

Mestizos and the Spanish Imperial Race for Reconstruction: Habilitation Payments, Crown Fundraising, and the Armada, 1588-1594

In the 16th century New World, conquering Spaniards fathered children with Indian women. Starting in the 1530s, however, colonists petitioned the Crown, calling them ‘mestizos’ and asking for special laws on them. I thus explore how the Crown created its laws from colonists' petitions, *verbatim*. This demonstrates how the Empire decided on racial and socio-economic policies ‘from below.’ The final segment of my research, from 1591 to 1595, explores fees mestizos paid to bear arms, asking if these payments facilitated the Spanish Armada’s reconstruction.

In 1591, the Spanish Crown issued a decree in response to an unspecified petition from the New World. The edict established that Peru’s many illegitimate part-Spanish, part-Indian vassals would be able to pay a fee to erase the stain of their sinful birth and Indian lineage.¹ The decree referred to these “mixed” individuals as mestizos, as well as by their preferred title, *montañeses* or mountain-dwellers. The Crown’s ruling Council of the Indies also included its rationale: it was allowing the mestizos to habilitate themselves – that is, to buy their legitimacy, honor, and status - to help rebuilt the Spanish Armada, which the British shockingly defeated in 1588.

Through what channels did this policy emerge, and what were its military, economic, and social impacts? Unfortunately Seville’s General Archive of the Indies (AGI) contained no trace of the petition that prompted Council ministers to issue the 1591 decree.² The shady origins of the 1591 decree notwithstanding, the AGI has revealed a number of insights on its intentions and its impacts. The edict itself states clearly that the Council discussed the measure and agreed that if part-Indian subjects paid for legitimation, the Crown could better fund the “armada, which is convenient to conserve and sustain” Spanish possessions in the Indies. The Viceroy of Peru thus had permission to habilitate part-Indian vassals as he saw fit.

How much did the Crown earn from this, however? Was it enough to restore Spain’s military might? Once the measure arrived to Peru in August 1593, the Viceroy granted a Crown inspector (*visitador*) Alonso Maldonado official permission to collect mestizos’ payments.³ He then sub-delegated the collection task to Antonio de Najera Medrano, a Spanish scribe of criminal cases. He would roam the Peruvian countryside for two years, collect mestizo habilitation payments, correct landowners’ illegal possessions for fines, and accept cash from foreigners to allow them the privilege to remain in the realm. These measures would resurrect King Philip II’s fearsome navy and give the Empire a second wind.

Was the measure successful? In 1597 Najera petitioned the Crown for the position of Arica’s treasurer, emphasizing his worthiness in part due to his diligence in collecting the 148,032 pesos and three and a half reales.⁴ He did not state how much came from habilitations, however. In 1610, however, the Council accountant produced an internal report to ministers on the effort to rebuild the fleet. The memo stated that the Crown’s general fundraising measures were a rousing success and allowed the full reconstruction of a small force in the early 1590s, followed by a brand new two million peso fleet in 1593-1594, with thirty-six galleons, thirty

¹ The decree is found in the General Archive of the Indies (AGI), Lima 273, “don García de Mendoza.”

² My hypothesis also included the theory that the 1591 decree owed to Crown responses to mestizo anger following the Quito tax revolt of the Alcabala between 1591-1595; I was unable to corroborate this.

³ See note 1.

⁴ AGI, Lima 133, “Que a residido,” 1597.

smaller warships (*bajeles*), six thousand soldiers, and three thousand seven hundred sailors.⁵ However, they noted that the mestizo habilitations contributed quite little, for there were “few that had the qualities” or the resources to buy offices and honors.

The hypothesis I set out to test with the support of the History Project Grant and the Institute for New Economic Thinking was that mestizo habilitations helped reconstruct the Spanish Armada after the 1588 defeat. My research has yielded two primary, interwoven conclusions. The first is military-financial: the Crown was far too slow to collect revenues to have used these funds to rebuild the Armada in 1589-1592. However, we know the Crown successfully rebuilt using credit immediately after the defeat and was back in full force by 1594. However, Spain’s rapid recovery from the Armada was not thanks to the paltry mestizo habilitations.

The second set of findings regard the impact of the 1591 habilitation decree on Spanish-Indian offspring and their status in Peru. Unfortunately, the vast majority of habilitation paperwork occurred in Peru in face-to-face transactions between vassals and Antonio de Najera. Records of these transactions are almost certainly lost, as are most of the 16th century papers that existed in Lima and have since been lost to fires, invasions, and other disasters. The only surviving records would be in the AGI, if vassals forwarded a given document to Madrid.

The AGI contained only one legitimation, but it was telling. Huamanga resident Diego Vega de la Torre presented a 1594 petition to the Viceroy on behalf of his wife, doña Elvira Alonso del Toro.⁶ She was born out of wedlock to Spanish captain García Gonzalez de Gadea and Carolina Sisapalla, of the Inca royal house. On January 22 1596, she finished her three payments of 500 *pesos ensayados* of twelve and a half reales (roughly the value of two priests’ yearly wages). The Council of the Indies confirmed her habilitation on April 20 1597. She was no longer in any way illegitimate, nor did she resurface in future documents as a mestiza. Her case, and Najera’s report, suggests that an elite number of part-Indian individuals turned the Armada crisis to their advantage. Their stories remain for exhaustive future research in the AGI, and perhaps in the notarial archives of Huamanga, Cuzco, Arequipa, Lima, and other Peruvian cities.

Like all archival work, this visit had its frustrations. Because Najera acted on the King’s extraordinary commission, his revenues did not appear in the AGI *Contaduría* section, meaning I spent many fruitless hours poring over dense statements of royal income. Moreover, my research into the origins of the 1591 decree were fruitless.

Nonetheless, research has a way of yielding unexpected treasures too. A major concern of my broader research has been the system through which petitioners produced royal decrees like the 1591 edict. My work had outlined the basic process, but not its costs for humble or destitute vassals. During my search for the 1591 decree, I discovered a set of Council of the Indies receipts that fixed decrees’ prices at 150 maravedies – a paltry sum. This meant that subjects of virtually any social background could afford to petition.

On the whole, the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking provided me with invaluable support, providing me with six weeks’ time and the income to make these valuable discoveries in the AGI. While no archives provide all the answers, this grant has brought us one step closer to understanding the Empire, its system of petitioning, its naval fundraising apparatus, and the lives of part-Spanish, part-Indian vassals who played a small part in Spain’s speedy recovery after the 1588 defeat.

⁵ AGI, Indiferente 614, “Los arbitrios,” 1610.

⁶ AGI, Lima 133, “don García Hurtado.”