VIEWPOINTS / PUNTOS DE VISTA

BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS AND THE CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAS

LAWRENCE A. CLAYTON

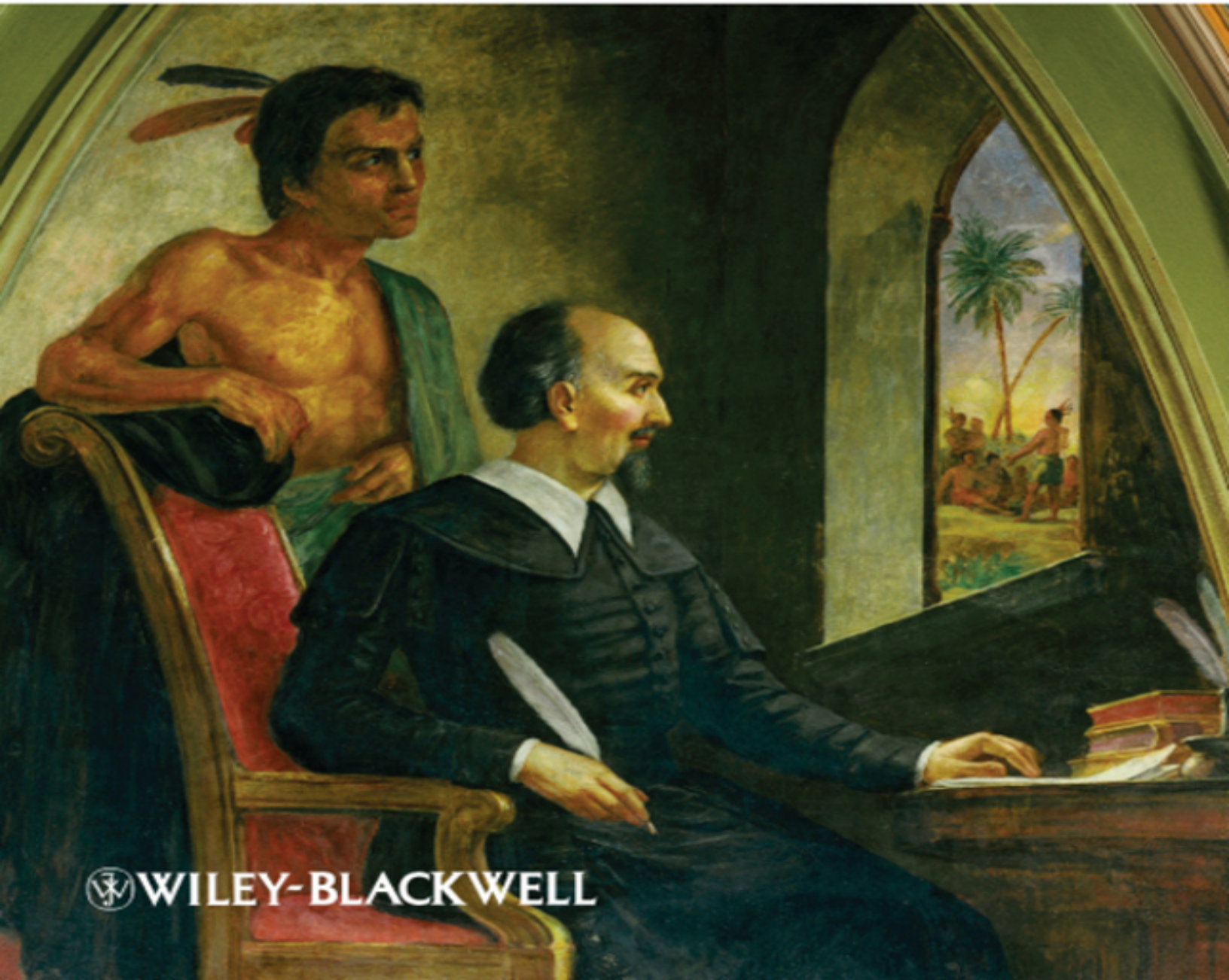

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Table of Contents

Bartolomé de las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas

Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista

Themes and Interpretations in Latin American History

Series editor: Jürgen Buchenau

The books in this series will introduce students to the most significant themes and topics in Latin American history. They represent a novel approach to designing supplementary texts for this growing market. Intended as supplementary textbooks, the books will also discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating to students that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Unlike monographs, the books in this series will be broad in scope and written in a style accessible to undergraduates.

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Bartolomé de las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Bartolomé de las Casas and the Taino peoples of the Caribbean, whose suffering led to his life's calling as protector of American Indians.

List of Illustrations

Maps

Figures

parents in the Christian faith.

Figure 6.1 Original painting of Las Casas.

Series Editor's Preface

Each book in the "Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista" series introduces students to a significant theme or topic in Latin American history. In an age in which student and faculty interest in the developing world increasingly challenges the old focus on the history of Europe and North America, Latin American history has assumed an increasingly prominent position in undergraduate curricula.

Some of these books discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Others offer an introduction to a particular theme by means of a case study or biography in a manner easily understood by the contemporary, non-specialist reader. Yet others give an overview of a major theme that might serve as the foundation of an upper-level course.

What is common to all of these books is their goal of historical synthesis by drawing on the insights of generations of scholarship on the most enduring and fascinating issues in Latin American history, and through the use of primary sources as appropriate. Each book is written by a specialist in Latin American history who is concerned with undergraduate teaching, yet who has also made his or her mark as a first-rate scholar.

The books in this series can be used in a variety of ways, recognizing the differences in teaching conditions at small liberal arts colleges, large public universities, and research-oriented institutions with doctoral programs. Faculty have particular needs depending on whether they teach large lectures with discussion sections, small lecture or discussion-oriented classes, or large lectures with no discussion sections, and whether they teach on a semester

or trimester system. The format adopted for this series fits all of these different parameters.

This volume is one of the two inaugural books in the “Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista” series. In *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas*, Larry Clayton recounts the life and times of a Spaniard who arrived in the New World with his father in the early days of colonization and conquest. After he witnessed firsthand the cruelty of colonialism as the owner of an *encomienda*, Las Casas abandoned his worldly career for a calling as a Dominican friar. He became the most vociferous critic of Spanish abuses in the New World, and particularly the practice of enslavement of the indigenous population. Based on Las Casas’s own writings and a close reading of the historical literature, Clayton provides a sympathetic yet trenchant biography that serves as an entry into the larger issues of colonialism, slavery, indigenous resistance, and the early colonial debate about human rights in Latin America.

Jurgen Buchenau

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Acknowledgments

While researching and writing this work, I have been helped by many friends and colleagues and institutions, none of whom are in any way responsible for errors in fact or judgment that may have survived in this small book in spite of their good efforts. Institutionally, the University of Alabama provided me with two sabbaticals, one in 1998 and one in 2005, without which I could not have initiated or completed this study. The Pew Evangelical Scholars Program (now discontinued) supported me in a full year of research in 1999–2000 that was indispensable.

Individually, many of my colleagues and students at the University of Alabama were supportive and helpful, reading portions of the manuscript, answering questions on recondite corners of history, always encouraging me. Among those are Tony Clark (now at Whitworth University), Maarten Ultee (emeritus), Jimmy Mixson, Dave Michelson, Steve Bunker, George McClure, Michael Mendle, James Knight, Steve Newton, and especially Helen Delpar for reading and commenting on the entire manuscript.

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At Wiley-Blackwell, my editor and his assistant, Peter Coveney and Galen Smith, were immensely supportive and I thank them for their enthusiasm, both professional and personal. Thanks to Jane Taylor, picture researcher in the UK, who helped us track down such esoterica as permissions from dead art collectors and reclusive friars.

Jürgen Buchenau, the general editor of the series, at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, and I first exchanged some ideas on this book at a meeting of the South Eastern Council on Latin American Studies (SECOLAS) in Ybor City, Tampa, one beautiful spring day in 2008.

Jürgen encouraged me to join him as he planned this series Viewpoints. We agreed that there was no more seminal—or controversial—figure than Bartolomé de Las Casas in early Latin American history and he was the perfect vehicle for opening this series on differing perspectives and points of view in the making of Latin America.

And at home, close to my heart and my office, my wife Louise and son Carlton have patiently put up with dad once again obsessed by some historical figure or subject, this time the friar Las Casas for over ten years that I will admit to.

Timeline

1485	Birth of Bartolomé de las Casas, Seville, Spain
1492–93	First voyage of discovery, Christopher Columbus
1493	Bull *Inter Caetera* of Pope Alexander VI
1502	First trip to the Indies, Las Casas
1511	Antonio Montesinos's sermón, Santo Domingo
1512	Laws of Burgos
1514	Massacre at Caonao, Cuba and Las Casas's prophetic call
1515	Las Casas returns to Spain
1516	*Memorial de remedios* to Cardinal Cisneros
1517	Las Casas's second trip to the Indies
1517	Las Casas with the Hieronomites in Santo Domingo
1517	Las Casas returns to Spain
1519–21	Conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés
1520	Las Casas's third trip to the Indies
1519–22	Ferdinand Magellan circumnavigates the world
1520–21	Venezuela (Cumaná) experiment
1522	Las Casas joins Dominican Order, Santo Domingo
1526–31	In Puerto Plata, "long sleep"
1527	Las Casas begins to compose *History of the Indies*
1531–33	Between Puerto Plata and Santo Domingo
1532–34	Conquest of Peru by Francisco Pizarro
1533	Las Casas and Enriquillo
1535	Las Casas's Attempt to reach Peru
1535–36	Las Casas goes to Nicaragua
1536–40	Las Casas in Guatemala and Mexico
1537	Pope Paul III's Bull on American Indians
1540	Return to Spain, Las Casas
1542	Publication of New Laws for governing the Indies
1543	Las Casas appointed Bishop of Chiapa
1544	Las Casas's fourth trip to the Indies
1544–47	In Guatemala, New Spain
1545–63	Council of Trent meets
1547	Las Casas returns to Spain
1550–51	Debate between Las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda
1552	Las Casas publishes major tracts, Seville
1553–61	Las Casas in Valladolid

1561–66	Las Casas in Madrid
1566	Death of Las Casas[1]

Note

1 All dates relating to Las Casas largely from Isacio Pérez Fernández, O. P. *Cronologia documentada de los viajes, estancias y actuaciones de Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* (Bayamon, Puerto Rico: Centro de Estudios de los Dominicos del Caribe, Universidad Central de Bayamon, 1984), supplemented by Helen Rand Parish, *Las Casas en México* (Mexico, 1992).

Introduction

The age of the exploration and conquest of the Americas has undergone some remarkable changes in interpretation in the past half century. This short book will serve as an introduction to this seminal period in world history encompassed by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

You will read about traditional and modern interpretations of what happened, and how historians and other students of the past such as archaeologists, ethnographers, and demographers have defined and studied the changes in world history prompted by this great encounter between two worlds. As the distinguished historian John Parry once observed, “America was not discovered by the Europeans; it was truly a meeting of two cultures who had not known each other previously.”[1]

Most readers are familiar with some of the bare facts of the age of the conquest: the discoveries made by Christopher Columbus; the beginning of the European settlements on the large islands of the Caribbean, and then the continuing conquest of lands and Amerindian peoples across the continents of North America and South America and including the connecting isthmus of Central America.[2] But as researchers have probed more deeply into the documentation and have embraced new priorities and brought new perspectives into the equation of interpreting the past, it seems that the history of the Conquest has been loosened from its foundations and radiates with controversy and differing points of view.

For example, to label it the “Conquest” of America is hardly acceptable to a new generation of scholars. It was, as John Parry noted, a meeting of two worlds, an encounter between two civilizations, and you will often find

“Encounter” used as a substitute for “Conquest.” In this book, we will use both, for each has a special meaning. *Conquest* implies a superiority of one civilization over the other, while *encounter* implies a greater equality of customs and culture, each different in many ways but neither “superior” in overall qualities. That the Spanish and Portuguese wielded a technological and military superiority over most of the Amerindian peoples, from the village-level people of the Caribbean to the great state-level Archaic empires of the Aztec in Mexico and Inca in Peru, is generally true, and thus “conquest” by arms is appropriate.[3] But even within this category, there is disagreement. The Spanish, armed with swords of Toledan steel and great war horses, did not simply ride roughshod over Amerindians armed with primitive weapons, absolutely intimidating and overwhelming the Tainos, for example, on the island of Española or the Aztecs of central Mexico. The first “battle” or campaign between the Tainos and Spaniards on Española went to the Tainos, and the mighty conquistador of the Aztecs, Hernán Cortés, waged a campaign of fire and terror between 1519 and 1523 on the Aztecs, the outcome of which was not a given. The Aztec warriors gave as much as they took and the pendulum of battle swung back and forth, driven by courage, wile, terror, technology, and disease, all in different proportions at different times of the campaign.

The first chronicles or histories of any given era—such as the Encounter—are usually the ones to establish the “orthodox” or traditional view of what happened. History is based on documentary evidence, which by definition is based on written records. Since the Spanish were literate and the great bulk of the Indian population was not, the first chronicles and records of the Conquest were produced by Spaniards. Their point of view was celebratory and triumphant, while the Indian perspective was submerged or

highly skewed, seen through the lens of Spanish customs and traditions.

The Spanish, or Eurocentric, perspective is challenged by contradictory evidence and points of view, many of them recent, born of new scholarship, but some perspectives—as you will read shortly below—arise from eyewitness accounts by Spaniards of the epoch itself. Some of these eyewitnesses did not view the Conquest as the unvarnished triumph of Spanish culture and Christianity over Amerindian barbarism and paganism. Other issues dot the landscape of the Encounter.

We do not really know how many people inhabited the Americas when Columbus completed his first voyage: Twenty-five million? Fifty million? One hundred million? More? Nor are we sure how devastating the role of diseases—largely European ones to which Amerindians had no immunities—played in the eventual predominance of the Spanish military conquest of the Americas. Scholars in the mid-twentieth century, led by a group of demographers, ethnographers, geographers, and historians at the University of California, determined with some precision—they thought—that the scythe of European epidemic diseases, such as smallpox, laid waste the Amerindian populations and thus made possible the swift conquest of the Americas. It certainly helped to have "General Smallpox" marching alongside Hernán Cortés into Mexico, or with Francisco Pizarro into Peru in 1532, but recent scholarship has considerably downplayed the role of disease and instead substituted the growing weight of European settlers to the Americas as a factor in the Encounter.[4] Even the widespread assertion that a smallpox pandemic spread with terrifying rapidity across Mexico and Peru has been questioned in the light of studies on the actual spread of the disease—usually slowly and only among families, household members and others who had to be in close contact with an

infected person. Reports of the spread and devastating effects of smallpox, as described by chroniclers, and accepted by historians of the twentieth century looking to the germs and diseases theory to account for the rapidity of the Spanish Conquest, simply do not conform to how smallpox spreads.[5]

The legends of the Spanish conquistadors have been persistent, given life by the accounts of the Spanish themselves of course.[6] Did the Amerindians really consider the European strangers to be gods in some human form? Were Amerindians religions so different from the Roman Catholicism that came in with the Spaniards? Did these same Spaniards truly think of the Amerindians as a lesser form of humankind?

These and other questions, and how they are addressed and answered, come broadly under the category of historiography, which is the study of how historians over the ages have interpreted the facts. In the pages that follow, you will find three basic elements, all essential to any good history: first, a presentation of the basics of the exploration, discovery, and conquest of the Americas; second, a presentation and discussion of the differing interpretations of what it all actually means—often very nuanced but sometimes radically different; and third, woven into all of this, the life of one man, Bartolomé de las Casas (1485–1566), to give this history a human face. Las Casas, however, was no ordinary Spanish settler in the “Indies” (a term employed by the Spanish to describe the Americas, along with the “New World” occasionally).[7]

Arguably the most important person of the age after Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), Las Casas was involved at almost every stage, major event, or controversy of the Conquest in one fashion or another. Las Casas, who became a priest and later a Dominican friar, was formed by the