The modern city of Santiago de Querétaro had its beginnings shortly after the fall of the Aztec empire. It is hard to point to a specific moment as the "foundation," in spite of many people’s acceptance over the years of the baroque myth which tells of a battle between unarmed Christian Otomí Indian warriors and local Chichimec nomads, highlighted by the miraculous apparition of the apostle James and a glowing cross. This symbolic battle is said to have taken place in 1531, according to the erroneous calculations of Friar Isidro Félix de Espinosa, published in his chronicle of the Franciscan Colegios de Propaganda Fide in 1746.

Documents from the sixteenth century tell another story. There are three separate moments in the early years of Querétaro’s existence that can be called “foundations.” The
first is when Otomí settlers, fleeing Spanish
dominion, arrived in the valley, which had been
occupied for centuries by semi-nomadic Pame.
The second took place a decade or two later,
when these Otomí refugees were forced to pay
tribute to the European invaders and embrace
the Christian faith. The third involves the
relocation of the settlement and the arrival of
a wave of Spaniards and indigenous from cen-
tral Mexico. Each “foundation” is part of a dis-
tinct phase in the conquest of this region.

THE EASTERN BAJÍO
BEFORE THE CONQUEST

The valleys of the Eastern Bajío, home to the
modern cities of Querétaro, Apaseo, Celaya
and San Miguel de Allende, were part of a
fluctuating frontier region during the millen-
nia preceding the Spanish invasion. Beginning
around 500 B.C. town-dwelling farmers from
the south, participants in the Chupícuaro cul-
tural tradition, colonized this region, which
participated in Mesoamerican civilization for
the next 15 centuries. The remains of monu-
mental architecture and refined ceramics in a
distinctive regional style attest to this fact. Sev-
eral centers of political power flourished in
the Eastern Bajío during the Classic period
(A.D. 200-900). Many of these sites appear to
have been abandoned in the tenth century, in
the context of migrations from northwestern
Mexico to the central valleys. In the valley of
Querétaro lie the ruins of El Cerrito, which
unlike most other Bajío sites enjoyed a second
flowering in the Early Postclassic (A.D. 900-
1200), when it participated in the Toltec cul-
ture and rivaled Tula in monumental splendor.

With the collapse of Tula in the twelfth
century and the final abandonment of northern
Mexico by Mesoamerican populations,
the urban centers of the Eastern Bajío fell into
decay. The region was dominated for the nextour centuries by the rustic, semi-nomadic
Pame and fully nomadic hunters and gather-
ers such as the Jonaz, Guamar and Guachi-
chil, generically called Chichimecs. When
Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlan in 1519, the
northern frontier of Mesoamerican civilization
was south of the valley of Querétaro; the pre-
sent states of Michoacán, Mexico and Hidalgo
were occupied by urban dwellers and farmers,
while the entire state of Querétaro and all but
the southern edge of Guanajuato were Chichimec territory.

THE CLANDESTINE SETTLEMENT OF ANDĀMĀXEI (CA. 1521-1538)

After the fall of the Aztec empire, Cortés’ soldiers were granted the right to collect the tribute that had previously been enjoyed by the imperial cities of the Triple Alliance, Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco and Tlacopan. The grantees, called encomenderos, had the obligation to attend to the religious indoctrination of the natives, although in practice friars of the Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian orders carried out this task. The combined impact of the encomenderos and the friars was traumatic for many natives. As epidemics of an apocalyptic scale ravaged the Indian populations, the encomenderos pressured the survivors to pay their towns’ taxes, while the mendicants, imagining themselves as protagonists in a holy struggle against the forces of darkness, persecuted those who dared to worship the gods of their ancestors.

In this context several small groups of Otomí abandoned their homes and quietly crossed the northern frontier of Mesoamerica, which had previously coincided with the boundary of the Aztec empire and at that time marked the limit of Spanish control. The Otomí refugees established agricultural settlements in Chichimec country, near the present cities of Querétaro, San Juan del Río, San Miguel de Allende and probably Apaseo el Grande. An Otomí trader named C’ohni, who had made his living before the conquest by trading with the Pame, was the founder of both San Miguel and Querétaro, according to his own testimony recorded shortly before his death in 1571.

Querétaro was first established in a canyon east of the present city. The Otomí inhabited caves next to a perennial stream and called the place Andāmāxei, “place of the large ball court,” probably a reference to the topography of the canyon. The settlement was later called Tlachco by speakers of Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec, and Querétaro by the Tarascans; both names mean “place of the ball court”. For some reason the latter name stuck, in spite of the fact that Tarascans were never a majority there. The Otomí still use their own word for the city, in two shortened regional variants: Ndīmxei and Maxēi. Initially some 200 refu-
gees lived there, growing corn, beans, squash and chili peppers, cultivating friendly relations with their Pame neighbors and practicing their ancestral rites.

The Integration of Andamaxei into the Spanish Empire (ca. 1538-1542)

Meanwhile the Spaniards realized that the virgin grasslands to the northwest of Mexico City could support thriving herds of cattle. Land grants were handed out to members of the colonial elite. One grantee was Hernán Pérez de Bocanegra, encomendero of Acámbaro and Apaseo since 1538. The latter town was just 24 miles from Andamaxei. Around 1540 Pérez discovered the refugee settlement and made them pay tribute in the form of chili peppers, cotton, and wheat; he provided the seed for the latter. This turn of events outraged the Pame inhabitants of the valley, but C’ohni soothed them with his artful diplomacy.

Shortly after the initial contact Pérez brought a Franciscan friar from Acámbaro to initiate the refugees in the mysteries of the Christian faith. C’ohni was baptized as Hernando de Tapia. A shortage of friars and the small size of the settlement precluded the founding of a monastery, but an employee of Pérez named Juan Sánchez de Alanis helped to teach the Otomi the essential aspects of the new religion, with the aid of the neophyte Don Hernando. Friars from Acámbaro and San Miguel visited regularly to administer the sacraments. Around this time Spanish colonists established cattle ranches near Querétaro and San Miguel.

Relocation and Laying Out the City (ca. 1542-1550)

The third and definitive “foundation” of Querétaro took place between 1542 and 1550; the settlement was moved from the canyon to its present location, on the western slope of a hill in an ample valley, to the south of the Río de Querétaro, which flows out of the canyon. The date of the move is unknown. It may have been around 1550, coinciding with the creation of a cart road connecting the recently discovered silver mines in Zacatecas with the capital of New Spain. Querétaro became a strategic point on the royal silver road, which ran north and south through the heart of the new town. Perpendicular to this road was another, extending eastward into the fertile Bajío in the present state of Guanajuato. At the junction a Franciscan monastery was erected, dedicated to the Apostle James (Santiago in Spanish), with church, cloister, walled atrium, chapels and orchard.

Hernando de Tapia, now the officially sanctioned governor of the indigenous town coun-
cil, supervised the creation of a network of irrigation canals to water orchards in the town and fields around it. Many indigenous from the south, speaking Otomí, Nahuatl and Tarascan, migrated to the new settlement, attracted by the opportunity to cultivate the fertile soil of the valley of Querétaro. Local Pame were also integrated into the expanding town. In 1551 and 1552 the viceroy granted house plots in Querétaro and cattle ranches in the surrounding countryside to Spaniards, initiating a century-long transition from indigenous town to multiethnic urban center dominated by a Spanish elite.

The nomadic tribes along the silver road reacted violently to the invasion of their ancestral territory. The Chichimec war broke out in 1550. Small groups of Spanish soldiers, accompanied by numerous Otomí, Nahuá and Tarascan warriors, fought the nomads. This tragic conflict was not contained until 1590, when it was realized that military force alone was only escalating the spiral of violence. A policy was adopted whereby the Chichimecs were coaxed into living as Christians in agricultural settlements, together with immigrants from agricultural towns in the south, in return for gifts and privileges.

Thus by the end of the sixteenth century the stage was set for Querétaro’s future growth and prosperity. A century later the city was the third most populous in New Spain, fragrant with gardens and orchards and boasting seven monumental churches. The refugee settlement in the canyon was all but forgotten, as native oral tradition blended with clerical rhetoric to create a foundation myth that reflected the social dynamics of the multiethnic city of the baroque era.

**Further Reading**

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