

FOREWORD

The conquest of Guatemala was a complex, prolonged, and (even by the grim standards of the day) hideously violent affair. How it has been perceived and written about, from elementary-school texts in Guatemala itself to monographs published outside the country by distinguished university presses, has not only failed to capture the drama and intrigue of the event but has misrepresented the historical record in ways that are difficult to reconcile. Granted, nothing can compare with the richness and multiplicity of sources available for consultation on central Mexico, but why should lands and peoples lying to the south and east of the Nahuatl heartland be so intellectually slighted? Scholarship across the disciplines has privileged inquiry about the core region of Mesoamerica, leaving peripheral territories, no less interesting, in need of often rudimentary investigation.

This book is a welcome corrective to this long-entrenched historiographic norm, a first installment in what might yet become (with no apologies to, indeed only admiration for, Bernal Díaz del Castillo) a "True History of Guatemala." Matthew Restall, having laid to rest seven myths about Spanish conquest throughout the New World,¹ has teamed up with Florine Asselbergs to demolish yet another: that, in 1524, the invasion of Guatemala by forces led by Pedro de Alvarado resulted soon thereafter in native capitulation and the establishment of imperial hegemony, with Alvarado himself auspiciously at the helm. How did such a myth arise in the first place, let alone be sustained generation after generation in the world of academe?

The late William L. Sherman offers us a clue. "Only rarely," he writes, "has one individual dominated the society of his time and

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

place in the way that Alvarado did in Guatemala."² Alvarado, whose heavy-handedness in the conquest of Mexico was cause for concern even among his fellow Spaniards, instilled apprehension and fear not only in native adversaries but also in his closest associates, members of his own family included. It is surely no coincidence that one of Pedro's brothers, Jorge, chose to write to the Crown about his role in the conquest of Guatemala when the official invader (or *adelantado*—the appellation most certainly fit the man) was not on the scene, indeed far removed from it, during one of his many absences while back in Spain.

Wendy Kramer concluded some time ago that don Pedro's stature in the grand scheme of things was "overemphasized and exaggerated," and dedicated a significant part of her work on "encomienda politics" to Jorge's deeds and achievements, as well as those of other key protagonists like Francisco de Orduna.³ An appeal by Jorge, in which he petitions the Crown for recognition, is featured by Restall and Asselbergs as a counterbalance to two more celebrated if vain-glorious missives penned by his brother, here freshly translated into English and presented alongside an array of documents articulating native views of the conquest. Restall and Asselbergs offer other Spanish perspectives, as did Sedley Mackie, most astutely, in his notable compilation,⁴ allowing alternate voices to be heard. What emerges from the exercise is an appreciation of the extent to which disparate actors, not just the one who has received most attention to date, and not only Spaniards, played prominent parts in a brutal, much-contested conflict. The consequences of that conflict still charge life—and death—in Guatemala today.

—W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz

2. William L. Sherman, "Some Aspects of Change in Guatemalan Society," in *Spaniards and Indians in Southeastern Mesoamerica: Essays on the History of Ethnic Relations*, ed. Murdo J. MacLeod and Robert Wasserstrom (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 137. Sherman adds, "Perhaps no other Spanish conqueror left his personal imprint so clearly on a colony as the conqueror of Guatemala."

3. Wendy Kramer, *Encomienda Politics in Early Colonial Guatemala, 1524–1544: Dividing the Spoils* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 46.

4. Sedley J. Mackie, trans. and ed., *An Account of the Conquest of Guatemala in 1524 by Pedro de Alvarado* (New York: Cortés Society, 1924).