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Patterns in Early Spanish Overseas Expansion

John E. Kicza

SPANISH expeditions ventured to the American mainland in the second and third decades of the sixteenth century only after an extended process of overseas expansion.¹ Spain had been trading and colonizing in Atlantic waters since the 1300s and had competed with Portugal for control over the Atlantic islands and the west coast of Africa.² Spain's movement into the Atlantic largely followed a mercantile approach embodying commercial practices also employed by Portugal and Genoa in dealing with non-Western peoples. This was to be expected, as the ports of southern Spain had long been integrated into the Mediterranean mercantile world. But Spanish expansion also enacted a new approach—that of full settlement or Reconquest—which emerged during Christian Spain's seven centuries of episodic warfare against Islamic Moorish kingdoms on the peninsula. This struggle reached a successful conclusion just as the Spanish undertook systematic colonization across the Atlantic.³

This article examines the practices and institutions brought by the

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¹ A thoughtful, comprehensive treatment of Europe's overseas involvement in this era is J.R.S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe* (New York, 1988). Still useful earlier studies include J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance, 1450-1650* (London, 1963), Boies Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420-1620* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), Carlo M. Cipolla, *European Culture and Overseas Expansion* (London, 1970), and G. V. Scammell, *The World Encompassed: The First European Maritime Empires, c. 800-1650* (Berkeley, Calif., 1981).

² An impressive contribution to this topic is Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Before Columbus: Exploration and Colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, 1229-1492* (Philadelphia, 1987). Detailed, more narrowly focused works are John W. Blake, *European Beginnings in West Africa, 1454-1578* (London, 1937), Florentino Pérez Embid, *Los descubrimientos en el Atlántico y la rivalidad castellano-portuguesa hasta el Tratado de Tordesillas* (Seville, 1948), and Antonio Rumeu de Armas, *España en el Africa Atlántica*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1956-1957).

³ Important syntheses of the longer process of Reconquest are Angus MacKay, *Spain in the Middle Ages: From Frontier to Empire, 1000-1500* (London, 1977), Derek W. Lomax, *The Reconquest of Spain* (London, 1978), and Charles Julian Bishko, "The Spanish and Portuguese Reconquest, 1095-1492," in Bishko, *Studies in Medieval Spanish Frontier History* (London, 1980), 396-456.

Spanish to the American continent through a consideration of their evolution in the conquests of the Canary and Caribbean islands. It seeks to demonstrate how certain patterns persisted to the end of the conquest era in the mid-sixteenth century while others were abandoned or replaced. Most of these characteristics formed part of either the mercantile or the full-settlement approaches to expansion, as latent rather than conscious aspects of the participants' behavior. The intentions and deeds of colonizers sprang primarily from the prevailing practices and cultures of their regions of origin: men from the southern coastal trading zone commonly followed the mercantile pattern; men from the interior provinces followed the full-settlement one. The primary issues treated in this discussion are the organization and funding of expeditions, the limited and intermittent role of the Spanish monarchy, the function of the *adelantado* (expedition leader), the goals and expectations of the colonizers, the lack of religious motivation in these early years, the conduct of campaigns, and the colonizers' attitudes toward and use of the native societies they subjugated.

The article commences with the characteristics of the mercantile and full-settlement patterns of expansion as representing values and traditions from two different parts of Spain. It then examines the conquest and initial colonization of the Canary Islands and the Caribbean to illustrate how these traditions came into play in the two arenas, though not necessarily in every aspect or to the same degree. The final substantive section looks at early Spanish activity on the American mainland to demonstrate that full settlement became dominant and more fully realized there than on the islands, while the mercantile practice largely faded from the scene.

The southern coast of Spain had long been distinct from the rest of the country. It contained a much more diverse population and a vigorous mercantile community scattered among several ports, of which Seville was easily the most important. Italian commercial houses, particularly from Genoa, had for centuries maintained a substantial—sometimes preeminent—presence in such ports.⁴ These branch operations could become so large and autonomous as to threaten the ascendancy of the founding firms. Resident Genoese businessmen married with some frequency into the families of Spanish merchants and local nobility, who themselves undertook trading ventures in the Mediterranean and along the North Atlantic coast of Africa.⁵

Such firms saw little gain in investing in colonial settlements involving substantial European populations. Instead, in the Atlantic, they operated in a manner similar to the Portuguese. This entailed the dispatch of small

⁴ Ruth Pike, *Enterprise and Adventure: The Genoese in Seville and the Opening of the New World* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1966); Charles Verlinden, *Les origines de la civilisation atlantique* (Neuchâtel, Switz., 1966).

⁵ Enrique Otte, "Los Sopranis y los Lugo," *II Colloquio de Historia Canario-Americana*, I (Seville, 1979), 241–244; Verlinden, "The Italians in the Economy of the Canary Islands at the Beginning of Spanish Colonization," in Verlinden, *The Beginnings of Modern Colonization*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Ithaca, N. Y., 1970), 253.

failure, with most of the participants (including Mendoza) dying from disease, Indian attacks, or famine within a year.⁸⁶ The survivors fled upriver until they entered the land of the Guaraní Indians in central Paraguay. The Guaraní themselves were beleaguered by incessant attacks from surrounding Indians and viewed the Spaniards as useful allies. The Spaniards founded the town of Asunción and enjoyed a certain localized prosperity based on their enduring association with this native group.⁸⁷

These mainland expeditions all followed the full-settlement pattern of expansion. The Spaniards never considered merely setting up lightly manned trading bases. They intended to colonize and to employ indigenous laborers and resources in their enterprises.

European merchant houses played a greatly reduced role in financing these expeditions; settlers and colonial merchants, most of whom were Spaniards, now provided much of the funding. Communications were maintained and trade was initiated even while a campaign was underway, if at all possible, since additional information and matériel were always needed. Further, a new colony's linkage into the European commercial system was indispensable to its viability. The conquerors had to be able to ship their gains profitably to Europe and to receive its manufactured goods in return for their province to endure and prosper. Thus they welcomed merchants into their midst and sought to augment their trade with the other colonies and with the mother country.

In the process of expansion, the governor of a colony characteristically authorized each new undertaking. Sometimes he helped in its financing or supply, expecting to profit personally from its success. Nonetheless, in the normal course of events, expeditions repudiated their sponsoring governor whenever the participants realized that they had chanced upon a rich new territory. They then declared autonomy and installed their commander as governor of the region being claimed for Spain. To execute this disavowal in proper legal fashion, they founded a town complete with a council. The municipality then declared itself independent of any preexisting colonial government and sent an emissary laden with documentation to Spain to gain royal approval.⁸⁸ The arrival of this agent—perhaps quickly followed by another from the repudiated governor—could well be the first that the crown heard of the expedition. The monarch commonly decided in favor of the successful leader, as there was little else he could do, but might order him to pay compensation to the rejected official.

The idea for an expedition usually originated with a man of prominence or authority. To gain the necessary backing, he had to be a highly regarded

⁸⁶ Ernesto J. Fitte, *Hambre y desnudeces en la conquista del Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires, 1963).

⁸⁷ Julián María Rubio, *Exploración y conquista del Río de la Plata: Siglos XVI y XVII* (Barcelona, 1953); Elman R. Service, *Spanish-Guaraní Relations in Early Colonial Paraguay* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1954).

⁸⁸ The founding of Veracruz by Cortés's expedition so that it might assert its independence of the governor of Cuba is the best known and described of these actions. See Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, ed. and trans. A. R. Pagden (New York, 1971), 24–28, 37–46; López de Gómara, *Cortés*. 81–91.

veteran of the Indies, a man the colonists termed a *baquiano*, preferably with experience in commanding men against native societies. The *adelantado* (leader) would secure the approval of the governor and then set about to staff and supply the venture, typically by selling or mortgaging his holdings in the colony. Officials and merchants also made loans or investments, sometimes in the form of partnerships, for set shares of the proceeds.⁸⁹ Thus expeditions usually departed with their leaders already deeply in debt. The capitalists' shares and the crown's standard claim to one-fifth of all gains (*quinto*) took precedence over all others.⁹⁰

Assembling a force of men was not a simple task. First, the organizer needed several loyal lieutenants. He therefore turned to relatives, who might already be living with him, or to men from his home province in Spain. When Pizarro, for instance, was in Spain to gain royal approval for the expedition he was organizing to Peru, he traveled to his home town of Trujillo to recruit several brothers as his primary aides, as well as other men to form a reliable retinue.⁹¹ Such assistants stood to gain far more than the common recruit at the end of the enterprise.

Recruits for the rank and file were not always readily available. Men joined *entradas* to obtain quick wealth, land, and laborers. A colonist who had assembled such assets or established himself as an artisan, merchant, or professional, typically displayed no desire to set off on another dangerous venture with unsure rewards.⁹² Thus the term "adventurer," so often applied to the *conquistadores*, could hardly be more inappropriate or misleading. When still without holdings, these men were prepared to risk their lives to make their fortunes and were ruthless in assailing those—native peoples and sometimes other Spaniards—who stood in their way. Once comfortably set up, however, the conquerors proved to be satisfied and sedentary sorts.

For this reason, the men who had lost out during the initial founding of a colony, plus others newly arrived from Spain, composed the *entradas* from any area. In fact, by the middle of the sixteenth century, when the major conquests had already been carried out and considerable immigration to the Americas was taking place, colonial authorities regularly authorized expeditions designed to remove surplus population from their regions.⁹³

⁸⁹ Pike, *Enterprise and Adventure*, chap. 5, enumerates a series of cases from the Caribbean of Genoese commercial agents funding such enterprises. López de Gómara, *Cortés*, 18–19, relates how Cortés raised money from both a merchant and local officials. The partnership that Pizarro maintained with two other men in his early ventures along the Pacific coast is well known; see John Hemming, *The Conquest of the Incas* (New York, 1970), 24–27. Góngora describes a complicated company in a conquering expedition in Central America in *Grupos de conquistadores*, 43–46.

⁹⁰ Góngora, *Grupos de conquistadores*, 55–56.

⁹¹ Lockhart, *The Men of Cajamarca: A Social and Biographical Study of the First Conquerors of Peru* (Austin, Tex., 1972), 6.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁹³ Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 143–145.

Entrada members came from a wide range of social backgrounds, with the vast majority from the broad middle sector of Spanish society. All types except the upper nobility and the desperately poor were represented, with generally a higher proportion of urban dwellers than countryfolk.⁹⁴ The list of ninety-three men present at the founding of Panama in 1519 identifies three *hidalgos* (gentry) and eight squires, six professionals (such as notaries and medical practitioners), twenty artisans, eleven farmers, thirteen sailors and pilots, and five foreigners (three Italian and two Greek).⁹⁵ Among the 168 men who participated in the capture of the Inca emperor Atahualpa at Cajamarca in 1532 were thirty-eight *hidalgos*, one cleric, twelve clerks, thirteen merchants, nineteen artisans, two seamen, two foreigners (both Greek), one black, and one mulatto horseman.⁹⁶ The 150 or so men who accompanied Pedro de Valdivia to Chile in 1540 included five notaries, three clerics, three merchants, five miners, ten artisans, one sacristan, five foreigners (from Germany, Flanders, Greece, Italy, and Portugal), and one black slave (who later became an *encomendero*).⁹⁷

Expeditions were not organized along military lines, and the members rarely had previous experience as soldiers.⁹⁸ The participants did not use the term "soldier" when describing each other.⁹⁹ Military experience was hardly necessary, since strict discipline and complex tactics were not called for in the type of warfare conducted against the indigenous societies. From the conquest of the Canary Islands, through their experiences in the Caribbean, and continuing on to mainland America, the standard approach of the Spaniards was to capture the local headman and to rule through him and the native social hierarchy. The seizures of Montezuma by Cortés and of Atahualpa by Pizarro were representative.¹⁰⁰

The salient division of forces in an expedition of 250–500 men (more or less the size of most of them) was between cavalry and footmen, with the number of horsemen rarely exceeding twenty. Footmen were organized into several squads, each commanded by one of the leader's trusted associates. There were no military ranks or serious training. The partici-

⁹⁴ Group biographies of conquering expeditions include Tomás Thayer Ojeda and Carlos J. Larraín, *Valdivia y sus compañeros* (Santiago, Chile, 1950), José Armando de Ramón Folch, *Descubrimiento de Chile y compañeros de Almagro* (Santiago, Chile, 1953), Góngora, *Grupos de conquistadores*, Lockhart, *The Men of Cajamarca*, and Carlos Meléndez, *Conquistadores y pobladores: Orígenes histórico-sociales de los Costarricenses* (San José, Costa Rica, 1982).

⁹⁵ Góngora, *Grupos de conquistadores*, 75–81.

⁹⁶ The previous occupations or social backgrounds of 87 men were found; see Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 36–38.

⁹⁷ The previous occupations or origins of 34 of the men were discovered; see Thayer Ojeda and Larraín, *Valdivia y sus compañeros*, 108–109.

⁹⁸ Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 21.

⁹⁹ Góngora, *Grupos de conquistadores*, 10; Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 18–19.

¹⁰⁰ Nor, in fact, do the chronicles of the conquests treat them as immense innovations or as anything more than an accepted major step in the process of gaining authority over the native societies. Great disagreement would develop later, however, over the issue of responsibility for the deaths of these two emperors.

pants already knew how to wield swords and pikes. Few carried arquebuses. Firearms were of limited utility, as they had little impact on the massive armies the imperially organized peoples of the Americas could muster, and artillery was of negligible importance given that the force would not have to invest any fortified towns. Crossbows remained the weapon of choice for launching projectiles.¹⁰¹ The Spaniards always preferred close combat, where they could use their metal weapons to excellent advantage, to a prolonged exchange of projectiles, where even their superior protective garments could not protect them fully against the waves of arrows and spears of their far more numerous opponents. Even in close combat, the Spanish tried to remain in compact fighting groups and avoid individual confrontations.

Expeditions were organized as companies; with the end of the venture, the agreement lapsed, and all parties became free agents to do as they wished, including joining other such endeavors.¹⁰² A well-equipped man usually received one share; one with a horse commanded a double share. The *adelantado* and his lieutenants claimed a number of shares each.¹⁰³ Merchants supplied the weaponry and other items men needed in return for a half share. People residing in the colony where an expedition was assembled could invest in the venture by sending along retainers, slaves, or horses. They usually obtained a third to a half of the gains of any servant they contributed, with the actual participant getting the remainder. A man who contributed a horse while himself remaining behind could claim a full share.¹⁰⁴

Entrada members often had to provide much or all of their food and other supplies. These costs forced them to contract substantial debts before the expedition ever set forth and added more during its course.¹⁰⁵ Bernal Díaz del Castillo relates how he and other impoverished settlers helped organize and supply two expeditions from Cuba in an effort to improve their fortunes.¹⁰⁶ Participants often formed companies among themselves to cover logistical and other needs.¹⁰⁷

Expedition members were understandably very sensitive to the final

¹⁰¹ An in-depth analysis of how a small group of Spaniards could prevail against a vast indigenous army that besieged them for about a year is Thomas Flickema, "The Siege of Cuzco," *Revista de Historia de América*, XCII (1981), 17–47. A consideration of military change in Europe in this period and the advantages that it gave to Europeans in warfare against non-European peoples is Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1988), chap. 4.

¹⁰² Silvio Arturo Zavala, *Los intereses particulares en la conquista de la Nueva España* (México, D. F., 1964), 19–20; Góngora, *Grupos de conquistadores*, 10; Ramón Folch, *Descubrimiento de Chile*, 34.

¹⁰³ For the distribution of shares in Pizarro's expedition see Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 78–82.

¹⁰⁴ Góngora, *Grupos de conquistadores*, 42.

¹⁰⁵ Zavala, *Intereses particulares*, 19, 54–55.

¹⁰⁶ Díaz, *Conquest of Mexico*, 16–17, 27.

¹⁰⁷ There were numerous company agreements among the men in Pizarro's expedition; see Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 69–75.

distribution of proceeds. They characteristically complained that they were receiving far too little and that the captains had either changed the rules or had hidden some of the booty.¹⁰⁸ Of course, a failed *entrada* could wipe out the fortunes of investors and participants.¹⁰⁹

Without military discipline and regulations to control behavior and because the participants had diverse allegiances and interests, the *adelantado* was always hard pressed to maintain morale and a sense of common cause among his men. This is one reason why leaders sought to enlist their own cadres of relatives, friends, and persons from their regions of birth in positions of importance. When an expedition faced a threat from hostile forces or perceived that it was likely to gain immense wealth, the leader could expect good conduct and cooperation, but when it enjoyed little success, the leader faced open challenges, rebellions, or the formation of splinter groups that threw off his authority and went their own way.¹¹⁰ The ill-fated early campaigns into Paraguay, for example, broke into factions that fought each other and deposed, even killed, their governors.¹¹¹

As in Spanish settlement of the Atlantic and Caribbean islands, evangelization was not initially an imperative in the subjugation of the Americas.¹¹² In fact, even the major campaigns on the American mainland—those of Cortés, Pizarro, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, and Valdivia, for example—included few ecclesiastics, and these went to minister to the Spaniards. (A friar in Cortés's expedition, in fact, repeatedly restrained the conqueror's religious fervor, reasoning that he might make native lords and priests irate by arguing with them or desecrating their sacred sites.)¹¹³ The era of evangelization closely followed the age of conquest in the core areas of the emerging empire, but it followed nonetheless. A zeal to convert did not drive Spain's expansion across the Atlantic. True missionary efforts developed later, centered among desert, mountain, and jungle peoples along the frontiers, against whom conquering expeditions had experienced little success.

The participation of the royal government in this movement was sporadic even at its height and quite negligible by the time *entradas* were penetrating Mesoamerica and South America. The crown generally encouraged such efforts, but lack of resources and weak governmental structure limited it to offering concessions and exemptions. As had been the case during the Reconquest, the leader of a successful expedition was

¹⁰⁸ Zavala, *Intereses particulares*, 45, 69; Góngora, *Grupos de conquistadores*, 57.

¹⁰⁹ Ramón Folch, *Descubrimiento de Chile*, 108.

¹¹⁰ A thorough treatment of a stagnating expedition's deterioration is provided in Demetrio Ramos, "Funcionamiento socioeconómico de una hueste de conquista: la de Pedro de Heredia en Cartagena de Indias," *Revista de Indias*, CXV-CXVIII (1969), 393–526.

¹¹¹ Ulrich Schmidel, *Derrotero y viaje a España y las Indias* (Buenos Aires, 1944); Enrique de Gandía, *Historia de la conquista del Río de la Plata y del Paraguay: los gobiernos de don Pedro de Mendoza. Alvar Núñez y Domingo de Irala, 1535–1556* (Buenos Aires, 1932); Rubio, *Exploración y conquista del Río de la Plata*.

¹¹² McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World*, 95.

¹¹³ Díaz, *Conquest of Mexico*, 177–178, 201, 235.

recognized as the first governor of the territory that he subdued, and the crown did not take an irrevocable position against such posts being hereditary until the mid-sixteenth century.¹¹⁴ The *municipio* remained the fundamental governmental institution conveying power and legitimacy.

Conquistadores subdued new territories in order to settle, not to raid and depart. Members of expeditions such as those of Cortés in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru remained in overwhelming numbers in the lands they subjugated even after the distribution of booty. Enduring wealth and status came through full settlement of a region and exploitation of its human and physical resources.¹¹⁵ Some settlers did ultimately return to their homeland, but most of them did so only after they had made substantial fortunes through postconquest economic and professional activities. Also, return migration must be understood within the framework of the family and local networks through which much of the migration in both directions functioned, for successful colonists were far more likely to promote the immigration of others from their home regions than they were ever to return to Spain.¹¹⁶

None of the labor systems that became so central to the Spanish American colonial economies—rotary draft labor systems, personal retainers, and slavery—had to be invented on the scene. All had precedents in the Iberian experience before colonization in the New World commenced, though they might be modified or expanded in this new setting. The extensiveness and longevity of each of these labor institutions in any particular region, as well as the mix among them, were determined by the

¹¹⁴ Floyd, *Columbian Dynasty*, is excellent on the government's vacillation into the 1520s on the authority of the Columbus family in the Caribbean. On the royal government's cautious assertion of authority in early colonial Mexico see Peggy K. Liss, *Mexico under Spain, 1521-1556: Society and the Origins of Nationality* (Chicago, 1975).

¹¹⁵ The centrality of the first conquerors in the formation of the early colonial societies and the continuing preeminence of some of their families has been overwhelmingly demonstrated. Besides the studies cited in note 93 see, for Mexico, Robert T. Himmerich, *The Encomenderos of New Spain, 1521-1555* (Austin, Tex., 1991), Julia Linn Bell Hirschberg, "A Social History of Puebla de Los Angeles, 1531-1560," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1976), and Ida Altman, "Spanish Society in Mexico City After the Conquest," *Hispanic Amer. Hist. Rev.*, 71, (1991), 413-445; for Peru, Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532-1560*. Karen Spalding, *Huachochiri: An Andean Society Under Inca and Spanish Rule* (Stanford, Calif., 1984), Robert G. Keith, *Conquest and Agrarian Change: The Emergence of the Hacienda System on the Peruvian Coast* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), Susan E. Ramírez, *Provincial Patriarchs: Land Tenure and the Economics of Power in Colonial Peru* (Albuquerque, N. M., 1986), and Keith A. Davies, *Landowners in Colonial Peru* (Austin, Tex., 1984); for Chile, Mario Góngora, *Encomenderos y estancieros: Estudios acerca de la Constitución social aristocrática de Chile después de la Conquista, 1580-1660* (Santiago, Chile, 1970).

¹¹⁶ Altman, "Emigrants and Society: An Approach to the Background of Colonial Spanish America," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXX (1988), 170-190, and *Emigrants and Society: Extremadura and Spanish America in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989); Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, chap. 3.

character of the indigenous peoples and the nature and dynamism of the economy.

The Spanish government acted slowly to incorporate the American colonies into its central administrative framework. As long as the possessions were in the Caribbean, they remained of peripheral interest to the home government, since the region contained no valuable resources or large, advanced civilizations. Individual islands and Tierra Firme were placed under governors who acted largely as autonomous authorities: not until the 1520s did they have to answer to a powerful oversight agency in Spain. The monarchs regarded these early settlements as trading factories.¹¹⁷ In 1503, the government placed them under the newly created *Casa de Contratación*, a royal trading house modeled after a Portuguese institution founded a half century previously to handle commerce along the African coast and eventually in India. In 1511, Santo Domingo, the capital of the Caribbean region, was assigned an *audiencia*, a court of appeals that also exerted considerable executive authority. The precedent-setting court was established in the Canary Islands in 1497, just as the conquest ended. Also that year, administration over the Indies was placed under a special section of the Council of Castile, but not until 1519 was Hispaniola annexed to the Castilian monarchy.

The conquest of Mexico in 1521, and the Spanish government's resultant comprehension that the Americas contained resources and peoples on a scale previously unimagined, impelled the crown to integrate this now very substantial colonial empire more tightly into its administrative structure. In 1524, Carlos I created the Council of the Indies with permanent authority over all of his territories in the Americas. Despite this, Cortés faced few obstacles to his near total authority in Mexico until an *audiencia* was finally assigned there in 1528. (Although royal notaries and treasury officials accompanied a number of *entradas*, with only a couple of notable exceptions, they did not concern themselves with issues of authority and patronage but rather sought to ensure that royal interests were protected, particularly in the distribution of booty.)¹¹⁸ The first viceroy arrived in Mexico in 1535, fourteen years after the defeat of the Aztecs and, incidentally, three years after the conquest of the Incas. Peru was long left to the governorship of Pizarro. The first viceroy and *audiencia* did not arrive there until 1544, fully three years after Pizarro's assassination. Columbus in Hispaniola, Velázquez in Cuba, Valdivia in Chile, and yet other *conquistadores*/governors also enjoyed extended periods in command of the lands they had colonized without other government officials or agencies to obstruct or modify their actions.

Spain's initial efforts at conquest and colonization in the Atlantic and the Caribbean, as described here, were not vastly different from other European countries' early undertakings in the Americas. Spain initially fol-

¹¹⁷ Lockhart and Schwartz, *Early Latin America*, 64.

¹¹⁸ McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World*, 186.

lowed the mercantile pattern of expansion, but this approach was soon subordinated to the full-settlement one when expeditions reached territories with substantial populations and resources. The government played a very circumscribed role in both types of endeavors. No entity or individual coordinated the expeditions. Private initiatives, characteristically by persons with some experience in exploration or settlement (or at least associates of others who had such experience), spearheaded the movement. Merchants in Europe and in the first colonial ports acted as the primary agents. Established colonists invested in the undertakings but did not participate in them. Religious motivation had not yet become a major force.

The first Spaniards to settle in the New World also broadly resembled their counterparts from other European societies.¹¹⁹ Studies have shown that many *conquistadores* and other early settlers came from locally respected families that lacked substantial resources; literate professionals were also well represented, as were mercantile agents and skilled artisans.¹²⁰ Few military men were present. Family networks provided the conduits of information and recruitment through which many came initially to the Americas. A scattering of foreigners was not unusual. Blacks—slave and free—participated in the initial settlement of Spanish America.

The early colonists enjoyed considerable autonomy. The Spanish monarchy acted quite slowly to dispatch authorities to the Americas. The first royal representatives on the scene of a conquest or new settlement were generally treasury agents; political officials came later. Thus the emerging colonial society was formed by the settlers themselves. By the time judges and viceroys arrived, they could do little but confirm the structures and relationships that already prevailed and try to exploit them.

Reconquest tradition and the presence of substantial native populations impelled the Spanish to incorporate the conquered peoples into their nascent colonial societies, commonly as a subordinate labor force, a practice without parallel in North America. The Spanish, nonetheless, showed considerable respect for the established indigenous hierarchy—honoring their landholdings and claims on labor service from their people—to the extent that the first generation of colonists considered marriage with local noblewomen to be most suitable and sometimes even socially advantageous.

Given the range of characteristics broadly shared by the initial colonizing endeavors of European countries, the most productive approach to the comparative study of the Americas may be to focus on the nature of the indigenous societies, resources, and environments that the settlers encountered upon their arrival. Perhaps the uniqueness of the colonies that developed lay not so much in the peoples who came to them as in what they encountered when they arrived.

¹¹⁹ An excellent comparative analysis and up-to-date bibliography are provided in Ida Altman and James Horn, eds., *"To Make America": European Emigration in the Early Modern Period* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991).

¹²⁰ I refer here to the works cited in notes 92, 111, and 114.