

The Spanish Empire in the Americas

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Overview

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I. Empire or Kingdom?

- The Spanish conquests in the Americas were spurred by the recent joining of two Iberian kingdoms: Castilla and Aragón.
- Only Carlos I was both Emperor (of Holy Roman Empire) and King (of Spanish dominions).
- Regardless of official title, Spanish monarchs acquired an empire, that is, a series of territories and states that can be contiguous or not under one supreme head.

Iberian Characteristics on the Eve of Discovery and Conquest of the Americas

- Five main kingdoms: Castilla, Portugal, Aragón, Navarra, and Granada. Single Spanish polity born not until Bourbons take over from Habsburgs in early s. XVIII.
- Reconquista of land taken over by Moors in 711 is main ideology: military orders, militant Church, warrior kings. ‘Booty mentality’: serving a king in arms best route to wealth and honor.
- Military service is the key of social advancement.

Government

- System evolved from Catalan-Aragonese government practice since late Middle Ages, which required crown representatives in its different territories.
- Crown at the apex represented by virrey in distant territories. These, in turn, represented at court by consejos (sistema conciliar). Each territory has a judicial tribunal (audiencia), which checks virrey's power. Closer towns and territories represented in Cortes (primitive parliament).
- Municipios are basic unit of local government: cabildo (represents and administers), corregidor (dispenses justice), governor (if town is big enough).

Social Structure

- Society divided into three estates (estamentos): nobility, clergy, and commoners. In addition, there were corporate bodies such as military orders, towns, universities with their own legal prerogatives.
- Nobles exempted from direct taxation. Top social aspiration is ennoblement due to privileges and status it conferred. From 1520s, Crown starts selling patents of nobility.
- Slavery was well-known in Iberia since the Reconquista, whereby defeated Moors were enslaved. Portuguese started importing African slaves into the peninsula in 1441. The association of dark skin with slavery was established before the Conquest of the American continent.

Economic Structure

- Agricultural and pastoral activity dominate Castilla. Aragón had a strong trading position in Mediterranean.
- Main export is wool of merino sheep, whereas most finished goods are imported due to absence of craft or proto-industrial base.
- Crown's main fiscal source: alcabala, a tax on the transport of goods.
- Crown's main financing source: external borrowing.
- Trade is socially stigmatized. Dwelling in cities preferred to living in countryside: strong urban culture whose base nonetheless remain landowning.

Question 1: What were the main ways in which Spain was affected by its discovery and conquest of the Americas?

- 1. Introductory paragraph should address question directly with a straightforward argument:
- (Discuss what is an argument)
- 2. Body of answer should focus on distinctive analytical points that support the argument: best not to focus on too many points because you risk falling into mere description – between 2 and 4 distinctive points should suffice.
- 3. Concluding paragraph should say how your analytical points support the initial argument, which should be re-stated.

Answer to question 1

- Introduction:

“It does not seem possible to ascertain historically a specific number of ‘main’ vs. ‘non-main’ ways in which Spain was affected by its discovery and conquest of vast territories in the Americas. Rather, in this essay I will argue that there was one fundamental factor, namely, the creation of new economic opportunities, that led to the demographic, political and geopolitical transformation of Spain.”

Answer to question 1

- Body:
- “To assess the impact of new economic opportunities on Spain’s transformation I will focus on the issues of emigration to the New World, the creation of a strong bureaucratic state with modern administrative capacities, and the creation and expansion of a trans-Atlantic trading system which allowed the Spanish monarchs to keep and expand their dominions throughout the sixteenth century.”

Answer to question 1

- Conclusion:
- “In this essay I have shown that the availability of new economic opportunities after the Spanish discovery and conquest of the Americas (1492-1520s) led to the demographic, political and geopolitical transformation of Spain in the sixteenth century. None of these transformations would have been possible on such a large scale and in such a short period of time without the availability of the riches from the New World”.

II. The Indigenous World in the Americas

- On the eve of Columbus' discovery estimates suggest there were between 35 and 45 million inhabitants in the hemisphere.
- The population was roughly divided into 350 major tribal groups.
- There were 15 distinct centres of higher culture, and more than 160 linguistic stock.
- No iron and hard metal tools.
- In Central and South America, no large domestic animals (except llama and its relative in the Andes) for transport, food and clothing.

The Aztecs

- As a nomadic tribe, they emigrated to Central Mexico in the thirteenth century. Construction of a capital city in the middle of Lake Texcoco in 1325. Not until the mid-fifteenth century do they establish control over Central Mexico.
- In early sixteenth century their empire stretches to Oaxaca, Guatemala and the Gulf Coast. Some tribes keep resisting such as the Tarascos in Michoacán, the Tlaxcaltecas in Puebla and Tlaxcala, and the Mayans in Campeche, Yucatán, Chiapas.

The Aztec Empire, early 1500s



Government

- Theocratic monarchy, whereby the tlatoani ('the one who rules') was both head of the temporal and the spiritual power: the offices of emperor and high priest fused in one person.
- Groups organized through kinship (altepetl) were in charge of the regions: they had political structures (hereditary rulers), religious structures (temples dedicated to patron dieties), and economic structures (markets).
- The local level of government (calpulli) were the equivalent to village 'barrios'. They distributed land, collected tribute, organized education, religious rituals, and military affairs: they formed the basis of a sophisticated organization of communal life.

Social Structure and Economy

- Society divided into four basic groups: nobility (pipiltin), free commoners (macehualtin), subjected commoners (mayeques), and slaves.
- Mayeques were conquered commoners who lost their land, and worked for conquerors; prisoners of war were main source of slavery. Slavery was not inherited.
- Aztec economy unlike other nations in Mesoamérica was not based on agriculture, but on the tribute paid by the conquered and trade. Tenochtitlán also had strong crafts and manufactures base. Barter economy.

The Incas

- Like Aztecs', their kingdom was of recent formation. Consolidation of empire not until second half of fifteenth century under Sapa Inca Pachacuti.
- Largest empire in the continent, effectively organized by extended network of roads, warehouses and military garrisons.
- By the time Cortés conquered México (1521), Inca empire ruled over vast areas of present-day Perú, Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile.

The Inca Empire at its zenith



Government

- The empire was centralized in the capital, Cuzco. Effective territorial division into 4 regions (ruled by close relatives of Sapa Inca) and 80 provinces (ruled by Inca nobles), who nonetheless gave authority on the ground to local chieftains (kurakas).
- Religion and politics intertwined as with other indigenous groups. Distinctive characteristics were ancestor and huaca worship, which had impact in succession politics: chosen heir inherited office, but not wealth which remained under the panaca, who organized cult of deceased ruler.

Social and Economic Structure

- Society divided into nobility, commoners and conquered peoples. Nobility mans the state (war and admin.).
- Basic social unit is kin based (ayllus), and their economic activity is communal. Inca establish the mita, the obligation to contribute to running of empire through personal labor.
- Trade and tribute are important but not as essential as for Aztecs. Backbone of Inca economy is agriculture. Greatest feat of their civilization was construction of infrastructure (irrigation, terraces, bridges).

Question 2: Spaniards' technological advantage secured their rapid conquest of the Aztecs and Incas. Discuss.

- Introduction:
- “Technological advantage was one of the keys to the Conquest. Armour, swords, arquebuses, cannon, and horses gave the upper hand to small groups of Spaniards fighting indigenous armies of thousands. However, in this essay I will argue that this advantage wouldn't have been decisive had it not been accompanied by three other factors, one diplomatic, one political, and one biological”.

Answer to question 2

- Body:
- “The diplomatic factor was Spaniards’ shrewd alliance with indigenous enemies of the empires (tlaxcaltecas and cañari). The political factor refers to the structure of the empires themselves. Being absolute monarchies/theocracies, once the ruler was detained, the empires were thrown into disarray. The biological factor was the importation of European diseases, which decimated both the Aztecs and Incas during their fight against the Spaniards”.

Answer to question 2

- Conclusion:
- “Technological advantage on its own might not have been sufficient to permit Spaniards the rapid conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires. It is not hard to envisage the failure of Córtes and Pizarro, or at least longer drawn-out conflicts had the three factors delineated in this essay not operated in their favour”.

III. The Meeting of the Spanish and the Indigenous Worlds

- Mental world of the Spanish conquistadores is based on late medieval ideas of the Reconquista and early Renaissance ideas associated with humanism.
- In Europe, calls for spiritual regeneration culminate with the Reform, spearheaded by Luther (1517: ninety-five theses).
- These influences translate once in America into religious war, Aristotelian justifications of indigenous inferiority, and jealous guarding of the new lands for the Catholic Church.

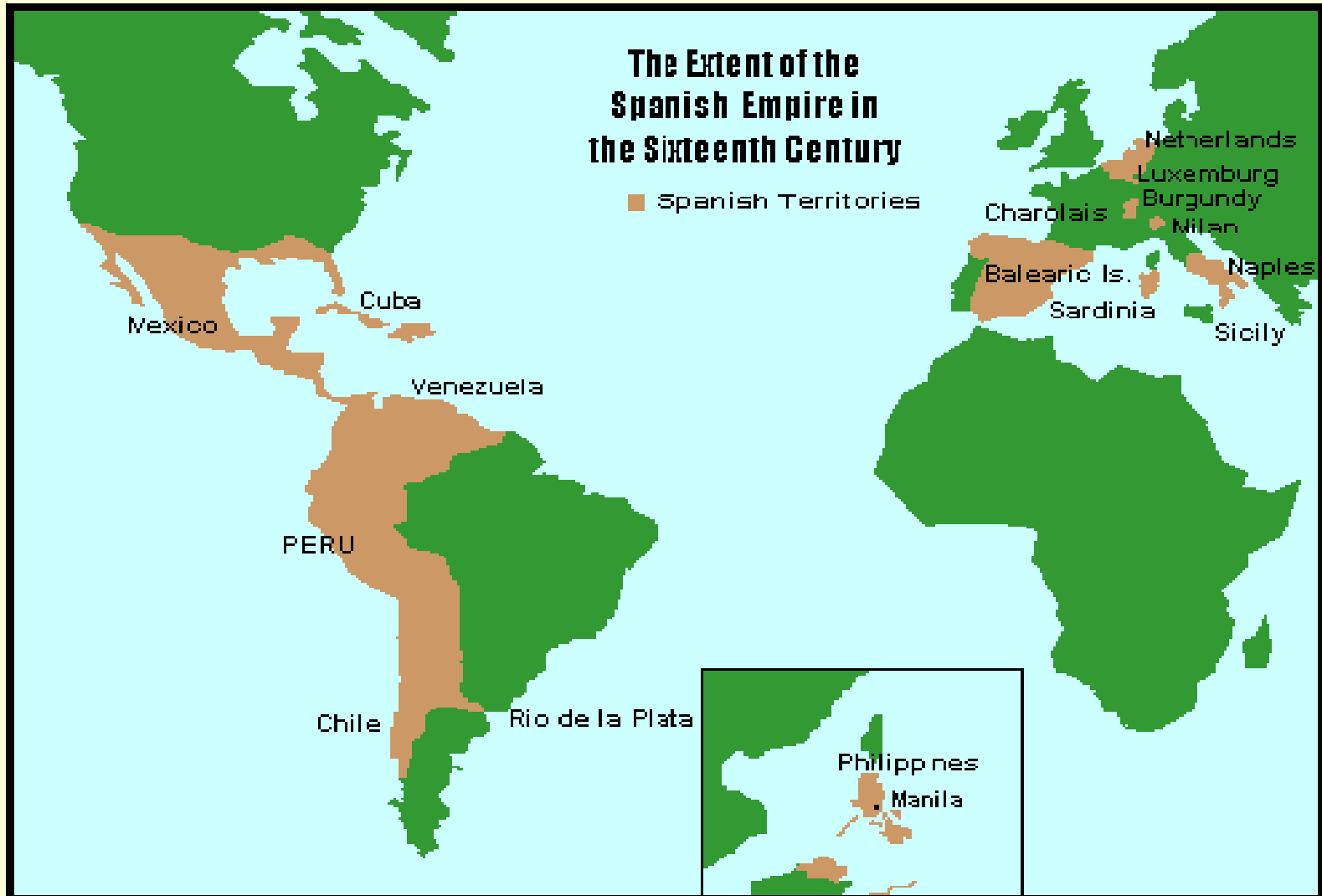
Spaniards' differences and compromise

- Conquistadores showed a victors' mentality, and their priority was gaining fame and riches.
- Friars showed a redeemers' mentality, and their priority was the Catholic conversion of the indigenous populations.
- The Crown showed a sovereign mentality, and its priority was the protection of its new vassals.
- Differences were bridged through the creation of institutions: **encomienda**, in particular, which gave conquistadores free indigenous labor in exchange for their 'protection' and conversion to Catholicism.

The structure of colonial societies

- Strong secular and religious powers, but secular authority in control (Patronato Real).
- Highly regulated societies with different social groups having different privileges and duties. Separate 'Repúblicas de Indios' regulated the life, property and resources of indigenous communities.
- Caste society, in which descent limited the life opportunities of peninsulares, criollos, mestizos, mulatos, and indios.

The Spanish Empire in the 1500s



Question 3: What allowed the Spanish Empire to persist relatively unchallenged in the Americas for three centuries?

- Introduction:
- “Several factors were responsible for the Spanish empire’s long life in the American continent. In this essay I will argue that there were two fundamental ones. One was external (geopolitical) and the other one was domestic (access to and rotation in positions of power)”.

Answer to question 3

- Body:
- “ The Spanish empire enjoyed on the external front, the absence of a strong, competing power with the capacity to dispute its rule over its American colonies. Incidents that did occur happened either close to the coast or on islands, and were short-lived. In addition, on the domestic front the creation of strong local nobilities capable of seceding was thwarted by keeping creoles out of public office. In turn, the growth of public officials’ power was checked by a system of office rotation”.

Answer to question 3

- Conclusion:
- “Had Spain faced strong land-based competitors in its dominions, its empire might have either collapsed or become fragmented. Given that this was not the case, the main challenge to the Spanish occurred in the seas. Internally, the Crown faced the dual challenge of an assertive local nobility and/or an assertive bureaucracy. To counteract these tendencies, the Crown excluded creoles from office and rotated civil and military authorities frequently”.

Questions that have to be answered next session

- Question 1: Why did the Portuguese crown decide to switch from factory system to permanent settlements in some cases, but not in others? Provide examples.
 - Question 2: Why were some captaincies more successful than others? Discuss by contrasting a successful and a failed captaincy.
- Question 3: What were the main consequences of the discovery of gold after 1695 in Brasil?