



PROJECT MUSE®

Atemorizar la tierra: Pedro de Alvarado y la Conquista de Guatemala, 1520-1541 by W. George Lovell, Christopher H. Lutz, and Wendy Kramer (review)

Kathryn Sampeck

Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 17, Number 2, July 2018, pp. 249-250 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/701032>

Netherly, P. 1984. The Management of Late Andean Irrigation Systems on the North Coast of Peru. *American Antiquity* 49 (2): 227–254.

W. George Lovell, Christopher H. Lutz, and Wendy Kramer

Atemorizar la tierra: Pedro de Alvarado y la Conquista de Guatemala, 1520–1541

Guatemala City, Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2016. 226 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, appendices, references, index. \$22.00 paper (978-9929-700-18-5).

ITHOUGHT I KNEW PEDRO DE ALVARADO. It is difficult to investigate sixteenth-century Guatemala without encountering him; he and his brothers were meddling in and around what is today El Salvador, part of Honduras, Guatemala, and even for a bit in Peru. Chasing Alvarado, trying to understand what happened, when, and why, ranges from grasping at smoke to pounding one's head against a brick wall. The time is ripe for a serious analysis of Alvarado and his entrada in Guatemala. George Lovell, Christopher Lutz, and Wendy Kramer turn the endeavor on its head by making it not about one person, but the story of peoples and places. They tell the story of a mission for personal glory such that the story and actions of native communities take center stage.

Alvarado's exploits in Mexico as Hernando Cortés's right-hand man earned him the privilege to go to Guatemala. He was famously brutal compared to Cortés. As the book's title indicates, Alvarado's cruelty did not abate in the security of achieving his reward of Guatemala. He used similar strategies in Mexico and Guatemala, the greatest difference being his efforts in Guatemala to conscript native allies, particularly the K'iche'. Bringing loyal Tlaxcallans from Mexico was important, but not enough; Alvarado needed native resident

allies for his regime to succeed.

The need for local support meant that Alvarado had to acknowledge and, to different degrees, work within indigenous political geographies. Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer show how in fact Alvarado was a stage, a catalyst, for Kaqchikel, K'iché and other indigenous groups' political and social machinations. This emphasis on indigenous strategy organizes the content of the book. Divided into three long chapters, only the first deals with the journey and events of the entrada. Chapters 2 and 3 relate episodes of alliance, rebellion, and surrender. The authors clearly labeled subsections within each chapter, and those titles—"The Battle of Pachah", "Tecún Umán, Man or Myth?", "Origin and Founding of the Kaqchikel Alliance", and "Vignettes of the Vanquished"—are a series of local places, groups, and people. Certainly, Alvarado's actions had important effects, such as his naming of the successor to the Kaqchikel lord Belehé Qat, who died while mining gold as part of Alvarado's new tribute requirements for native nobles (p. 138–139). This deadly consequence of Alvarado's policy also gave him a chance to consolidate power further by installing his hand-picked successor. Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer present a balanced view of the limitations of the evidence as well as how

scholars have interpreted it, showing that one possibility is that Alvarado's actions triggered a second Kaqchikel uprising (pp. 141–153).

Although the three authors are well known for their writings in English, this text in Spanish is clear and compelling. Even more impressive is the even tone and style; it is hard to tell that three authors wrote it, as the text reads like a single voice. That single voice speaks with authority, viewing the past in terms of its repercussions in the present. Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer have each spent their careers in the region, conducting decades of fieldwork and archival work. They know these communities well, and this familiarity shines through in both the way they organized the text as well as the details that they highlight to illustrate key points.

What is especially impressive is the thoroughness of research. Few works deal in such a systematic way with well-known works, such as the *Memorial de Sololá* and the letters of Alvarado, numerous native-language texts, particularly in K'iché and Kaqchikel, unpublished manuscripts in the Archivo General de las Indias, the Audiencia de Guatemala, and other archives, as well as important analyses by scholars such as Adrián Recinos, Matthew Restall, and Michel Oudijk. A true gift in the volume is the reproduction of images from the 1582 *Historia de Tlaxcala* by Diego Muñoz Camargo. The images follow typical Nahuatl conventions in representing battles and place names of locales not depicted anywhere else.

Another helpful appendix is a table of the chronology of the conquest period in Guatemala, organized by date, event, and place. The first entry is 19 May 1521, when Alvarado orchestrated the massacre in the

Temple of Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlan. Did this take place in or near Guatemala? No, but would Alvarado have ended up in Guatemala without that event? Probably not. The chronology ends with 11 September 1541, when the just-appointed Governor Beatriz de la Cueva died during the torrential rains, earthquake, and collapse of the crater wall of the Volcán de Agua that destroyed the capital city. The text of the book, however, ends a few months earlier, with the death of Pedro de Alvarado in combat during a battle of the Mixtón War. The appendices provide invaluable resources for a comprehensive understanding of the conquest of Guatemala.

Lovell, Lutz, and Kramer state that understanding the conquest of Guatemala is a challenge principally because of the often Balkanized evidence of documentary sources due to restricted, often biased views of periods, events, and communities. Nevertheless, the conquest continues to be presented as a clash that ended decisively with Spanish victory (p.23). They complicate this clean narrative with indefinite endings, a sense of the confusion and improvisation surrounding events, and consideration of the multiple, conflicting aims of actors. The authors argue that the only certainty is that oppression did not end with Alvarado's death. This observation is also a plea to recognize that the past is not distant or forgotten, but rather a daily challenge for the descendants of those actors in those communities that Alvarado sought to conquer.

Kathryn Sampeck

*Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Illinois State University*