

Andämaxëi

The Three Foundations Of Querétaro in the Sixteenth Century

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Photos by Daniel Munguia

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

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The San Francisco Church (left) and a detail of its facade that pictures the Apostle Santiago (James) whose miraculous appearance, according to myth, aided in the conquest.

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 central Mexico. Each “foundation” is part of a distinct 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 millennia preceding the Spanish invasion. Beginning around 500 B.C. town-dwelling farmers from the south, participants in the Chupícuaro cultural tradition, colonized this region, which participated in Mesoamerican civilization for the next 15 centuries. The remains of monumental architecture and refined ceramics in a

distinctive regional style attest to this fact. Several 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 culture 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 four centuries by the rustic, semi-nomadic Pame and fully nomadic hunters and gatherers such as the Jonaz, Guamar and Guachichil, generically called Chichimecs. When Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlan in 1519, the northern frontier of Mesoamerican civilization was south of the valley of Querétaro; the present states of Michoacán, Mexico and Hidalgo were occupied by urban dwellers and farmers, while the entire state of Querétaro and all but



The third and definitive “foundation” of Querétaro took place between 1542 and 1550 on the western slope of a hill in an ample valley, to the south of the Querétaro River.

the southern edge of Guanajuato were Chichimec territory.

THE CLANDESTINE SETTLEMENT OF ANDĀMAXĒI (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 *Andāmaxēi*, “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: *Ndāmxei* and *Maxēi*. Initially some 200 refu-



The San Francisco de Asís church in La Cañada, the place where the first Spanish settlements were established.



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 ANDĀMAXĪ
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 Andāmaxĕi. 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

Otomí 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, Nahuatl 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. **NMM**

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El Cerrito, like other pre-Hispanic urban centers of the Eastern Bajío, fell into decay in the twelfth century.

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By the seventeenth century, Querétaro was the third most populous city in New Spain.