



2012

Conquests of the Imagination: The Manipulation of Myth in Iberian Conquest Literatures

Daniel Arbino

University of Minnesota - Twin Cities, arbin002@umn.edu

Michael Arnold

University of Minnesota, arno0055@umn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/naeh>



Part of the [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Arbino, Daniel and Arnold, Michael (2012) "Conquests of the Imagination: The Manipulation of Myth in Iberian Conquest Literatures," *Nomenclatura: aproximaciones a los estudios hispánicos*: Vol. 2, Article 4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/naeh.2012.04>
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/naeh/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hispanic Studies at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Nomenclatura: aproximaciones a los estudios hispánicos* by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.



Spring/Primavera 2012

Conquests of the Imagination: The Manipulation of Myth in Iberian Conquest Literatures

Daniel Arbino and Michael Arnold

In approximately 1165, a letter addressed to the Emperor of Byzantium seeking help during the Crusades circulated throughout Europe. Supposedly sent by a man known as Prester John of the Three Indias, this letter led Europeans to believe in a rich Christian state surrounded by non-Christian neighbors. The letter, anonymously transformed with interpolations in each new edition or translation, created a stir throughout Europe as Christian armies were renewed with hope of a great Christian king and warrior. They were only to be disappointed that he never came.¹ Many of the exploratory expeditions and conquests in Africa and India during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries owed themselves in part to the search for Prester John. While much was made of his importance in Europe, Asia, and Africa, he was equally as significant in the conquests of the New World, particularly in Mexico and Peru. It is in these regions where the Iberians “othered” Prester John to serve in their conquests. That is to say, Prester John remained in the imaginary of Christopher Columbus, Hernán Cortés, and Francisco Pizarro as they set out to explore and conquer by transplanting Western legends into the New World through the manipulation of indigenous cosmovisions. This essay uses a transatlantic approach to explore the Iberian manipulation of the legends of Prester John, Quetzalcóatl, and Viracocha for pre- and post-conquest justifications. All three legends served the same imperial purpose in the conquest of non-European lands as well as in the failed Spanish proposition to extend the ideologically Christian return myth into Asia.

The return myths of the Incas and the Aztecs closely paralleled Jesus Christ’s own supposed return in Christian ideology. The Incas allegedly believed that Viracocha, who walked to the edge of the Inca world and continued out to the sea, would return in times of trouble. Thus, when Francisco Pizarro and his army appeared in the midst of a civil war

occurring in the Inca Empire between the brothers Huascar and Atahualpa, it is believed that the Incas mistook the Spaniards for the second coming of Viracocha. Similarly, it is said that the Aztecs awaited the return of Quetzalcóatl from the east, the direction in which he had left them. Therefore, when the Spaniards arrived in present-day Mexico from the east, the Aztecs too mistook the newcomers for gods. In both cases, Quetzalcóatl and Viracocha are indigenous gods that are described as bearded and fair-skinned. This enabled the Spaniards to exploit these myths and frame themselves as gods. Yet these myths did not exist in the aforementioned form prior to conquest. This is not to suggest that Quetzalcóatl and Viracocha did not exist in the Aztec or Inca cosmivision prior to the arrival of the Europeans, but that the return prophecy was later introduced in post-conquest history as a master narrative for the early colonial period. In this form it served as another justification for the atrocities that occurred during conquest and colonialism.

What is particularly of interest is the duplicitous use of this return figure in early Western imperialism in efforts to indoctrinate other areas of the world through the manipulation of their belief systems. We argue here that the Asian/African quest to aid Prester John was a pre-conquest justification to rationalize the exploration and conquest of foreign lands. The Prester John archetype then became a post-conquest justification of European domination and indigenous subjugation in the New World via the alteration of pre-Colombian histories, religions, and prophecies. In other words, variants of the same tactic were used in a series of conquests of the “Other” on both sides of the Atlantic. This article seeks to discredit the idea that the Iberian conquest of the Americas was a stroke of luck for the Europeans by highlighting a system of similarly calculated operations in various parts of the world in the events preceding and following the conquests of the New World. The essay also aims to challenge academic canons that divide colonial histories according to region by examining an early global system centered on Iberian imperialism. By reading conquest literatures in dialogue with each other, one sees that the legend of Prester John was intimately intertwined with the conquest of the Americas and the desired conquest of Asia.

Prester John may not have been a god like his counterparts in the New World, but he was not a typical king. Since he was said to be a descendant of the Magi, a certain religious aura supplemented his status as king and warrior. However, it is within reason to see why he could never reach god-like proportions. After all, the Christians already had their God and Prester John could not replace Him without Christianity losing its legitimacy. In the New World, on the other hand, an alteration to Prester John’s role was made through the manipulation of pre-Colombian cosmivisions in which Quetzalcóatl and Viracocha are “othered” versions of this archetypal figure. Arguing that Quetzalcóatl and Viracocha are “others” of Prester John reveals a colonial tactic that highlights the aim of the Iberian conquistadors: to expand their Catholic empire on a global scale. Only through considering Prester John as an archetype for how the

Iberians interpreted the legends of Quetzalcóatl and Viracocha can one begin to understand the drastic revision of indigenous beliefs that took place shortly after conquest, an erasure of indigenous cultures to fit Iberian needs while they invented America. The legends of Prester John, Quetzalcóatl, and Viracocha functioned similarly to the extent that they required the Spaniards to be in unfamiliar places to fulfill prophecies, whether they were Christian predictions regarding the rightful owners of the Holy Land, or indigenous prophecies concerning the awaited return of Quetzalcóatl and Viracocha. This sense of entitlement passed down from a god or a god-like figure would provide the Spaniards with a basis for conquest and colonization. Understanding that Prester John, Quetzalcóatl, and Viracocha are manipulated versions of the same idea illuminates the ways in which the European imagination conflated all non-European cultures into one exotified “Other” as the conquistadors initiated a period of worldwide conquest and colonization.

Mapping Prester John

In the early fourteenth century, the treatise of Giovanni da Carignano was the first to place Prester John in Ethiopia, a theory which was accepted due to the fact that, although largely unexplored, Ethiopia was Christian. Robert Silverberg notes that “the steppes of Central Asia had been extensively searched and had yielded no one...but rather than abandon all hope for finding Prester John, fourteenth-century Europe simply ceased to look for him in Asia and turned instead toward Africa, toward the land of Ethiopia” (163). Hence, the Europeans, having explored Asia, would use the same pretext to investigate Africa. Placing Prester John in Ethiopia served the Europeans two-fold: it would justify their entrance into Muslim territories as well as provide a route to the riches that were thought to be in India. The Portuguese took advantage of this new location for Prester John’s kingdom to explore the entire continent, listing their real justifications alongside their imaginary ones. According to a chronicle by Gomes Eanes de Zurara, there were five motivations for Portugal’s sudden interest in Africa: to convert “heathens,” to increase knowledge of Africa’s geography, to gauge the strength of Muslim forces on the continent, to enhance foreign trade, and to locate Christian kings in the region (46-47). Prester John’s relevance grew again after a third voyage in 1513, when the Portuguese governor of India pleaded with King Manuel to find Prester John’s land and take control of the port so as to have a monopoly on the spice trade with the East. Prester John’s name thus became synonymous with Iberian reasoning to validate acts of conquest, as he is only evoked in times of necessity. Similarly, the return myths of Viracocha and Quetzalcóatl became a dominant point of reference for the Iberians in post-conquest justifications. This will prove important to our study when considering Columbus’s descriptions of the New World and his westward search for the Spice Islands of the East Indies.

A dramatic change in Prester John's description took place after the conquests of Mexico and Peru. In *Verdadiera Informação das Terras do Preste João das Índias* (1540), Francisco Álvares's account of the missionary experience in Ethiopia, the subjects of the supposed Prester John undergo criticism for their "wayward" Christian practices. Álvares does not portray the Ethiopians as a Christian ally but rather as exotic Others similar to the Aztecs as described during the same time in Mexico. His representation suggests that the encounter in the New World effected a change in the Prester John legend in Ethiopia, as well as a change in European attitudes towards Ethiopians. In the same way the chroniclers "othered" the indigenous in the New World, one sees a European gaze that affects potential non-European Christian allies. This is what Cornel West calls "the normative gaze," "an ideal aesthetic standard by which to categorize and compare observations, all leading to the emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of discourse" (159). Through this gaze, Iberians imposed the same history on non-Europeans as they did most explicitly on the Aztecs and the Incas. Therefore, colonial techniques circulate from the Prester John legend to New World conquest literatures and back to the Old World through the manipulation of religious semiotics.

The Medieval New World

Columbus, perhaps more than any other explorer, fed the imagination of the European public with endless tales of exploration. However, these stories were not original and there is not a disconnect between the world that Columbus related to his kings and the world that he left behind in Europe. Columbus's mindset was influenced by a medieval canonical imagination grounded in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*. Although written in the first century after Christ, *Historia Naturalis* "remained the great dictionary of knowledge throughout the Middle Ages" and was "among the first books to be printed in Italy, in 1469" (Whalley 7). This timely publication influenced Columbus' voyage, as Pliny describes a group of men who live without women (Book V), oddities of the human race (Book VII), and mermaids (Book IX). Similar depictions reappear in Columbus' journal. These exotifications were not exclusive to Pliny or Columbus, but typical of the medieval imaginary. Take, for instance, an early thirteenth-century interpolation added to Prester John's letter in which he claims that "we have in our country yet another kind of men who feed only on the raw flesh of men and women...Nevertheless we take many of them with us into battle, whenever we wish to make war, and we grant them permission to eat our enemies..." (Silverberg 65). This interpolation added a new dimension to the Prester John legend: the Other. Prior to this addition, Prester John's kingdom was said to be fertile and inhabited only by good Christians. The presence of cannibals in the kingdom went against this utopic idea and, at the same time, transformed the image of Prester John. Suddenly this descendant of the Magi was a ruler of "barbarians."

This metamorphosis began a process in which the Iberians distanced themselves from Prester John and chose to exotify him through cultural differences in a dichotomy of “self” and “other,” as seen in Álvares’ accounts of Ethiopia. By placing “barbarians” in Prester John’s realm, the Iberians emphasized perceived weaknesses of Prester John and asserted their own alleged strength. This began a colonial discourse to construe conquered populations as degenerate in order to justify exploration and conquest. A 1503 decree from Queen Isabella of Spain intensified this motivation because it explicitly permitted the enslavement of cannibals. According to Neil Whitehead, the edict provided economic reasons to “discover” cannibals in the New World: cannibals became a labor force for the new colonies without the least concern for human rights. The edict both demonized the native population and legally produced an economic benefit (172-73). The parallels between the cannibals in Prester John’s kingdom and the Caribs that roamed the islands of the New World, described by Columbus as terrorizing the innocent indigenous, are evident, as are other examples. When Columbus came upon the New World in 1492, stories such as that of the Amazon women were linked to Prester John’s kingdom, a connection which culminated in Viracocha and Quetzalcóatl as his “othered” versions. The likenesses are perceptible, and one observes that Columbus transplanted European legend to the New World. Aside from the fact that Columbus did not realize the importance of his discovery, there is another reason why this development occurred.

Although Prester John had been identified by the Portuguese as being the ruler of Ethiopia by the time that Columbus reached the West Indies, the explorer continued to believe he was in Prester John’s realm. In a note that Columbus put in Chapter LI of Marco Polo’s first book of voyages, he notes that Asia is “Ubi sit Presbiter Ioannes” (Columbus *Códice* 452). What is more, a tale written by John Mandeville in the fourteenth century and published in 1470 contends that a group of islands off the Asian continent belonged to Prester John and could only be reached by traveling around the earth (Landstrom 15). This is relevant because Columbus staunchly held until his death that he was in Asia and that he was searching for a great king. If Columbus thought he had reached islands off the coast of Asia, and had traveled around the earth to do so, then that would have also led him to believe he had reached Prester John’s lands. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that Ethiopia (where Prester John had most recently been placed) was not necessarily believed to be in Africa at the time, but was considered part of India. C.F. Beckingham thus mentions that “an extraordinary confusion between India and Ethiopia persisted throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (178). Furthermore, Giuliano Datio states in a chapbook that Columbus wanted to be in Prester John’s realm: “Columbus, who was keenly interested in Prester John, had hoped to find his kingdom on that voyage...” (Silverberg 223). This document provides insight into Columbus’ psyche during the time of the discovery. His mindset had an impact on his historical account because his desire to find Prester John

took precedence over historical accuracy. This becomes more apparent as one questions his fidelity as a narrator.

Much has been said about the purpose of Columbus's journal and the reasons for his portrayal of the New World.² He may have been promoting a fertile region with great wealth nearby and indigenous people anxious to convert to Catholicism because he hoped to receive funding for future voyages. Although some of the ideas he presents to the reader are exaggerated, others appear to be more realistic. Yet how does one separate fictitious and real statements? And how does one know that it has been done correctly for over five centuries? The fundamental problem reverts back to the West's domination of history. The Western world still accepts that Columbus was a patriarch of the Age of Discovery. But in addition to the fact that there is much doubt that he was the first to reach the New World, the discovery notion also implies a Eurocentric view of that time period that endows him with too much credit. The fact of the matter is that Columbus's journal is full of fabrications that reproduce Western exotifications of the "Other." For instance, it is within general opinion that Columbus never encountered men with dog snouts because there is no scientific proof to suggest otherwise. Therefore, the reader accepts that this is one of Columbus's exaggerations or his imagination. However, the line between reality and fiction becomes much more ambiguous when he states that "después a la tarde vino el rey [indígena] a la nao, [Colón] le hizo la honra que debía y le hizo dezir cómo era de los reyes de Castilla, los cuales eran los mayores Príncipes del mundo. Mas ni los indios que el almirante traía, que eran intérpretes, creían nada ni el rey tampoco, sino creían que venían del cielo y que los reinos de los reyes de Castilla eran en el cielo y no en este mundo" (*Diario* 454). The declaration in question is the indigenous perception of Spaniards as gods, something that is accepted as the "official" history. Yet historical examples contradict this notion. There are the more obvious examples of revolt, such as when Columbus returned to the islands on his second voyage. At that time, all thirty-nine men that were left behind from the first voyage were either killed or missing. Then there are the strategies employed by the indigenous to rid themselves of the Spaniards: namely, telling them that gold or a great king was always on the next island in hopes that they would leave. Why would the indigenous take such a contradictory stance towards a god? By masquerading the truth, Columbus made the European arrival just as important for the indigenous as for the Europeans. If the conquistadors could convince their European public that the indigenous openly received them, then they could justify their presence in the New World. This allowed popular opinion to remain high in Europe while demonstrating that although Catholics could not convert Muslims, there were thousands of welcoming souls to evangelize in the New World. The search for Prester John in Africa and Asia seemed justifiable to Papal and European audiences because Prester John would provide assistance in the Crusades. Yet the Iberians needed to justify their presence in the New World not only to their European public but also to the indigenous peoples

whose land they occupied. The Prester John archetype subtly changed to fit the needs of this new audience. Cortés further developed this logic in Mexico by emphasizing the Aztec return myth.

The Convenient Quetzalcóatl

The legends of Quetzalcóatl and Viracocha are eerily similar despite the geographic distance between the Aztec and Inca territories. This similarity is due to the way in which the Spaniards conveniently manipulated them to explain their conquest. The Spaniards focused on the legends as return myths, although some of the many stories about Quetzalcóatl and Virachoca among the Aztecs and Incas entailed no return at all. However, if the Europeans were “gods” who had returned to the indigenous, then everything the conquistadors did could be considered a fulfillment of prophecy. A similar insertion, in which the Augustinians Antonio de la Calancha and Ramón Gavilán placed Santo Tomás in the Andean region, is yet another example of the manipulation of indigenous foundational myths for conquest purposes. By stating that Santo Tomás (and in some cases San Bartolomé) was in the Americas preaching Christianity prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, the post-conquest clergymen assured a continuity between indigenous and Spanish rule and provided a foundation for the evangelization and domination of the indigenous. What is more, they conflated Santo Tomás and Viracocha when they stated that the former followed the latter’s route.³ Religion thus assured the longevity of the colonization process by establishing a hierarchy of power. This allows us to pose the question with respect to the Quetzalcóatl and Virachoca legends: is it not curious that two distinct cultures are awaiting bearded white men to come save them from peril? The reason for this curious coincidence is that the Europeans consistently deployed similar colonization strategies in various areas of the world. As Guy Rozat Dupeyron notes, “ese mito cristiano de fundación con la presencia de los dioses blancos por venir, se encuentra también bajo formas extrañamente parecidas en relatos que describen otras regiones del mundo, y ha acompañado casi siempre a la penetración occidental” (16).

The possibility that the Inca and Aztec cultures shared similar stories in reference to the returning bearded white god is disproved by observing the absence of such a myth in other pre-Columbian cultures. Despite the enormity of the Inca and Aztec realms, with cosmopolitan cities like Tenochtitlan that traded with and influenced other cultures, similar legends were absent in other regions of present-day Spanish America. The fissure is explicable when considering the importance of Mexico City and Peru during the conquest and later during colonialism as the only two sites of the Spanish Viceroys in the New World. These two sites served as the foci of Spanish America. Their importance strengthened the need for the Spaniards to re-write pre-Colombian beliefs so that the indigenous would accept their fate without being able to challenge history and their “own” cosmovision. For this reason, similar return stories do not

show up in other areas where the conquest was not as intense. Dupeyron continues:

Esta universalidad del mito de la esperanza del dios blanco, no es otra cosa que la suficiencia de una civilización que se complace desde su nacimiento en un narcisismo sin complejo, y que se nutre de la destrucción y de la negación de otras experiencias humanas. Es también notable que esta construcción no se estructure de una manera especial coherente, sino que florezca particularmente en las regiones administradas por los 'blancos', mientras que los mitos de las regiones periféricas de los grandes centros ocupados, apenas muestran trazos de ella...Existe una fuerte correlación entre la existencia de esta construcción mítica y la dominación occidental. (17)

This passage debunks the age-old notion that the Spaniards luckily stumbled upon a convenient return legend, when in fact it was their brutality and technology that led to their success. The return myth was added at a later date to fortify their claims to regions laden with gold and other jewels. Quite simply, the Spaniards, unable to locate in their search what Jacques Derrida calls "the transcendental signified," or a point of reference that would provide an ultimate center of meaning (49), imposed their own to place themselves as rightful inheritors of riches. They rewrote history in the process.

The campaign in Mexico noticeably differed from explorations in the Old World, but its founding principles were the same. As the need to convert the indigenous to Catholicism became more prevalent in the New World, the idea of Prester John evolved into the "othered" idea of Quetzalcóatl. Just as Europeans shifted Prester John's location from Asia to Africa after the realignment of Muslim power, they transformed him from a human religious icon into a religious deity under the guise of Quetzalcóatl in Mexico. A supposed "King of Kings" was now a "god of gods." With this transformation came a shift in propaganda. Prester John was no longer a Catholic king fighting on the same side as the conquistadors, but "othered" as an Aztec god who conveniently looked like the very Spaniards who had just arrived. While the archetype had changed, Prester John and Quetzalcóatl had much in common. They were quintessential examples of the fusion of Church and State. They were also based on historical figures that developed into myths.⁴ Furthermore, they appeared in convenient times of manipulation and justification and their descriptions share notable parallels:

Y más dicen que [el reino de Quetzalcóatl] era muy rico y que tenía todo cuanto era menester y necesario de comer y beber, y que el maíz era abundantísimo, y las calabazas muy gordas...y más dicen que en el dicho pueblo de *Tulla* se criaban muchos y diversos géneros de aves de pluma rica y colores diversos...Y más tenía el

dicho *Quetzalcóatl* todas las riquezas del mundo, de oro y plata y piedras verdes...y los dichos vasallos del dicho *Quetzalcóatl* estaban muy ricos y no les faltaba cosa ninguna, ni había hambre ni falta de maíz...(Sahagún 245)

If indeed you wish to know wherein consists our great power, then believe without doubting that I, Prester John, who reign supreme, exceed in riches, virtue, and power all creatures who dwell under heaven...In our territories are found elephants, dromedaries, and camels, and almost every kind of beast that is under heaven. Honey flows in our land, and milk everywhere abounds...in the [Physon River] are found emeralds, sapphires... (Silverberg 2)

The likenesses between the two passages are too great to be coincidental. Both offer two explicit reasons to explore and/or conquer the territories of *Quetzalcóatl* and Prester John: the lands are a source of crops, and they are full of riches. Moreover, both provide a third, implicit reason. It is religious: a Christian alliance begets a need to Christianize peoples. Lastly, the exotification of the land through zoological descriptions is present in both works.

How this link can be made was established in Columbus's journal and expounded on by Cortés and later historians. The manipulation of these figures was the same: *Quetzalcóatl* and *Viracocha* were variants of Prester John whose legends were re-written into post-conquest history. The purpose of this revision was to morph the Spaniards from an outnumbered group of men rummaging around the New World into deities bent on righting the wrongs of the indigenous civilizations. Columbus was in search of a man of mythical proportions and believed himself to be in his realm, but this did not allow Columbus to gain full control over the indigenous. That is not to say that Columbus did not impose dominance on the natives he encountered, but rather that the objectives of Columbus and Cortés were different. Columbus, after all, was searching for a route to Asia. Cortés on the other hand, was on a military mission to conquer and, officially speaking, convert thousands of souls to Catholicism.

What better way to convert the indigenous than to recall a legendary king that allowed Europeans to do the same in Asia and Africa? For Cortés, the easiest way to do that was to gain total access to the indigenous culture by embodying their god. By doing so, Cortés tactically convinced indigenous peoples in Mexico that Catholicism was now their religion by forcing Moctezuma to persuade his own people of this possibility. At the behest of Cortés, Moctezuma addresses his subjects in the following manner in Cortés's *Segunda carta de relación*:

Y bien sabéis que siempre lo hemos esperado, y segúnd las cosas que el capitán nos ha dicho de aquel rey y señor que le invió acá y segúnd la parte de donde él dice que viene, tengo por cierto, y ansí lo debéis vosotros tener, que aquéste es el señor que esperábamos,

en especial que nos dice que allá tenía noticia de nosotros. Y pues nuestros predecesores no hicieron lo que a su señor eran obligados, hagámoslo nosotros y demos gracias a nuestros dioses, porque en nuestros vino lo que tanto aquéllos esperaban. (*Segunda* 228)

We want to make two points about this passage. It is pertinent to note first that Quetzalcóatl's name is not mentioned here, but was added later to post-conquest history by historians such as Bernardino de Sahagún and Francisco López de Gómara after they found similarities between this passage and the indigenous legend that spoke of Quetzalcóatl's departure or death, but that never spoke of his return. Therefore, it is questionable whether the Aztecs were awaiting a return or if it was merely recounted in such a form because of Christian ideology. Sahagún wrote Quetzalcóatl's history as told to him by indigenous informants who at no point suggested his prophesized return. This indicates that Quetzalcóatl's departure was not to be followed by a return, unless that idea was implicit. However, Sahagún contradicts himself by claiming that when the indigenous cultures saw the Spanish boats, they automatically interpreted them as Quetzalcóatl's return. According to Michel de Certeau in his discussion on history, this contradiction demonstrates that historiography fabricates its past in its own present: "the past is the fiction of the present" (10). Chroniclers such as Sahagún allowed their Christian education to directly influence their present accounts. The Europeans manipulated the Aztec legend through the filter of their Christian background. In the block quote above, Cortés does not mention Quetzalcóatl, but rather describes a figure that closely resembles Western messianic visions of Jesus Christ. Thus, if Sahagún's informants spoke of Quetzalcóatl's departure while leaving out his second coming, it is within reason to see Christian influences concerning the end times and resurrection in his supposed return. In agreement, Tzvetan Todorov states that:

The Indian accounts of the conquest, especially those collected by Sahagún and Durán, tell us that Montezuma identified Cortés as Quetzalcoatl returning to recover his kingdom; this identification is given as one of the chief reasons for Montezuma's failure to resist the Spanish advance...The notion of an identity between Quetzalcoatl and Cortés certainly existed in the years immediately following the conquest, as is also attested by the sudden recrudescence of cult objects linked to Quetzalcoatl. But there is an obvious hiatus between these two states of the myth: the old version, in which Quetzalcoatl's role is secondary and his return uncertain; and the new one, in which Quetzalcoatl is dominant and his return absolutely certain. Some force must have intervened to hasten this transformation of the myth. (117)

That force, as Todorov states, was Hernán Cortés. By focusing on the return myth as a master narrative, Cortés created a colonial discourse

of “othering” by regarding the colonized as “a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality” (Bhabha 20).

Our second point about the scene from the *Seguna carta de relación* is that one can debate the accuracy of Cortés’s interpretation of Moctezuma’s speech by taking into consideration the chain of translation, both linguistic and ideological, that had to occur before Cortés understood it. To what point did Cortés record the conversation without some type of partiality due to his Christian upbringing and his military objective? Such an objective is elucidated in a letter to the King of Spain, when Cortés comments that “yo le respondí a todo lo que [Moctezuma] me dijo, satisfaciendo a aquello que me pareció que convenía, en especial en hacerle creer que vuestra majestad era a quien [los aztecas] esperaban; y con esto se despidió” (*Cartas* 52). Therefore, it is within reason to contend that Cortés fabricated a large part of this speech, relying largely on Biblical imagery while at the same time having access to indigenous lore through his relationship with Doña Marina.⁵ In that sense, Cortés conflated Aztec mythology and fundamental Christian belief.

Furthermore, doubt must be raised regarding the reception of the Spaniards in central Mexico, which permits us to see further contradictions in the “official” discourse about the conquest. If, as the discourse claims, the Aztecs acknowledged the Spaniards as their returning gods, why were they so reluctant to have the Spaniards enter Tenochtitlan? As Cortés himself points out: “Y me rogaba que me volviese y no curase de ir a su cibdad” (*Segunda* 201). When Moctezuma sent the Spaniards gifts, it was in hopes that they would satisfy the Spaniards’ desire for treasures, thus encouraging them to leave his kingdom. Why would a king send away his beloved god and risk dissention among his people? A possible answer is that Moctezuma, despite his hesitancy, perhaps never even considered that Cortés and his men were in fact the embodiment of Quetzalcóatl. This doubt may have been what fueled Cortés’s decision to take Moctezuma into custody, for if Moctezuma truly believed that Cortés and his men were the sons of Quetzalcóatl, it would not have been necessary. Yet by acting as the sons of Quetzalcóatl, the Spaniards created their dominated subjects and also strategically placed themselves, the dominant, within the colonial discourse (Bhabha 21).

With Cortés’s success came the formula for conquest in the New World. Cortés, in turn, would develop into an invaluable resource for others, particularly Pizarro. Whether or not the Aztecs believed Cortés to be Quetzalcóatl varies according to the accounts by Sahagún and Cortés examined above. Nevertheless, Cortés’s access to indigenous beliefs through Doña Marina allowed him to manipulate meetings between himself and Moctezuma that ultimately led to his imposition of power. This proved vital to Pizarro, who deployed similar manipulatory strategies in Peru. While considering the conquest of Peru, we will further our discussion on language and post-conquest history.

Pizarro Meets Cortés

In 1529, Francisco Pizarro returned to Spain after a second expedition in which he reached northern South America and discovered that a civilization far more developed than any he had previously encountered existed on the mainland. While in Spain, Pizarro met Hernán Cortés in Extremadura, where Cortés was defending himself after having been accused of an abuse of power as governor of New Spain.⁶ During their discussion, Cortés imparted some knowledge crucial to the success of Pizarro's conquest of the Inca Empire in Peru. Though we will never know exactly what was said during this encounter, the shaping of a Machiavellian strategy toward new conquests in the Andes can be almost certainly assumed as part of the tutelage. This much seems certain from the tactics used by Cortés's apprentice upon his arrival to Cajamarca and his brief showdown with Atahualpa Inca.⁷

The quick defeat of Inca forces in Cajamarca can be credited in part to the vast disparity in the availability of knowledge between the Spanish and Inca Empires, based largely on the Europeans' rapid access to information through the written word and the printing press. However, the illiterate Pizarro would rely heavily on the tactics gleaned in his oral exchange with Cortés. Hence, the conquest of Perú was marked by the possibility of a post-conquest ideological manipulation fashioned after tactics used by the Spaniards in Mexico to quell indigenous uprisings and to convert the Aztecs to Christianity.

The Legend of Viracocha

Some of the historical interpretations of the religious prophecy that would foresee the encounter between Pizarro and the Incas come from retrospective accounts penned by highly-esteemed chroniclers such as El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega.⁸ As Sabine MacCormack explains,

According to Garcilaso, Andeans called the Spaniards 'Viracochas' after the Inca who had foretold their coming. This explanation attempts to translate Andean theory into European fact. If instead we follow the argument of Guaman Poma, we see that the Spaniards were to be called Viracochas because they inaugurated a new epoch...Garcilaso and others relate that the prophecy of the coming invasion was repeated by the Inca Guayna Capac, father of Atawallpa, who advised his followers not to fight the invaders, because they would bring with them a better law. The prophecy, according to Garcilaso's principal Inca informant, was 'more effective in overcoming us and depriving us of our empire than the arms your father and his companions brought to this country'. ("Pachacuti" 981)

A brief look into the period immediately preceding the arrival of Pizarro and his men will give us a better understanding as to how the newly founded Inca Empire could have so quickly unraveled. According to María Rostworowski de Díez Canseco, significant archeological evidence confirms the “limited duration of the Inca occupation in contrast to a long stratigraphic sequence representing the development of the various earlier Andean cultures” (66). The Incas deftly adopted some of the cultural and political achievements of prior groups while instituting Quechua as an imperial language in order to unify diverse populations and to facilitate the administration of the state. Nevertheless, most local groups continued to identify with their *huacas* and most immediate neighbors and leaders.⁹ The reality of an Inca domination simply did not last long enough to produce a national consciousness amongst the subjugated societies. Many indigenous provincial leaders saw the arrival of the Spanish as the perfect moment to make an alliance powerful enough to overthrow the Incas. Pizarro immediately recognized the value of this latent discontent and exploited it in true Machiavellian fashion.

Not only was there strife between the Incas and subjugated indigenous groups prior to Pizarro’s arrival, but perhaps more importantly, Inca leaders had just come into conflict among themselves. A smallpox epidemic brought by Spanish settlers to Panama and Colombia subsequently spread to the Inca Empire. After the death of the Inca emperor Huayna Capac, his designated heir Ninan Cuyuchi, and much of the emperor’s court in 1526, the Inca Empire found itself in crisis. The sickly, divided empire represented by Huayna Capac’s remaining two descendants, Atahualpa and his half-brother (and legitimate heir) Huascar, would also quickly be exploited to further the Spanish invader’s own ends. In order to usurp his brother’s claim to the throne, Atahualpa had Huascar assassinated. The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, in his *Comentarios reales* (1609), believes Huayna Capac should be faulted for defying sacred Inca laws and leaving part of his empire to the son most dear to him (Atahualpa) at the expense of the legitimate heir (Huascar). Huayna Capac’s infidelity to Inca tradition in this way would set in movement the further unraveling of the empire. Atahualpa later betrayed promises he had made to his brother as a submissive vassal, and he deceived a group of warriors who had helped him overthrow the trusting Huascar. The story that unfolded from this fratricidal contest gave subsequent Inca generations a reason to believe in the necessary demise of the empire, an event rooted in the prophetic fulfillment of apocalyptic divine retribution due to the final Inca emperor’s tragic flaw and sinful fall.

This divine retribution would seem to be meted out symbolically by Viracocha via the Spaniards. In ancient Cuzco, Viracocha was believed to be the deity who sent Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo to found a city. But Inca veneration of the god had diminished over time up until the reign of Yahuar Huasca. Huasca ordered the construction of the Wiracocha temple in the city of Cuzco in honor of the apparition of Viracocha, who had advised Huasca’s son to battle the advancing Chancas.

The Inca prince would later adopt the deity's namesake after roundly defeating the Chancas. El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega elaborates on the prince's historical description of the apparition in order to explain the use of the term Viracocha to describe the Spanish:

Y porque el Príncipe dijo que tenía barbas en la cara, a diferencia de los indios que generalmente son lampiños, y que traía el vestido hasta los pies, diferente hábito del que los indios traen, que no les llega más de hasta la rodilla, de aquí nació que llamaron Viracocha a los primeros españoles que entraron en Perú, porque les vieron barbas y todo el cuerpo vestido. Y porque luego que entraron los españoles prendieron a Atahualpa, Rey tirano, y lo mataron, el cual poco antes había muerto a Huáscar Inca, legítimo heredero, y había hecho en los de la sangre real (sin respetar sexo ni edad) las crueldades que en su lugar diremos, confirmaron de veras el nombre Viracocha a los españoles, diciendo que eran hijos de su dios Viracocha, que les envió del cielo para que sacasen a los Incas y librasen la ciudad del Cuzco y todo su Imperio de las tiranías y crueldades de Atahualpa, como el mismo Viracocha lo había hecho otra vez, manifestándose al príncipe Inca Viracocha para librarle de la rebelión de los Chancas. Y dijeron que los españoles habían muerto al tirano en castigo y venganza de los Incas, por habérselo mandado así el dios Viracocha, padre de los españoles, y ésta es la razón por la cual llamaron Viracocha a los primeros españoles. (256)

According to Pedro de Cieza de León, Huascar called on the god Viracocha to help him defend the part of the empire left to him by his father from the attacks of his half-brother. When the Spaniards finally assassinated Atahualpa, they appeared to be fulfilling Huascar's wish as "los enviados de por manos de su gran dios Ticsiviracocha y...hijos suyos: y asi luego les llamaron y pusieron por nombre Viracocha" (11). Whether the Spaniards were sent by Viracocha, or by the embodiment of the god as invoked by Huascar, or even returned to avenge the treasonous actions of Atahualpa, any of these explanations could have been easily exploited by the conquistadors to justify their arrival and domination of the Inca Empire after the death of the final emperor.¹⁰ Alternatively, one could posit that this story of the return or revenge of Viracocha, in the guise of Pizarro and his men, could have been planted by the Spanish soldiers and missionaries themselves as a way to maintain order after the conquest, as happened in Mexico. Not only would this explanation of the conquest allow for divine authorization of the invader's occupation thereafter, but it would also provide for a nice segue (perhaps even using the end times of Inca rule as a metaphor for the Christian apocalypse) for Catholic missionaries to dialogue with the conquered about the providential plan of their own God. After all, the story of the abuse of power and betrayal of the nation by the Inca emperor Huayna Capac (and the subsequent fall of the Inca nation)

would have been an easy contrivance for the Spaniard to concoct after having suffered a similar fate in his own national history.

The concept of divine retribution unleashed upon an entire nation due to the sins of its leader would have by no means been a new concept to the Spanish people during the sixteenth century. The Old Testament is rife with allegories and histories of this type that would have been known by any good Catholic during this period. On a more domestic level, Spain had experienced a similar tragedy in 711 when the Visigoth rule was abruptly ended by a Moorish invasion that was attributed by historians and artists alike to the sin of the ruler, “el último rey godo” King Rodrigo. In some versions the king is seduced by the daughter of the Count Don Julian, La Cava. In other versions, despite her many rebukes and refusals, the king rapes her. Nevertheless, in every version the Count, who keeps the Moors at bay in North Africa, retaliates by allowing Muslim armies to pour into Spain and to conquer the nation while restoring honor to the family name of Don Julian. The blame for the subsequent eight centuries of Muslim rule on the nation’s history is typically laid on one of these three protagonists. Most of the narratives dealing with this episode follow the Visigoth king as he repents of his wrongdoing and is justly punished by God. Although Rodrigo accepts his ultimate fate, the nation itself would have to suffer the consequences for generations.

Most of the portrayals of King Rodrigo’s sin and ultimate redemption draw a relationship between his fall and that of Adam in the Garden of Eden. “While the romancero del rey Rodrigo is of three disparate origins, a simple important unifying feature for nearly all the romances that pertain to the legend may be observed in the parallel between the loss of Spain and the Fall of Man” (Burt 435). Connecting the flaws of this historical figure with the original sin of Adam provided the Spanish nation with a sense of a paradise lost and a need to restore this earthly paradise by any means necessary. The moral of this story would most certainly not have been lost on the generation of Spaniards represented by Cortés and Pizarro, specifically because one of the most important stages of the restoration of Spain as a metaphorical Eden occurred under the rule of the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel with the final expulsion of the Muslims from Granada in 1492. The next phase seemed to occur in the same year as Christopher Columbus took his first steps in the New World and encountered the inhabitants that would eventually give a new focus to the restoration of the paradise lost centuries earlier in Spain by laying waste to the Amerindian’s own proverbial Eden.

By the time Spain had established itself as the new reigning power in Peru, the historians who would chronicle the evangelization efforts to convert the remaining Incas considered the missionaries’ efforts a further marker of restoration. The missionaries in essence replaced the souls that the Catholic Church had lost to Martin Luther’s Reformation with those of indigenous peoples. This Spanish desire, a longing for universal Catholic domination, would seem to converge with Andean prophecies that foretold of a new law and religion which would take hold across the Inca Empire.¹¹

To what extent was this convergence of supposed indigenous beliefs and European desires a mere fortuitous coincidence for the Spanish invader, or a conscious method of ideological manipulation by the post-conquest rulers in Peru of the proper way to interpret the aforementioned prophecies in order to maintain social order while leading “heathen souls” to Christ?

Regardless of whether this prophetic sowing method was indeed utilized in order to harvest souls in the New World, any illusions the Incas may have had during the immediate period following the conquest rapidly disintegrated after Spanish brutality and greed became readily apparent. As Titu Cusi, disillusioned after the Spaniards had betrayed his constant loyalty by imprisoning his father Manco, comments: “I thought they were kindly beings sent (as *they* claimed) by Tesci Viracocha, that is to say, by God; but it seems to me that all has turned out the very opposite from what I believed: for let me tell you, brothers, from proofs they have given me since their arrival in our country, they are the sons not of Viracocha, but of the Devil” (Wachtel 22).¹²

Language and Memory

It seems fitting at this point to look at the ways the Spanish colonization of Amerindian language (and with it the collective memory of the indigenous) allowed for centuries of subsequent colonization in the New World. In order to do this, we will draw on some of the insightful commentary on the subject by the renowned scholar of post-colonial studies, Walter D. Mignolo. In his study on literacy, territoriality, and colonization in the New World titled *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Mignolo begins with a look at the linguistic unification of Spain and the ensuing preoccupation with the linguistic expansion of Castilian grammar as a function of imperial ambitions.¹³ By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Castilian language was considered by experts in the field such as Bernardo de Aldrete as severely lacking in effectively implanting itself amongst the Amerindian populace. Aldrete compares the successful linguistic expansion of the Quechua tongue following the conquest effected by Huayna Capac with that of the weak influence of the Castilian tongue after more than half a century of Spanish occupation in Peru. Aldrete reiterates a concern posed decades earlier by Nebrija and draws on historical evidence connecting language dominance with empire maintenance in order to convince the Spanish crown and clergy in Peru to adopt a greater focus on civilizing (and therefore controlling) the indigenous population through teaching them the Catholic catechism in Spanish instead of their own language.¹⁴

As the initial Amerindian and Spanish generations searched for an interpretive framework in which to comprehend the events following the conquest, Andean myths of ancient apocalyptic cataclysms would facilitate comparisons with European equivalents and, thanks to a standardized Castilian grammar and orthography, could be expressed not only orally by

the Spaniard to better subjugate the Amerindian, but also in written form. The *quipus* used by the Incas prior to their encounter with the Spanish consisted of a series of knots of different colors spaced at specific intervals along groups of strings that were connected along another circular-shaped thread. This method of historical writing maintained a collective Inca memory and relied upon a system of oral interpretation passed from generation to generation. The conservation of Inca history required the training of heirs to the interpretive method, an instruction that utilized mnemonic devices taught to the apprentice from an early age so that, drawing from memory and a mathematical analytical system, he would be able to read the *quipus* and relate an historical narrative of the Inca.

Mignolo addresses the manner in which the European bias toward a hierarchical representation of history in the form of a “graphic sign (letter, character, images) inscribed on a solid surface (paper, parchment, skin, bark of a tree)” rendered certain types of notation acceptable to be considered as written memories (84). To better understand this hierarchical bias, Mignolo relies at times on the perceptions of the Jesuit father José de Acosta, who spent a great deal of his life in Peru and maintained a strong interest in understanding the indigenous life and means of recordkeeping throughout his time there. According to Mignolo, the analytically-minded Acosta could not consider a bunch of knotted strings of different colors as writing. In his description of the function of the *quipu*, however, Acosta seems to contradict himself, showing his appreciation for how the Inca used the *quipu* and making a perfect analogy between writing with letters and writing with strings, colors, and knots: “Son quipos, unos memoriales o registros hechos de ramales, en que diversos ñudos y diversas [sic] colores, significan diversas cosas...los libros pueden decir de historias, y leyes y ceremonias, y cuentas de negocios, todo eso suplen los quipos tan puntualmente, que admira” (cited in Mignolo 84). Also lost on the astute yet narrow-minded Acosta was the ability of civilizations to transmit history through means using senses that fall outside the spoken/heard or written/read traditions to which the European mind was accustomed. The ability to physically record and interpret history through the sense of touch, an intrinsic component of the *quipu*-maker’s task, pre-dated by centuries a similar form of communication primarily used by the blind: Braille.

This bias toward the written word held by the occupying Spaniard manifested itself as a distrust for the reliability of record keeping in the form of the tactile *quipu*. Additionally, the Spaniards considered it a practice that was questionably influenced by superstitions and falsehoods of the devil. In Mexico and Peru alike, the fervor of missionaries that misunderstood Amerindian memory-keeping devices as diabolical products resulted in the wholesale destruction and incineration of nearly all the indigenous historical records. These would necessarily be replaced by the European book as the official text to provide a new Amerindian history, albeit one corrupted not only in its linguistic translation, but also (specifically in Peru) in the transference from a tactically-based,

mathematical record keeping to a visually-based text written with a foreign semiotic, the European alphabet.

Spanish Eyes Look East (or West?)

Magellan's discovery of the *Todos los Santos* strait near the southern tip of South America in 1520 encouraged the Spaniards to seek out new conquests and led Charles V to modify the earlier ideology of *non plus ultra* ("there is nothing beyond") to the new motto *plus ultra*. This strait, later renamed after Magellan himself, gave the Spaniards access to the Pacific Ocean and the riches of the Indies by sailing west. The need to reach the Indies and the Orient using this route was born of political necessity after the Bull of Demarcation, drawn by Pope Alexander VI in 1493, and the later modification known as the Treaty of Tordesillas, which granted Spain all land discovered 30° west of the Azores and Cape Verde. It was hoped that finding a westward route to the Spice Islands would permit the Spanish crown to show that these territories fell within its side of the line of demarcation.

Within a few decades of the conquest of Peru, the next logical step toward expanding a global empire for the Hapsburg dynasty seemed to be China. Once again, Spaniards turned to the religious dimension of evangelization to justify Spanish presence in the newly discovered Indies. Several disastrous expeditions were sent out over four decades after Magellan's crew circumnavigated the globe in order to establish a Spanish dominion stretching across the South Sea to Asia. Finally, a successful return voyage from Asia to the Americas, led by Andrés de Urdaneta in 1565 and termed the *tornaviaje*, established a safe, efficient route to allow profitable commerce amongst the two continents.¹⁵ As trade increased across the Pacific, so did Spanish presence in the Philippines. This led to the pursuit of business dealings with the Chinese and an increasing Jesuit interest in entering the Chinese mainland, though these missionaries had been continually denied entrance.

In order to better understand and better profit from the Chinese Empire, the Spanish crown took diplomatic steps to gain access to the mainland. On July 11, 1580, immediately preceding a newly united Iberian kingdom led by Philip II (Philip I in Portugal), the Spanish king wrote a letter to the emperor of China with the objective of establishing an embassy. Shortly thereafter, Philip II sent the already accomplished thirty-five-year-old friar Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza as part of this new enterprise. Although Mendoza never actually made it to China, he penned a very influential manuscript describing the nation. It was published in Rome in 1585 under the title *Historia del Gran Reino de la China*. Mendoza drew from a variety of sources in his effort to produce an exhaustive study of the cultural, political, and religious aspects of Chinese life, as well as the geographical breakdown of the area complete with natural resources of interest to European merchants.

The idea of a possible conquest of China preceded Mendoza's study by over two decades as Spaniards in the Philippines called for a campaign to be waged against the country after continued Chinese pirate attacks of Spanish merchant vessels. The concept of an invasion was based not only on the inability of Spanish settlers in the Philippines to tame the indigenous population and make their new land productive, but also on the will of ecclesiastic imperialism to convert the entire world to Christianity. In 1576, the disgruntled governor of the Philippines, Francisco de Sande, provided the Spanish king with a plan of attack that would only require four to six thousand men for the conquest. John Headley comments on the mixed message provided in Sande's diatribe to the Spanish king: "Whatever the riches and attractions of China itself, the Chinese were here represented as a people of idolaters, sodomists, robbers, and pirates, peculiarly prone to revolt yet somehow ripe for Christianity" (634). Though King Philip opted to ignore this first request in order to foster more friendly relations with the Chinese, the influence of Mendoza's description of this nation as a people ripe for conversion caused a fervent outcry amongst the entire political-ecclesiastical community of Manila. This led to the memorial of July 26, 1586 and advocated a forceful entry into mainland China, headed by the Jesuit Father Alonso Sánchez.¹⁶

Echoes of lessons learned during the conquests of Mexico and Peru seem to remain into the final decades of Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, as seen in the plan for the conquest of China and in some of Mendoza's insights on that country. The point of entrance that Sánchez intended to propose to King Philip offered the hope that the Chinese would revolt against their tyrannous mandarins, allowing for a divide-and-conquer strategy that had already proved very effective for Cortés and Pizarro in the Americas. Prior to this, Mendoza had already laid the groundwork to justify the post-conquest domination of China by the Spanish, insinuating a legend that, as Robert Richmond Ellis points out, "declares that the Chinese supposedly possessed foreknowledge that Christian Europeans would one day subjugate them" (475). Ellis draws from Mendoza's text: "Dios por su misericordia, los trayga al conocimiento de su Santa Ley, y cumpla un pronóstico que ellos tienen, con el qual son auisados, que han de ser señoreados, de hombres de ojos grandes, y de barbas largas, y que vendran a mandar los, de reynos muy remotos, y apartados, que parece señala a los Christianos" (475). Ellis, through the research of Pascale Girard, shows that Mendoza's prophetic historiography has no foundation in Chinese culture. This insertion of a non-existent prophecy into a description of China never directly experienced by the author betrays not only a bias toward the moral supremacy of the European Christian, but also a knowledge of an entire ideology of conquest proven effective in the Americas that manipulates (or even invents) an indigenous religious history in order to justify the further colonization, Christianization, and subjugation of conquered peoples.

Interestingly enough, the man who accompanied the Jesuit Father Alonso Sánchez as he crossed the Atlantic, preparing him for the royal

audience, was none other than the aforementioned Father José de Acosta. Acosta immediately differentiated for Sánchez the proper evangelization for advanced, civilized, and cultured peoples (such as the Chinese) and the more forceful approach appropriate for the “backward, barbaric” Amerindian:

Acosta elaborates a missionary method based on a caritative application according to the cultural level of the indigenous people, wherein writing plays a determinative role. If the culture has written muniments and the people are thus more civilized and especially sophisticated (*vae gentes humaniores & maxime politicae sint*), specifically preeminent in this respect being the Chinese, a show of arms becomes totally inappropriate. Where, however, writing is absent but clear evidence exists of ordered government and other cultural attainments, as in Peru and Mexico, force is not discountenanced. (Headley 642)

During the crossing of the Atlantic, however, Acosta was able to convince Sánchez to forget the forceful conquest of China.¹⁷ Sánchez reached Madrid in January of 1588 and opted not to request a new armada for the distant, improbable conquest of China.

Conclusions

We have seen throughout a span of history, stretching from the Emperor of Byzantium’s reception of a letter from the now mythical Prester John in 1165 to the final transformative years of Iberian conquest methods during the end of the sixteenth century, the global reach of Portugal and Spain’s unquenchable thirst for complete domination. This particularly early modern desire to unite all peoples under one crown, to subjugate all souls under one Papal authority at any cost, required monumental efforts from historical figures often afflicted with some form of megalomania. From Columbus’s millennial aspirations to Cortés’s belief in his own ability to control the Wheel of Fortune, to the ultimate goals of Mendoza—a fully Christianized China—the impossible, the ridiculous, and the sublime could always be rationalized and considered plausible within the advent of the Renaissance-inspired humanism exemplified by the early modern European Catholic mindset.¹⁸

When the Spanish Catholic Monarchs clearly aligned their goals toward a modern empire in 1492 through the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Granada, the composition of a Castilian grammar, and the financial backing of expeditions to conquer distant kingdoms, a ready supply of inspired discoverers, cartographers, and writers provided Spain an edge over the Portuguese in a race against time to colonize the heretofore unknown world. This practice, which took these adventurous explorers, conquistadors, and missionaries into Africa, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines, and China (as well as many locations in between) necessarily

required a justification worthy of a Papal blessing. This conquest, as seen from the opposite side of the Atlantic, had also to be rationalized using whatever psychological strategies were available to indigenous societies. Though history played out somewhat differently for the Aztecs and the Incas, the experience common for both peoples was an invasion of their world by the unknown, an event that caused each society to actively seek out an explanation for this seemingly implausible experience. As shown in this study, such an explanation was all too readily offered (or at least manipulated) by conquistadors, colonizers, and missionaries—the first revisionist historians in the New World?

As time progressed, original sources of indigenous histories would ultimately be destroyed or burned to the dismay of the Aztecs and the Incas alike. Nevertheless, even remaining information from very early sources such as the writings of Sahagún can provide insight when one actively questions established texts and reads between the lines of indigenous histories written with a Latin alphabet. These early writings must be read alongside accepted “official” histories in order to question the imperialist premises upon which the latter have been built. Points of rupture such as these are subsequently erased from the collective memory in the New World. These cracks are smoothed over in order to create a history that works to foreclose the possibility that indigenous truths, histories, and religions could have a memory independent of the one provided by European influence.

Notes

¹ While the letter was passed around Europe for centuries, Prester John never appeared in the form that many thought he would. For instance, he was mistaken for Genghis Khan until it became clear that Khan was not only conquering non-Christian lands, but Christian lands as well. Starting in the fifteenth century, the name “Prester John” became the name to refer to the lineage of Ethiopian kings.

² See Columbus’ contemporaries such as Ramón Pané, *Acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* (1498); Fernán Pérez de Oliva, *Historia de la invención de las Indias* (1528); and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia general de las Indias* (1535).

³ For more information, see Sabine MacCormack (“Antonio de la Calancha”), Raquel Chang-Rodríguez (“Santo Tomás en los Andes”), and Verónica Salles-Reese (“The Apostle’s Footprints”).

⁴ Quetzalcóatl was the King of Tula.

⁵ Doña Marina, or Malintzin, was a Nahua woman given to Cortés as a slave. She served as his interpreter, advisor, and lover.

⁶ For details on the encounter, see Ricardo de la Cierva’s *Historia total de España* (355).

⁷ A divide and conquer strategy was useful to both men, who exploited rifts that had just arisen in both Mexico and Peru. Also important was an understanding of hierarchical relationships within many of the Amerindian empires: if you capture their leader, the battle is won.

⁸ For detailed analyses of the various versions of Viracocha as interpreted by other early colonial writers such as Juan de Betanzos, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, and Joan de Santa Cruz Pachacuti Yamqui see Arthur Andrew Demarest, *Viracocha: The Nature and Antiquity of the Andean High God* (1981); Antoinette Molinié-Fioravanti, “El regreso de Viracocha” (1987); Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (1993); and Verónica Salles-Reese, *From Viracocha to the Virgin of Copacabana: Representation of the Sacred at Lake Titicaca* (1997).

⁹ *Huaca* or *Waq* is a sacred Inca concept relating to both a spiritual and physical phenomenon in which spirits inhabit physical locales and subsequently provide a source of communal identity.

¹⁰ “The Cuzco chroniclers, chief among them Titu Cusi, describe the strange features which distinguished the Spanish as divine beings in Indian eyes: beards, fair or dark; clothes completely covering the body; great animals with silver hoofs, on whose backs they rode; magic language enabling them to communicate with one another by means of white cloth; mastery of thunderbolts” (Wachtel 21-22).

¹¹ The implantation of Viracocha’s return by the Spanish in order to justify their colonial expansion finds an interesting counterpoint in the Inca manipulation of the biography of the apostle Saint Thomas which historians such as Guaman Poma and Santacruz Pachacuti use to refute the principle of evangelization as part of Spanish post-conquest justification. “Si no hubo lucha, sino sometimiento pacífico, qué les da derecho a los europeos para gobernar; si el Evangelio, efectivamente, fue predicado por uno de los

apóstoles anteriormente a la llegada de los españoles, nada justificaría su permanencia en América” (Chang-Rodríguez 565).

¹² My emphasis. These words (including the astonishing parenthetical statement which seems to give some credence to the conquistador’s planting of the Spanish as Viracocha myth) were related by Titu Cusi, and transcribed by the Augustine Friar Marcos García, who did not yet find it problematic to include this revealing aside within Cusi’s more direct accusations of betrayal. This citation is quoted from Titu Cusi’s *Relación* (1570) by Wachtel, who comments in his end notes on how Cusi had been repeatedly reproached by Manco’s vassals for his great errors in judgment and “unresisting welcome of the Spanish.”

¹³ The treatises which preceded the conquests of both Cortés and Pizarro, composed by Elio Antonio de Nebrija in 1492 and 1517, provided one of the first grammars of a vernacular language, Castilian, and the rules of its orthography. These treatises were accompanied by prefaces in which Nebrija lays out a means to consolidate the Spanish empire via the Castilian language (Mignolo 29).

¹⁴ Nebrija was apparently responding to the obstinate position in New Spain of friars “who were convinced that their goals would be better achieved if they learned and wrote grammars of Amerindian languages instead of teaching Castilian to the natives,” as well as to that of the university and the Jesuit colleges which held the conviction that “the *estudia humanitatis* was the best model of education to civilize New World colonies” (cited in Mignolo 53).

¹⁵ This typically involved an exchange of the products of gold and silver mines exploited in the Americas for the spices of the Indies as well as silk and porcelain from the Orient.

¹⁶ This memorial is a document that, aside from suggesting the best methods to govern the Philippines, also has a section titled “The Proposed Entry Into China, In Detail.” The first half of the memorial describes the precarious position of Spanish inhabitants in Manila. It calls for the construction of forts and *presidios* to protect the capital and ships, ensuring the safety of the islands from Chinese and Bornean pirates. The need to enter China is considered in terms of risks (i.e. outnumbered soldiers, destruction of China’s resources) and benefits (i.e. complete domination of the neighboring islands, Christian expansion). Of greater importance is the need for expediency. The memorial warns of the peril of hesitation by implying the potential loss of the Philippines as well the threat that Islam could possibly spread across mainland China prior to Spanish entry.

¹⁷ “In the extended exchange between the two men—and it was an exchange, although Sánchez’ influence on Acosta is less immediate and direct—Sánchez had to give ground. In his presentation to Philip in Madrid, the China Project is forever shelved” (Headley 642).

¹⁸ Cortés had faith in his ability to steer, or at least to stop, the Wheel of Fortune from completing its cycle with the help of a friendly divine intervention. This is another example of Machiavelli’s influence over Cortés’s strategy and worldview.

Works Cited

- Álvares, Francisco. *Verdadiera Informação das Terras do Preste João das Índias*. Lisboa: Agencia Geral das Colónias, 1943.
- Beckingham, C.F. "The Quest for Prester John." *An Expanding World, Volume 2: The European Opportunity*. Ed. Felipe Fernández-Armesto. Aldershot: Variorum, 1995. 175-94.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question." *Screen* 24.6 (1983): 18-36.
- Burt, John. "The Motif of the Fall of Man in the 'Romancero del Rey Rodrigo.'" *Hispania* 61.3 (1978): 435-42.
- Chang-Rodríguez, Raquel. "Santo Tomás en los Andes." *Revista Iberoamericana* 53.140 (1987): 559-67.
- Cierva, Ricardo de la. *Historia total de España*. Madrid: Fénix, 1997.
- Cieza de León, Pedro de. *Crónica del Perú, Vol. 2*. Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1985.
- Columbus, Christopher. *Codice diplomatico columbo-americano, ossia, Racolta di documenti, originali e inediti, spetlanti, a Cristoforo Columbo alla scoperta ed al governo dell' America*. Genoa, Italy: s.n., 1823.
- . *Diario del primer viaje*. Madrid: Fundación José Antonio de Castro, 2006. Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes. 15 December 2008 <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/fichaaautor.html?Ref=142>>.
- Cortés, Hernán. *Cartas de relación*. México: Porrúa, 1970.
- . *Segunda carta de relación de la conquista de la Nueva España*. México: El Impreso del Gobierno, 1970. Cervantes Virtual. 15 December 2008 <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/servlet/SirveObras/01383820855804515089680/ima000.htm>>.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Writing of History*. Trans. Tom Conley. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
- Demarest, Arthur Andrew. *Viracocha: The Nature and Antiquity of the Andean High God*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 1981.

- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.
- Dupeyron, Guy Rozat. *Indios imaginarios e indios reales en los relatos de la conquista de México*. Mexico: Tava, 1993.
- Eanes de Zurara, Gomes. *Crónica dos feitos notáveis que se passaram na conquista da Guiné por mandado do infant D. Henrique*. Lisboa: Academia Portuguesa da Historia, 1978-1981. Biblioteca Nacional Digital. 15 December 2008 <<http://purl.pt/216/1/P1.html>>.
- Ellis, Robert Richmond. "The Middle Kingdom through Spanish Eyes: Depictions of China in the Writings of Juan González de Mendoza and Domingo Fernández Navarrete." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 83 (2006): 469-83.
- Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, Gonzalo. *Historia general de las Indias*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1932.
- Garcilaso de la Vega, Inca. *Comentarios reales de los incas, I*. Ed. Aurelio Miró Quesada. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1976.
- Headley, John M. "Spain's Asian Presence, 1565-1590: Structures and Aspirations." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 75.4 (1995): 623-46.
- Landstrom, Bjorn. *Columbus*. New York: MacMillan, 1966.
- MacCormack, Sabine. "Antonio de la Calancha: Un agustino del Siglo XVII en el Nuevo Mundo." *Bulletin Hispanique* 84 (1982): 60-94.
- . "Pachacuti: Miracles, Punishments, and Last Judgement: Visionary Past and Prophetic Future in Early Colonial Peru." *The American Historical Review* 93.4 (1988): 960-1006.
- . *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2003.
- Molinié-Fioravanti, Antoinette. "El regreso de Viracocha." *Bulletin de L'Institut Français d'Études Andines* 16 [3-4] 1987: 71-83.
- O'Gorman, Edmundo. *La invención de América: Investigación acerca de la estructura histórica del Nuevo Mundo y del sentido de su devenir*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958.

- Pané, Ramón. *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los Indios: El primer tratado etnográfico hecho en América*. Ed. Angel Rodríguez Alvarez. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Editorial Nuevo Mundo, 2009.
- Pérez de Oliva, Fernán. *Historia de la invención de las Indias*. Ed. José Juan Arrom. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, 1991.
- Pliny. *Natural History*. Trans. Harris Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1938.
- Rostworowski de Díez Canseco, María. *History of the Inca Realm*. Trans. Harry B. Iceland. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Sahagún, Bernardino de. *El México antiguo: selección y reordenación de la Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España de fray Bernardino de Sahagún y de los informantes indígenas*. Ed. José Luís Martínez. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1981.
- Salles-Reese, Verónica. *From Viracocha to the Virgin of Copacabana: Representation of the Sacred at Lake Titicaca*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1997.
- . "The Apostle's Footprints in Ancient Perú: Christian Appropriation of Andean Myths." *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 16 (1992): 185-93.
- Silverberg, Robert. *The Realm of Prester John*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.
- Sánchez, Alonso. *Relación de las cosas de Filipinas*. 1588.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Harper, 1984.
- Wachtel, Nathan. *The Vision of the Vanquished: The Spanish Conquest of Peru through Indian Eyes, 1530-1570*. Trans. Ben and Siân Reynolds. Hassocks: Harvester, 1977.
- West, Cornel. *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*. Ed. George Yancy. Boston: Blackwell, 2001.
- Whalley, Joyce Irene. *Pliny the Elder: Historia Naturalis*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982.
- Whitehead, Neil. *Lords of the Tiger Spirit: A History of the Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guyana, 1498-1820*. Dordrecht: Foris, 1988.