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A Satellite Community in a Spanish City: The Barrio of Santiago Cholultecapan in Colonial Puebla de los Ángeles

Verónica A. Gutiérrez

From the slaughterhouse to the center of Puebla [de Los Ángeles] it is not permitted to give native peoples a single undeveloped plot of land.

—*Cabildo de Puebla de Los Ángeles, 15501*

In the year 1732, the citizens in Puebla de los Ángeles, the second city of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, were in a state of anxiousness. After more than seventy years of construction, the cathedral had finally been completed and all that remained was to place the bell in the southern belfry. But weighing in at eight tons, the *doña María* was too heavy.² Unable to complete this colossal task, the Poblanos retired to their homes in discouragement. The following morning, the sound of the *doña María* calling them to early Mass was evidence enough that the spiritual namesakes of the city, that is, the angels, had taken pity on them and flown down from their heavenly abode to lift the bell into place as the city slept.³

The pious story of the successful hanging of the *campana de doña María* serves not only to underscore Puebla's eighteenth-century status as the second most important city in New Spain, but it also effaces the efforts of countless indigenous tributaries who participated in the city's construction. In reality, it was *not* the angels who

lifted the bell into the cathedral belfry, but rather the industrious and very human *indios* from neighboring Cholula. Obligated to work in Puebla as *indios de servicio* (service Indians or day laborers), the native Cholulteca had manufactured a ramp, working together to raise the enormous *doña María* into place using a complicated system of ropes and pulleys.⁴ Importantly, their participation in the construction of Puebla was not limited to this episode. Indeed, the Cholulteca had been intimately involved in the new Spanish city since 1530, when Spanish settlers occupied a region of Cholula that was sparsely inhabited, most likely, as demographic historian Peter Gerhard suggests, because it was a frontier region with hostile neighbors.⁵ Within twenty years, the Cholulteca had settled into their own neighborhood outside the *traza*, or city center, in a region known alternately as *el barrio de Santiago Cholultecapan* and *el barrio de Santiago de los Cholultecas*.

This essay recounts the early history of this *barrio*, exploring the relationship of its indigenous Cholulteca inhabitants with the Spanish city of Puebla, whose downtown religious and civic buildings they were expected to construct, but within whose city center they were not allowed to reside. This arrangement ostensibly separated Poblanos from their indigenous labor force, which also included *indios* from local settlements in Tlaxcala, Huejotzingo, and Tepeaca. The restriction, however, did not prevent these *indios de servicio* from interacting with the inhabitants of Puebla, especially since the proscription against *indios* living within the Spanish *traza* was not reciprocal. According to municipal documents dating to the 1590s, several Spaniards received grants of land within the Cholulteca *barrio*.⁶ These land grants not only signaled the city's incredible growth from its original 50 Spanish residents in 1531 to nearly 15,000 at the turn of the seventeenth century, but they also served to alter the nature of Spanish-indigenous co-existence by placing Spaniards side by side with indigenous neighbors.⁷

I will compare the experience of the Cholulteca migrant in the *barrio* in Puebla to life in Cholula proper during the same period. Who were these *indios de servicio* and how were they chosen? Who provided service in Puebla and then returned to his ancestral lands in Cholula? Who provided service and then remained to settle along the banks of the Rio San Francisco? Did these *indios* retain their ties

to Cholula? Did the absence of these *indios* affect life in Cholula a mere two leagues away?

Unfortunately, sources are limited, so many of these questions remain unanswerable, though we do know that “the movements [of these *indios de servicio*] back and forth to their home provinces represented a vital urban-rural tie and mechanism of incipient cultural change.”⁸ I examine this cultural change alongside the early history of the *barrio* of *Santiago Cholutecapan* using sixteenth-century Franciscan chronicles, a collection of materials recently published in Puebla, and a handful of archival documents. The few studies of Puebla’s indigenous *barríos* that do exist tend to be non-scholarly compilations written by local historians who exude a Puebla-centric perspective.

Founded in 1531, the city of Puebla de los Ángeles was meant to accommodate Spaniards who arrived too late to participate in the distribution of *encomienda*, or grants of indigenous tribute payers, though some *encomenderos* did eventually settle there. In need of a stopover between the capital and the port of Veracruz, Spanish surveyors chose an area abandoned by native peoples, a region previously known as Cuextlaxcohuapan. While the actual site was within Cholula’s limits, the Spaniards also took land from Tepeaca, Totimehuacán, and Huejotzingo.⁹ Puebla was unique among cities in New Spain, being founded on “free” lands rather than over the ruins of an indigenous polity destroyed and appropriated during the conquest, and because of its identity as a “Republic of Spanish Farmers.” Eventually, however, this combination of free land and free people meant that few were willing to construct its buildings and to work its fields, thus necessitating the importation of indigenous labor.¹⁰

Because *encomienda* distribution did not serve as the basis for Puebla’s founding, neither was *repartimiento*—or compulsory rotational draft labor—officially endorsed. Instead, Spanish colonial law required neighboring indigenous settlements to provide *indios de servicio* to aid in Puebla’s construction. These indigenous laborers, sometimes called *laborías*, quickly became important aspects of city life.¹¹ In the case of Puebla, indigenous laborers from Tlaxcala, Huejotzingo, and Tepeaca joined the native Cholulteca in the city’s construction program. Peter Gerhard estimates that by 1570—when Puebla boasted a population of 500 Spaniards—there were around

1,000 indigenous tributaries in the city and its environs, including a number of *indios* in Puebla who did not pay tribute.¹² Although some *indios de servicio* lived with their Spanish masters, many others lived in irregular structures at the edge of town.¹³ This practice led to the flourishing of several indigenous *barrios* in Puebla, the most commercially successful and socially popular of which was the *barrio de Santiago Cholultecapan*.

Because Cholula's *indios* were residing on the lands selected for Puebla's foundation in 1531, native Cholulteca were present in the city from its inception. At that time, colonial officials moved some *indios* west of the Atoyac River, but others remained to build the Spaniards' homes and to serve them.¹⁴ According to Franciscan chronicler fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, numerous Cholulteca participated in Puebla's founding day ceremonies on April 16, 1531, the feast day of his patron, San Toribio. Motolinía recounts the impressive site of seeing so many indigenous laborers pouring in from neighboring pueblos to "aid the Christians."¹⁵ He describes how each pueblo arrived, approaching the city in groups on the road that led from their home settlement. The *indios* carried bundles of straw to erect temporary housing, and cords to measure the city streets. The Cholulteca—whose numbers Motolinía estimates at around 7,000—and the other *indios de servicio* arrived singing, holding aloft flags, ringing little bells, and beating drums while some swayed to the rhythm and others paused to perform ritual dances. After Motolinía said the Mass of dedication, these service *indios* accompanied the forty founding Spanish residents to the *traza* so they could expand the already laid-out city center. As he recounts, the *indios* made short order of the construction, using their cords to lay out forty home plots. Within a week's time, they had finished construction on all forty homes, domiciles that Motolinía insists were not rude constructions, but rather ample and large enough to accommodate house guests.

Not long after the founding day ceremonies, the relationship between Puebla and Cholula solidified further when the Spanish Crown assigned to Puebla a *corregidor*, or local Spanish official, who also administered Cholula and Tlaxcala.¹⁶ This relationship facilitated the importation of *indios de servicio* to aid in the construction of Puebla's religious and civic buildings. The Puebla cathedral was the most important sacred structure requiring indigenous labor,

with construction beginning on the existing cathedral in 1575, at which point the Cholulteca had been living and flourishing in their *barrio* for over twenty years.¹⁷

The *barrio de Santiago* developed along the banks of the Rio San Francisco on the site where Cholulteca laborers had settled on the road leading to Cholula. The *barrio* was officially recognized in 1550 when the city's municipal council granted the Cholulteca four *solares*, or home plots, of land for the founding of its *barrio* and the construction of the church under the direction of the Augustinian friars.¹⁸ Puebla's *alcalde mayor* and *regidores* witnessed this event, accompanied by the magistrates and *regidores* of the *Justicia Suprema*, all duly noted in the presence of a scribe identified as "Solano."¹⁹

Around this time in their home city, the *indios* of Cholula were busy with construction projects of their own. Most notably, they built the castle-like Franciscan *convento de San Gabriel*, a feat accomplished in just four short years: 1549-1552. That same year, the *indios principales* or indigenous leaders of Cholula successfully petitioned the Spanish Crown for city status based on the sumptuousness of the newly-constructed *convento*.²⁰ Though I have yet to locate the royal response, in a letter dated October 1554, the governor, *alcaldes*, and *vecinos* of Cholula thank Charles V for granting them the title of city.²¹ Hence, while the *indios* of Cholula were thriving in their new city status at home, the Cholulteca in Puebla were establishing their dominance amongst the indigenous *barrios*.

According to Franciscan historian fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, from the beginning there was a strong connection between the *indios* of Cholula and the Poblanos, specifically, with the Franciscans who resided in the friary in Puebla. Mendieta says it would be difficult to imagine the extensive devotion of the Cholulteca and their penchant for giving alms. In fact, for the greater part of 1531-1596 (the time he was writing), the quantity of alms the *indios* in Cholula provided not only sustained the 30 friars in its home friary, but also supported the Franciscans in the friary in Puebla.²² These alms included bread, wine, meat, fish, hens, and eggs, as well as monetary donations. Although we cannot say for certain whether *indios* living in the *barrio de Santiago* also donated alms, we can reasonably make this assumption.

Whereas the Franciscans oversaw a thriving evangelization complex in nearby Cholula, it was the Augustinians who became the caretakers of the *barrio* of Santiago, since its 1550 grant of four plots of land fell within their parish dedicated to San Sebastián. According to one source, the Cholulteca living in the *barrio* approached Puebla's *ayuntamiento*, or city hall, in 1540 to ask permission to build a Christian church dedicated to Santiago.²³ If this event did indeed take place, it more likely occurred in 1550, in which year the Augustinian friars commenced construction of a church dedicated to Santiago el Mayor, or St. James the Greater, thus giving the *barrio* its name.²⁴ They worked quickly, securing 150 pesos from the *cabildo* to pay for the cost of the Corpus Christi procession that first year.²⁵ The friars became so dedicated to this new site, in fact, that they made Santiago the center of their Augustinian holdings in Puebla, eventually building a friary for themselves behind the church.²⁶

The *barrio* of Santiago, situated alongside the *barrio* of Huejotzincapan (inhabited by *indios* from neighboring Huejotzingo) and Tlaxcaltecapan (inhabited by the Tlaxcalteca), quickly became known for the richness of its maguey fields and especially for the quality of its *pulque*, an alcoholic drink of fermented maguey juice.²⁷ Beginning in the sixteenth-century and continuing into the eighteenth, the *barrio* established superior workshops of sculptors, especially of Santiago images.²⁸ In addition, by 1790, it had developed a reputation for the quality of its butchers and masons.²⁹ The success of the *barrio*'s *pulquería* and other industries should come as no surprise, given the precedent set in their home city of Cholula. According to Mendieta, by the 1590s Cholula was one of the best cities in New Spain given that nearly everyone there was a merchant. Because of this, it had "the best houses and the richest people in all of the Indies."³⁰ Cholula's association with merchants dates to the pre-hispanic period when it was home to a widely-known marketplace that attracted numerous *pochteca*, or long-distance Nahuatl merchants, from throughout the Mexica Empire. With Cholula being such a successful home city, its satellite community in Puebla was bound to flourish.

Although the *barrio* of Santiago's cool, lush gardens became a place of retreat and recreation for Poblanos long before the existence of the Alameda or the Paseo de la Reforma, its indigenous

inhabitants remained residentially segregated from Poblanos for much of its early history.³¹ During the colonial period, the *barrio de Santiago Cholultecapan* remained outside the *traza* (see figure 1). This was due to a ruling by the *cabildo* in 1550—the same year of the *barrio*'s founding—that native people should not receive a single plot of land within the *traza*.³² Despite the restrictions regarding the intermixing of indigenous tributaries with Spanish *vecinos*, by the 1570s Puebla's rapid growth led to the abandonment of this prohibition. In fact, according to documents dating to this period, seven Spaniards—all male—received land in “*el barrio de los Cholultecas*.” In the same period, *cabildo* records indicate that four native people—two men and two women—received one fourth of a plot of land at the back of the church of Santiago.

The first documented Spaniard to receive land in the *barrio de Santiago* was Macario de Anzúrez; Puebla's *cabildo* approved his



Figure 1: Traza de Puebla

From *Puebla a través de los siglos*. José García Valseco, editor general. El Sol de Puebla, 1962

grant on April 6, 1575. According to the record, a Spanish official named Diego de Anzúrez accompanied two *regidores*, Pedro Diez de Aguilar and Alonso Galeote, to the site to complete the inspection three days prior to the approval of “*una huerta de tierra*,” that is, “an orchard of land.” This designation indicated that the principal intention of the land was cultivation.³³ By this time, the *barrio* was well-known for its lush gardens, shady orchards, and successful industries, so it is no surprise Spaniards would be interested in owning property there. In addition, by this time the city had already swelled from its original fifty inhabitants to about five hundred *vecinos*.

One week later, on June 13, 1575, two additional Spaniards, Francisco de Lucas and Juan Galeote, also received *huertas*, or agricultural plots of land, in the *barrio*.³⁴ The *cabildo*, in fact, granted these lots adjoining Macario de Anzúrez’s land (see figure 2). The positioning of their land grants was likely no accident. Since both men petitioned for land the same day Macario de Anzúrez received his *huerta*, we can assume they knew one another. These three contiguous lots extended to four on June 17, 1575, when the *cabildo* granted a *huerta de tierra* to a Spaniard named Antón Martín.³⁵ According to the official record, his lot adjoined that of Juan Galeote and was located “*abajo del barrio de Santiago Cholultecapan*,” that is, “below” the neighborhood, which I take to mean south. The document suggests that this group of Spaniards received land along the edges of the *barrio* rather than in its heart, which would have been thick with native peoples. In fact, the *huerta* of one of the earlier recipients, Francisco de Lucas, was described as being located “*por el barrio*,” that is, near or towards the neighborhood. That same June day, Puebla’s *cabildo* granted the fifth and sixth *huertas de tierra* as adjoining lots to the Spaniards Juan Ruiz Ortíz and Diego de Nava.³⁶ Although the record indicates that Juan Ruiz Ortíz petitioned for and received his land the same day, we have no information about Diego de Nava’s petition. These two grants align with all the others, that is, together they adjoin the *huerta* of Francisco de Lucas (see figure 2).

The following year, we begin to see the granting of *solares* of land, rather than *huertas*, a solar being a home plot or land destined for construction, whereas a *huerta* was land designated for cultivation. The first such documented land grant took place on February 24, 1576, being assigned to the Spaniard Hernando de Chávez, a

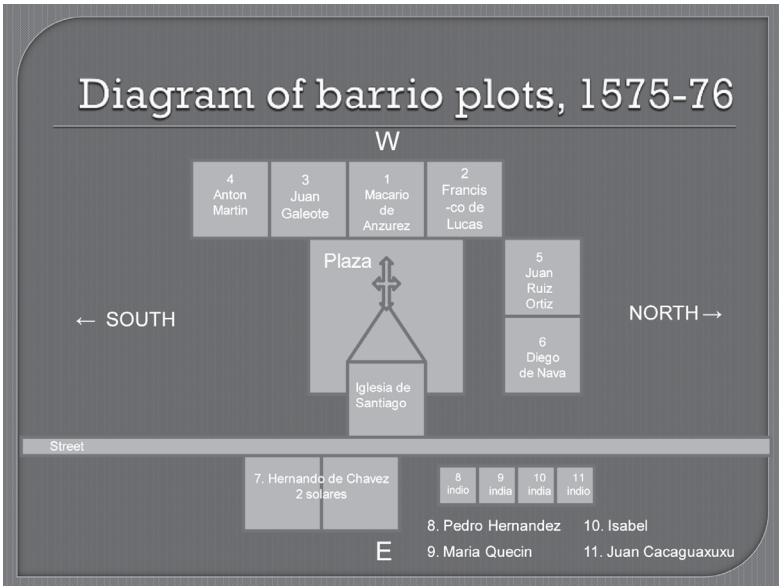


Figure 2: The Barrio of Santiago Cholultecapan

Author's rough sketch of the plot distribution

vecino of Puebla. He received two *solares* of land “a la espalda de la Iglesia de Santiago, en el barrio de los Cholultecas,” that is, “at the back of the church of Santiago in the neighborhood of the Cholultecas.”³⁷ The record indicates that the *alguacil mayor*, Francisco Díaz de Vargas, made the inspection and the authorization accompanied by a *regidor* named Nicolás de Villanueva.

In contrast to the sizeable grant of two *solares* of land given to the aforementioned Spaniard, the *indios* in Santiago received only a quarter of a solar. The date on the four documented cases is February 24, 1576, the same day as Hernando de Chávez's land grant. These four grants were contiguous, all of them located “a espaldas de la iglesia, calle en medio” that is, behind the church, with a street between the church and their lots. Pedro Hernández, *indio*, receives the first plot, neighbored by María Quecin, *india*. The property of the second female indigenous landholder, mentioned only as Isabel, adjoined the plot of the aforementioned María Quecin. The fourth and last documented quarter-solar adjoined the property of Isabel, *india*, held by Juan Cacaguaxuxu, *indio*. Like the Spaniards, these *indios* received property at the edge of the *barrio* (see figure 2).

Unlike the earlier documents, there is no indication of the date of the petition, nor is there information regarding the inspection or the authorization of these land grants. Is the information missing because they are indigenous rather than European landholders? That is not clear.

In the end, scholars will need to conduct more research to fully understand the sixteenth-century relationship between the satellite community of *Santiago Cholultecapan* in Puebla and its home community in Cholula. Even so, I would argue that Cholula's proximity to Puebla, coupled with its history as a successful marketplace, contributed to its flourishing and booming industries in the *barrio de Santiago*. Unlike other *indios* in Puebla, these Santiago *indios de servicio* enjoyed the local protection of their indigenous leaders from nearby Cholula, for if the Poblanos mistreated them in any way they could take recourse in their home *cabildo*. We can imagine that the sixteenth-century connection between these two locations was strong. Even today, residents from Santiago travel every week to Cholula for its traditional Sunday market, demonstrating ties that likely originated during the colonial period. Most indicative of this lingering relationship is the fact that the *barrio* of Santiago looks like a miniature Cholula, being surrounded on three sides with two-story businesses and residences much like its home city. Santiago's *zócalo*, or its central plaza in front of the church, doubles as a garden and a playground. In its center stands a lone archway, remnants of a gate built in 1689 that opened into a former cemetery housed in the enclosed atrium. And just a short twenty minute walk away—seven blocks east and seven blocks south to be exact—is the Puebla cathedral, where in 1732, the industrious *indios* of Cholula raised the enormous *doña Mará Palafox* to her current resting place in the southern belfry.

NOTES

¹ Mtro. Antonio Bravo Méndez, "Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol," *Guía de Templos* (Puebla, Puebla, México: Universidad Popular del Estado de Puebla, sin año). The *cabildo* is the municipal town council.

² The Poblanos named the bell after the Virgin Mary, since it would toll daily at 6am, noon, and 6pm to invite the citizens of Puebla to recite the Angelus, a prayer recognizing Mary as the Mother of God. See *The State of Puebla* (México: Ediciones Nueva Guía, S. A. de C. V., 2002), 18.

³ To this day, Puebla's coat of arms depicts two angels holding up the bell towers of the cathedral. Another legend claims that angels armed with rods, tapes, and surveying tools descended from heaven to found the city, mapping it out in perfectly straight lines from north to south and east to west.

⁴ *The State of Puebla*, 28 and 18.

⁵ Peter Gerhard. *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain*. Revised Edition (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1993), 222. In 1531, Puebla's founders broke ground on this land.

⁶ These documents, which I discuss below, can be found in Archivo Municipal-Puebla (AM-P), libro de cabildo 10.

⁷ I took these numbers from Gerhard, 222. He adds that the original 50 *vecinos* increased to 81 by 1534. By 1570 the city boasted 500 inhabitants. Motolinía numbers the original founders at 40; see fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *La historia de los indios de la Nueva España* [1541] (Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 2001), 272.

⁸ James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz, *Early Latin America: A history of colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge Latin American Studies, 1983), 91.

⁹ Gerhard, 222.

¹⁰ *The State of Puebla*, 24.

¹¹ Lockhart and Schwartz, 91.

¹² Gerhard, 222. Regarding the identity of the non-tribute paying *indios*, I have no further information than a sentence in Gerhard.

¹³ Lockhart and Schwartz, 91.

¹⁴ Gerhard, 222.

¹⁵ Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía. *La historia de los indios de la Nueva España* [1541] (Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 2001), 272.

¹⁶ Prior to 1531, the Spanish Crown exercised loose local rule from Mexico City. See Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952): 66-68.

¹⁷ Puebla's original cathedral had been built between 1536 and 1539, but in addition to needing extensive repairs, the structure no longer accommodated the rapidly growing population. See *State of Puebla*, 28.

¹⁸ Bravo Méndez, 1 and Eduardo Merlo Juárez and José Antonio Quintana Fernández, *Las Iglesias de la Puebla de Los Ángeles*, Tomo II (Secretaría de Cultura, Puebla and Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla, no year), 340. According to Merlo Juárez and Quintana Fernández, the location became known as *el barrio de Santiago de los Cholultecas* as early as 1551.

¹⁹ Emma García Palacios, *Los barrios antiguos de Puebla* (H. Ayuntamiento del Municipal de Puebla de Zaragoza, 1974), 94-95, which gives the date alternately as 1640, 1650, and 1540. I use 1550 because it seems the most reasonable, plus it is the date used by Merlo Juárez and Quintana Fernández, a more reliable source.

²⁰ "Carta al Emperador de los indios de Cholula, 1552," AGI, Audiencia de México, document 94.

²¹ "Carta al Emperador de los indios de Cholula, 1554," AGI, Papeles de Simancas, Est. 59, Caja 1, Lec. 3, Libro de Cartas.

²² Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* [1596] (México: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1993), 423.

²³ García Palacios, 94; the book actually says 1640, but I take this as a typo for 1540. Other sources indicate 1550 so the actual date is unclear.

²⁴ St. James the Greater was the brother of St. John the Evangelist and the son of Zebedee, not to be confused with the other apostle named St. James, who was the son of Alpheus, often called “the Lesser.”

²⁵ García Palacios, 94.

²⁶ Merlo Juárez and Quintana Fernández, 340. See also Bravo Méndez, 1.

²⁷ Merlo Juárez and Quintana Fernández, 340. See also Bravo Méndez, 1.

²⁸ Merlo Juárez and Quintana Fernández, 340 and Bravo Méndez, 1. It is ironic that native peoples were fashioning Santiago images given that he purportedly killed their ancestors during the Conquest, becoming known as Santiago Mata-indios (St. James the Indian-slayer), a New World modification of Spain’s patron: Santiago Matamoros, or St. James the Moor-slayer.

²⁹ Bravo Méndez, 1.

³⁰ Mendieta, 329.

³¹ Merlo Juárez and Quintana Fernández, 340. See also Bravo Méndez, 1.

³² See the essay’s opening quote taken from Bravo Méndez, 1.

³³ AM-P, libro de cabildo 10, ficha 7942. It is not clear whether Macario de Anzúrez and Diego de Anzúrez were related to one another.

³⁴ AM-P, libro de cabildo 10, fichas 7946 and 7947.

³⁵ AM-P, libro de cabildo 10, ficha 7953.

³⁶ AM-P, libro de cabildo 10, fichas 7954 and 7955.

³⁷ AM-P, libro de cabildo 10, ficha 8029.