

An Approach to the Social History of the Mining District of Sultepec, México, 18th Century.

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Abstract

The first findings of mineral deposits discovered after the Spanish Conquest of the Americas (1521) took place in the so-called "*Silver Province*" [Provincia de la Plata] composed of four mining districts, some of the first established in the New World: Taxco (State of Guerrero), Temascaltepec, Zacualpan and Sultepec (State of Mexico). In the case of Sultepec, twenty silver mills were already working by 1597. Nevertheless, on the first half of 18th century, production declined and eventually that glorious past would be forgotten and overshadowed by other districts in the states of Guanajuato, Hidalgo and Zacatecas. At the end of that century and the beginning of the 19th, a new bonanza started, but after the Independence War (1810- 1821), although some foreign capital tried to continue silver extraction, production was far from the Spanish times. This decline led people to abandon mining activities to engage in the manufacture of shawls [*rebozos*] and muleteers [*arrieros*].

The focus of the first version of this paper was to detail the various brotherhoods that were recorded in 1717 Sultepec from an episcopal visitation book made by Archbishop José Pérez de Lanciego Eguilaz (1665-1728), where vast amounts of information about parish conflicts, economic problems and brotherhoods is to be found. However, after making a second trip to Sultepec, accompanied by the head of the local Tourism, who kindly took us to visit some chapels and mining haciendas of 17th and 18th century centuries, I discovered the rich artistic heritage of the region, so I decided to add a second part regarding this subject.

The Real de Sultepec is located in the southwestern State of Mexico, a three hours car ride from Mexico City. Originally, Aztecs populated it but after the Conquest, Spanish people colonized the area since 1523. On the region, rich silver veins were found, so it was soon known as the Provincia de la Plata (Silver Province).¹ For example, it is known that in 1597 had been seventeen mills powered by water and three by mules.² However,

¹ This are the few publications about the village of Sultepec: Jaime García Mendoza, 2002: *La información de grupos de poder en la provincia de la plata en el siglo XVI*, tesis que para obtener el grado de Doctor en Historia, Doctorado en Historia UNAM, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Jaime García Mendoza, 1994, *Una región minera del siglo XVI: Temascaltepec, Zultepec, Zacualpan y Tasco*, tesis que para obtener el grado de Maestro en Historia (Historia de México). Ana María Arroyo Leyva, 2011, *Minería en el Real de Temascaltepec en el último cuarto del siglo XVIII: La Compañía Refaccionaria de la Mina de Agua, 1784-1792*, México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. Ana María Arroyo Leyva, 2008, *Política y minería en el centro de la Nueva España: los reales de Temascaltepec, Zultepec y Zacualpan en el último tercio del siglo XVIII (1784-1792)*, Tesis para obtener el grado de maestro en Historia y Etnohistoria, ENAH. Brígida von Mentz, 1989, *Sultepec en el Siglo XIX: Apuntes históricos sobre la sociedad de undistrato minero*, México, Universidad Iberoamericana. Hildebrando Jaimes Acuña, 2008, *Testamento y sociedad en Sultepec, Estado de México 1875-1911*, Tesis de doctorado en Historia, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

² Ana María Arroyo Leyva, *Política ...*, p. 54.

at the beginning of 18th century, production declined and like many others mining areas, the inhabitants of Sultepec changed their activity, for the production of shawls and breeding of mules. Today, the shiny silver past of Sultepec, has been forgotten and only a few people remember the names of the miners, or their population or even less something about their religious holidays. Hence the importance of not just talk about the economy and the amount of the ore extracted from the mountains, it is also necessary to recover the presence of his people, their conflicts and beliefs to regain the presence of its miners, workers and crews.

The Sultepec region consisted of several villages: Santiago Texcatitlán, Almoloya, Aguacatitlán, St. Francis, St. Andrew, Aquiaipa, Pozontepec, Holy Cross, St. Thomas and Capula. There was also another type of settlement, the *cuadrillas*, an irregular one associated with mining workers of the area like the ones of: Rincón, Hacienda de Sánchez, de Carvajal, Huayatengo, Diego de Sanchez, Matalacontla, Azumpa, St. Hippolytus, and Coyometitlán.

In the town settled in 1599 the Discalced Friars Minor founded a small convent dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua. The parish church dates from around 1660 and it was dedicated to St. John the Baptist, and administrated by two secular, who gave the sacraments and indoctrinate the Indians. As some clerics, didn't know the Indian language they needed help of another two vicars to complete their tasks.³

During the viceroyalty the constructions of some chapels in different small villages around Sultepec was necessary because the clerics could not easily travel the distance between the parish and the *cuadrillas*. Such were the cases of Capula, Totolmoloya, St. Michael and St. Peter.

³ Baltasar de Medina, 1977, *Crónica de la Santa Provincia de San Diego de México*, Editorial Academia Literaria: [distribuidores, Biblioteca J. Denegre Vaught], p. 253.



Fig. 1: Sultepec Valley. Photo Gabriela Sánchez Reyes.



Fig. 2: Parish Church of St. John the Baptist. Sultepec. Photo Gabriela Sánchez Reyes

Brotherhoods in 18th century

In June 1717, Archbishop Joseph Eguilaz Lanciego made an Episcopal visit in his archbishopric and his observations can be read in a very detailed document.⁴ In summary, in the case of parish brotherhoods there were different types. In one group, we find those founded by Spanish population as that of Our Lady of Rosary and the Holy Cross, this last one had its own chapel and had their rulebooks. In another group, we found those that admitted anyone regardless of gender, status or quality. The Blessed Souls in Purgatory, founded in 1540 to care for the souls of the faithful departed.⁵ However, for 1767 and had no funds and its activities were practically suspended.⁶ Two other brotherhoods were St. Nicholas Tolentino and the Blessed Sacrament.

In the parish also were founded two brotherhoods, both had mulattos among their members. The first one was dedicated to Our Lady of Rosary and registered mulattos exclusively. On the contrary, in the case of the Holy Name of Jesus brotherhood had Spanish people, mestizos and mulattos.⁷ This was founded on February 15th 1685 and suspended on 1767.⁸ Naturally, there was one dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the most popular devotion in Mexico since the 17th century, this brotherhood was founded in 1685. Documents sometimes describe their properties and their incomes were used in religious festivities, and for example the benefits of the sale of 400 cattle paid some ornaments and masses.⁹

Four villages around Sultepec also founded confraternities, probably because the veins were rich enough to pay the construction and maintenance of the chapels. In the village of St. Thomas, St. Anne brotherhood was founded the by the Indians. In

the village of Capula, the Holy Trinity and Holy Cross was founded in, but it isn't clear the kind of people that were part of it, however there was another founded by the Indians dedicated to St. Nicholas of Tolentino and the Assumption of Mary. At Pozoltepec, Indians founded one of the Assumption of Mary. At Aquiapan there was one dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which was founded with ecclesiastical approval on October 20th 1670, by Indians who cover their festivities with the product of cattle and horses.¹⁰ In the town of Holy Cross the Indians founded another one. To this, we must add nine chapels authorized in the *cuadrillas* although are not specified the invocations. In 1779 in the Mill of Holy Cross, another brotherhood was founded and dedicated to St. Lazarus,¹¹ There, they used to celebrate each Wednesday a special mass dedicated to St. Joseph considered patron of the Good Death.¹²

From the lines above it is possible to identify some important aspects that reveal part of the beliefs of the workers. On the first place, there were not a main miner's devotion, the way it was in Catholic Central Europe under the patronage of St. Barbara. The patronage has a relationship with the salvation of the soul, under the protection of Our Lady of the Rosary, or the Blessed Souls of Purgatory, St. Joseph and St. Nicholas of Tolentino. There is no doubt that the eternal salvation of the soul was a primary concern for the operators of the mines, since they were exposed to landslides and other accidents. This meant instant death without receiving the last rites and without confessing their sins and therefore, the soul would remain in Purgatory waiting for glorification. Hence, it was natural that the devotions were associated with the salvation of the souls in Purgatory, as the Our Lady of the Rosary and St. Nicholas of Tolentino. The other type of brotherhood is that related to the Catholic worship devotions according to the liturgical year, as the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Trinity, the Holy Cross, the Holy Name of Jesus and the Assumption of Mary.

⁴ Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México (AHAM), CL27, CL *Libro quinto*, f. 68v.

⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 76v.

⁶ AHAM, CL27, CL, *Libro quinto*, f. 68.

⁷ AHAM, CL21, L1, Visita de José de Lanciego.

⁸ AHAM, CL27, CL *Libro quinto*, *Op.cit.*, fs. 70v-72 v.

⁹ AHAM, CL27, CL, *Libro quinto*, *Op.cit.*, f. 96v

¹⁰ AHAM, CL27, CL, *Libro quinto*, *Op.cit.*, f. 68.

¹¹ AHAM, CL27, CL, *Libro quinto*, *Op.cit.*, f. 70.

¹² AHAM, CL27, CL, *Libro quinto*, *Op.cit.*, f. 79v.



Fig. 3: Book of the Blessed Souls of Purgatory brotherhood. Archivo de la Parroquia de san Juan Bautista, Sultepec. Photo Gabriela Sánchez Reyes



Fig. 4: Canyons of Coyometitlán.
Photo Gabriela Sánchez Reyes.

Origin of the “Hand Stone” tradition

In 1761, Francisco Xavier Gamboa published his *Commentaries on the Mining Ordinances*, which included a section titled “obscure mining terms used in New Spain”, which included the term *pie-dra de mano* or “hand stone” which he defined as “ore of good quality often given by miners for several pious purposes”.¹³ In 1837, Joseph Burkhart who visited Mexico around 1830, defined it as “rich piece of ore, or in general any type of mineral that operators take their *partida* [proportional pay to ore mined] to give it to the parishes or convents for pious purposes”¹⁴ in a way, it can

¹³ Francisco Xavier Gamboa, *Comentarios a las ordenanzas de minas*, Madrid, 1761, p. 497.

¹⁴ Joseph Burkhart, “Alphabetisches Verzeichniss spanischer Ausdrücke bei dem Bergbau in Mexico, nebst ihre Bedeutung in Deutschen”, *Archiv für Mineralogie, Geognosie, Bergbau und Hüttenkunde*, Vol. X, No. 2, p. 794. Burkhart marked with an asterisk Mexican terms that did not exist in Spain, “hand Stone” is one of them.

be understood as a kind of donation that mine workers gave to cover some construction materials such as churches¹⁵ or bridges. For example, in the temple of Valenciana in the city of Guanajuato, it is said that weekly taxes produced 50,000 pesos annually. While in the mines of the city of Zacatecas, the “hand stone” was given away every day from each one of the workers. It is important to note that the custom of giving the “stone hand” was exclusive for the operators of mines.

Little is known on what terms are actually engaged in this practice, so the news given in a document about the Indian Village of Coyometitlán in 1776 is revealing. A new church was built and dedicated to St. John the Baptist with the “hand stone” contributions of the brotherhood of Corpus Christi.¹⁶ The document specifies that the owners of the mines only provided sacred vestments, so the construction depended by the Indians donation.

Shortly after finishing the temple, people founded a brotherhood under the title of the Blessed Sacrament. It took a long time to get an Ecclesiastical authorization, nevertheless, the population collected donations for divine worship because of a decaying silver production. The parish priest investigated why people didn’t want to pay benefits to the parish. He argued that donations were given to him but the once the construction of the temple was started in Coyometitlán, these benefits stopped. He also explained that the *barreteros* (borers) gave this charity, who donated part of his salary unlike the owners that only gave as much as their devotion dictated: very few money.¹⁷ This practice of donating the “hand stone” was not only for the cases of religious buildings, since there is record from the Temascaltepec’s mayor that used these taxes to build a bridge.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sylvester Baxter, *La arquitectura hispano colonial en México*, México Secretaría de Educación Pública y Bellas Artes, 1934, p. 184. Clara Bargellini, *La Arquitectura de la Plata: Iglesias Monumentales del Centro-Norte de México, 1640-1750*, UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1991, p. 104.

¹⁶ Archivo General de la Nación, (AGN), Indiferente Virreinal, Caja 0921, exp. 23. f. 3104.

¹⁷ AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, caja 4425, exp 65, f. 1v.

¹⁸ AGN, General de Parte, vol. 63, exp. 27, fs. 14-15.

Final Considerations

I may conclude that the social and religious life of the *reales mineros* in Mexico during the viceroyalty still has many veins to explore. This requires a vast research on the archives to open new perspectives, as has been the case of Sultepec. The documents about viceregal Brotherhoods not only give an account of the patron saints, but provides information on the type of population and some economic disputes.

In connection with the so-called "mining brotherhoods", we have to rethink the term. Discussed data of Sultepec brotherhoods suggest other points of analysis. These are usually called "mining brotherhoods" just because they were founded on a *Real Minero*. I think that can be divided into five groups: First those connected to the Catholic cult itself, and the liturgical calendar, the festivities of the Holy Cross, Assumption of Mary, the Name of Jesus, etc. Secondly, those related to some devotion associated with the salvation of the soul in case of accidental death without receiving the last rites, a common situation in mines so they were founded under the protection of the souls in Purgatory, St. Nicholas of Tolentino and the Our Lady of Mount Carmel. And the third one might be in terms of a specific social group; those founded by Spanish, or other groups such as Indian or mulattos.

As a conclusion, I must say, that if the aims of the *Erbe Synposium* is the recovery of mining heritage, the mission was accomplished. I can tell that this research has begun to create a project to recover the history of the mining town of Sultepec. Sultepec municipal authorities, who are interested in local history rescue, have supported this. I must mention Mauricio Alvarez, responsible of the tourism office who is not only concerned about publicizing the attractions of the town; he also showed enthusiasm and interest to rescue the town's History. I am indebted to him, as he managed to get permissions to photograph some of the chapels. Likewise, the historian Ana Maria Arroyo, who has studied the mineral extraction for the second half of the 18th century and who has studied this region. As to its artistic heritage, little is known of the dates of construction of their churches and

chapels, and even less about their altarpieces, sculptures and paintings. For example in the village of Diego Sanchez, their inhabitants do not know the origin in this name or something about that person. When looking at the historical record, in 1717 a person of this name led a *cuadrilla* or group of workers. It is still unclear who this character was, though certainly was associated with mining. Another peculiarity is that, in this town, there is still a small chapel with ornate ceilings and an altarpiece of the 18th century, 13 colonial sculptures, 3 paintings, that hasn't been cataloged and are awaiting for restoration. For example, The National Coordination of Historical Monuments had registered five buildings when in fact there are 24 chapels and the remains



Fig. 5: Diego Sánchez Chapel. Photo Gabriela Sánchez Reyes

of at least 5 mining haciendas. The Coordination, with the support of the municipal authorities, will update the information so they soon be registered and protected. No doubt, much work remains to retrace for the Sultepec mining history,

but thanks to this *Symposium*, we found the seed to rescue the presence of the miners and their workers to have an idea of the history of mining in Mexico.



Fig. 6: Anonymous. The Adoration of the Magi, Our Lady of Guadalupe, St. Michael, St. Francis, St Barbara, St. Jerom, St Anthony, St. Nicholas Tolentino. 1797. Diego Sánchez Chapel. Sultepec. Photo Gabriela Sánchez Reyes