

# ***Encomienda* and Settlement: Towards a Historical Geography of Early Colonial Guatemala**

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## **Abstract**

The *encomienda* has long been recognized as a key institution in forging a colonial society throughout Spanish America. In Guatemala, its appearance coincided with the act of conquest itself, a coincidence previous studies have failed to highlight. Analysis of sources in the Archivo General de Indias shows the *encomienda* to have had a turbulent early history in Guatemala, one in which Indian settlements awarded in trust to Spanish conquerors changed hands frequently. As a means of political reward and favoritism, the *encomienda* was manipulated by eleven different governments between 1524 and 1548, and involved the allocation (and reallocation) of the tribute capacity of about one hundred Indian communities. The arrangements formalized by President Alonso Lopez de Cerrato between 1548 and 1555, generally acknowledged to be the most complete surviving record of early tribute obligations, are not in fact the beginning of the *encomienda* in Guatemala but instead constitute a revised, inherited inventory dating back some twenty-five years.

Key words: *encomienda, encomendero, tribute, conquest culture, Guatemala.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In Guatemala, as throughout Spanish America, the creation of *encomiendas* played a key role in formalizing power relationships and in consolidating conquest culture. Although more and more is being written about the colonial experience in Guatemala, little attention has been paid to the *encomienda*, an institution Spaniards introduced almost immediately to control local Maya populations and exploit the resources of their far-flung communities. The history of the *encomienda* is complex, but it remained throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a device whereby privileged Spaniards or their creole offspring received tribute in labor, goods, or cash from Indians entrusted to their charge. *Encomiendas* were not grants of land but, rather, awards to enjoy the fruits of what the people and their land could provide, whether prized items such as gold, silver, salt, or cacao or less spectacular produce like corn and chickens.

It has long been assumed that, because of unstable government and prolonged Indian resistance, early grants of *encomienda* in Guatemala were few in number, ephemeral in nature, and, consequently, of little historical importance. The opposite, in fact, is true. The *encomienda* in Guatemala dates from 1524, the year that Pedro de Alvarado led the first *entrada* (military expedition) into Mesoamerican lands south of Mexico. Conquest and the distribution of *encomiendas* thus went hand in hand. By 1548, when the New Laws promulgated under Charles V were enforced by President Alonso López de Cerrato, the *encomienda* already had a turbulent, quarter-century history. Despite this, scholars of Spanish Central America, Solano (1974) and Rodríguez Becerra (1977) foremost among them, have tended to focus discussions of the early *encomienda*

around the Cerrato presidency (1548-1555). This tendency may be explained by the fact that the earliest surviving list of encomiendas, and the individuals (*encomenderos*) who received them, was compiled during the time Cerrato held office. Tribute assessments carried out earlier, in the 1530s and early 1540s, are no longer extant, except for fragments we have located sporadically over the years (Kramer, Lovvell, and Lutz 1986; 1991).

Cerrato and his colleagues recorded tribute information while simultaneously seeking to moderate the amount of goods and services that encomenderos were supposed to receive. They did not, however, carry out a *repartimiento general*, a surveyor inventory that might redistribute the spoils of conquest in a radical, original fashion. Cerrato did re-allocate some encomiendas and granted others that fell vacant, but these cases were relatively few in number. Unfortunately, nowhere in the tribute assessments compiled by Cerrato is there any indication of how long a particular settlement or group of settlements had been held in encomienda, nor by whom these awards were originally granted. However, encomiendas held by the son or heir of a conquistador--a fact always noted--reflect earlier grants, for they indicate which settlements paid tribute to Spaniards for at least two generations. The Cerrato assessments are clearly an invaluable source for studying the encomienda at mid-century, but they cannot be viewed as the beginning of the institution in Guatemala. They represent, rather, a point to work back from when reconstructing the historical geography of earlier times, a quality well recognized by the late John F. Bergmann (1969).

For some time now we have worked towards locating, in archives in Spain as well as in Guatemala, sources that contain information on the settlements listed in the Cerrato assessments, which collectively record tribute information on 169 places held in encomienda by 93 different encomenderos (AGI, AG 128; Lovvell, Lutz, and Swezey 1984). Although we have concerned ourselves primarily with the establishment of encomienda chronologies and the elaboration of settlement histories, it became apparent early on that the best way to reconstruct the historical geography of populated places was through their respective encomenderos. It therefore became necessary to gather and to organize information on the family ties and fortunes of these elite individuals. All of this lured us into a labyrinth of colonial documentation, the contents of which, and our handling of which, we discuss in summary fashion below.

## **SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY**

Information on encomenderos in pre-Cerrato years comes from various sources. Perhaps the most useful are *probanzas de meritos y servicios*, documentation in which conquerors or their recognized descendants petition the King, seeking recompense for services rendered. Also useful are *pleitos*, or lawsuits, between Spanish residents over rights to encomienda (Sánchez Ochoa 1976). The correspondence of governors, treasury officials, high-ranking clergy like Bishop Francisco Marroquín, and the *cabildo* (city council) of Santiago de Guatemala (Saenz de Santa María 1964; Sune Blanco 1984) furnish additional data. These sources, which Kramer (1990) utilized for her doctoral dissertation, yield considerable information, especially about hitherto unexplored or unsuspected aspects of what precisely the encomienda in Guatemala was prior to Cerrato's presidency.

*Probanzas de meritos y servicios*, housed in the Archivo General de Indias (Sevilla) as part of the Audiencia de Guatemala and Patronato Real, were designed to serve either as a record for posterity or as a petition to the Crown. Social background and contribution to conquest and colonization are usually described in detail. In most cases a petitioner sought compensation in the form of an encomienda for his services to the Crown. Usually the petitioner already held an encomienda and would note that he had received scant reward in consideration of his many services and the quality (*calidad*) of his person. In some instances the petitioner, or his descendants, would argue that an encomienda had been unfairly removed and had been granted to a relative or follower of the governor then in charge. The petitioners, and witnesses who testify on their behalf, describe at what juncture a governor had awarded the grant and why the grant was awarded in the first place. In addition, many *probanzas* contain information on how long an individual encomienda had been held, and whether it had been removed or reconfirmed under subsequent governors. Since the Spanish colonists were foremost concerned with acquiring additional or more lucrative encomiendas, *probanzas* almost always contain some reference to economic potential and, in some instances, to tribute items and the geographical

location of the encomienda. By compiling a record of the names of men who granted and received encomiendas, as well as the place names of their awards, we have been able to trace encomienda succession in detail and to determine what Indian settlements figured over time in the distribution process.

Governors usually had formal documents drawn up at the time of the granting of encomiendas. These official records, called *cédulas de encomienda*, have survived in some cases and are an invaluable source for encomienda history (Kramer 1990). A typical *cédula de encomienda* lists the date, the name of the settlement (s) held in encomienda, the name of the recipient, and the name of the governor who made the award. The *cédula de encomienda* was often included in the legal correspondence as definitive proof that the petitioner or his heir held, or once had held, a certain settlement (or settlements) in encomienda. The text frequently notes who held previous title and for what reason the encomienda became available for reallocation. For example, many *cédulas* record that encomiendas fell vacant because of death or absence of the former owner, as a result of the former recipient being awarded a new, often better, encomienda or because a holder was mistreating Indians.

Although fewer in number than probanzas, *pleitos* sometimes contain the richest data for our purposes. These documents are housed in the Justicia section of the Archivo General de Indias, a part of the archive few researchers have had the time or the patience to explore. Historian William L. Sherman (1979) is a notable exception. *Pleitos* usually contain additional documents that duplicate much of the information found in the probanzas. They are primarily concerned, however, with rival claims. Encomenderos would either be involved in litigation against one another, or they would be pressing charges against a governor over the removal of a grant. Claimants would seek to discredit each other by the presentation of testimony that might damage or ruin reputations. Unusual information, therefore, comes to light regarding the activities of governors and encomenderos alike. These sources reveal both how the granting of encomiendas was used by governors as a personal weapon and to what extent encomenderos ignored Crown directives regarding the proper treatment of their Indian charges. Invaluable testimony concerning encomienda succession may be found in these documents. *Pleitos*, unlike the majority of probanzas, occasionally provide detailed information on the size, location, and tribute-paying capacity of Indian communities.

One document that yielded considerable data on the early encomienda is the *residencia*, or judicial review, of Pedro de Alvarado (Archivo General de Indias, Justicia 295 and 296). Alvarado's *residencia* was carried out in Guatemala in the late 1530s, during one of Don Pedro's frequent and lengthy absences. Preparation of this document when Alvarado was conveniently absent provided Spanish colonists with an opportunity to voice grievances with less fear of reprisal. Testimony of dozens of witnesses furnish rich data on how Alvarado manipulated the encomienda to suit his personal needs. Kramer (1990) uses this source extensively and portrays the life and times of the conquistador more concretely than standard texts.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

We can now identify and locate most of the settlements listed in the tribute assessments compiled by López de Cerrato, something that long frustrated and eluded us. We can now also describe, in detail, when many of these settlements were first assigned and held in encomienda, as well as document when and under what circumstances they reverted to the Crown or were passed on from one colonist to another. This information is presented in Table 1, which summarizes the vital statistics of awards by governorship, and in Figure 1, which locates some one hundred settlements granted between the beginning of conquest in 1524 and the arrival of more responsible royal government in 1548. Many spatial designations in Figure 1 are approximate and indicate only the general area of the encomienda award, for no reliable maps have survived to guide us. In addition, several settlements have since disappeared or have experienced a marked change in nomenclature. Sixteenth-century spelling of place names varies widely, so we have opted for wordings that most resemble present-day orthography. Places omitted from Figure 1 are ones we have so far been unable to assign even an approximate location. In an attempt to convey how quickly encomiendas might change hands, Table 2 reconstructs the succession of grantors and holders of Chichicastenango, eleven recorded permutations between 1526 and 1549. The experience of Chichicastenango, by no means unique, reflects well the propensity of one governor to alter or to modify the ruling of his predecessor, and indicates how

unstable and fluid the institution could be.

Table 1. Awards of *encomienda* in early colonial Guatemala, 1524–1548.

Governors, Lieutenant Governors and Interim Governors	Tenure in Office	Number of Awards	Number of <i>Encomenderos</i>
Pedro de Alvarado	1524–1526	30	22
Jorge de Alvarado	1527–1529	94	72
Francisco Orduña	1529–1530	11	10
Pedro de Alvarado	1530–1533	90	50
Jorge de Alvarado	1534–1535	8	6
Pedro de Alvarado	1535–1536	19	10
Alonso de Maldonado	1536–1539	12	8
Pedro de Alvarado	1539–1540	7	3
Francisco de la Cueva	1540–1541	14	5
Beatriz de la Cueva	1541	—	—
Bishop Marroquín and Francisco de la Cueva	1541–1542	20	16
Alonso de Maldonado	1542–1548	45	19

Source: Kramer (1990).

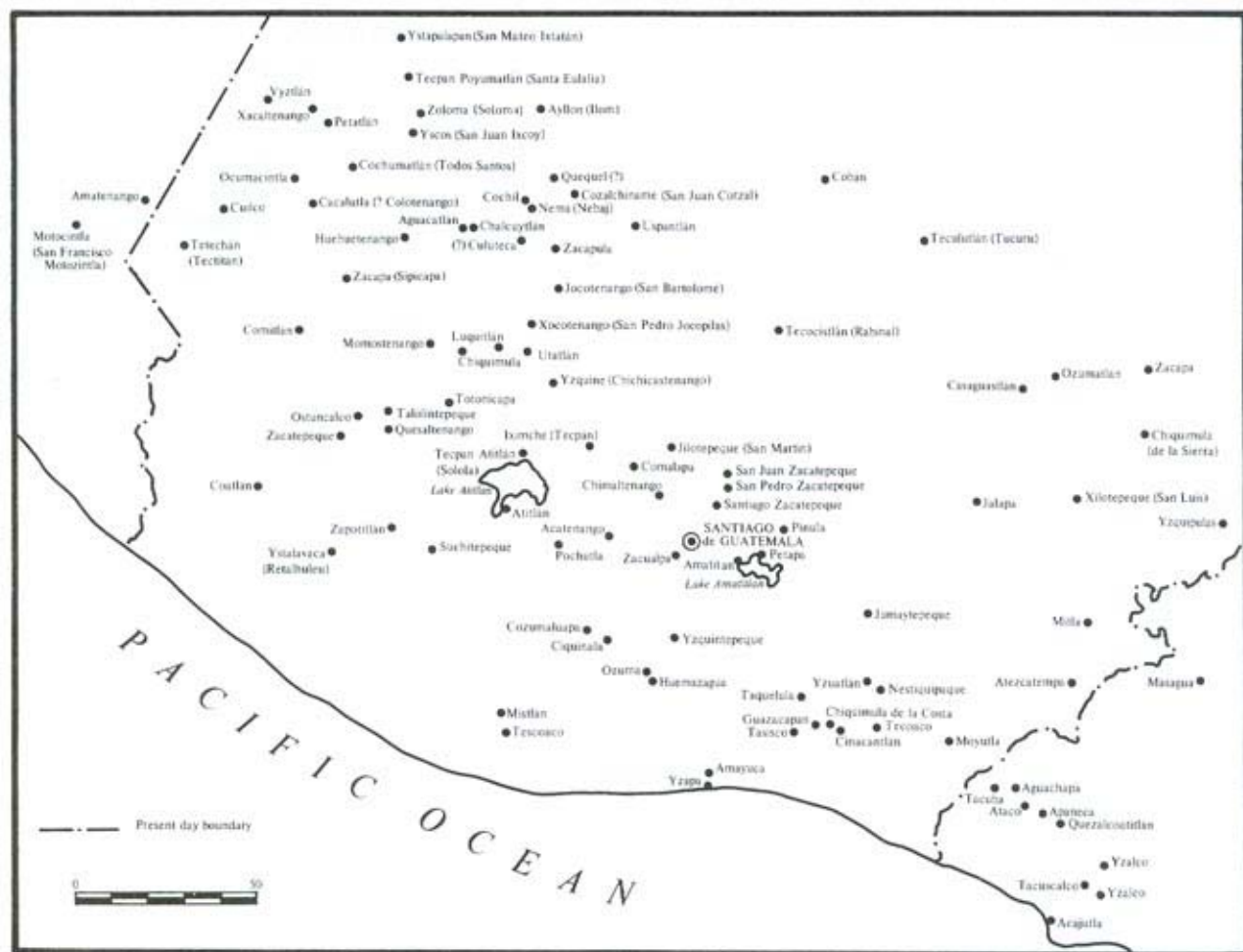


Fig. 1. Settlements held in *encomienda* in the jurisdiction of Santiago de Guatemala, 1524–1548.

Table 2. *Encomienda* succession in Chichicastenango, 1526–1549.

<i>Encomenderos</i>	Grantors	Dates
Gonzalo de Alvarado	Pedro de Alvarado	before August, 1526
Jorge de Alvarado	Jorge de Alvarado	after March, 1527
Francisco de Orduña	Francisco de Orduña	August, 1529
Ortega Gómez	Francisco de Orduña	November 27, 1529
Pedro de Alvarado	Pedro de Alvarado	April, 1530
Pedro de Cueto	Pedro de Alvarado	1533
Jorge de Alvarado	Jorge de Alvarado	after January, 1533
Gaspar Arias	Jorge de Alvarado	May 15, 1534
Gaspar Arias	Pedro de Alvarado	June 17, 1535
Ortega Gómez	Alonso de Maldonado	March, 1537
Gaspar Arias	?	before 1540
Son of Gaspar Arias	Alonso López de Cerrato	May 6, 1549

Source: Kramer (1990).

## CONCLUSION

Our synopsis demonstrates the reconstructive potential of hitherto little-known sources that shed light on both the distribution of settlements held in *encomienda* and the history of *encomienda* succession. Initially, the tribute assessments legislated by President Cerrato served as our organizational benchmark. We now know there is abundant, untapped documentation on the pre-Cerrato years. Consequently, the Cerrato assessments serve more as a vital checklist rather than an exclusive register for early *encomienda* arrangements. Our research shows that, even in the absence of comprehensive tribute rolls for the first quarter-century or so after conquest, *encomiendas* can be effectively traced through individual documents prepared by *encomenderos* themselves. These findings form part of a larger work concerned with reconstructing other aspects of the historical geography of early colonial Guatemala. Our goal is to provide, for Guatemala, a basic work of reference, one akin to the New Spain trilogy of Peter Gerhard (1972, 1979, 1982), albeit more modest in size and less ambitious in scope.

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## **Resumen**

Desde hace tiempo, la encomienda ha sido reconocida como una institución clave en la formación de una sociedad colonial a lo largo de Hispanoamérica. En Guatemala, la aparición de dicha institución coincidió con el acto de la conquista misma, coincidencia que no había sido recalçada en estudios anteriores. El análisis de las fuentes documentales del Archivo General de Indias demuestra que la encomienda tuvo, en Guatemala, una historia temprana de carácter turbulento. Fue una historia en la cual los asentamientos indígenas ortogados al cuidado de los conquistadores españoles cambiaron de encomendero con frecuencia. Como medio de recompensa política y favoritismo, la encomienda fue manipulada por once diferentes gobiernos, durante el período comprendido entre 1524 y 1548, proceso que involucró la distribución (y la redistribución) de la capacidad tributaria de aproximadamente unas cien comunidades indígenas. Los arreglos formalizados por el presidente Alonso López de Cerrato, entre 1548 y 1555, son generalmente reconocidos como los registros existentes más completos de las obligaciones tributarias tempranas. De hecho, no reflejan el principio de la encomienda en Guatemala, sino que constituyen un inventario revisado heredado que se remonta a unos veinticinco años atrás.

Palabras clave: *encomienda, encomendero, tributo, la cultura de conquista, Guatemala.*