

Latin America in Colonial Times

Second edition

Few milestones in human history are as momentous as the meeting of three great civilizations on American soil in the sixteenth century. The fully – revised textbook *Latin America in Colonial Times* presents that story in an engaging but informative new package, revealing how a new civilization and region – Latin America – emerged from that encounter. The authors give equal attention to the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors and settlers, to the African slaves they brought across the Atlantic, and to the indigenous peoples whose lands were invaded. From the dawn of empires in the fifteenth century, through the conquest age of the sixteenth century and the end of empire in the nineteenth century, the book combines broad brush strokes with anecdotal details that bring the era to life. This new edition incorporates the newest scholarship on Spain, Portugal, and Atlantic Africa, in addition to Latin America itself, with indigenous and African views and women's experiences and contributions to colonial society highlighted throughout.

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41640-5 — Latin America in Colonial Times
Matthew Restall , Kris Lane
Frontmatter
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LATIN AMERICA IN COLONIAL TIMES

Second edition

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108416405

DOI: 10.1017/9781108236829

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Second edition © Matthew Restall and Kris Lane 2018

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First published 2011

4th printing 2017

Second edition 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc., 2018

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-41640-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-40346-7 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at www.cambridge.org/LatinAmerica2ed

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Maps</i>	xiii
<i>List of In Focus Boxes</i>	xiv
<i>Preface: The Colonial Crucible</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxi
PART ONE: BEFORE THE GREAT ENCOUNTER	1
1 Native America	3
2 Castile and Portugal	21
3 Atlantic Africa	37
PART TWO: THE LONG CONQUEST	51
4 The Iberian Imperial Dawn	55
5 Native American Empires	71
6 The Chain of Conquest	91
7 The Incomplete Conquest	119
PART THREE: THE COLONIAL MIDDLE	141
8 Native Communities	145
9 Black Communities	169
10 The Religious Renaissance	195
11 Deviancy, Discipline, and Identity	215
12 Daily Life in City and Country	235

PART FOUR: THE AGE OF CHANGE	261
13 War and Reform	263
14 Late Colonial Life	285
15 Independence	309
<i>Conclusion: The Latin American Puzzle</i>	329
<i>Index</i>	331

FIGURES

Image Credits

Figure 1.1 ID: SIL28-198-06, courtesy of Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Washington, DC. Figure 1.2 (a) Photograph by Raymond Ostertag, August 2006; (b) photograph by Amanda J. Smith; (c) photograph by Durova. Figure 1.3 (a) Rollout Photograph K2803. © Justin Kerr; (b) photograph by Amara Solari. Figure 1.4 (a) and (b) The Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark.

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Florentine Codex, the sixteenth-century compendium of materials and information on Aztec and Nahuatl history collected by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún; (b) from Bishop Baltasar Jaime Martínez Compañón, 2:197.

Figure 5.1 National Museum of Anthropology and History, Mexico City, photograph by El Comandante. Figure 5.3 Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, D.F., Mexico, image reference ART117086. © Schalkwijk/Art Resource, New York. Figure 5.4 (a) Photograph by Fabricio Guzmán; (b) photograph by Steve Bennett.

Figure 6.1 (a) Ms Palat. 218–220 Book IX, by Spanish School (sixteenth century), Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Florence, Italy/Bridgeman Art Library, image No. XTD 82721; (b) © ARS, NY. Hernan Cortez and “la malinche,” 1926, mural. Escuela Nacional Preparatoria San Ildefonso, Mexico City, D.F., Mexico, image Reference ART27199. Image provided by Schalkwijk/Art Resource, New York © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Figure 6.2 (a) Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University; (b) drawing 148 (GKS 2232 4°), at the Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark. © The Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark. Figure 6.3 (a) Folio 208v (vellum), Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, Spain/Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library, image No. XIR 227180; (b) Ms mexicains No. 59–64, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, France, image reference ART170224. © Snark/Art Resource, New York. Figure 6.4 (a) Photograph by Ángel M. Felicísimo; (b) photograph by Bonnie Miluso.

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Figure 9.1 (a) Reproduction No. LC-USZ62-44000. Image courtesy of the Rare Book division of the Library of Congress; (b) vol. 2, plate XI, facing p. 400. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. Figure 9.2 (a, b) Leiden University Library, 1407 B 3. Figure 9.3 Accession No. 89.481, photograph © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Figure 9.4 Image reference NW0171, as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

Figure 10.1 Courtesy of Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin. Figure 10.2 (a) Drawing by Matthew Restall; (b, c) photographs by Matthew Restall.

Figures

ix

Figure 11.1 Used with permission of Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.
 Figure 11.2 Photograph by Kris Lane.

Figure 12.1 AGI, MP-Buenos Aires, 244. © Spain. Ministry of Culture. Archivo General de Indias. Figure 12.2 (a) Private collection (José Ignacio González Manterola); (b) engraving by Edouard Riou, 1833–1900 (after). Private Collection/Bridgeman Art Library, image No. BAL 126943. Figure 12.3 (a, b) Images courtesy of the Rare Book division of the Library of Congress.

Figure 13.1 Engraving (b&w photograph) by English School, eighteenth century. Private Collection/Bridgeman Art Library, image No. XJF 105408. Figure 13.2 AGI, MP-Uniformes, 83 – Campeche. Pardos Tiradores. © Spain. Ministry of Culture, Archivo General de Indias.

Figure 14.1 National Art Museum Collection – La Paz, Bolivia. Reproduced from “El Barroco Peruano, Volume 2,” by Ramón Mujica Pinilla (Banco de Crédito, 2003), page 311, fig. 40. Figure 14.2 Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California. Figure 14.3 (a) Photograph by Daniel Giannoni, used with permission; (b) image provided by Charles F. Walker. Figure 14.4 (a) Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico. Reproducción Autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia; (b) Museo de America, Madrid, Spain/Bridgeman Art Library, image No. XJL 62185. Figure 14.5 © Brooklyn Museum Collections. Photograph by Barbara E. Mundy, PhD. Used with permission of Brooklyn Museum Collections and Barbara E. Mundy.

Figure 15.1 Museo de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia, Reg. 1568. Figure 15.2 Reg. 380. Courtesy of The National Museum of Colombia Collection. Figure 15.3 (a) Engraved by Thierry Freres (engraving), by Jean Baptiste Debret (1768–1848) (after), Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil/Index/Bridgeman Art Library, image No. IND 146585; (b) Litho (b/w photograph), by Jean Baptiste Debret (1768–1848), Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, France/Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Art Library, image No. CHT207841.

- | | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 1.1 | From Jan van der Straet, <i>Nova reperta. Speculum diuersarum imaginum specuatiuarum</i> , 1638 | 6 |
| 1.2 | (a) Tikal (Guatemala), Temple 1; (b) Machu Picchu; (c) Mayan vase depicting a costumed noble; burial offering. Late classical period (AD 600–900) (Copán, Honduras) | 8 |
| 1.3 | (a) Four ball-game players in elaborate costumes in front of steps; text mentions the Hix Witz (jaguar mountain) place; (b) Copán ball court | 9 |
| 1.4 | (a) Drawing 112. Burials of the Inka: Inka illapa, aya, the deceased Inka, his corpse; (b) Drawing 115. Burials of the Qullasuyus. Both from the Guaman Poma manuscript (GKS 2232 4°) at the Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark | 11 |
| 2.1 | (a) Life of Raymond Lull, fourteenth century; (b) Alhambra Islamic details; (c) the author presenting his book to Juana la Loca (Joan the | |

- Mad, 1479–1555) and Philip I the Handsome (1478–1506) of Castile. From the *Devocionario De la Reyna Da Juana a Quien Hamaron la Loca*, by Pedro Marcuello 24
- 2.2 The Tomb of Martin de Arce, detail of bust. Cathedral, Sigüenza, Spain 28
- 2.3 View of the city of Seville by Francisco Pacheco, sixteenth century 31
- 3.1 Detail from the Catalan Atlas, 1375 (vellum) by Abraham Cresques, 1325–1387 42
- 3.2 Slave trade, nineteenth century. African captives yoked in pairs and force-marched by slave traders from the interior to the slave markets on the coast. Wood engraving, nineteenth century 47
- 4.1 A ship crowded with armed men, from “Le Canarien. A History of the Conquest of the Canary Islands,” c. 1420–1430 (vellum) by French School 58
- 4.2 (a) Conjectural reconstruction of La Isabela, c. 1494; (b) Conjectural reconstruction of the Columbus house 62
- 4.3 (a) Friar Bartolomé de las Casas defender of the Indians (oil on canvas) by Felix Parra (1845–1919); (b) a 1689 English edition of las Casas’ *Devastation of the Indies* 66
- 4.4 (a) *Florentine Codex* (1540–1585), Book XII folio 54, showing Nahuas infected with smallpox disease; (b) the drawing shows a Native woman in northern Peru ill with smallpox, c. 1785 68
- 5.1 Monolith of the Stone of the Sun, also named Aztec Calendar Stone 73
- 5.2 (a) Folio 2r of the *Codex Mendoza*, a mid-sixteenth-century Aztec codex, depicts the founding of Tenochtitlán, and the conquest of Colhuacan and Tenayucan; (b) folio 47r of the *Codex Mendoza*, lists the tribute that towns were required to pay to the Aztec Empire 75
- 5.3 Luis Covarrubias, Vista de Tenochtitlán en el Lago de México 77
- 5.4 (a) Machu Picchu; (b) a view of the entire site of Machu Picchu, seen from Huayna Picchu 81
- 6.1 (a) Doña Marina (Malinche) interpreting for the Spaniards at a meeting between Hernando Cortés and Montezuma (1466–1520), from the *Florentine Codex* by Bernardino de Sahagún, c. 1540–1585; (b) Cortés and Malinche in a 1926 mural by José Clemente Orozco 97
- 6.2 (a) Portrait of the “invincible” Cortés as a 63-year-old conquistador, first published in 1588 as the frontispiece to Gabriel Lasso de la Vega’s flattering *Valiant Cortés*; (b) the conquistadors Don Diego de Almagro and Don Francisco Pizarro, from the Guaman Poma manuscript 101
- 6.3 (a) Meeting of Cortés (1485–1547), accompanied by a black servant, and Montezuma’s ambassadors, from the *History of the Indians* by Diego Durán, 1579; (b) arrival of Cortés in Mexico, followed by his black servant and preceded by Malinche, from the *Codex Azcatitlán* 112

Figures

x1

- 6.4 (a) Built in the sixteenth century for Hernando Pizarro, the carved busts represent Francisco Pizarro, Inés Huylas Yupanqui, Francisca Pizarro, and Hernando Pizarro; (b) Francisco de Montejo's house in Mérida, Yucatán 115
- 7.1 Lienzo de Quauhquechollan 129
- 7.2 (a) Brazilian shaman with sick natives, from Jean de Léry, *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Bresil* (1578); (b) detail from an early eighteenth-century tile painting showing a chocolate party or *chocolatada* in the Spanish city of Valencia 130
- 7.3 The execution of Túpac Amaru Inka by order of the Viceroy Toledo, as distraught Andean nobles lament the killing of their innocent lord. Drawing 182, from the Guaman Poma manuscript 136
- 8.1 The title page to Ogilby's *America* 146
- 8.2 (a) Page 1 of the Nahua Bible, Ms 1692; (b) literate noblemen left behind tens of thousands of documents in colonial Mesoamerican languages. This example is a 1748 will written in Yucatec Maya 149
- 8.3 (a) The *cacica* of Sutatausa, a native village outside Bogotá; (b) La Casa de la Cacica, Teposcolula 150
- 8.4 Canoe for pearl fishing (Margarita, c. 1570), from the *Histoire naturelle des Indes* or "Drake Manuscript" 157
- 8.5 Native horticulturists tending their garden: "Chew this coca, sister," from the Guaman Poma manuscript 159
- 8.6 A 1609 Chinese "Complete World Map," showing Latin America on its right edge 163
- 9.1 (a) "Stowage of the British slave ship *Brookes* under the regulated slave trade act of 1788," etching showing deck plans and cross-sections of British slave ship *Brookes*; (b) M. Chambon, "marche d'esclaves" (slave market); *Le Commerce de l'Amerique par Marseille, Avignon, 1764* 170
- 9.2 (a, b) Images from Willem Piso/*Historia naturalis Brasiliae* 179
- 9.3 *Watson and the Shark*, 1778, John Singleton Copley, oil on canvas 184
- 9.4 Capoeira Dance, Brazil, 1830s, from Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Voyage Pittoresque dans le Bresil* 189
- 10.1 Woodcut of Sor María preaching in New Mexico, by Antonio de Castro, originally used for 1730 Mexican edition of "Benavides' Memorial of 1634" 200
- 10.2 (a) Three drawings depicting the evolution of the prototypical early church built in late sixteenth-century Yucatán; (b, c) colonial-era Yucatec churches 203
- 11.1 Engraving made by Fauchery from Pacheco's 1630 portrait of "Lieutenant Miss Catalina de Erauso" 222
- 11.2 Cartagena Inquisition rack 227
- 12.1 The City of La Plata, 1777 237
- 12.2 (a) A black slave or domestic servant preparing chocolate in the kitchen of a Spanish household. Detail of José de Páez, "De español y negra, mulato," 6, c. 1770–1780, oil on copper, 50.2 × 63.8 cm;

- (b) “Extracting Pulque,” from *The Ancient Cities of the New World*, Claude-Joseph-Desire Charney, engraved by Manini, published 1887 250
- 12.3 (a) “The Cruelty of Lolonois”; (b) portrait of Henry Morgan, both from Alexander Exquemelin’s *The Buccaneers of America*, first published in 1678 256
- 13.1 “A Prospect of the Town and Harbour of Carthagena, taken by the English under the brave Admiral Vernon, 1741” 268
- 13.2 Afro-Yucatecan riflemen 272
- 14.1 Virgin of the Mountain of Potosí, 1720 287
- 14.2 “Vista de Jalapa,” Carlos Nebel. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California 289
- 14.3 (a) Portrait of Manso de Velasco from Basílica Catedral de Lima; (b) *tapada* image, from *Recuerdos de Lima* (1856) 295
- 14.4 (a) *Casta* painting containing complete set of sixteen *casta* combinations (racial classifications in Spanish colonies in the Americas), oil on canvas, 148 cm × 104 cm (58¼ inches × 40⅞ inches). Anonymous, “Las Castas,” eighteenth century; (b) from a series on Mixed Marriages by Spanish School, eighteenth century 296
- 14.5 Gregoria Pumayalli Awkakusi Belt. Quechua Camelid fibers, 7.1 cm × 115.6 cm (2⅞ inches × 45½ inches). Place Collected: Chinchero, Peru 304
- 15.1 Miniature of Manuela Sáenz, c.1828, by José María Espinosa Prieto (1796–1883) Pintura (óleo sobre marfil), 7 × 5.5 centímetros, Colección Museo de Antioquia 323
- 15.2 Constancio Franco Vargas, “Jose Prudencio Padilla,” c. 1880. Painting, oil/fabric, 63.4 cm × 50 cm 324
- 15.3 (a) The Coronation of Dom Pedro I (1798–1834) as Emperor of Brazil, December 1, 1822; (b) the Acclamation of Pedro I (1798–1834), Emperor of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, April 7, 1831, illustration from “Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Bresil,” Paris, 1835 326

MAPS

1.1 Early Migrations into the Americas	4
1.2 Native Americans before 1492	13
2.1 Iberia in the Age of the Reconquista, 711–1492	23
2.2 Iberian Cities in 1492	29
3.1 Atlantic Africa in 1492	39
3.2 West Central Africa in 1492	45
4.1 The Wind and Current System of the Atlantic World	57
5.1 Mexico at the Time of the Aztec Empire	74
5.2 The Andes at the Time of the Inca Empire	80
5.3 The Maya Area at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century	85
6.1 Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean in the Conquest Period	93
6.2 South America in the Conquest Period	100
7.1 The Protracted Conquest in South America	120
7.2 The Protracted Conquest of the Mayas	125
9.1 The Transatlantic Slave Trade	176
9.2 Sugar in the Americas	177
10.1 The Religious Orders in New Spain	198
10.2 The Inquisition and the Mission	206
12.1 The Cities of Colonial Latin America	239
12.2 The Trunk Lines	242
12.3 Competition for the Caribbean	254
13.1 Competition for the Americas in the Eighteenth Century	266
13.2 Brazil in the Age of the Pombaline Reforms	278
13.3 Spanish America in the Age of the Bourbon Reforms	279
14.1 Rebellion in the Andes	300
15.1 The Chain of Independence in South America	322

IN FOCUS BOXES

1.1 Noble Savagery: European Views of “Indians”	6
1.2 A Comparison of the Ten Main Features of Mesoamerican and Andean Civilizations	8
1.3 Playing Ball	9
1.4 Mountain Mummies	11
2.1 Instruments of Empire	24
2.2 Conquistador Roots: The Reading Warrior	28
2.3 Seville: Spain’s City	31
3.1 Epic Scenes from an African Empire	42
3.2 Statistical Shock: Numbers from the Slave Trade	47
4.1 The Conquest of the Canary Islands	58
4.2 The “First” House	62
4.3 Las Casas and the Black Legend	66
4.4 How Many Native Americans were there in 1492?	68
5.1 The Aztec Sun Stone	73
5.2 Promoting the Past: The <i>Codex Mendoza</i>	75
5.3 The Imperial Capital of Mexico-Tenochtitlán	77
5.4 The Riddle of Machu Picchu	81
6.1 Malinche’s Words	97
6.2 Conquistador Cousins	101
6.3 Black Conquistadors	112
6.4 Conquistador Superiority: Carved in Stone	115
7.1 Nahuas versus Mayas: An Indigenous Spin on a “Spanish” Conquest	128
7.2 The Two Faces of the Columbian Exchange	130
7.3 The Pleasure of Conquest: An Eyewitness to the Execution of Túpac Amaru	134
8.1 America!	146
8.2 Heirs to the Hieroglyphs	149
8.3 The <i>Cacica</i>	150
8.4 Forced Labor and Fragile Ecosystems: Caribbean Pearls, Colombian Gold, and Argentine Cattle	157
8.5 Coca and Community in the Colonial Andes	159
8.6 The Complete World	163
9.1 The Middle Passage	170

In Focus Boxes

xv

9.2 The Sweet and the Bitter	179
9.3 Diego the Devil and the Black Jacks	184
9.4 The Dance of War	189
10.1 Worshipping Christ and Serving the Gods	200
10.2 From Village Pyramids to Parish Churches	203
11.1 The Nun Conquistador(a)	222
11.2 The Rack	227
12.1 The Best-Planned Cities	237
12.2 The Eleven-O'-Clock Shot	250
12.3 Pirates of the Caribbean	256
13.1 Delenda Est Carthago	267
13.2 Colonial Latin America's Buffalo Soldiers	272
14.1 The Virgin of Potosí	287
14.2 The Perils of the Highway	289
14.3 Colonial Fault Lines: The Aftershocks of the Lima Earthquake	295
14.4 The Wishful Thinking of <i>Casta</i> Paintings	296
14.5 A Baroque Postscript: The Distribution of Body Parts	303
15.1 The Liberator's Liberator	323
15.2 From Cabin Boy to Admiral to the Executioner's Block	324
15.3 Brazil Becomes an Empire	326

PREFACE



The Colonial Crucible

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS “SAILED FROM SPAIN,” wrote one Spaniard in the sixteenth century, “to mix the world together and give to those strange lands the form of our own.” That mixing of the world together, or “the discovery of the new world,” as Europeans of the day put it, was characterized by the Paduan philosopher Buonamico in 1539 as the greatest achievement of human history, comparable “not only to Antiquity, but to immortality.” In various forms that sentiment has been repeated many times during the past five centuries; one historian recently called the European discovery and conquest of America and its native peoples “the most astonishing encounter of our history.”

With as many motivations as there were individuals, men and women sailed across the Atlantic Ocean seeking power, wealth, social status, religious mission, scientific knowledge, and personal adventure. At the same time, they often failed to recognize that the lands they claimed as their own were already occupied. Tens of millions of Native Americans had over thousands of years developed sophisticated societies from which the newcomers could learn a great deal. Yet, despite European attempts to reshape the Americas into known forms, Native Americans – and the millions of Africans brought against their will by Europeans – contributed as much as willing newcomers did to the formation of colonial societies. Native American foods, meanwhile, such as maize, potatoes, chocolate, and chili peppers, quickly revolutionized world cuisine and spurred population growth.

This book tells the story of that astonishing encounter among Iberians, Africans, and Native Americans – and then examines the many regional stories and general social and economic patterns that developed in its aftermath. But the book does more than simply tell stories about colonial Latin America. Our concern is also with the question that has been raised as often as the “discovery” has been called history’s greatest event – the question of how. How had Europeans come to think that they could simply “give to those strange lands the form of their own”? How were so few

Spaniards able to conquer the great and powerful empires of the Aztecs and the Incas? How were small numbers of Spanish and Portuguese settlers able to build, maintain, and defend such vast colonies across three hundred years?

The answer is simple: they did not; or at least, they did not do it alone. Europeans neither embarked on conquests nor created colonies without substantial contributions from non-Europeans. In both endeavors, they were accompanied and assisted by much more numerous Native Americans and sub-Saharan Africans. Such peoples were usually – but not always – subject to Spanish and Portuguese rule and exploitation. But European settlers were very much dependent on the Native Americans and Africans who consistently outnumbered them. Colonial Latin American societies were not segregated; they were crucibles in which many peoples and cultures mixed and changed one another. It was therefore not only Spaniards and Portuguese who gave form to colonial Latin America but also the Mexica and the Maya, Quechua and Tupi speakers, Yorubas and Congolese, and many others.

Our narrative journey through the great encounter and into the mixed-together world – the crucible – of colonial Latin America takes the form of fifteen chapters. In Chapters 1–3, we look at what historians now call the Atlantic world, as it was when the ocean divided, rather than bridged, the Eastern and Western hemispheres. The civilizations of native America; the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal); and western, or “Atlantic,” Africa, are each introduced in turn.

In Chapters 4–7, the peoples of the Atlantic continents are brought together, beginning with the birth of Spain and its imperial ambitions, Portuguese expansion into the Atlantic and toward Asia, and the 1492 voyage of Columbus that grew from those Portuguese and Spanish roots. The story continues with the experience of Spaniards, Native Americans, and Africans in the Caribbean in the decades after 1492. We then cross to the American mainland to explore the nature of native empires on the eve of the Spanish invasion, the events and patterns of that invasion, the roles played by Native Americans and Africans, and the birth of a Portuguese colony in Brazil. The sum of these transformative events is here called the Long Conquest.

The book is less chronological and more thematic in Chapters 8–12. These chapters paint a social portrait of colonial Spanish America and Brazil from the time when colonial rule began in the sixteenth century through to the early eighteenth century, when change began to gather pace. We have dubbed this period the “colonial middle.” These chapters give support to the assertion that Native Americans and Africans played indispensable and central roles in the formation and florescence of Spanish and Portuguese colonial societies, as these roles are examined in detail alongside the efforts and endeavors of Iberian settlers.

Preface: The Colonial Crucible

xix

The final part of the book, “The Age of Change,” shifts back to chronology, as the period treated – roughly 1750–1825 – was marked by momentous events, culminating in independence. Chapters 13–15 trace the growing pressures of war and administrative reform in an era when colonial society was increasingly complex, growing in size and wealth, and otherwise changing. Imperial administrators struggled to reorder colonial power structures and to generally raise taxes, all against the wishes of colonial subjects. Dissenters included Iberians descended from early settler and conquistador families, along with some Native Americans and mixed people of color. A spate of regional revolts laid bare the fault lines of colonial society. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with late colonial reforms, the Latin American colonies remained faithful to Spain and Portugal into the early nineteenth century, when they were overtaken by a combination of events in Europe and local discontent. Led by able commanders such as Simón Bolívar, the colonies at last became independent nations.

At the book’s close, we revisit our argument as to how Latin America’s fabled conquests – followed by some three centuries of largely unchallenged, transoceanic colonial rule – were possible. We summarize and conclude by reiterating the importance of the complementary roles played by Iberians, Africans, and Native Americans in both processes. It is our firm belief that conquest and colonialism succeeded despite what seem in retrospect to have been very long odds, because both were perceived – most importantly by indigenous, black, and mixed-race participants – as shared ventures. On the flip side, understanding how this widespread acquiescence to Iberian invasion and long-term rule came about and functioned in the Americas is fundamental before attempting to interpret rebellions and other forms of resistance, including the final push to independence.

In 1566, St. Francis Borja sent a present of a globe to his son (who was himself the father of a future viceroy of Peru); the son wrote back, “Before seeing it, I had not realized how small is the world.” The world had indeed become small and, as another observer had said, “mixed,” within a few generations of Columbus’ famous transatlantic voyage, shrinking the distance among European, African, Asian, and American peoples while expanding both the threat of conflict and the potential for human growth. Colonists did not succeed in giving European form to American lands, but nor did America remain the same. Conquest and colonization made America near in the European consciousness but very far from its people in practice.

Our subject, the history of colonial Latin America, may seem as vast as the world once did to Borja. Our hope is that this book will render it, like Borja’s globe did the world, manageably small but still wondrous.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41640-5 — Latin America in Colonial Times
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the many colleagues and scholars who have contributed to the development of this book. Although we used primary archival sources for many of our examples and case studies, we have inevitably drawn on the works of dozens of other historians for most of our information. Because the textbook format does not allow for individual citations, please accept this as a general acknowledgment (you know who you are: thank you!).

We have greatly enjoyed and appreciated working with Eric Crahan (first edition) and Debbie Gershenowitz (this edition) and their colleagues at Cambridge University Press; thank you, all of you, for your patience and hard work.

We also thank Rob Schwaller and his Penn State students in History 178 (spring 2006) and Mark Christensen and his Penn State students in History 178 (fall 2008) for their feedback on earlier drafts of the book. Likewise, we are grateful for the responses to the first edition from undergraduates in our own classes at Penn State and Tulane, from instructors and students at other institutions, and from anonymous readers commissioned by the Press.

Finally, we raise our glasses to Felipe Fernández-Armesto and James Lockhart, to Robert Ferry and Stuart Schwartz, in whose footsteps we have sought to tread in numerous ways (this book being but one), and to whom the book is a humble tribute.

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