribute produced by a particular indigenous group.⁸⁴

In this immediate post-Conquest period, the Spanish government and Nahua nobility showed a mutual interest in each other. Spaniards both recognized and appreciated the preexisting status of the native elite.⁸⁵ During these early formative decades, the Spanish government viewed the native nobility and the existing power structure as a useful tool in controlling, governing, converting, taxing, etc. the rest of the native population.⁸⁶ For this reason, Spanish authorities attempted to build on existing governmental structures when reorganizing “the *altepetl* in the image of a Hispanic municipality.”⁸⁷ The native nobility, for their part, assumed that “Hispanic imperialism, though directed by new personnel, would resemble Aztec imperialism.”⁸⁸ For this reason Nahuas believed that it was necessary to cultivate a relationship with the higher echelons of the Spanish system – the king, viceroy, audiencia, and archbishop – to protect or improve their position in the colonial system.⁸⁹ There is ample evidence in the *Actas* that the Tlaxcalans employed a legal representative in Mexico City for the purpose of presenting the cabildo's cases to the Royal Audiencia.⁹⁰ Likewise, the cabildo made an effort to maintain a relationship with the Viceroy through petitions and delegations.⁹¹

84 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 1.

85 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 175.

86 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 175.

87 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 1.

88 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 176.

89 Lockhart, *Nahuas and Spaniards*, 7. According to Gibson in *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* this strategy was fated to be successful: “privileges were granted in the Spanish world to those who took the pains to ask for them” (161).

90 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 17.

91 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 16-17. As Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson note, the cabildo did occasionally object to the Viceroy's interference in Tlaxcalan internal affairs.

Finally, on several occasions throughout the century, the Tlaxcalans sought to communicate with the Crown itself.⁹²

The monarch was, theoretically, the source of power in the administration of the Spanish colonial system.⁹³ The Tlaxcalans were in regular contact with Charles V and his successor Philip II throughout the sixteenth century. Their first encounter with the monarchy came in 1527, when a group of Tlaxcalan envoys joined a passel of Nahua nobles accompanying Cortés on a voyage to Spain.⁹⁴ Envoys returned from a second encounter in 1535 after securing two cédulas, or royal decrees, issued by Charles V. The first granted the city of Tlaxcala the title “La Leal Ciudad de Tlaxcala” and the second granted the city an official coat of arms.⁹⁵ Additional delegations traveled to Spain in 1540, 1550, 1562, and 1583-85.⁹⁶ Most of the cédulas granted to Tlaxcala had few actual effects on provincial affairs; they were either reiterations of privileges that had been previously in effect or grants of prestigious window dressing such as the title and coat of arms.⁹⁷ According to Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, the three main benefits Tlaxcala was able to obtain by petitioning the Spanish authorities were the evasion of *encomienda*, the relocation of Puebla, and the combination of the four *subaltepetl* into a single municipality.⁹⁸

92 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 17.

93 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 65.

94 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 164.

95 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 165. “The Loyal City of Tlaxcala” – I will discuss the city, title, and coat of arms in further detail in the next sections. Personal coats of arms were granted to individual Tlaxcalan nobles in the following decades as well.

96 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 165-168.

97 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 169. Gibson, in “The Aztec Aristocracy,” asserts that the privileges themselves were “nominal” at best (177).

98 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 2. Tlaxcalans were able to convince the Spanish to build Puebla, a specialized urban area for Spanish residents, to the south of the province.

The Tlaxcalans were able to distinguish themselves from other *altepetl* in the eyes of the Spanish government and were able to further benefit from this distinction. They convinced the Spanish authorities that they were “good Christians” and “loyal vassals” who were above the wild and barbaric natives who had yet to capitulate to the Spanish or adopt Spanish norms.⁹⁹ For this reason the Spanish government singled out the Tlaxcalans as possible “Spanish auxiliaries” who could be sent to live in colonies in the northern *Chichimec* country and by example help “civilize” the peoples living there.¹⁰⁰ The first attempt to send out a group of settlers, in 1560, was aborted.¹⁰¹ The second attempt in 1590, however, saw the establishment of number of successful Tlaxcalan colonies, who enjoyed many of the same privileges of their home community.¹⁰² There were, eventually, a great many of these Tlaxcalan communities scattered throughout New Spain, New Mexico, and other areas such as Guatemala. Stanley A. Lucero, for example, discusses the existence of a group of Tlaxcalans who established themselves in Santa Fe, NM around 1598 and quickly involved themselves in the profitable local turquoise and textile trades.¹⁰³ They brought with them a number of privileges and exemptions including the right to bear arms and ride horses, freedom from sales tax, and the right to set up their own distinct district within the city limits of Sante Fe.¹⁰⁴

99 Yanna Yannakakis, *The Art of Being In-between: Native Intermediaries, Indian Identity, and Local Rule in Colonial Oaxaca* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 17.

100 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 106.

101 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 106. The Tlaxcalan cabildo first agreed to the request for colonists, then “begged off” when they encountered difficulties with the logistics. Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson assert that the “fiasco” publicly disgraced the cabildo and thus is one of the instances where we can see the cabildo upset by the perceived loss of reputation and/or status.

102 Mathew and Oudijk, *Indian Conquistadors*, 22-23.

103 Lucero, Stanley A., “Tlaxcalan Indians in New Mexico,” *Lucerito's Music*, last modified April 13, 2009, www.lucerito.net/documents/TLAXCALANINDIANSINNEWMEXICO2.pdf, 1-4.

104 Lucero, “Tlaxcalan Indians in New Mexico,” 7.

The methods the Tlaxcalans used to distinguish themselves and obtain these special privileges were an example of traditional forms of communication being Hispanized for the purpose of pursuing status. Tlaxcalan petitions included propaganda materials designed to impress the reigning Spanish monarch. These materials belonged to a genre of Conquest pictorials produced by Tlaxcalans during the sixteenth century. Similar to other written or drawn Nahua petitions, Tlaxcalan pictorials attempted to impress by calling “attention to the services rendered by themselves or by their ancestors in the Conquest” while “prudently overlooking the period of their resistance to the Spaniards.”¹⁰⁵ They also “served for self-identification, to preserve memories of the past, and to secure high-status positions.”¹⁰⁶

The earliest extant Tlaxcalan pictorial was the Texas fragment, a Tlaxcalan manuscript fragment of a Conquest pictorial dating to sometime before 1550.¹⁰⁷ Notably, the subject matter of this document was “expressed using both Nahua and Spanish forms of communication:” for example, the manuscript included both pictures and alphabetic Nahuatl glosses and used traditional flat color washes as well as attempts at European-style “modeling” or shading in the images.¹⁰⁸ Content-wise, the Texas fragment focused on events such as the gifting of Tlaxcalan noblewomen as marriage partners to the conquistadors and omitted events that could paint Tlaxcala in a bad light, such as the first

105 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 176.

106 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 9.

107 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 5. It is unknown whether this particular fragment was specifically used in a petition.

108 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 5; According to Restall, Sousa, and Terraciano in *Mesoamerican Voices*, works utilizing alphabetic Nahuatl text appeared around 1530-1540, peaked in quality and quantity around 1580-1610, and declined around 1770: as I will discuss later Tlaxcalans did adopt and make use of text but mainly used pictorials when communicating their version of their role in the Conquest (16)

skirmishes between Cortés's troops and Tlaxcalan forces.¹⁰⁹ While there is evidence of Hispanization of this style of communication within this early pictorial, the effects of this process are much more pronounced in the better known Lienzo de Tlaxcala. This later pictorial document was probably produced in the 1550s by the Tlaxcalan cabildo by request of Viceroy Luis de Velasco and likely accompanied a delegation sent to petition the king.¹¹⁰ The Lienzo more fully incorporated Spanish elements and just as purposefully focused on the positive aspects of the Spanish-Tlaxcalan alliance in the Conquest. It included more extensive alphabetic glosses, removed the traditional Tlaxcalan toponym, and prominently featured the European-style coat of arms given to the city twenty years prior. In content, however, the gift of Tlaxcalan noblewomen was de-emphasized, showing that the Tlaxcalans “perceived other visual arguments” such as depicting a romanticized scene of the adoption of Christianity by the leaders of Tlaxcala's four *altepetl* “to be more effective in securing privileges from the Spaniards.”¹¹¹ Kranz shows that “they remodeled their arguments to convey that they had accepted the new beliefs” by including a prominent image of a cross in the Lienzo that had not existed in the earlier Texas fragment.¹¹² Later Tlaxcalan pictorials such as the *Descripción* produced by Muñoz Camargo prior to 1584 expanded on this theme; the *Descripción* placed yet greater emphasis on “Tlaxcalan military assistance” and “the acceptance of Christianity” by the

109 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 6. As Gibson in *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* notes, the original sixteenth-century document(s) no longer exist(s) – fortunately the Lienzo was copied several times in the nineteenth century and these reproductions are still intact (247).

110 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 9.

111 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 16. Specifically, the Lienzo showed the leaders being baptized immediately after the arrival of Cortés. Kranz and Gibson question the truthfulness of this claim of early conversion.

112 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 17.

Tlaxcalans.¹¹³ By the time of Muñoz Camargo, however, an alphabetic manuscript accompanied the pictorial component of the petition. While it's clear that the Tlaxcalans still felt that the inclusion of an illustrated version of events was important, they had by this time moved on to a written account as the primary means of communication.¹¹⁴

As the century wore on, the Tlaxcalans explored other means of communicating with the government in Spain and its arm in Mexico City. They began to send strongly-worded declarations that outlined the importance of their assistance to Conquest. In 1562 the Tlaxcalan cabildo responded to an audit performed by the Royal Audencia in Mexico City by composing a “general statement” recounting the many trials and tribulations that their ancestors faced in aiding the Spanish over the years of the Conquest and ending the petition with a request for a reduction in tribute requirements (“for all the trials with which we have served our ruler the king, we have been paid nothing”).¹¹⁵

These petitions represented the efforts of the native nobility to obtain power and preserve their autonomy through external means. The Tlaxcalans quickly recognized that power within the Spanish colonial infrastructure originated with the king and trickled down into New Spain through the viceroy and audencia. Through petitions addressing these authorities, they engaged in a strategic campaign of self-promotion that “ensured a unique and protected space for themselves within the Spanish crown, replete with special exemptions and privileges.”¹¹⁶ In these petitions they consistently incorporated newly

113 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 15-16; Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, eds., *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 12. In Muñoz Camargo's case there is direct evidence that the manuscript and accompanying pictorial were directly delivered to the King of Spain.

114 Kranz, “Sixteenth Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents,” 16.

115 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 21.

116 Villella, “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen,” 10.

adopted Spanish forms of communication of identity and prestige in addition to or instead of traditional forms. The adoption of this political strategy brought many benefits to Tlaxcala.

The Colonial Period: the Tlaxcalan Cabildo

At the same time that they were using the external political power structure to petition for status, the Tlaxcalan nobility used an adopted Spanish form of government in an effort to retain internally their province's pre-Conquest social position and social stratification. The transformation of an indigenous *altepetl* into a Spanish municipality required the introduction of a Spanish political system called the cabildo. A Spanish-style cabildo consisted of a group of elected officials including a high official called the *gobernador*, judges called *alcaldes ordinarios*, and councilmen called *regidores*, all presiding over a larger municipal government of appointed offices including scribes, constables, stewards, etc.¹¹⁷ This government as implemented in Tlaxcala was subordinated to a Spanish provincial official called a *corregidor*.¹¹⁸ Parallels between the existing indigenous sociopolitical structure and the newly introduced Spanish system (i.e. the *gobernador* was the non-hereditary equivalent of the *tlatoani*) made this transition easier to accomplish.¹¹⁹ The cabildo in Tlaxcala, however, was not fully operational until the 1540s. In the decades immediately following the Conquest, an irregular, less complex government often dominated by members of the *subaltepetl* of Ocotelulco controlled the province.¹²⁰ In 1545, the cabildo was reorganized into the form that it would take for the

117 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 1-2.

118 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 15.

119 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 1-2.

120 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 2-3.

rest of the sixteenth century.¹²¹ This form is notable because it incorporated elements of pre-Conquest Tlaxcalan political organization through mechanisms such as a governorship (and other offices) that rotated through the representatives of each of the four *subaltepetl* every eight years.¹²² The pattern of rotation communicated ideas about the status of the different *subaltepetl*; in general, Ocotelulco was first in rotation and Tepeticpac last.¹²³ In addition to the various elected offices distributed between the four *subaltepetl*, the highest ranking noble of each *subaltepetl* automatically received the position of *regidores perpétuos*.¹²⁴ Tlaxcala was one of the few quadripartite confederations of *altepetl* whose bonds were strengthened by the Spanish administrative system.¹²⁵

The nobility used their position in the cabildo to dictate, essentially, what Tlaxcalan society should look like. The Spanish-style cabildo government gave them a platform from which they could enforce their often very traditional ideas about what social rank and prestige looked like and meant in the new colonial Tlaxcala. In practice this often meant drawing a clear dividing line between the responsibilities of the nobility and those of the commoners. This line became more and more important as time went on and “the gap between indigenous nobility and commoners was defined more by lineage and status than by wealth or class.”¹²⁶

121 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 106.

122 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 4.

123 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 4. This order was varied on occasion: for example during the first rotation following 1545 Tizatla “went” first, then Quiyahuitzlan, then Tepeticpac, then Ocotelulco (which then, technically, “began” the next rotation). This order was chosen to more evenly distribute power as Ocotelulco had had more than its fair share during the 1530s.

124 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 104.

125 Hicks, “Land and Succession,” 570.

126 Yannakakis, *The Art of Being In-between*, 16.

In much of Mesoamerica, the native elite “monopolized governmental and churchly office” as well as contributed more, regardless of economic status, to communal endeavors.¹²⁷ The Tlaxcalan use of the *cabildo* reflected these patterns. According to McEnroe,

both [Nahuas and Spaniards] understood a polity to be comprised of corporate elements with higher functionaries defending both their own caste prerogatives and the broader interest of the communities which they represented. The *cabildo* records of the sixteenth-century show that Tlaxcalan leaders considered their central charge to be the protection of their community's corporate privileges and of their peers' noble privileges.¹²⁸

Tlaxcalans used the *cabildo* to protect pre-Conquest power structures and maintain the prestige of the nobility. Any task – from law enforcement to city management – or any position – from scribe to gardener – at any level that was in some way related to the “responsibility of government” was reserved for a person of noble birth.¹²⁹ A corp of nobles circulated through the upper elected positions – for example an individual might be elected *regidor* one year, *alcalde* two years later, and *gobernador* the next, then repeat the process again – creating a professional group of “functionaries with a great deal of experience in Hispanic-indigenous municipal government.”¹³⁰ The *cabildo* was a noble-run institution that acted on behalf of the nobility and was used as a tool to keep the traditional distinctions between noble and commoner alive. This meant, on one hand, keeping up the prestigious image, responsibilities, and privileges that traditionally

127 Lockhart, *Nahuas After the Conquest*, 131.

128 McEnroe, “Spain's Tlaxcalan Vassals,” 20-21.

129 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 11.

130 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 8. During a well-recorded period of twenty years *cabildo* positions were filled by only seventy-four individuals – this pattern was probably a result of the continuation of pre-Conquest ideas about lifetime office holding.

separated the Tlaxcalan noble from the Tlaxcalan commoner. On the other, it meant suppressing commoners who attempted to use the new colonial reality to subvert the traditional social structure.

Nobles maintained a privileged position in post-Conquest Tlaxcala. They were exempt from tribute obligations (though their dependents were not).¹³¹ Any punishment was softened for a member of the nobility: the entry in the *Actas* on September 14, 1549 asserted that any Indian caught playing games during mass was to be punished with a flogging – any Spaniard or noble who committed the same crime was to be fined.¹³² In protecting their privileges the Tlaxcalan nobility often explicitly affiliated themselves with Spaniards.

With heightened privilege came heightened responsibility; the Tlaxcalan nobility held themselves to a higher standard when it came time to support the community economically. Voluntary support of public works was a mark of an “individual's identification as a member of the *gente decente*” or of the local elite even into the late eighteenth century.¹³³ In the sixteenth century this support manifested in conspicuously increased levels of taxation as well as philanthropic contributions to certain public works projects undertaken to improve Tlaxcala's image. In the *Actas* of January 27, 1548, Tlaxcala's rulers and nobles contributed more to Tlaxcala's tribute obligation of 8,000 fanegas of maize than commoners of equal economic standing. A “well-off” commoner

131 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 24.

132 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 42.

133 James Riley, “Public Works and Local Elites: The Politics of Taxation in Tlaxcala, 1780-1810,” *The Americas* 58, no. 3 (2002): 377-78. Riley discusses the role of the native elite in dealing with the issue of flood control in Tlaxcala in the 1790s.

was required to pay a maximum of a fanega and a half while a nobleman was required, at minimum, to produce two fanegas (within a range of one fourth of a fanega to seven fanegas from poorest commoner to wealthiest noble).¹³⁴ Class distinctions were such that even the poorest nobleman paid more than the wealthiest commoner. When the city coffers were empty or if there was a special occasion, the nobility also voluntarily contributed their own money to important projects: “for the prominent of an indigenous community to take primary responsibility – and credit – for public improvements was a common phenomenon in colonial central Mexico.”¹³⁵ In the *Actas* of March 3, 1550, the cabildo decided to look into purchasing a striking clock for the city. They proposed that the device be purchased with small contributions from “all the Tlaxcalan noblemen and lords” due to a lack of funds in the city coffers.¹³⁶ More than ten years later in the *Actas* of September 25, 1561, the cabildo declared that due to the “depletion” of the city's monies the “rulers and legitimate noblemen” were to contribute a “turkey and twenty cacao beans” towards festivities to entertain the Viceroy on his return from Vera Cruz.¹³⁷ In this case, the cabildo explicitly stated that commoners were not allowed to chip in.¹³⁸ This and the “legitimate noblemen” comment exposed some of the tensions that existed at this

134 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 67-68. Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson interpret the great variation in tribute assessments in this entry as evidence of a flexible “continuum” of social subdivisions rather than a system of “fixed social categories.” I believe that this instance as well as later evidence in the *Actas* instead shows that, despite the variability in the nobility's wealth and the similarity of well-off commoners to less well-off nobles, the cabildo clearly preferred to differentiate between the two categories. A fanega is a Spanish unit of measurement: 8,000 fanegas is around 12,000 bushels (25).

135 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 69.

136 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 70. The significance of this clock will be discussed in the following section. The proposed contributions were finalized as a tax of two tomines for each fanega that a nobleman was normally required to pay in tax (47).

137 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 61.

138 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 61.

time between Tlaxcalan nobles and commoners.

Tlaxcalan nobles also used the cabildo's power as a tool to quell the ambitions of commoners who wished to step outside of the rigidly stratified Tlaxcalan social structure. In this case, they rallied against commoners who, they felt, infringed upon their noble rights and privileges and subverted the existing social structure. The *Actas* entry on January 10, 1550 mentioned commoners who avoided “tribute labor by falsely claiming nobility.”¹³⁹ The entry on June 13, 1550 elaborated: “all over Tlaxcala everyone is falsely claiming nobility, and certain commoners have come from (the small towns named after) saints to settle in other people's households here in the city, whence they no longer perform the tribute duties that are performed in Tlaxcala.”¹⁴⁰ The cabildo authorized an *alcalde* to seek out these delinquents and command them to return to work, taking “direct action to preserve the exclusiveness of its members' noble status.”¹⁴¹ The cabildo was fighting a losing battle with these illegitimate nobles; according to Gibson, an observer in the 1550's reported that the number of false nobles was “greater than the number who belonged rightfully and by birth to this class.”¹⁴² The cabildo was still attempting to “investigate further those falsely claiming nobility” on December 18, 1553.¹⁴³

The cabildo also rallied against their own peers who they believed were facilitating the commoners' subversion of the proper social structure. In the *Actas* entry for May 10, 1553, the cabildo banned “delinquent” nobles from selling their lands to

139 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 45.

140 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 72.

141 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 72.

142 Gibson, "The Aztec Aristocracy," 184. According to Villella in “Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen,” the native nobility accounted for approximately ten percent of the pre-Conquest indigenous population (7).

143 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 54.

commoners for fear of those commoners buying the land becoming nobles.¹⁴⁴ As seen in the January 27, 1548 entry of the *Actas*, there existed at least some commoners who were considered “well-off.”¹⁴⁵ Their economic activities were a threat to the noble elite; as the commoners became wealthy enough to obtain the outward trappings of nobility, such as land and luxury goods, they began to blur the distinctions between the two classes. Despite the nobility's best efforts to prevent social climbing ambitious commoners could over time squeeze into available positions in the native nobility and usurp power.¹⁴⁶

The cabildo responded to this encroachment by wealthy commoners on their status by attacking the source of the commoner's wealth. In central Mexico during the pre-Conquest period, a commoner could increase his personal status by demonstrating exceptional combat ability – lacking this outlet, ambitious commoners in the post-Conquest era turned to newly lucrative commercial opportunities to improve their standing in society.¹⁴⁷ The Tlaxcalan nobles “could see how their own positions of rank and authority were being undermined” by the commoners' economic activities, which were encouraged by the growing money economy in Tlaxcala.¹⁴⁸ These activities included the propagation of cochineal: native people produced this dye through preparation of the hulls of certain insects residing on the nopal cactus and then exported it to Spain.¹⁴⁹ Over the course of the sixteenth century, “European demand” for this “expensive, labor-intensive dyestuff” greatly affected “the lives of tens of thousands of members of

144 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 85.

145 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 37.

146 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 183. The demographic disaster had a hand in this dynamic.

147 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 181.

148 Restall, Sousa, and Terraciano, *Mesoamerican Voices*, 130.

149 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 149.

Mexican indigenous peasant communities.”¹⁵⁰ In Tlaxcala production for an external “global market,” encouraged by Spaniards such as Motolinía, began in the early 1530s.¹⁵¹ According to Amy Butler Greenfield, “Tlaxcalans responded quickly and enthusiastically to the first indications of strong European demand for the dyestuff.”¹⁵² A survey in the 1550s suggested that production in Puebla, Tlaxcala, Cholula, Tepeaca and other towns of the region was valued at 200,000 pesos a year.¹⁵³ This booming market gave both commoners and nobles the chance to “make a great profit” by producing cochineal for export.¹⁵⁴

The nobility on several occasions rebuked the commoners' participation in the cochineal trade. They first discussed banning the cultivation of cochineal cactus on June 17, 1552, citing the possibility of famine and idleness resulting from overproduction.¹⁵⁵ On March 3, 1553 they elaborated on the “evils” of cochineal – mainly that its cultivation caused farmers to neglect food crops, caused drunkenness and sinning, and made the commoners so wealthy that they become “proud and swaggering,” so much so that they poured good chocolate drink (made of cacao – essentially liquid money) on the ground.¹⁵⁶ There is the possibility that the nobility, by taking such a strong stance, were protecting their own economic interest; Tlaxcalan nobles participated in the trade themselves.¹⁵⁷

150 Carlos Marichal, “Mexican Cochineal and the European Demand for American Dyes,” in *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy*, ed. by Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 77.

151 Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest,” 318.

152 Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2005), 94.

153 Raymond L. Lee, “Cochineal Production and Trade in New Spain to 1600,” *The Americas* 4, no. 4 (1948): 457.

154 Restall, Sousa, and Terraciano, *Mesoamerican Voices*, 130.

155 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 51.

156 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 82-83.

157 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 82-83.

There is certainly evidence that the elite in other areas moved to restrict cochineal to “better exploit the commerce” themselves.¹⁵⁸

The cabildo asked the Viceroy to limit the production of cochineal in Tlaxcala – in this way cochineal took “the brunt of the blame for strong general currents of social and economic change in the post-contact period.”¹⁵⁹ The Tlaxcalan nobles feared that the wealthy commoners (the “nouveaux riche”) were a threat to the exclusivity of the nobility – thus they used the Spanish form of government to declare the immorality of the commoners who were challenging the traditional societal roles.¹⁶⁰ In light of “growing pressure” on the traditional social structure the Tlaxcalan nobility used the newly minted Spanish-style cabildo to try to dictate what status was and who possessed it in the colonial system. They defended the social structure and their position in it by proclaiming through word and deed who the “legitimate” nobles were and what their exclusive rights and responsibilities were.

The Colonial Period: The City of Tlaxcala

The communication of prestige on the individual and community levels mainly occurred with the adoption of Spanish material culture. On the community level, the adoption of Hispanic elements was driven by competition with other indigenous groups and undertaken with the clear goal of communicating Tlaxcala's transformation into a proper Spanish municipality to outsiders.

Municipal pride was the driving force behind the adoption of Spanish material

¹⁵⁸ Lee, “Cochineal Production,” 461.

¹⁵⁹ Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 80.

¹⁶⁰ Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 80.

culture on the municipal or communal level. In the pre-Conquest era there was no “capital” of Tlaxcala. Tlaxcala City was a post-Conquest invention: the municipality was a Castilian institution that was adopted by the Tlaxcalans “in order to assert their autonomy within the emerging political system.”¹⁶¹ The Tlaxcalan elite decided to erect an urban center in the 1520s, distributing plots of land to nobles in 1528.¹⁶² They subsequently decided that the urban center needed to be designated a city (rather than a lower-ranked village or town) to remain free from outside interference.¹⁶³ The title of “city” could only be obtained through royal entitlement – this was petitioned for and granted in 1535 when Charles V bestowed a coat of arms and the title of “La Leal Ciudad de Tlaxcala” on the infant urban center.¹⁶⁴ The Tlaxcalans began immediately to improve the stature of their city by constructing “a central plaza, a church, government buildings, shops, inns, and other buildings typical of a Castilian urban center.”¹⁶⁵ They felt they needed to match the features of a Spanish city in order to properly communicate their status within colonial society.

The best and most well-reported example available to us of the Tlaxcalans' interest in status symbols of Spanish origin is the purchase, by the Tlaxcalan nobility, of a striking clock for Tlaxcala City. In this instance and many others Tlaxcala's “quick adoption of many Spanish innovations was motivated as much as anything by its desire to have everything a proper municipality should, and indeed if possible to have the first,

161 Jovita R. Baber, “Empire, Indians, and the Negotiation for the Status of City in Tlaxcala, 1521-1550,” in *Negotiation Within Domination: New Spain's Indian Pueblos Confront the Spanish State*, ed. by Ethelia Ruiz Medrano and Susan Kellogg, (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2010), 20.

162 Baber, “Empire, Indians,” 19.

163 Baber, “Empire, Indians,” 29.

164 Baber, “Empire, Indians,” 25.

165 Baber, “Empire, Indians,” 19.

best, and largest.”¹⁶⁶ As we have seen, the cabildo discussed, on March 3, 1550, the possibility of purchasing a clock, confirmed interest in the project, worked out a (voluntary, by the nobility only) payment plan, and sent a letter off to the Viceroy to receive approval for the project.¹⁶⁷ The clock was next mentioned in the *Actas* for April 19, 1550 when the Viceroy and cabildo formally approved the project and formed a committee to oversee the collection of funds.¹⁶⁸ The clock project was not mentioned again in the *Actas*, but was apparently successful; a note in a set of annals for the year 1560 stated that in that year “for the first time a clock was set in place in Tlaxcala.”¹⁶⁹ Another set of annals identified the clockmaker as the Italian-sounding Juan Bernardo Geminiano.¹⁷⁰ Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson suggest that the decade between the start of the project and its completion was due to either clockmakers proving hard to find or a deliberate choice to wait until after a new cabildo building was finished in 1558.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, the record shows that the Tlaxcalan cabildo, with apparent enthusiasm, decided to obtain (with their own, private funds) a novel piece of European technology and within ten years had a working clock in the center of their town.

Tlaxcalans wanted their urban center to acquire the “symbolic, territorial, and political qualities of a city – the highest-ranked municipal status in Castillian tradition.”¹⁷² Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum's work on public clocks in Europe describes the allure of public clocks to European municipalities small and large:

166 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 69.

167 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 70.

168 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 47.

169 Townsend, *Here in this Year*, 167.

170 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 69.

171 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 69.

172 Baber, “Empire, Indians,” 20.

To be sure, the acquisition of a public clock was not only a utilitarian undertaking. A clock was also a prestigious project that brought renown to the city as well as its lord. Even though we find only occasional explicit statements to this effect in our sources, the frequent mention of public clocks in the chronicles of the cities and those of the ruling houses makes this sufficiently clear... The relatively few texts that allow any kind of inference about the nature of communal initiatives confirm what has been variously conjectured: inter-city competition for prestige was a motive of considerable importance behind the drive to get a clock... Competition for prestige means that a city acquired a public clock because other cities already had one. It also means that the expenditures involved with the clock were intended to express the rank of the city as compared to the capital or to neighboring cities of a region. Undoubtedly the territorial lords also competed amongst one another for prestige when they helped their cities to acquire what was at times a particularly costly clock; however, the competitive motive is specifically addressed only in the cities... From the very beginning, the installation of a public clock was considered a sign of a city's openness to innovation, of its wealth and the vigor of its administration.¹⁷³

Though Rossum focuses his study on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, he notes that by 1500 a clock was one of the typical “elements of urban life” in Europe and that a number of villages even had “at least one simple striking clock as early as the sixteenth century”¹⁷⁴ As clocks were so ubiquitous in Europe to be considered an element of any self-respecting polity, it is easy to see why the Tlaxcalans jumped at the opportunity to own one.¹⁷⁵ Elements of Spanish material culture communicated status not only to Spaniards but to other indigenous groups. The Tlaxcalans constantly improved

173 Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 138, 140, 141, 157.

174 Rossum, *History of the Hour*, 155. Clocks had existed in Spain since at least 1392 when the king of Spain had one installed in Barcelona (137). Public clocks in Europe in general date back to at least 1307 (129).

175 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 69; Rossum, *History of the Hour*, 155. Charles V was purported to be a “famous collector of clocks:” though it would be impossible to prove if the visits the Tlaxcalan nobles paid to the king influenced their decision to obtain a clock it is likely that their experiences in Europe played a part. Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, in *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, suggest that the Spanish *corregidor* may have “told the Tlaxcalans of the beauties of a clock” but also note that the “primary impetus” seems to have come from the Tlaxcalans themselves (69).

their urban center, usually focusing on the central area of the town: often they would utilize the city's tribute labor to make improvements.¹⁷⁶ For example they maintained a “fountain, fountain basin, and washing place” in the central town square.¹⁷⁷ They also constructed arcades in the central marketplace to “beautify the marketplace and provide shelter from rain and sun for the commoners who sell things.”¹⁷⁸

Other elements of Spanish origin used to promote the city include the coat of arms and title granted to the city by Charles V. The symbolism of the coat of arms is similar in many ways to the clock. In Europe, “municipal and personal coats of arms... were avidly sought for the legitimacy and prestige they conveyed. Communities that had obtained the right to bear such arms were considered superior to those that had not.”¹⁷⁹ Likewise, the title and status of “city” was a mark of prestige in European municipalities.¹⁸⁰ The concept of a coat of arms was not foreign to Mesoamerican communities; each *altepetl* had a toponym symbol and warriors often emblazoned their shields and other regalia with specific imagery.¹⁸¹ Tlaxcala received its coat of arms in 1535 – the Tlaxcalan nobles, however, apparently did not fully appreciate the importance of the device in the early period up to 1547, when the *Actas* record that the Spanish *corregidor* had to prompt the cabildo to make a seal with the coat of arms on it.¹⁸² This situation seems to have reversed itself fairly quickly as the Tlaxcalan cabildo clearly and prominently included the coat of arms in the main image of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala when

176 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 41.

177 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 39.

178 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 41.

179 Haskett, “Paper Shields,” 104.

180 Baber, “Empire, Indians,” 19.

181 Haskett, “Paper Shields,” 105.

182 Haskett, “Paper Shields,” 106.

they sent a copy off to the king in the 1550s.¹⁸³ They likely came to believe, as many other indigenous groups did (enough to create fake crests for themselves), that a coat of arms was a “symbol of indigenous corporate legitimacy” and was a “protective shield” for indigenous corporate communities in the colonial world.¹⁸⁴ In the case of the title, there is very clear evidence that the Tlaxcalan elite appreciated its symbolism from at least the start of the *Actas*; every regular entry in the *Actas* opens with some variation of the phrase “in the loyal city of Tlaxcala on the twenty-seventh day of the month of January of the year 1548 there consulted and assembled...”¹⁸⁵

The Colonial Period: The Church in Tlaxcala

The history of religion and conversion in Tlaxcala is complex. For the most part, Tlaxcalans and other Nahuas reacted to the introduction of Catholicism in a number of vastly different ways ranging from conversion to prolonged resistance. Most “found a middle path” by adopting certain elements of Christianity while continuing to preserve elements of pre-Columbian religious practices.¹⁸⁶ The Franciscans (including Motolinía) arrived in Tlaxcala in 1524 and chose to begin the process of indoctrination by focusing on the conversion of the Tlaxcalan noble class.¹⁸⁷ The Franciscans often initiated this process by identifying elements such as “rituals, ceremonials, and theological tenets” within the pre-contact religion that were comparable to certain elements of

183 Haskett, “Paper Shields,” 107.

184 Haskett, “Paper Shields,” 100.

185 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 68. As time went on the title was apparently embellished slightly to the “very noble and very loyal city of Tlaxcala” in 1576 and the “renowned, very noble, and very loyal city of Tlaxcala” in 1627 (122, 126).

186 Louise M. Burkhart, ed., *Aztecs on Stage: Religious Theater in Colonial Mexico* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 5.

187 Hugo G. Nutini, “Syncretism and Acculturation: The Historical Development of the Cult of the Patron Saint in Tlaxcala, Mexico (1519-1670),” *Ethnology* 15, no. 3 (1976): 302.

Catholicism.¹⁸⁸ They then utilized these comparisons to more quickly explain the basic structure and tenets of Catholicism to their indigenous audiences. The incorporation of these indigenous elements into the Franciscans' teachings tended to ultimately produce what Hugo G. Nutini calls a “syncretic” form of Indian Catholicism – one that evolved from the fusion of two religions with a “relatively high degree of initial similarity.”¹⁸⁹ According to Nutini, “the decade between 1530 and 1540 was the most crucial period of conversion, not so much for the results achieved as for the firm foundations, both physical (church and convent construction, destruction of temples and idols) and sociopolitical (support of the nobles, social changes) which the friars were able to build.”¹⁹⁰

How did the adoption and practice of Catholicism contribute to the communication of the prestige of Tlaxcala and its citizens? As we have seen in the discussion of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, the Tlaxcalans found that conversion, or at least the pretense of conversion, equated additional prestige within the Spanish system. Once they “realized how important the propagation of the Christian faith was to the Spaniards” they chose to emphasize (and sometimes romanticize) their early adoption of Christianity in pictorials and other documents meant to be seen by the Spanish power structure.¹⁹¹

Within Tlaxcala, the nobility protected the prerogative of the elite to hold offices related to the Church just as zealously as they did political offices.¹⁹² They also came to see the

188 Nutini, “Syncretism and Acculturation,” 304.

189 Nutini, “Syncretism and Acculturation,” 304-5.

190 Nutini, “Syncretism and Acculturation,” 303.

191 Schroeder, *The Conquest All Over Again*, 60.

192 Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 104.

health and appearance of the Church in Tlaxcala as an marker of prestige at the same level of importance as the condition of the city. Thus, the “first, best, and largest” principle was enthusiastically applied to religion in Tlaxcala.¹⁹³ It is clear that Tlaxcalans equated status with spectacle and spared no expense in the organization of religious ceremonies, processions, and theater.

The nobility dominated certain positions in the church. The law at this time did not allow native people to become priests – they were instead hired as church personnel. Positions in the Church held by people of indigenous origin included *fiscales*, or assistants to the Catholic priests, *maestro de capilla*, or chapel masters, and *cantores*, or members of the choir.¹⁹⁴ Franciscans chose to educate young sons of the elite in “reading, writing, and Christian doctrine.”¹⁹⁵ These young, educated nobles, along with the also noble *cantores*, were the only Nahuas who knew how to sing the Latin chants that accompanied performances and rituals.¹⁹⁶ Acting in religious theater was also a privilege reserved for the native nobility.¹⁹⁷

Tlaxcalans put an enormous amount of time, money, and effort into the production of religious theater. A religion-themed play, according to Louise M. Burkhart, brought a community together for an enjoyable event that expressed its solidarity. An impressive play also glorified one's own *altepetl*, and thus

193 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 69.

194 Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 23.

195 Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 4.

196 Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 25. According to Gibson in “The Aztec Aristocracy” a young noble “would have learned to read and write, to study grammar and rhetoric, and to speak Spanish and possibly Latin” in a school or *colegio* set up by the Franciscans for the indigenous noble class such as the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco (181). It is likely that these schools introduced the nobility to Spanish culture as well.

197 Max Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians: Festivals of Reconquest in Mexico and Spain* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000), 136.

one's own group identity, over others. It attracted visitors and drummed up business for local merchants. In this way theater played a role similar to the imposing churches that natives Mexicans constructed for their communities. A play or church was a public, visible assertion of political legitimacy, community pride, and devotion to the sacred powers – however people actually conceived of those. Within the community, nobles or relatively well-off individuals who sponsored a performance, paid for the sets and costumes, fed the actors, and so on would gain prestige, as would the actors themselves if they did a good job. All of these benefits existed on top of whatever spiritual or moral messages priests hoped the audience would absorb.¹⁹⁸

The play performed during Tlaxcala's 1539 Corpus Christi celebration has been called the most spectacular of all the Nahuatl plays performed in post-contact sixteenth century Mexico.¹⁹⁹ The play – the *Conquest of Jerusalem* – was performed to commemorate the recent 1538 truce between Charles V and Francis I of France.²⁰⁰ This truce supposedly lifted one of the obstacles preventing Christian forces from eventually re-taking Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks.²⁰¹ The *Conquest of Jerusalem* depicted this hoped for outcome; in the play, three Christian armies – the army of New Spain led by Viceroy Mendoza, the army of Spain led by the Count of Benavente, and the army of the Holy Roman Empire led by Charles V, Francis I, and the king of Hungary – liberated Jerusalem from a group of Muslim defenders led by conquistadors Hernán Cortés and Pedro de Alvarado.²⁰² The description of the play in Motolinía's *The Indians of New*

198 Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 18.

199 Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, 134.

200 Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, 124.

201 Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, 123.

202 Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 120. Harris, in *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, delves deep into the symbolism behind the seemingly odd casting choices. The Count of Benavente character represented Antonio Pimentel, a benefactor of the Franciscans who the Tlaxcalans and Franciscans may have wanted to honor and impress by making him a leader of an army in the play (it should be noted that all of the characters were played by native actors) (136). The casting of Mendoza as a general was likely also a form of flattery (136). The conquistadors were perhaps portrayed as the leaders of the infidels because Cortés's status in 1539 was at a “low ebb” and the Tlaxcalans thought that by ridiculing the conquistadors they could please the Viceroy (137). Other references to contemporary Mexican

Spain, written by either Motolinía or another Franciscan, painted a picture of an elaborate and sophisticated performance designed to demonstrate Tlaxcala's status.²⁰³ There is evidence that the *Conquest of Jerusalem* was performed in response to the “sumptuous” *Conquest of Rhodes* performed in Mexico City only four months earlier.²⁰⁴ The Tlaxcalans, after seeing the Mexica play in the capital, may have put extra flair into their performance in order to trump the efforts of their old enemies.²⁰⁵ Thus the play was “intended to glorify Tlaxcala's recent triumphs” and celebrated its “status as an important, if not the most important, *altepetl*” within New Spain.²⁰⁶ This theme of status and spectacle was evident in all of the Tlaxcalan religious performances that we have record of. Motolinía provided descriptions of many other sixteenth century plays and processions that took place in Tlaxcala. He often commented that “if the Pope and Emperor” had been present at these performances “with their courts they would have been delighted with the sight.”²⁰⁷

The Tlaxcalan cabildo often supported the Church in order to increase its own status. According to Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson religious affairs were “one of the cabildo's principle preoccupations” and the cabildo “clearly took the maintenance and furtherance of the established cult as an important state function.”²⁰⁸ The cabildo took an interest in the comfort of the friars and the appearance of the Church; in the *Actas* entry

politics may have been at play as well (138).

203 Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, 134. According to Restall, in *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, the Conquest of Rhodes was a thinly veiled “Mexica reconquest of Mexico” (121).

204 Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, 124-5.

205 Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, 134.

206 Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 121.

207 Motolinía, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, 101.

208 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 17.

for December 2, 1552, the cabildo declared that it would reconstruct the friars' quarters in the monastery, which had fallen into disrepair.²⁰⁹ The cabildo also conspicuously spent city funds on items of prestige such as long, red capes ornamented with gold “for its members' use on Corpus Christi day when in procession escorting the Holy Sacrament.”²¹⁰ Other gifts to the Church included acolytes' cassocks, friar's chasubles, a monstrance, an altarpiece, food, and costumes.²¹¹ Musical instruments also appear. Music added spectacle and excitement to religious ceremonies.²¹² Native communities often chose to have their *cantores* learn to play European instruments.²¹³ Tlaxcala was no different; over the years the cabildo chose to purchase various instruments for the use of the Church including chirimías, flutes, and eight trumpets at 20 pesos apiece – in 1564 they even looked into purchasing an organ.²¹⁴ The cabildo also showed an interest in the *cantores*. On December 20, 1549, the cabildo distributed “twenty pesos among the musicians of the Franciscan monastery church,” including “singers and players of wind instruments,” and on December 18, 1553, the cabildo reported its decision to send six Tlaxcalans to Puebla for an incredible span of sixteen weeks at a cost of 150 pesos to learn to play the chirimía and the sackbut.²¹⁵

The Colonial Period: Tlaxcalan Personal Prestige

Acculturation on an individual level was driven by a desire to communicate social status within the *altepetl* to both other elites and to commoners. The adoption of Spanish

209 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 52.

210 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 41.

211 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 17.

212 Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 25.

213 Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 23.

214 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 49, 51-52, 64.

215 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 44, 54.

material culture allowed the Tlaxcalan elite to continue to project an image of status and prestige according to the changing norms of the colonial period. The social position of Nahua nobles “in colonial society normally induced them to look with a certain favor upon Hispanic ways and to Hispanize themselves as actively as circumstances allowed.”²¹⁶ In pre-Conquest Mesoamerica, “as in many societies, the accumulation of material possessions was another mechanism used to display social status:” there was already a longstanding tradition of the “ruling class” arraying itself in “finery.”²¹⁷ During the sixteenth century, luxury goods of traditional Mesoamerican origin were gradually replaced by goods of Spanish origin – though never completely.²¹⁸ These “European symbols of rank” allowed members of the “indigenous ruling group” to assert their “social and political status by imitating the true holders of power in the colonial world, the Spanish elite.”²¹⁹

On an individual basis, the Tlaxcalan elite chose to communicate their level of prestige in a number of ways. They strove to incorporate Spanish material culture and the trappings of the Spanish elite into their image (though as we have seen they also retained indigenous items as well) according to their own self-interest.²²⁰ Traveling Spanish merchants likely first introduced goods of Spanish origin as they passed through Tlaxcala in the first few decades after the Conquest.²²¹ Sumptuary laws prevented most native

216 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 181.

217 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 44, 46.

218 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 44.

219 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 46.

220 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 182.

221 David M. Szewczyk, “New Elements in the Society of Tlaxcala, 1519-1618,” in *Provinces of Early Mexico: Variants of Spanish American Regional Evolution*, ed. by Ida Altman and James Lockhart, (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1976), 140. A Spanish merchant who became a permanent resident set up shop in the square in Tlaxcala city by 1560.

people from obtaining items like Spanish clothing, weaponry, and horses.²²² These items required special viceregal permission to own. The nobility often petitioned for the right to purchase and conspicuously wear and/or use these items out of a “desire to project social distinction from other Indians and to maintain their claims to authority in a context where older claims no longer had the same meaning.”²²³ For example, the Tlaxcalan cabildo recorded receiving a permit in April 1551 giving its members permission to ride horses: the cabildo thereafter kept a number of horses for its member's use.²²⁴

Status in pre-Conquest times was displayed by the wearing of “ostentatious dress” and the ownership of “conspicuously fine material goods.”²²⁵ The elite in the post-Conquest era adopted Spanish clothing in a piecemeal fashion: Gibson describes a portrait of a noble from central Mexico wearing “Indian sandals, Spanish breeches, an ocelot-skin shirt tailored in Spanish style, and a native cacique's headdress.”²²⁶ This incorporation of both Spanish and indigenous clothing suggests that the nobles were still attempting to communicate both internally or within their indigenous group as well as externally their belief that the “nobility must set itself above the ruled through the outward display of status.”²²⁷ The ownership by nobles of both cultures' status symbols can be seen in the earlier discussed testament of Don Julián de la Rosa who in 1566 owned a horse as well as prestigious indigenous items like cloaks and feathers.²²⁸ The mixture of Spanish and indigenous items in native wills was a common sight in the mid

222 Yannakakis, *The Art of Being In-between*, 36.

223 Yannakakis, *The Art of Being In-between*, 36.

224 Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 50.

225 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 53.

226 Gibson, “The Aztec Aristocracy,” 181.

227 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 46.

228 Anderson, Berdan, and Lockhart, *Beyond the Codices*, 45.

to late-sixteenth century. For example the items found in the 1579 testament of a noble of Cuernavaca included tables, a horse, a set of tackle, and saddles alongside traditional insignia of rank like feathered headdresses, shields, drums, and parrots.²²⁹ Lockhart demonstrates that, though nobles were apparently the first to adopt Spanish clothing, Spanish dress and material culture quickly permeated every level of society; in 1584, for example, even a lowlife turkey thief owned a European-style fitted and buttoned shirt.²³⁰

Perhaps the most common method chosen by the Tlaxcalan elite to communicate prestige was the adoption of Hispanized names and honorifics. Spanish surnames were “associated with high rank in the indigenous world.”²³¹ Even at the beginning of the *Actas* in 1547, there existed a number of Tlaxcalan nobles with Spanish elements incorporated into their name: double first names were the most common (i.e. Antonio, Juan, etc.), Spanish religious names (i.e. de Santiago, de la Cruz, etc.) or patronymics (i.e. Sánchez, López, etc.) next, and true distinct Spanish surnames (Cortés, Mendoza, etc.) were the most rare and associated with persons of prestige.²³² These surnames were often taken from prominent Spaniards (sometimes with permission, sometimes not) - Tlaxcala's don Martín Coyolchiuhqui, for example, became don Martín de Valencia in honor of Fray Martín de Valencia, leader of the Franciscans.²³³ This pattern can be seen in other indigenous polities like Cuernavaca, where true Spanish surnames were identifiable with the absolute “highest levels of Cuernavaca's Indian society.”²³⁴

229 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 44.

230 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 199.

231 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 124.

232 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 124-25.

233 Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 124.

234 Haskett, “Living in Two Worlds,” 36.

The adoption of Spanish-style honorifics also communicated prestige. In Spain before the conquest, “don” was reserved for only the very highest strata of Spanish nobility.²³⁵ While Spaniards treated don as an inheritable title, Nahuas treated it as a symbol of the achievement of a certain position or of high reputation.²³⁶ Though the application of the honorific varied, “ordinary commoners would never receive the title, and the highest-ranking nobility would never be left without it.”²³⁷ In Tlaxcala, the don honorific quickly migrated down the ranks from the names of very highest nobility in the 1540s, to the majority of the cabildo members in the 1560s, to, eventually, all of the cabildo members and all of the electors in the 1620s.²³⁸

Conclusion

The Tlaxcalans were, in general, able to capitalize on sixteenth century colonial conditions. At the opening of the seventeenth century, however, they were looking at a period of decline. Native populations dropped to their lowest levels around 1650.²³⁹ This shift in population and the increasing “fragmentation” of cabildo and *altepetl* leadership led to an increase in the influence of non-Tlaxcalan authority, though the cabildo always “retained enough legitimacy and authority” to defend Tlaxcala's interests and autonomy.

²⁴⁰ The Tlaxcalan elite, because of their participation in the Conquest and subsequent achievements in the sixteenth century, were always able to project an image of Tlaxcalans as the triumphant, “victorious architects” of New Spain even into the

²³⁵ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 125.

²³⁶ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 126.

²³⁷ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 126.

²³⁸ Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 126.

²³⁹ Skopyk, “Undercurrents of Conquest,” 238.

²⁴⁰ Riley, “Public Works and Local Elites,” 362.

beginning of the nineteenth century.²⁴¹

The sixteenth century saw the transformation of Tlaxcala from a marginalized confederacy of *altepetl* on the fringe of the Mexica empire to one of, if not the most, powerful municipalities in New Spain. This transformation, in part, was driven by the Tlaxcalans' decision to adopt Spanish ideas about the communications of status. The Tlaxcalans' pride and sense of self was linked to their independent pre-Conquest heritage. Their pre-Conquest antagonistic relationship with the Mexica drove their decision to ally with the Spaniards during the Conquest and become Nahua conquistadors. This decision was rewarded with immediate, tangible benefits to their *altepetl* such as independence from the *encomienda* system.

In the early, formative years of the colonial era, the Tlaxcalan elite began to first utilize Hispanic forms of communication that allowed them to promote Tlaxcala and its interests. The relationships that they maintained with the Spanish authorities paid dividends in the form of policies and privileges that were beneficial to Tlaxcala. These benefits included the support of the transformation of the *altepetl* of Tlaxcala into a Spanish municipality. This transformation included the transition to a Spanish-style municipal council, or *cabildo*. The Tlaxcalan elite used the *cabildo* as a platform to attempt to reaffirm traditional social divisions, paradoxically using a Spanish governmental format to enforce pre-Conquest ideas about status. At the same time, they constructed a Spanish-style municipality, or city, and beautified it in order to demonstrate their level of wealth and status. They likewise communicated status through their support

²⁴¹ Villella, "Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen," 4.

of the Catholic Church. On a more personal level, they changed their appearance, names, and titles to match Spanish ideas about status as well. Throughout the sixteenth century, Tlaxcalans were able to assert their standing as a corporate entity, as a community, and as individuals through the adoption of Spanish forms of status expression.

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