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Encomienda Politics in Early Colonial Guatemala, 1524-1544: Dividing the Spoils. By Wendy Kramer. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994. xiv + 293 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$47.50 paper.)

Many narratives of the conquest of Guatemala go little beyond the name of the first governor, Cortés's former captain, Pedro de Alvarado. Wendy Kramer furnishes the details of a much fuller history with her study of Guatemalan *encomiendas* during the first two decades of Spanish rule. In the process, she demonstrates how archival sources can be profitably exploited for such a project. Based on her investigation of primary documents, Kramer dissents from the conventional wisdom regarding the conquest of Guatemala and Alvarado's role in it. Alvarado is most famous as the conqueror of Guatemala, but his exploits in Peru are also well known, as are his journeys to Spain and his support of Cortés in Honduras. His untimely death at the *peñol* (rock) of Nochistlán, in Mexico, occurred as he was preparing for further conquests in the direction of California and the Far East.

Despite these many absences, the peripatetic Alvarado is generally portrayed as a dominating presence in Guatemala. Kramer depicts him as a strong influence, but a chaotic one, more responsible for delaying than for promoting the establishment of a stable regime. A recurring theme of this book is that of Alvarado exploiting his position in Guatemala to promote his own efforts elsewhere, even attempting to abandon it in pursuit of personal power in Mexico. Meanwhile, others contributed more to the conquest and settling of the region.

The role of these other figures from Guatemalan history is illuminated in *Encomienda Politics*. Their own writings, in their *probanzas* (proofs) and *informaciones de méritos y servicios* (evidence of merits and services to the crown), provide Kramer with her main sources. These are supplemented by *pleitos* (litigations), *residencias* (judicial reviews of officials), and official letters. Most were found in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain.

The obvious danger in depending upon such petitions is that each claimant is likely to have inflated his own role in events as well as his own reputation; and Alvarado was a logical target for criticism. In relying on these sources, Kramer could be accused of trading in one biased viewpoint for another which is equally partisan. The enthusiasm which she brings to debunking the Alvarado legend lends some credence to such criticism.

Encomienda Politics, however, does not simply argue one side of a centuries-old dispute. This is a detailed account of the granting and annulling of early *encomiendas*, valuable in its own right and as background to already existing studies of the second half of the sixteenth century. *Encomiendas* were the prizes sought by winners in the conquest and local power struggles; as such, they were also a potent weapon. Kramer demonstrates that many were assigned by others besides Pedro de Alvarado, crediting his brother Jorge with the first *repartimiento general* (general distribution of *encomiendas*). The story of when *encomiendas* were granted and rescinded, who bestowed, lost, and received them, and the reasons behind these transactions, is a large part of the story of the conquest and settlement of Spanish America. A case study of the *encomienda* of Huehuetenango during the period under investigation shows how one locale fared under the sway of its *encomenderos* and what this prize meant for those who won it.

Encomienda Politics adds needed depth to our knowledge of the Spanish conquest and early settlement of Guatemala. In Kramer's portrayal, Pedro de Alvarado is situated within a cast of major players, many of whom survived the transition from conquest to colony. Kramer did not write this study of the *encomienda* as a social history of Guatemala, or of the *encomenderos*. She used the *encomienda* to detail the early years of the colonial period. She succeeded in that, and in providing the best portrayal yet available of the first *encomenderos*.

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