

Conclusion

The Coming of the Kingdom

In his influential *General History* of the New Kingdom of Granada, published in 1688, the chronicler Lucas Fernández de Piedrahita recalls a telling anecdote. Once upon a time, in the early 1560s, the *cacique* of Ubaque had appeared before the *Audiencia* of Santafé to request permission to hold a great celebration in his town. ‘Arguing that if Spaniards were allowed to hold bullfights, jousting, masques, and carnival’, the *cacique* requested that his people too be allowed the ‘pastimes and pleasures that they used to vent their troubles and relieve the commoners of their work’. Given that the request ‘had nothing that smelled of past idolatry’ – something the *Audiencia* apparently confirmed by checking with ‘interpreters of their language and other people’ – they gave him permission and also sent a delegation to the town, headed by the *oidor* Melchor Pérez de Arteaga. The celebrations had been delightful, and the delegation returned ‘full of admiration for the great things and curiosities they had witnessed’, not least ‘the great quantities of gold jewels and headdresses’ on display in the procession. The events of Ubaque had been the talk of Santafé, and an account ‘of all the circumstances, and the number of people present in the celebration’ had been recorded for posterity and circulated widely. Writing over a century later, in the 1660s, Piedrahita wondered how much more impressive celebrations like these would have been in the old days ‘of the Kings of Bogotá, or the *caciques* of Tunja and Sogamoso’, whose histories he proceeded to recount.¹

¹ Fernández de Piedrahita, *Historia general*, 25.

If this story seems familiar, it is because Piedrahita is retelling the story of the celebrations held at Ubaque in December 1563, that had so shaken Santafé, shocked the authorities, and which Pérez de Arteaga had been sent to stop. Instead of being dazzled in admiration, the *oidor* had scrambled to stop the proceedings, fully convinced that the feasting, dancing, and celebrations that he witnessed were – as he had in fact reported – for ‘the cult and veneration of the devil’. Instead of recording what he saw for posterity out of curiosity and wonder, these events were documented as part of a criminal investigation against those involved.² It was not that Piedrahita was ignorant of the New Kingdom. Having been born in Santafé, of Spanish and Indigenous ancestry, Piedrahita (1624–1688) had in fact devoted much of his life to the service of its church and colonial administration. He had been educated at its Jesuit-run diocesan seminary, been among the first to obtain a doctorate from its Dominican university, and begun his work as a priest in the Indigenous parishes of Fusagasugá and Paipa, before obtaining a succession of positions in Santafé’s cathedral chapter, and eventually appointments as bishop of Santa Marta and later Panama.³ Instead his account is testament to how, by the second half of the seventeenth century, successive authors felt free to reimagine, embellish, and decorate the accounts they read and the stories they heard about the pre-Hispanic and early colonial past, because these were now free from taboo or suspicion. The Muisca and their ritual practices, in other words, had by now ceased to be a source of anxiety – they had become the stuff of legend.

This shift is a reflection of the distinctive direction that the New Kingdom of Granada and its missionary project had taken over the preceding decades. It was not just that the authorities of the New Kingdom, in contrast to their fellows elsewhere, had long since ceased to centre the removal, or even the investigation, of indigenous heterodoxy as a strategy of Christianisation – whether this heterodoxy was

² Documents pertaining to the case of Ubaque, 1563, AGI Justicia 618, 1396r–1397r.

³ For an excellent recent study of Piedrahita’s life and work, see Luis Fernando Restrepo, ‘The Ambivalent Nativism of Lucas Fernández de Piedrahita’s *Historia general de las conquistas del Nuevo Reyno de Granada*’. In *Creole Subjects in the Colonial Americas: Empires, Texts, Identities*. Edited by Ralph Bauer and José Antonio Mazzotti, 334–354 (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2012). Through his mother Piedrahita was the great-great-grandson of the Inca Huayna Capac, through his daughter Francisca Coya, but was nevertheless born in relatively humble conditions, as his father was apparently a carpenter. Restrepo situates the composition of the *Historia general* in the context of a suit involving his parentage.

understood as the survival of pre-Hispanic practice or as more recent innovation. Instead, in Piedrahita's account, the events of Ubaque in 1563 were transformed – gold headdresses aside – into an elaborate confraternity procession of the sort that he would have seen countless times over the course of his career, in Santafé and in Indigenous parishes across the two central provinces of the highlands. What is more, in his *History*, this idealised and reimagined vision of the early colonial period served, in turn, to make sense of the pre-Hispanic past: this section of his text concludes a description of the religious and cultural practices of the Muisca before the invasion, featuring a description of an imagined procession, led by high priests, in honour of the pantheon of deities of the solar religion that he had, in the preceding pages, so vividly described. Piedrahita projected, in other words, what were by then distinctive elements of the customs and ways of life of the Muisca of his colonial present to make sense of their pre-Hispanic past – a present in which the sixteenth-century obsession with 'past idolatry' was, overwhelmingly, fading, and in which authors like him instead took for granted the effectiveness of colonial institutions and the rootedness of Christianity, which in his account unfold over the Muisca with startling speed. The people of Ubaque in Piedrahita's account are, after all, already Christians by 1560, and the *Audiencia* of Santafé has the means to enforce its claims of power and jurisdiction to the point that Indigenous rulers turn to it for permission to run their internal affairs.

These characterisations of the pre-Hispanic past and the first decades after the European invasion, and those that followed, are powerful fictions that long shaped our understanding of the early colonial history of the New Kingdom of Granada and its missionary project. Instead of the common, unified, transcendental religion of accounts like these, a detailed examination of a broader range of bureaucratic writing revealed a series of highly localised immanentist practices centred on the maintenance of lineage deities and of a sophisticated ritual economy of reciprocal exchange central to the political and economic organisation of Muisca groups. This is important not because we should understand Christianisation as the progressive replacement of these practices with their Christian functional equivalents, but rather because identifying and exploring these features is key to understanding the profound, multidimensional challenge that the efforts of colonial authorities to introduce Christianity represented to the social organisation, political economy, and cultural life of Muisca communities – to the very foundations, in other words, on which these same colonial authorities sought to build their colonial project.

At the same time, instead of effective and powerful colonial officials and institutions, a careful re-reading of surviving early colonial visitations and other records, set against a reassessment of the workings and limitations of early colonial governance, revealed the vast distance that existed between the claims and aspirations of officials and missionaries, and the realities on the ground. From the vantage point of the late seventeenth century, or of the assumptions of later periods still, this large gap is all too easily ignored and glossed over, to the point that the late sixteenth century has often been read as the beginning of a period of stability and prosperity – a ‘golden age’ of colonial rule. In reality this was the period when colonial institutions were at their weakest. This is clearest in the catastrophic campaign of violence and dispossession that the venality, self-interest, and incomprehension of local conditions of civil and ecclesiastical officials unleashed on Indigenous people across the provinces of Santafé and Tunja. This dealt a deadly blow to the ability of many Indigenous rulers to keep their positions of leadership and authority, at a time when these same colonial authorities needed them the most. The late sixteenth century was not a period of the triumphal unfolding of colonial rule. It was, instead, a time of its overwhelming, profound, and multi-layered crises. The kingdom, its claims laid bare, was revealed to be – to paraphrase Augustine – little more than a great band of robbers.

It is this context that the settlers of Santafé, Tunja, and other highland cities came together, as they had in other occasions, to petition and lobby for change. Their efforts laid the ground for the ambitious initiative for the reform of the missionary project that was first implemented under the leadership of Archbishop Lobo Guerrero and President Juan de Borja, in close collaboration with their Jesuit allies. The initiative involved a number of institutional reforms, from the translation of influential legislation from other contexts to the establishment of educational institutions and systems of oversight, all of which would form the coordinates of Lucas Fernández de Piedrahita’s own career later in the century. More significant still was the ideological shift that underpinned the reforms. Efforts to Christianise Indigenous people shifted to centre the introduction and fostering of what the reformers understood as ‘external’ manifestations of piety: popular devotions, public celebrations, and social institutions. This shift opened the way for many Indigenous groups and individuals to interact with Christianity in new and different ways. They adapted and appropriated Christian institutions and practices to pursue their interests, navigate colonial pressures, and survive a changing world.

It is tempting to imagine that this state of affairs was the result of the fulfilment of a predetermined plan, whether for the unfolding of a fully formed institutional church or even of a discrete programme of Tridentine reform, over the Indigenous peoples of this region. But there was no such linear trajectory. There was no single, coherent design. There were instead, many faltering, meandering, contested, and contingent trends driven by diverse actors. Even the reforms inaugurated by Lobo Guerrero, Borja, and their allies were subject to changes, reassessments, and reversals even among the authorities themselves, as the story of their acceptance of Indigenous *alféreces* holding banquets and celebrations shows so clearly.

Trent provided an impetus for reform, but no practical template. How successive archbishops and officials interpreted what Tridentine reform should involve varied widely according to their interests and circumstances. Zapata's efforts to reform the church in the 1570s were for him no less 'Tridentine' than those of the reformers of 1606 were for them. Only with time, and through the consolidation and circulation of models such as those articulated by Carlo Borromeo in Milan, or by the framers of the provincial councils of Mexico and Lima, did anything approaching a coherent template emerge. Even then, these templates were subject to significant shifts in emphasis and direction as they were translated and retranslated to suit the ever-changing understandings of dynamic local conditions of diverse actors who drew on, contested, and in turn contributed to the broad patchwork of methods, priorities, and practices that characterised early modern Catholicism.

Most significantly, and at every stage, Indigenous people shaped the introduction of Christianity in the New Kingdom, just as it shaped them. Their incorporation into Christianity, and of Christianity into their lives, was an effect of the coming together of a series of conditions that allowed them to interact with it in different ways, adapting and adopting what it had to offer them, and including many of its features into their lives. They did this for multiple reasons and purposes, some of which this book has traced, some yet to be uncovered, and some that will remain theirs alone. These interactions took place on uneven terrain, backed by the coercive power, however faltering and at times ineffective, of colonial rule, and in circumstances of profound inequality. But this was a collective story nonetheless, and one that we simply cannot understand if we do not centre the experiences of Indigenous people, however challenging this might be. The old fixation on missionary success or failure simply cannot capture its complexity.

Christianisation, to be sure, provided the justification for successive efforts and initiatives of colonial institutions, royal officials, ecclesiastical authorities, priests, and settlers to shatter many of the religious features, political structures, patterns of exchange, social relations, hierarchies, and cultural features of Muisca communities. They oversaw this destruction at times deliberately, at times accidentally, at times out of ignorance. At different moments and in different ways they did so at the expense of their own colonial project. And yet Indigenous individuals and communities also found in Christianity ways to navigate and survive profound upheaval, demographic collapse, and dispossession. They used it to shore up and preserve existing bonds and relations, to dissolve and shed old ones that were no longer relevant, and to create and foster new ones. Indigenous people had been doing this work all along, when they had the chance, sometimes under the gaze of colonial officials, and more often beyond it, in immigrant communities in Spanish cities and other settings, individually and in groups, in ways large and small. With time they came to do this more and more, especially in their towns and rural parishes, and in ways increasingly visible to us. Gradually, collectively, and with just a little fanfare, a new kingdom had taken shape in their midst.