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Rereading the Conquest: Book Review

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James Krippner-Martinez, Rereading the Conquest: Power, Politics and the History of Early Colonial Michoacán, Mexico, 1521-1565. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-271-02129-2, vi, 192, \$35, hardcover, illustrations, endnotes, index.

In this loosely connected collection of essays, James Krippner-Martinez, associate professor of Latin American History at Haverford College, writes about the production of historical texts from the perspective of post-colonial analysis. His subject is the Spanish conquest of the indigenous inhabitants of Michoacán, the Purhépecha or, as they were renamed by the Spanish, the Tarascan Indians. Separated from the central valley of Mexico by the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains, the Purhépecha had avoided domination by their bitter enemies, the powerful Aztec federation, but by 1530 had been subdued by the Spanish. Although the cazonci of Michoacán had peaceably received the initial Spanish forces under Cristóbal de Olid, and although in 1524 Hernán Cortes distributed the towns of Michoacán to his lieutenants as encomiendas, the ensuing decade saw violent resistance to the Spanish. This ended in 1530 with the execution of the cazonci at the hands of Nuño de Guzmán, the arrival of Vasco de Quiroga, the first Bishop of Michoacán, and the installation of the first audiencia all in that same year.

The Spanish defeat of the Purhépecha is generally acknowledged to be a result of Spanish military superiority and brutality, particularly by Nuño de Guzmán, president of the first audiencia of Mexico, who was given the task in 1528 of subduing the Purhépecha. It is also acknowledged to be a result of disease, particularly smallpox, evidently introduced into Michoacán by a delegation returning from Mexico City in 1521 where an epidemic was raging in the midst of the Aztec's fight for survival against the forces of Cortes. A third, less convincing argument, is the refusal of the cazonci, Zuangua, to come to the aid of the Aztecs against the Spanish. The Aztecs believed that combined Purhépecha –Aztec force could defeat the foreign invaders, but the cazonci refused, citing the traditional enmity between the two peoples. This left the Purhépecha to face the Spanish alone after the conquerors had finished with the Aztecs.

The intent of the author of this work is not a retelling, perhaps with new information or a fresh perspective, of the events of the conquest of Michoacán. This book is an attempt to analyze the representation of the events of the conquest of Michoacán in order to consider how these representations have privileged the view of the conquerors and distorted our understanding of the early colonial history of the region. Krippner-Martinez argues that this representation has never been challenged by subsequent historians of the conquest of Michoacán, from the eighteenth century Franciscan historian Pablo Beaumont's Crónica de Michoacán to twentieth century historians Benedict Warren, Robert Ricard and Bernardino Verástique, among others. While this book is not a complete rewriting of the history of the conquest of Michoacán, it does offer a new interpretation of some of the important documents and figures associated with it.

One challenge to this initiative, which the author readily admits, is lack of documentation specific to the region. In contrast to the Nahuatl and Maya speaking cultures of Mexico, the Purhépecha had no writing and did not after the conquest adopt the latin alphabet and

produce accounts of their experiences written in their own language. The documentation in Spanish is also thin, consisting primarily of histories by Franciscan missionaries dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dictionaries produced by the missionaries, Nuño de Guzmán's testimony of the trial and execution of the cazonci, the anonymous Relación de Michoacán, set down after the conquest, and the writings of Vasco de Quiroga, principally his Información en Derecho of 1535 and his "Rules" for the operation of his pueblo hospitals. There is also the question of the validity of some of these documents, particularly those of the trial.

In subjecting this body of evidence to his analysis, Krippner-Martinez focuses on two events: the trial and execution of the last cazonci, Tzintzincha Tangaxoan, and the spiritual conquest of Michoacán, particularly as represented by the American career of Don Vasco de Quiroga, first bishop of Michoacán. His analysis is both literary and historical. Literary in the sense that his essays focus on a textual analysis and historical because the author is sensitive to the context of the writings under discussion and how they inform the historical record.

In his analysis of the record of the trial and execution of the cazonci and the Relación de Michoacán, the author argues that the main characters of the execution drama, the cazonci and Nuño de Guzman are represented in ways that accomplish certain political goals of the writers, who are also the conquerors. The cazonci, for example, is represented as treacherous and sexually perverted by the Spanish. Guzmán is represented as a brute. Both representations serve to validate the actions of the colonizers because they show the necessity of the conquest and, by contrast with Guzmán, the beneficence of the colonial rulers who followed him, particularly Vasco de Quiroga. He also counters the representation of native passivity in the face of the conquest by focusing on what the documents suggest about the views of the Purhéchepe leader regarding his relationship with the Spanish and the self-interested actions of Don Pedro, the cazonci's adopted brother toward the Spanish. The author does not mention the conflict between Tangaxoan's father and the Purhéchepe elite that had developed in pre-hispanic times when the cazonci moved his household and ritual religious activity from Pátzcuaro to Tzintzuntzán and how this may have influenced Tangaxoan's ability to retain political power and his relations with the Spanish.

Fray Pablo Beaumont's Crónica de Michoacán completed in 1788 represents a late colonial, Creole vindication of the brutality of the conquest of the region. Beaumont's purpose was to demonstrate the success of the missionary orders in the conversion of the Mexican natives at a time when the orders were under attack by the Spanish Bourbon monarchs. In a close reading of this text, Krippner-Martinez effectively shows how Beaumont's text was influenced by the historical period in which he wrote and how he subverted his own intentions by providing evidence for the resistance of the natives to conversion. In his analysis of Vasco de Quiroga, the author questions the representation of Quiroga as a revered individual during the sixteenth century, a representation that endures to the present day, and argues that this view of Quiroga was constructed after the fact. The slim documentation on Quiroga, his life and activities in Michoacán would seem to bear this out.

Although the chapters of this book are loosely connected, each is effectively argued. However, because he situates his argument within the paradigm of post-colonial analysis, that is, the critique of language and the questioning of celebratory histories of the conquest, the author's analysis does not move beyond the deconstruction of existing documentation and histories. In doing so, however, he has laid the groundwork for a new understanding of the conquest of Michoacán.

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