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NOTES AND COMMENTS

A Black Conquistador in Mexico

PETER GERHARD*

While the role played by the people of equatorial Africa in the colonization of Latin America is relatively well-known, it is for the most part an impersonal history that emerges from the contemporary documents: the establishment of a Negro slave trade as a result of the demand for labor to replace a devastated native population; the employment of these black slaves in the more arduous tasks throughout the colonies; and, in most areas, their gradual assimilation through miscegenation with natives (and to a far lesser extent with Europeans). Information about individual blacks is usually confined to a brief statement of age, physical characteristics, and degree of acculturation at the moment of sale or the taking of estate inventories; less frequently, the place of origin of a slave is indicated. Only rarely do we hear about a Negro slave who achieved distinction in some way. Two examples that come to mind are Juan Valiente, the conquistador of Chile,¹ and Yanga, the famed maroon leader in Veracruz.²

Although most blacks who came to America in early years were slaves, records of the Casa de Contratación show that a good many black freedmen from Seville and elsewhere found passage on westward-bound ships.³ Some of them settled in the Caribbean region, and others followed the tide of conquest to Mexico and Peru, identifying themselves no doubt as Catholic subjects of a Spanish king, with much the same privileges and ambitions as white Spaniards. “Benito el Negro” and “Juan el Negro” (the latter’s real name seems to have been Juan de

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1. Peter Boyd-Bowman, “Negro Slaves in Early Colonial Mexico,” *The Americas*, 26 (Oct. 1969), 150–151. Robert Brent Toplin, *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, Conn., 1974), p. 16.

2. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *El señorío de Cuauhtochco—luchas agrarias en México durante el virreinato* (México, 1940).

3. Ruth Pike, “Sevillian Society in the Sixteenth Century: Slaves and Freedmen,” *HAHR*, 47 (Aug. 1967), 358.

Villanueva) were encomenderos in the province of Pánuco and thus they should not have been slaves, but we cannot be sure of their origin.⁴ Spaniards might call anyone with a very dark skin “negro,” and indeed the fact that Villanueva was from Granada makes it seem likely that he was a morisco. On the other hand there is record of an African who apparently crossed the Atlantic as a freeman, participated in the siege of Tenochtitlan and, in subsequent conquests and explorations, tried his hand as an entrepreneur (with both Negro and Indian slaves of his own) in the early search for gold, and took his place as a citizen in the Spanish quarter of Mexico City. **His name was Juan Garrido, and he was still alive in the late 1540s when he wrote or dictated a short resume of his services to the crown:**

Juan Garrido, black in color . . . says that he, of his own free will, became a Christian in Lisbon, [then] was in Castile for seven years, and crossed to Santo Domingo where he remained an equal length of time. From there he visited other islands, and then went to San Juan de Puerto Rico, where he spent much time, after which he came to New Spain. He was present at the taking of this city of Mexico and in other conquests, and later [went] to the island with the marquis. He was the first to plant and harvest wheat in this land, the source of all that there now is, and he brought many vegetable seeds to New Spain. He is married and has three children, and is very poor with nothing to maintain himself. . . .⁵

The early chronology of this statement is vague, but working backwards from the fall of Tenochtitlan (1521), one can assume that Garrido arrived in America about 1510. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that a Spaniard called Pedro Garrido landed in Santo Domingo with his family and entourage in 1510, and later accompanied Cortés to Mexico.⁶ Slaves were often given the surnames of their masters, and while we do not know whether Juan Garrido was ever a slave it seems most probable that he was at least a protégé of a Spaniard at one time.

4. *Papeles de Nueva España publicados de orden y con fondos del gobierno mexicano por Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, director en misión del Museo Nacional*, 7 vols. (Madrid, 1905–1906), I, nos. 566, 572–573. Francisco de Icaza, ed., *Diccionario autobiográfico de conquistadores y pobladores de Nueva España*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1923), no. 1165.

5. Icaza, *Diccionario*, no. 169.

6. Peter Boyd-Bowman, *Índice geobiográfico de cuarenta mil pobladores españoles de América en el siglo XVI*, 2 vols. (Bogotá, 1964 and México, 1968), I, 15.

However, this is pure conjecture, and we might also consider the possibility that the subject of this essay was named for his physical appearance (Juan Garrido can be roughly translated as “Handsome John”). In fact, the matter of how and when Garrido got to Mexico, and what part he played in the conquest, are something of a mystery. The *Diccionario Porrúa*, perhaps relying on an inconclusive passage in Bernal Díaz, says that he arrived with Juan Núñez Sedeño, who accompanied Cortés’ 1519 expedition in his own ship with a large retinue that included “un negro”; Manuel Orozco y Berra has him crossing a year later with the army of Pánfilo de Narváez.⁷ Magnus Mörner, after claiming that “many” hispanicized and Spanish-speaking blacks took part in the conquest, leaves us without any details,⁸ nor does one find any mention of Garrido by name in the various contemporary accounts of the siege and surrender of Tenochtitlan (indeed the same might be said of many Spaniards who were there). His name appears for the first time in the proceedings of Mexico City’s cabildo on March 8, 1524, when that body granted a piece of land for the establishment of a smithy on the Tacuba causeway “going out of this city, just past the chapel [hermita] of Juan Garrido.”⁹ Lucas Alamán identifies this as the church subsequently rebuilt and dedicated to San Hipólito de los Mártires, occupying the site where so many of Cortés’ men died as they fled from Tenochtitlan on the Noche Triste.¹⁰ It may have been the brief statement in Alamán that gave rise to a somewhat embellished and much repeated version, of which the following is an example:

7. *Diccionario Porrúa de historia, biografía y geografía de México* (México, 1964), pp. 357, 597. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, ed. by Joaquín Ramírez Cabañas, 2 vols. (México, 1960), I, 87, 92. Baltasar Dorantes de Carranza, *Sumaria relación de las cosas de la Nueva España con noticia individual de los descendientes legítimos de los conquistadores y primeros pobladores españoles* (México, 1902), p. 384. In an earlier version of his list of conquistadors, Orozco y Berra does not specify how Garrido reached Mexico: cf. *Diccionario universal de historia y de geografía*, 7 vols. (México, 1853–1855), II, 499.

8. Magnus Mörner, *La corona española y los foráneos en los pueblos de indios de América* (Stockholm, 1970), p. 94.

9. *Actas de cabildo de la ciudad de México* (hereafter cited as AC), Mar. 8, 1524 (since there are several published editions, I shall refer only to the date).

10. Lucas Alamán, *Disertaciones sobre la historia de la república mexicana desde la época de la conquista que los españoles hicieron a fines del siglo XV y principios del XVI de las islas y continente americano hasta la independencia*, 3 vols. (México, 1844–1849), II, 285–287. Cf. Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, *Crónica de la Nueva España* (Madrid, 1914), p. 494, where the chapel’s builder is identified as Juan Tirado.

San Hipólito . . . Historically and sentimentally this is one of the most interesting churches in the city. In front of the spot where it now stands there existed in the year 1520 the second line of defenses on the causeway (now the street occupied by the horse railway to Tacuba) that connected the Aztec city with the main-land westward. At this point was the greatest slaughter of the Spaniards during the retreat of the memorable Noche Triste (July 1, 1520). After the final conquest of the city, one of the survivors of that dismal night, Juan Garrido, having freshly in mind its bloody horrors, built of adobe at this place a little commemorative chapel.¹¹

Terry's guide, drawing on the story as told by Orozco y Berra, identifies Garrido as "one of the Conquistadores [who] undertook to recover the bodies of his slaughtered countrymen and to erect a chapel wherein they could be buried with religious rites."¹²

While his role in the Tenochtitlan episode remains obscure, Garrido took part in at least one of the expeditions sent out by Cortés after the conquest of the Triple Alliance to secure control and investigate the economic potential of outlying areas. According to a *relación geográfica* of 1580, "A Negro . . . who called himself Juan Garrido" accompanied Antonio de Caravajal and three other Spaniards to the hot country of Michoacán and the coast of Zacatula, most likely in 1523–1524. This little group was received hospitably by the Tarascans of Zirándaro, after which it proceeded across the Sierra Madre del Sur "on a deserted trail through a cold rugged area with lions and tigers and snakes and other animals."¹³ Zirándaro belonged to the Tarascan empire which in 1522 had accepted Spanish rule practically without resistance, while the more truculent Indians of the coast had recently surrendered to the army of Gonzalo de Sandoval, which may explain how a small force could emerge unscathed from such an expedition.¹⁴ In fact, Caravajal's mission was to introduce Christianity to the natives (although there was no priest in his party) and to make a careful census of the communities visited, noting the mineral wealth and the tribute-paying capacity of each, for the guidance of Cortés in the first

11. Thomas A. Janvier, *The Mexican Guide*, 4th ed. (New York, 1890), pp. 206–207.

12. T. Philip Terry, *Terry's Mexico—Handbook for Travellers*, (London, 1909), pp. 335–337.

13. *Relaciones geográficas de la diócesis de Michoacán, 1579–1580*, 2 vols. (Guadalajara, 1958), II, 40. J. Benedict Warren, *La conquista de Michoacán, 1521–1530* (Morelia, 1977), p. 88.

14. Donald D. Brand, et al., *Coalcoman and Motines del Oro: An Ex-districho of Michoacan, Mexico* (The Hague, 1960), pp. 56–58.

distribution of encomiendas. We do not know whether Garrido stayed with Caravajal throughout the visitation of Michoacán, which lasted about a year; in any event, we find him once again in Mexico City early in August 1524.¹⁵

It must have been before he went off with the Caravajal party that Garrido became the first wheat farmer on the American continent. The importance to the expatriate Spaniards, both as a matter of taste and as a measure of social status, of having wheat bread rather than cassava or maize tortillas, can hardly be overstressed.¹⁶ According to the conquistador Andrés de Tapia, “after Mexico was taken, and while [Cortés] was in Coyoacán, they brought him a small amount of rice, and in it were three grains of wheat; he ordered a free Negro [*un negro horro*] to plant them.”¹⁷ The Negro referred to by Tapia is identified in a parallel account by the seventeenth-century chronicler Gil González Dávila as “Juan Garrido, a servant [*criado*] of Hernando Cortés.”¹⁸ Both sources agree that the tiny crop harvested by Garrido at this time was the first in New Spain, and that all wheat subsequently grown came from its seed.

The conquistador community moved from Coyoacán to the rebuilt Mexico City at the beginning of 1524. If, as we surmise, Garrido was still occupied in the reconnaissance of Michoacán when this move took place, it was perhaps a year or so earlier that the pious black conquistador built his hermitage, next to which he lived and had a garden plot or huerta (undoubtedly a *chinampa*) where he could continue his horticultural experiments.¹⁹ We can be sure that foremost among such activities was the cultivation of grapevines and the manufacture of wine, a product not only greatly desired by the Spanish laity but also desperately needed by the clergy for the celebration of mass. Before long, Cortés ordered all encomenderos to have wheat and other useful European plants grown in their villages, and by late 1525, wheat and

15. AC, Aug. 12, 1524. Warren, *La conquista de Michoacán*, pp. 87–89.

16. Pierre Chaunu, *L'Amérique et les Amériques* ([Paris], 1964), p. 86.

17. Joaquín García Icazbalceta, ed., *Colección de documentos para la historia de México*, 2 vols. (México, 1858–1866), II, 592–593.

18. Gil González Dávila, *Teatro eclesiástico de la primitiva iglesia de las Indias occidentales, vidas de sus arzobispos, obispos, y cosas memorables de sus sedes*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1649–1655), I, 8.

19. AC, Mar. 15, 1524; Sept. 30, 1524; Aug. 11, 1525. Angel Palerm, *Obras hidráulicas prehispánicas en el sistema lacustre del valle de México* (México, 1973), pp. 154–157. Cf. Manuel Toussaint, Federico Gómez de Orozco, and Justino Fernández, *Planos de la ciudad de México, siglos XVI y XVII* (México, 1938), pp. 96–97.

grapes cultivated by Indians in the vicinity of Mexico City were no longer a curiosity.²⁰

Juan Garrido's position in the close-knit conquistador society of Mexico–Tenochtitlan in those early years can only be imagined, but surely he must have been considered a rarity because of his color. There were as yet relatively few free blacks in the colony (indeed as far as we know Garrido was the only Negro vecino in Mexico City in the 1520s), and the social complications of mestizaje had really not begun. At first, as we have seen, Garrido made his home outside the city limits or *traza* on a piece of land perhaps formed as the waters of the lake receded (a dry spell set in shortly after the conquest), adjacent to both the Tacuba causeway and the aqueduct bringing fresh water from Chapultepec. His may will have been the first of a great many huertas in the old lake bed west of the city acquired and developed by Spaniards beginnings in the mid-1520s.²¹ However, nearly all the conquistadors forming the original body of citizens (vecinos) had *solares* or house lots within the *traza*, and there is a suggestion of stigma in the fact that Garrido initially settled outside the Spanish quarter, and was not officially received as a vecino until February 10, 1525. At that time, he was assigned a house site within the *traza* on Calle de la Agua, although he retained his country property.²² The move may have been merely a matter of convenience, after all, to make it easier for Garrido to carry out his duties as doorkeeper (*portero*) of the city's cabildo, a position that he seems to have held from 1524 to the end of 1526.²³ This was not a particularly lucrative post, the salary being a mere thirty gold pesos annually. However, for a few months Garrido was also made responsible for taking care of the Chapultepec aqueduct with a stipend of fifty pesos a year, and he may have acted simultaneously as town crier (*pregonero*), starting the still-honored tradition of "moon-lighting."²⁴

During the years 1526–1527, frequent changes in the Spanish power structure in Mexico brought about equally frequent reversals of personal fortune among the adherents and the enemies of Cortés, and thus it is quite conceivable that Juan Garrido lost his small sinecures as a result of this factional strife. Specifically, an unsuccessful effort on

20. Hernán Cortés, *Cartas y documentos*, ed. by Mario Hernández Sánchez-Barba (México, 1963), p. 349. García Icazbalceta, *Colección*, I, 488.

21. *AC*, passim.

22. *AC*, Feb. 10 and Aug. 11, 1525.

23. *AC*, Aug. 12, 1524; Jan. 13, Feb. 28, June 2, and Dec. 15, 1525; Aug. 17 and Dec. 10, 1526.

24. *AC*, Aug. 26 and Dec. 29, 1524; Jan. 4, 1525; Jan. 4, 1527.

Cortés' part to "pack" the Mexico City cabildo at the beginning of 1527 coincided with the appointment of a new *portero-pregonero*.²⁵ Whatever the reason, Garrido decided to leave the city and seek his fortune in the gold fields, in the same region which he had visited with Carvajal years earlier. By the spring of 1528, he had acquired on credit a gang of slaves and mining equipment and was reported to be in the province of Zacatula, perhaps in the famous placers of the Motines area, the objective of many Spaniards and the grave of literally millions of Indians in those terrible years.²⁶ The gold rush was at its peak, but Garrido does not seem to have enjoyed much success as a miner. In October 1528, he was back in Mexico City and had still not paid a debt of twelve pesos, the value of "certain washing pans," when he incurred a new debt for some pigs that he had purchased.²⁷ The anti-Cortés faction was soon to be considerably reinforced by the president and judges of the first audiencia, and Garrido no doubt retired to his *chinampa* farm to await better times.

In 1530, Cortés returned to Mexico from Spain with a title (marquis), ample resources, and great ambition, but only a shadow of his former political power. New Spain was ruled by a hostile audiencia, Guatemala by the ungrateful Alvarado, and New Galicia by the marquis' greatest enemy, Nuño de Guzmán. Cortés, frustrated and bitter, sulked in his marquisate and surrounded himself with lawyers and malcontents. The king had wisely provided a remedy for this dangerous situation by giving him a commission to search the shores of the Pacific for new lands and riches.

By the early 1530s, the gold rush was almost finished, and while favored Spaniards in Mexico were living munificently on Indian tribute, and others were building fortunes in the newly discovered silver mines, there was a growing body of restless young men looking for adventure and profit. Many of them from 1532 to 1536 headed for the conquest of Peru, and indeed Cortés himself had prepared two ships to sail southward from Tehuantepec when he heard that another of his vessels had discovered an "island" in the north supposed to be rich in gold and pearls and the home of the legendary Amazons.²⁸ The island was in

25. C. Harvey Gardiner, *The Constant Captain, Gonzalo de Sandoval* (Carbondale, Ill., 1961), pp. 178–179.

26. Agustín Millares Carlo and José I. Mantecón, *Índice y extractos de los protocolos del Archivo de Notarías de México, D.F.*, 2 vols. (México, 1945–1946), I, no. 1263. Brand, et al., *Coacomán*, p. 64.

27. Millares Carlo and Mantecón, *Índice*, I, nos. 1664, 1674.

28. Woodrow Borah, "Hernán Cortés y sus intereses marítimos en el Pacífico: El Perú y la Baja California," *Estudios de Historia Novohispana*, 4 (1971).

fact a peninsula, the southern tip of Lower California. Learning that Guzmán had seized the returning ship and its treasure, Cortés ordered his flotilla to the north and marched overland to join it, gathering recruits on the way.²⁹ By the time he reached Chametla, a port in Guzmán's territory opposite the newly discovered "island," the charismatic marquis was accompanied by a formidable retinue which apparently included Juan Garrido. **A contemporary witness testified that Cortés' followers numbered 400 Spaniards and 300 Negroes;³⁰ most of the latter must have been slaves intended for work in the gold mines and oyster beds.** Garrido was no doubt in a privileged category, and in fact it would seem that he had his own complement of Negro and Indian slaves at this time.³¹

The Lower California expedition was Cortés' last great venture and it was a disaster, an heroic undertaking carried out against impossible odds. There were far too many people and horses to be transported across the stormy gulf (the fleet had to make several trips to take them all), and once on that desolate shore they had to be fed with provisions brought from great distances. The nearest mainland was controlled by Guzmán, and in any event it produced little surplus as the native population on the whole west coast of Mexico was at this very time being decimated by a fearful epidemic. Thus, the settlers were dependent on what they could find locally (mostly fish) and supplies from the highlands of central Mexico which had to be carried to the coast and shipped out of ports as far south as Huatulco.³² Even the marquis' vast revenues were not enough to keep the colony going. The remarkable fact is that some Spaniards remained in the vicinity of La Paz, in a desert and surrounded by extraordinarily primitive Indians, for more than a year and perhaps two, from May 1535 to late 1536 or early 1537. Cortés himself, however, returned to Mexico via Acapulco in the spring of 1536, accompanied by a few Californian Indians and some of the colonists including Juan Garrido, who was in Mexico City by July of that year.³³

We know very little indeed about the further career of this unusual black man. How he made a living after his return from California, the

29. Cortés, *Cartas*, pp. 524–527.

30. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Mexico*, 6 vols. (San Francisco, 1883–1886), II, 423n; William H. Prescott, *The Conquest of Mexico*, 2 vols. (London, 1957), II, 352.

31. Millares Carlo and Mantecón, *Indice*, II, no. 1889.

32. Woodrow Borah, *Early Colonial Trade and Navigation between Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley, 1954), pp. 22–25.

33. Millares Carlo and Mantecón, *Indice*, II, no. 1828.

details of his marriage, what role (if any) he played in the aborted black slave uprising of 1537 and its grisly aftermath, may some day come to light.³⁴ Twice in 1536, Garrido gave a power of attorney to the municipal *procurador de causas* in Mexico City in connection with some unspecified suit, perhaps a claim for unpaid back salaries as the cabildo doorkeeper which was finally settled in November 1538.³⁵ Garrido's *hoja de servicios* was part of a group of such documents prepared between 1547 and 1550, and since it bears the notation "es ya muerto," it would seem that he died sometime during those years.³⁶

34. Cf. Edgar F. Love, "Negro Resistance to Spanish Rule in Colonial Mexico," *Journal of Negro History*, 52 (Apr. 1967), 96.

35. *AC*, Nov. 19, 1538. Millares Carlo and Mantecón, *Indice*, II, nos. 1828, 2090.

36. Icaza, *Diccionario*, no. 169. *Epistolario de Nueva España, 1505-1818, recopilado por Francisco del Paso y Troncoso*, 16 vols. (México, 1939-1942), V, 8-9. Perhaps Garrido died in the great plague that was raging in 1547. On the other hand, someone called Juan Garrido was alive in Cuernavaca in March 1552; cf. Millares Carlo and Mantecón, *Indice*, II, no. 2647.