

Privilege Campaigning in Tlaxcala

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In a traditional historical narrative, the Conquest of Mexico is often depicted as solely the work of Cortes and his men. However, evidence from primary sources show that the Spaniards were heavily aided by indigenous allies to conquer the Mexica. The main allies for the Spanish were the Tlaxcalans, who had yet to be incorporated into their enemy's massive empire. After fighting for two weeks upon their first encounter, the Tlaxcalans, motivated by the benefits of an alliance with the Spanish, joined Cortes and his men to conquer the Mexica. Previously published research on Tlaxcala focused on the adaptability of Tlaxcalans to retain pre-Conquest culture.¹ The goal of this research is to analyze the effectiveness of Tlaxcalan use of campaigns to obtain privileges promised by Cortes through the use of Spanish-appealing persuasive elements.

The starting point for developing this research was Matthew Restall's *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, where he discusses common misconceptions of the conquest of Mexico.² Restall argues that indigenous groups, and in particular the Tlaxcalans, formed alliances with the Spanish due to political motivations as demonstrated in primary sources such as the *Florentine Codex*³ and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*.⁴ Due to the unmet Tlaxcalan political motivations, Charles Gibson argues in *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* that in response the Tlaxcalans created the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* as a persuasive tool.⁵ Based on Tlaxcalan political goals, multiple scholars argue the persuasive elements within the lienzo were essential towards obtaining privileges from the Spanish Crown.

The first component in understanding how and why Tlaxcala utilized the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* is to understand the motivations behind their alliance with the Spanish. In chapter 3 of

Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest, Restall addresses the commonly perpetuated myth of the European underdog being vastly outnumbered by indigenous enemies. Instead, Restall argues that the Spanish were often outnumbered by their native allies as well as the Tlaxcalans.⁶ The question then becomes why the Tlaxcalans would ally themselves with the Spanish despite having a considerable advantage at the time.⁷ According to Restall, the Tlaxcalans, as well as other native groups, saw an alliance with the Spanish to be beneficial because the Tlaxcalans could accomplish immediate political goals.⁸ These goals were to pursue rivalries against the Mexica and their affiliates and remove their influence across south-central Mexico. One such example of weakening rivals can be seen in the *Florentine Codex*. The codex was commissioned roughly one generation after the fall of the Mexica by friar Bernardino de Sahagun and written by the Tlatelolcans, the people of the twin altepetl to Tenochtitlan. The Cholulans were rivals to the Tlaxcalans and hated almost as much as the Mexica. The Tlatelolcans described relations between the two altepetls, stating they “viewed each other with anger, fury, hate, and disgust; they could come together on nothing.”⁹ The Tlaxcalans, seeing the opportunity to weaken their rivals, utilized their alliance with the Spanish to remove the Cholulans through a massacre easily accomplished with the use of Spanish steel.¹⁰ The Cholulan Massacre connects to the argument made by Restall because it demonstrates an instance where the Tlaxcalans used their alliance to accomplish certain political goals, which in this case was the destabilization of a pre-conquest enemy.

However, the connection between alliances and privileges proved to be a complex issue, as, after the fall of Tenochtitlan, the promises made by Cortes to the Tlaxcalans were largely

ignored.¹¹ The original agreement between the Tlaxcala tlatoque and Cortes was vague, with only a few conquistadors saying the discussion even took place in the way the Tlaxcalans would describe. The main point, however, is that this altercation was never written down, allowing the Spanish officials to ignore the initial promises made to the Tlaxcalans more effectively. Gibson argues that the Tlaxcalans reshaped their motivations and formed their arguments in writing to persuade the Spanish Crown to grant them privileges.¹²

As a result, the Tlaxcala cabildo campaigned to receive the privileges promised to them by documenting in writing the initial exchange between the Tlaxcalan tlatoques and Cortes. Gibson cites the first account of the promises made to Tlaxcala by Cortes in an entry in the *Tlaxcalan Actas*, a compendium of minutes from the Tlaxcala cabildo (town council) from 1545 to 1627.¹³ The entry in question from November 16, 1562, was written in the context of an investigation of the proceedings of the Tlaxcalan government. The members of the cabildo call into question an overall assessment on the city since the time of the conquest, with particular emphasis on tributary payments.¹⁴ The members of the Tlaxcalan cabildo argue that this review would show “how the Tlaxcalan rulers [and commoners] just met and received him [Cortes] in friendship” and “gave him everything (the Spaniards) needed.”¹⁵ Gibson argues this passage is important for future campaigns for privileges by asserting to the Spanish Crown that Tlaxcala needed to be compensated according to the promises made by Cortes: “to relieve the Tlaxcalans of all tribute payment and to present them with several towns.”¹⁶

Expanding on the argument made by Gibson, other scholars such as Jeanne Gillespie argue that the campaigns for long-term economic benefits established the Tlaxcalans as having

“a special status in the colonial order.”¹⁷ Gillespie in her book, *Saints and Warriors: Tlaxcalan Perspectives on the Conquest of Tenochtitlan*, makes this argument based on both analysis of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* and the *Tlaxcalan Actas*. As previously stated, the *Tlaxcalan Actas* detailed motivations such as the relief of tributary payments, which if granted, would elevate the status of the Tlaxcalans because they would no longer have to be limited by their payment to the Spanish. This privilege would greatly benefit the community by situating itself ahead of other altepetls that still supported the Spanish Crown through both tributary payments and labor.

Another piece of evidence for the special status desired by the Tlaxcalans comes from one of the altepetl’s main campaign documents. The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, the other source analyzed by Gillespie, is a pictorial political document created between 1550 and 1562 as one of the petitions to the Spanish Crown for privileges.¹⁸ Gillespie notes that the source emphasizes Tlaxcalan service by omitting aid given by the Otomi, who were a group close to the Tlaxcalans pre-contact with the Spaniards.¹⁹ This omission is important because it stresses the argument of the Tlaxcalans wanting special status, which by nature is not shared. The lack of Otomi presence in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* is only one element of its use as a persuasive document. Now that the motivations of the Tlaxcalans have been discussed, the campaign efforts can be analyzed with those contexts in mind.

Travis Kranz, in his article “Visual Persuasion: Sixteenth-Century Tlaxcalan Pictorials in Response to the Conquest of Mexico,” uses the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* to analyze the way that the document was used as a persuasive tool for privileges to the Spanish Crown using the content of pictorial panels.²⁰ In looking at the elements in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Kranz points to certain

types of panels having more effect in petitioning the Crown. The Lienzo has a heavy portion of panels dedicated to military efforts such as what is depicted in Figure 1.²¹ Kranz argues the Spanish emphasized military action during the conquest as a way to obtain favors, even amongst Spaniards. The Tlaxcalans used strategies that would appeal to the Spanish perception of an alliance to show their willing alliance, rather than the traditional "gendered symbolic representation of the alliance."²² By making appeals to the Spanish, the Tlaxcala cabildo could more efficiently petition for the economic and political privileges promised to them by the Spanish.

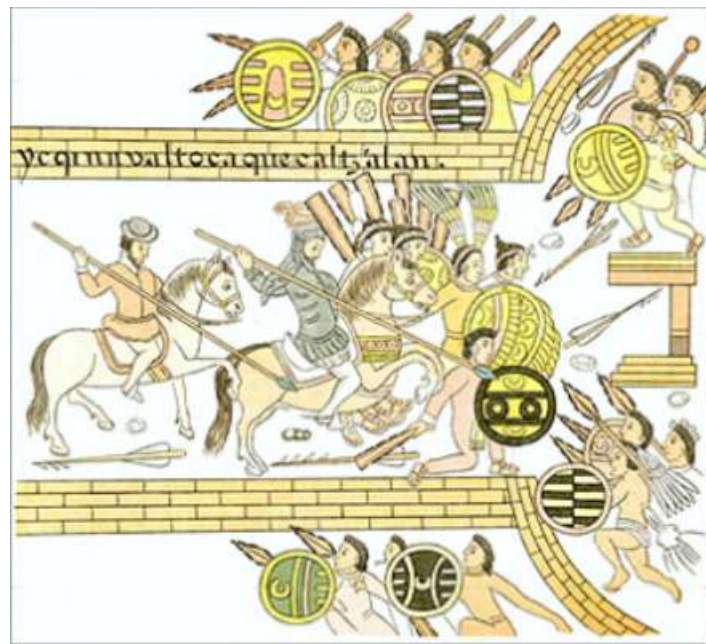


Figure 1: Spanish and Tlaxcalan entrance into Tlatelolco.
Panel 50. *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*

In addition to stressing the importance of their military aid, the Tlaxcalans also used the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* to show support to the Spanish by depicting the acceptance of European religious ideology and providing generous tribute and provisions. In a similar way to Kranz,

Gillespie analyzes argumentative strategies seen in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* to demonstrate what factors worked for the Tlaxcalan campaigns for privileges. Despite evidence that the Tlaxcalans did not begin full conversion until the 1530s, the Lienzo shows the people of Tlaxcala as very receptive to Catholicism to classify themselves as good Christians and allies.²³ Figure 2 depicts the conversion scene of the four Tlaxcalan tlatoque, or leaders, and demonstrates a willingness to be allied with European Catholic ideology, and as a result, the Spanish. Gillespie argues that European elements such as Catholicism made the petitions made by Tlaxcala more effective to “lobby for a role in the colonial power structure.”²⁴



Figure 2: Conversion of four Tlaxcalan tlatoque. Panel 8.
Lienzo de Tlaxcala.

Additionally, there are scenes in the Lienzo which depict Cortés receiving gifts such as provisions, women, and non-militant labor. Scenes such as that depicted in Figure 3 argue a repeated message of Tlaxcalan service to the Crown by documenting proof that the Tlaxcala

lords gave provisions to Cortes and his men.²⁵ This panel would demonstrate the sentiment mentioned before in the *Tlaxcalan Actas*, that the Tlaxcalans welcomed the Spanish as allies from the beginning.²⁶ These scenes show a Pre-Columbian tradition of establishing alliances by giving gifts (which despite holding lesser importance to the Spanish) would cement the Tlaxcalans as abiding allies to the Spanish.



Figure 3: Tlaxcala tlatoque lead by Maxicatzin provide Cortes and his men with provisions. Panels 30-31. *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*.

In addition to understanding the motivations and usage of persuasive elements, it is also crucial to understand the outcome that the Tlaxcala cabildo wanted from their petitions. The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* was a tool to explain the position of the Tlaxcalans in the new colonial system as part of the conquerors and victors. In her article, Florine Asselbergs analyzes the persuasive elements of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* as well as the purpose of its creation.²⁷ She argues that the creation of the Lienzo was to record the Tlaxcalans as "faithful allies from the very beginning to present an unambiguous story that would best serve their interests."²⁸ Asselberg

states that the Tlaxcalans wanted to be recognized as having legitimate power in the colonial system, a sentiment which she argues can be seen at the top of the Lienzo with its emblem and the elements that surround it, as seen in Figure 4. She argues that the "alliances with the Spaniards were perceived to be a gathering of forces and as the establishment of new power."²⁹ This analysis pertains to the argument because the Tlaxcalans wanted to stress that they had a major role in the success of the Conquest of Mexico and wanted the privileges that came along with being in that role. From the beginning of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, the Tlaxcala cabildo wanted to persuade the Spanish Crown to grant the Tlaxcalans a role in colonial society that would match the aid that they had put forth during the Conquest.

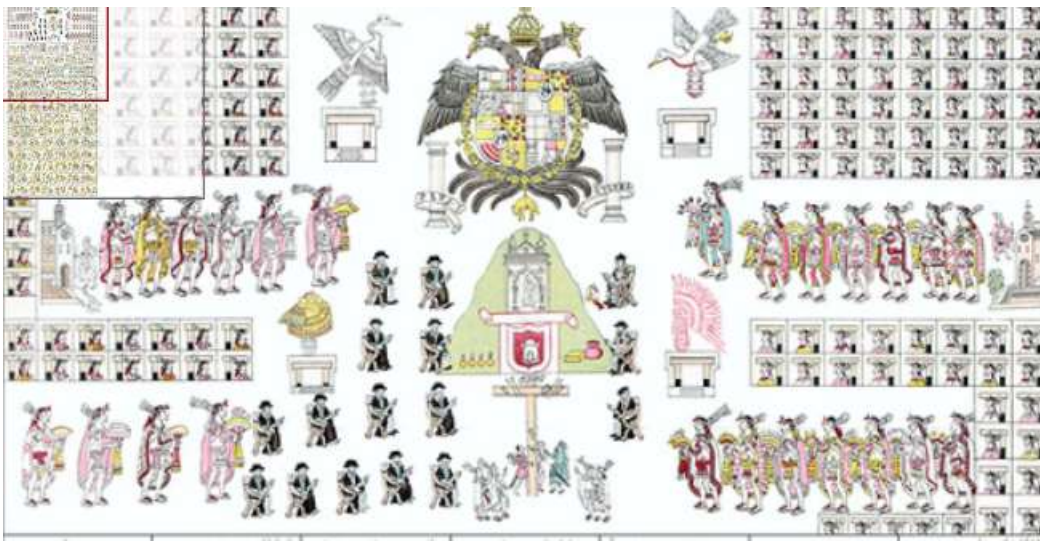


Figure 4: Top Emblem of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*.

The Tlaxcalans were allies to the Spanish in conquering the Mexica and the northern parts of Mexico. They joined the Spanish with motivations to accomplish political goals such as weakening pre-conquest enemies and acquiring land and power in a new political order. During

the colonial period, this motivation shifted to earning economic and political advantages over other indigenous communities by petitioning the Spanish Crown for tribute exemption. The cabildo of Tlaxcala then campaigned for privileges using documents such as the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, which with its visual persuasion elements appealed to the Spanish and made the document at least partially successful due to the Crown granting tribute exemption in 1585. The Tlaxcalan campaign using the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* was important for demonstrating that indigenous communities were not completely powerless in the colonial system at least during the sixteenth century.

¹ Taylor Marshall, "Tlaxcala Under Spanish Rule" in *The Toro Historical Review*, volume 4, 2018.

² Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ Bernardino de Sahagun, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, translated by James Lockhart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁴ *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Mesolore, Brown University, 1555. www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/3/The-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala

⁵ Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

⁶ Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 45.

⁷ Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 46.

⁸ Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 48.

⁹ Sahagun, *We People Here*, translated by James Lockhart, 94.

¹⁰ Sahagun, *We People Here*, translated by James Lockhart, 95.

¹¹ Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 26.

¹² Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 160.

¹³ James Lockhart, Berdan Frances, and Arthur J.O. Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, (1545-1627)* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986).

¹⁴ James Lockhart, Berdan Frances, and Arthur J. O. Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 119.

¹⁵ James Lockhart, Berdan Frances, and Arthur J. O. Anderson, *The Tlaxcalan Actas*, 120.

¹⁶ Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century*, 161.

¹⁷ Jeanne Gillespie, *Saints, and Warriors: Tlaxcalan Perspectives on the Conquest of Tenochtitlan* (New Orleans, LA: University Press of the South, 2004), 45.

¹⁸ *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Mesolore, Brown University, 1555.

¹⁹ Gillespie, *Saints and Warriors*, 52.

²⁰ Travis Kranz, "Visual Persuasion: Sixteenth-Century Tlaxcalan Pictorials in Response to the Conquest of Mexico" in *The Conquest All over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and Painting Spanish Colonialism*, ed. Susan Schroeder (Eastbourne; Portland, Or.: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

²¹ *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Mesolore, Brown University, 1555.

²² Kranz, "Visual Persuasion: Sixteenth-Century Tlaxcalan Pictorials," 59.

²³ Gillespie, *Saints and Warriors*, 110.

²⁴ Gillespie, *Saints and Warriors*, 79.

²⁵ Gillespie, *Saints and Warriors*, 109.

²⁶ Gillespie, *Saints and Warriors*, 89.

²⁷ Florine G.L. Asselbergs, "The Conquest in Images: Stories of Tlaxcalteca and Quauhquecholteca Conquistadors," in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, eds. Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

²⁸ Florine G.L. Asselbergs, "The Conquest in Images," 72.

²⁹ Asselbergs, "The Conquest in Images," 72.

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