

10 ✨ *Between Two Seas*

W. GEORGE LOVELL AND CHRISTOPHER H. LUTZ



Figure 10.1. Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, *Descripción del Avdiencia de Gvatimala*, plate 6 from *Descripción de las Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Océano, que llaman Indias Occidentales* (Madrid: Por Iuan Flamenco, 1601). Copperplate engraving, 19.8 × 28.4 cm. Courtesy of the authors.

A century after Columbus, when the geographic implications of what the Admiral of the Ocean Sea himself failed to grasp had long since registered on the Spanish crown, bureaucrats in its employ were hard at work. Their job was to process information supplied by captains and navigators who sailed back and forth to the Indies from Seville (see chap. 3). These diligent officials combined the art of cartography with textual description, compiling often voluminous reports about the political organization of imperial Spain's far-flung possessions. Most of these accounts, including the *Demarcación y división de las Yndias* (Demarcation and division of the Indies) put together in the 1570s by royal

cosmographer and chronicler Juan López de Velasco (d. 1598), circulated among the cognoscenti in manuscript form. Not until López de Velasco's successor, Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas (1549–1626), appeared on the scene was a *Description of the Indies* eventually published, in 1601. As he rose to the peak of his distinguished career, Herrera could reach audiences that his predecessors, Alonso de Santa Cruz (c. 1505–1567) and López de Velasco, could only dream of. Did imperial bureaucrats, however, see fit to share everything they knew with interested parties, most of all political adversaries who might be expected to read published accounts? Maps produced of the Audiencia de Guatemala, a territorial



Figure 10.2. Juan López de Velasco, *Descripción de la Audiencia de Guatemala*, from *Demarcación y división de las Yndias* ([Madrid?], [1575?]). Ink and watercolors on paper, 26.5 × 33.3 cm. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Codex Sp 7 / 1-SIZE.

unit that embraces present-day Central America, offer spatial evidence that content was deliberately manipulated with specific constituencies in mind.

Comfortable family circumstances and a disciplined work ethic allowed Herrera to develop intellectual prowess that caught the attention of Prince Vespasiano Gonzaga, who engaged him in 1569 as his secretary and employed him when posted to Italy. Gonzaga, on his return to Spain in 1575 as viceroy of Navarra, presented Herrera to King Philip II, a judicious intercession that eventually led to Herrera's being named not only the official *cronista mayor* (historian or chronicler) of the Indies in 1596 but also, two years later, that of Castile. Not yet fifty, Herrera was in the prime of his life. By 1601, he had taken up residence alongside the royal family in Valladolid, where he had ready access to the massive paperwork of empire and to the expertise of the Council of the Indies. Soon thereafter, the first of his four-volume *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos* (General history

of the deeds of the Castilians) (1601–1615) was printed, along with a single-volume introduction, the *Descripción de las Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Océano, que llaman Indias Occidentales* (Description of the islands and mainland of the ocean sea, which are called the West Indies) (1601).

Among the works Herrera consulted were López de Velasco's *Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias* (compiled between 1571 and 1574, but unpublished until 1894) and Santa Cruz's *Islario general de todas las islas del mundo* (unfinished at his death and not published until 1918). We also know that Herrera borrowed heavily from Bartolomé de las Casas, though he took pains to temper information that portrayed Spaniards in an unflattering light. Herrera's job was to construct a "description" of the Indies that evoked "events so worthy of memory," not document their destruction.¹ And describe the Indies he did, starting with the *audiencias* (high court jurisdictions) that made up the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru, followed by a discussion of the Council of the

Indies, ecclesiastical authorities, and colonial institutions of “good government.” This hundred-page overview appends fourteen maps that highlight the spatial reach of each *audiencia*. Why Herrera’s work received such preferential treatment remains a source of speculation, but most likely by 1600 the crown wanted its version of Spain’s accomplishments to circulate widely and thus counter negative views propagated by internal critics and outsiders, the infamous Black Legend.

It is through the eyes of an illustrious court scholar, therefore, one whose knowledge of the Indies was gleaned from archives and libraries, not empirical observation, that we contemplate the *Descripción del Avdiencia de Gvatimala* (1601) (fig. 10.1). The map appears as plate 6 of the *Descripción*, described by Kit S. Kapp as a “very plain map” with “no latitude or longitude” indicated in its 22 × 18 centimeter frame.² Kapp’s assessment is valid: from both an aesthetic and an informational viewpoint, Herrera’s cartography is decidedly minimalist. He hones to functional essence the available geographic data. Is this economy of expression, however, deliberate? Does Herrera’s mapmaking indeed constitute a process of paring down rather than indicate a lack of knowledge?

Just as Herrera leaned textually on Las Casas, so too did he base much of his cartography on López de Velasco, as is evident by examining Herrera’s map of Central America alongside one made in 1575 by López de Velasco, to which it bears a striking resemblance (fig. 10.2). The cosmographer’s map is an attractive watercolor whose washed-out hues allow the traces and inscriptions of an ink pen to stand out and be admired. Herrera had at his disposal cartographic material besides that produced by his predecessor, but none must have appealed to him as much, given the extent to which he saw fit to replicate from that key source.³ Herrera adds and embellishes—he records more settlements, inserts ranges of mountains, changes the name Veragua to Panama—but also eliminates internal boundaries and thus obscures the territorial limits over which Spanish cities held administrative and judicial sway. His overall creation, albeit sharp and elegant, is a selective recycling of López de Velasco, even down to the exaggerated shape of the peninsula between Trujillo and Cape Gracias a Dios.

But why did some content disappear? We must remember the constraints under which Hapsburg *cronistas* operated: while charged with making knowledge about

the New World available to colleagues and associates in Spain, they had to take care to keep crucial information from falling into the wrong hands, especially those of political enemies and rivals in Europe.⁴ A published work, therefore, might have different emphases and serve different purposes from those of an unpublished map drawn for official eyes only. Given his position, and most likely his desire to remain a respected member of elite circles, the *cronista mayor* chose for display elements of landscape he considered appropriate for public consumption. Herrera’s map thus privileges knowledge deemed neutral enough to share from an imperial Spanish perspective. He reflects that emphasis cartographically by focusing on the towns and cities through which settlers and royal agents transferred ideas and values to the New World.

The territory over which the Audiencia de Guatemala presided, and which bore the same name, in the nineteenth century fragmented into five nation-states that emerged largely from internal colonial jurisdictions already hinted at in López de Velasco’s map. The isthmian nature of the region made it strategic, even though it was endowed with limited exploitable resources. French scholars Pierre and Huguette Chaunu considered the region “the richest of the poor, or the poorest of the rich relations.”⁵ It lay between the two seas that Spaniards referred to as the Mar del Norte (the Atlantic Ocean) and the Mar del Sur (the Pacific Ocean), both prominently identified on Herrera’s map. A chain of mountains runs from the top left, or northwest, the present-day state of Chiapas in Mexico, through Honduras and Nicaragua in the center of the map, to Costa Rica de Panama, a designation that embraces the present-day republics of Costa Rica and Panama, in the bottom right, or southeast. The region also incorporates what today we know as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Belize, unidentified as such at the time, and Yucatán, indicated at the base of a featureless peninsula cut off at its top end, where it juts into the Mar del Norte. Pride of place in Herrera’s schema is given first to man-made towns and cities, and then to natural features such as islands, rivers, and lakes; the line of the coast, whether Atlantic or Pacific, is as important to demarcate as the lay of the land, possibly even more so given the seaborne thrust of trade and commerce.

Spanish priorities are clearly etched. Four major settlements founded during the second quarter of the sixteenth century are marked with churchlike motifs,

illustrating their ecclesiastical as well as political significance: the cross and the sword epitomized Hispanic values in Chiapa (San Cristóbal de las Casas in Mexico), Valladolid (de Comayagua) (Honduras), Granada (Nicaragua), and most notably S. Tiago de Guatemala, the capital of the entire audiencia unit, known for most of the colonial period as Santiago de Guatemala and, following the establishment of Guatemala City as the regional seat of authority in 1773, as Antigua Guatemala.⁶ Other important centers include S[an] Salvador, still the capital of El Salvador, and Cartago, the former capital of Costa Rica. La trinidad (Trinidad) and el realejo (Realejo), ports in El Salvador and Nicaragua, are two Pacific locales of note, their Atlantic counterparts being Trujillo (Trujillo) and Puerto de cavallos (Puerto Caballos) in Honduras. At the latter port, in 1543, the first recorded shipload of African slaves came ashore in Central America, some 150 bodies in total, signaling the beginning of race mixture between Amerindians, Europeans, and blacks that gives the isthmus its varied ethnic complexion.⁷

In terms of geopolitical resonance, depicting the Bay Islands (Utila, Guayana, and Guanaxa) in the Golfo de Honduras affords an appreciation of British interest in making the islands part of their Caribbean operations.⁸ Equally striking is the depiction of el Desaguadero, Lake Nicaragua's drainage to the Caribbean, cutting halfway across the isthmus from P[uer]to de San Juan on the Atlantic to Lag[o] de Nicaragua, at the western end of which León and Granada seem to lie within easy reach of the Pacific. "As late as 1890," Kapp reminds us, "the Nicaragua Canal Route was favored over the Panama route after stormy debate in the U.S. Congress."⁹ Herrera's map makes a strong case for that routing, some spatial infelicities notwithstanding: León, for example, is actually located closer to the shores of Lake Managua, a body of water unto itself, not Lake Nicaragua.¹⁰ Other topographical features not captured with as much accuracy as in later maps include the string of rivers in Soconusco, which appear more navigable into the highlands of Chiapas than in fact they are, and the anvil-shaped peninsula that rises north of Trujillo rather than running less obtrusively east of the port toward Cape Gracias a Dios.

Laden though it is with insightful evidence about what Spaniards deemed important, Herrera's map conveys next to nothing about sense of place and use of space from an indigenous perspective. Ideologically, the

terms of reference under which the map was devised had little to do either with the representation of native peoples or the expression of their geographies. Herrera's map of this region of the "Indies," apart from a few native toponyms and names for lakes and rivers, is almost completely devoid of "Indians"; native absences abound but are particularly noticeable east of an imaginary line running south from Trujillo to Olancho, southwest from Olancho to Segovia, and southeast from Segovia to Jaen. On Herrera's map, the empty, unmarked space of Taguzgalpa, which refers to eastern parts of Honduras and Nicaragua, we know to have been occupied and assiduously tended by indigenous communities (see chap. 15).¹¹ One wonders what might have gone through Herrera's mind when he transposed the name of his home province in Spain, Segovia, onto that of a site located in the middle, for him at any rate, of a New World no man's land. Like most early mapmakers, Herrera constructed an image without having seen, in situ, what reality actually looked like.

There was a notable appetite for the information that Herrera, under instructions from the crown, compiled and published. He lived to see the *Historia general* appear in one French, one German, and three Latin editions; after his death, his magnum opus was also translated into Dutch and English. In the early nineteenth century, Central American leaders would make audiencia jurisdictions the building blocks of nation-states: towns and cities highlighted on maps like Herrera's became national capitals (see chaps. 26–28). It would take subsequent generations of mapmakers to fix that errant Honduran coastline, however, as it would take another era of scholarship to make space and find a place for native peoples in the Spanish scheme of empire.



Notes

1. See Herrera's dedication to the *Descripción* (Madrid, 1601) and opening remarks to the *Historia general* (Madrid, 1601) for unequivocal praise "of the deeds of the Castilians."
2. Kit S. Kapp, *The Printed Maps of Central America up to 1860*, pt. 1, 1548–1760 (London: Map Collectors' Circle, 1974), 11.
3. Carolyn Hall and Hector Pérez Brignoli, with cartographer John V. Cotter, *Historical Atlas of Central America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 6.

4. Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11–27; Hall and Pérez Brignoli, *Historical Atlas*, 6–7; and Jens P. Bornholt, *Cuatro siglos de expresiones geográficas del istmo centroamericano/Four Centuries of Geographic Expressions of the Central American Isthmus, 1500–1900* (Guatemala City: Universidad Francisco Marroquín, 2007), 65. Specifically in relation to Herrera, Bornholt mentions “the secrecy imposed by the Spanish crown to give as scant information about its colonies as possible to the outside world.”

5. Cited in Murdo J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History, 1520–1720*, rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007 [1973]), lviii.

6. See Christopher H. Lutz, *Santiago de Guatemala, 1541–1773: City, Caste, and the Colonial Experience* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); and Hall and Pérez Brignoli, *Historical Atlas*, 150–151, on the colonial authority of Santiago de Guatemala.

7. Severo Martínez Peláez, *La patria del criollo: Interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, [1970] 1998), 203; and W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz, *Demography and Empire: A Guide to the Population History of Spanish Central America, 1500–1821* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

8. William V. Davidson, *Historical Geography of the Bay Islands, Honduras* (Birmingham, AL: Southern University Press, 1974); and Hall and Pérez Brignoli, *Historical Atlas*, 34–37.

9. Kapp, *The Printed Maps*, 6. See also Hall and Pérez Brignoli, *Historical Atlas*, 208–215.

10. For additional discussion of a transisthmian canal, see Dana on Panama (chap. 24) and Dym on Nicaragua (chap. 26).

11. Hall and Pérez Brignoli, *Historical Atlas*, 44–45; Karl H. Offen, “El mapeo de la Mosquitia colonial y las prácticas espaciales de los pueblos mosquitos,” *Mesoamérica* 50 (2008): 1–36.

Additional Readings

Barba, Francisco Esteve. *Historiografía indiana*. 2d ed. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1992.

Cuesta Domingo, Mariano. *Antonio de Herrera y su obra*. Segovia: Colegio Universitario de Segovia, 1998.

Davidson, William V. *Atlas de mapas históricas de Honduras; Honduras / An Atlas of Historical Maps*. Translated by Jamie Incer Barquero, Jorge A. Fiedler, and Lillian Levi. Managua: Fundación Uno, 2006.

Herrera y Tordesillas, Antonio de. “Audiencia de Guatemala.” In *Descripción de las Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Occéano, que llaman Indias Occidentales*, 33–39. Madrid, 1601. Available at “Memoria Chilena,” Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0012405.pdf> (accessed December 23, 2008).

McAlister, Lyle N. *Spain and Portugal in the New World, 1492–1700*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Murray, James C. *Spanish Chronicles of the Indies: Sixteenth Century*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.