

Discourses of Power: Andean Colonial Literacies and *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain*

Kristi M. Peterson

Images of the Virgin Mary, as exported from Europe to the Americas in the sixteenth century, performed similar functions as those for the Catholic monarchs of Spain in the face of Reformation threats in Europe and in the Reconquista on the Iberian Peninsula. The narratives subsequently employed in the New World were defined by a language of Christianity and conquest. By invoking the Virgin in new locations and contexts, priests and conquistadors alike adapted patterns of European devotion to build a system of colonial order and Spanish supremacy. Through integration into their ceremonies and activities, the Virgin Mary began to be substituted for and syncretized with formerly indigenous representatives of the feminine sacred. This paper argues not for the survival of Pre-Columbian sacrality in the face of conquest, but rather its synthesis, re-negotiation, and engagement with new colonial literacies in the Andean territories of South America. This discussion will therefore situate the circumstances of *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain of Potosí* (before 1720) within emerging perspectives in the field that consider how images function as a form of literacy in colonial societies (Figure 1).

Following the definition of Tom Cummins and Joanne Rappaport, literacy corresponds to a complex system of both visual and textual communication that functions within an encompassing ideological system, in this case what has been identified as “colonial discourse.” With the work of scholars such as Michel Foucault, Franz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha, among others, in mind, “colonial discourse” encompasses the cultural language that serves to maintain unequal relationships of economic and political power. This is accomplished through a variety of strategies, of which literacy is but one. The colonial situation serves to cultivate a dependency by guaranteeing a position of superiority for the colonizer *vis-à-vis* the colonized.¹

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¹ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 7.

In the colonial Andean world this strategy served as a means of reorganizing the worldviews and everyday lives of native South Americans.² Literacy is thus a multivalent term and is not confined solely to written texts.³ As regards *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain* this paper takes a revisionist view by acknowledging native regard for the work as an issue of visual literacy in a complex colonial situation. The painting thus occupied a position within a re-negotiated social space of multiple literacies. This paper contends that the significance of the painting is recognized as a part of a multidimensional colonial discourse and as such creates a social space in which cultural codes and practices were re-negotiated by native peoples and Europeans alike.

The Virgin Mary of the Mountain resembles other Marian imagery in the Americas formally and iconographically. The painting is unique, however, in that the body of the Virgin is completely inscribed within the mountain. The landscape, punctuated by veins of silver, lush vegetation, and miniature figures, forms the rich brocade of her gown.⁴ In the upper register, the Archangel Michael (far left) stands next to the figures of Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, and God the Father, the three of whom crown the dual figuration of the mountain peak and the Virgin's head. The sun and moon iconography of the pre-Conquest Inca are shown on either side of the mountain in the middle ground. Two native figures stand just left of center as representatives of the indigenous settlement at Potosí, while, just to the right, two European figures represent the Spanish founding of the contemporary city. In the lower register, directly in front of the mountain, a globe contains an aerial view of the colonial city of Potosí. To the left stand the figures of the Pope and a cardinal, while to the right stands the Emperor Charles V and an indigenous *cacique*.

² For a full explanation of their approach to “literacy” in the Andes, see the “Introduction,” to Tom Cummins and Joanne Rappaport, *Beyond the Lettered City: Indigenous Literacies in the Andes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 1-26.

³ *Ibid.*, 19. Cummins and Rappaport further define the term as, “...a set of practices deeply embedded within social, political, and economic realities.”

⁴ This is an intentional invocation of indigeneity through the Virgin's direct and physical incorporation into the sacred landscape (i.e., the Incan association of body parts with aspects of nature).

In colonial Latin American art, the representation of the Virgin Mary was also one tied to practices of colonial order.⁵ *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain* communicates the ordering function of the colonial city, the crusading ambitions of colonization, and the Virgin's central role in the economy of salvation. This places the painting within a larger colonial discourse that operated to reshape epistemologies and subjectivities by co-opting pre-contact signs and conflating them with aspects of the new colonial reality.

Within the new colonial reality, pre-conquest Incan literacies still maintained a presence. A strong element of the indigenous concept of *quariwarmi* (or complementarity) features through the presence of the sun and moon, and the juxtaposition of the highlands and the coastal shore visible in the valleys flanking the mountain. In addition there is the notable element of uncoursed masonry pictured directly behind the globe. The Incan built environment was consistently integrated with the natural one. Many Inca settlements employed outcrops of living rock (rock in its natural state) in their foundations. These rocks could also be sacred for a variety of reasons. As Carolyn Dean notes, through the integration of these rocks into manmade constructions the Inca symbolically possessed any sacred elements as well as the landscape.⁶ Spanish colonial culture effectively reframed indigenous visual systems through the use of the Virgin and other tropes.

A defining feature of *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain* is its associations with the mountain of Potosí. Located in present-day Bolivia, the area was originally under the aegis of the Viceroyalty of Peru.⁷ The city itself stands directly beneath the mountain Cerro Rico (Cerro de Potosí), as pictured in Gaspar Miguel de Berrio's 1758 *View of Potosí* (Figure 2).⁸ The Spanish settlement was established in 1545 as a mining town and eventually became the location of the Spanish colonial mint.⁹ This soon made the city not only one of the largest in the Americas but also (within a century of its founding) larger than many of its European counterparts (including London and Paris).¹⁰

The Virgin Mary of the Mountain is essentially a painting of space and landscape, but one concerned with a narrative of claiming. The mountain of Potosí was the single largest source of silver ever discovered: 45,000 tons of the precious metal was extracted from the establishment of the mining settlement up to 1783. Because of the value of its natural resources, the Spanish were determined to lay claim to Potosí and accomplished this partly through the imposition of a new built environment. By this time, the area already had a history of being manipulated by political entities. Potosí was a settlement within the Aymara Empire when the Inca arrived on their own mission of imperial expansion in the fifteenth century. Throughout its history, Potosí was continuously engaged with the establishment and re-negotiation of political agendas.

The construction of the Spanish colonial city involved the re-inscription of the landscape into a new colonial discourse. The visual program of the colonial built environment can be seen in the drawings accompanying Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's *First Chronicle and Good Government* (1615). Three hundred ninety-eight line drawings accompany the written account of the contemporary state of the Andean territories.¹¹ In the plates, cities like Lima, Riobamba, and Potosí are represented as plazas, often surrounded by nature (Figures 3, 4, and 5). The colonial cities are visually presented as clones of the "Divine City" featured in the Apocalypse of Saint John. Throughout the sixteenth century, imperial edicts such as the *Laws of the Indies* (1573) established rules for construction. This involved the imposition of the Christian faith and the designation of the city as a perfectly sacred and geometrical space.¹²

Poma's illustration of Potosí highlights both the plaza and the mountain. The plaza was the space of public ritual in the American colonial city, a void activated by social performance.¹³ Prior to colonization Inca settlements contained a main square-like space called the *huakaypata* that served as a sacred and political center and the site of events such as victory celebrations and the investiture of rulers.¹⁴ The

⁵ Cummins and Rappaport, *Beyond the Lettered City*, 6. Cummins and Rappaport state that in its imposition of Western European systems of sociability, colonial cultural politics, "imparted a system of referentiality that fostered the expression of a divine and secular power that was embedded within a hierarchy of natural authority."

⁶ Carolyn Dean, "The Inka Married the Earth," *Art Bulletin* 89, no. 3 (2007): 514.

⁷ The Viceroyalty of Peru was established in 1542.

⁸ "Cerro rico" translates literally to "rich mountain." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the Author.

⁹ From Potosí, the precious metal was taken by llama and mule train to the Pacific Coast where it was shipped north to Panama City. From there it travelled again by mule train across the isthmus to either the port of Nombre de Dios or Portobelo where it was handed over to the treasure fleet and sailed for Spain, entering through the port of Seville.

¹⁰ Within a century of its founding, the city had a population of

c.100,000. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Towards a Geography of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 276.

¹¹ Title translation: *First Account and Good Government*. Poma (1532-1615) was an indigenous noble. Poma's work is additionally a petition for legislative reforms that would recognize the physical and moral rights of the indigenous population and protect them from colonial abuses. The text is written in Spanish with occasional uses of Quechua.

¹² Jean-Francois Lejeune, "Dreams of Order: Utopia, Cruelty, and Modernity," *Cruelty and Utopia: Cities and Landscapes of Latin America*, ed. Jean-François Lejeune (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 31.

¹³ Cummins and Rappaport, "The Reconfiguration of Civic and Sacred Space: Architecture, Image, and Writing in the Colonial Northern Andes," *Latin American Literary Review* 26, no. 52 (1998): 80. The plaza also served to reframe the Andean reference of vision.

¹⁴ Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999) 28-89.

Hispanicization of the space converted it to one for Christian festivals and public acts. In replacing indigenous public performances these new rituals recast the action of the plaza in terms of conversion and instruction.

The principal roads leading to the plaza defined the limits of the city's grid, itself a spatialization of the political order. The plaza's space of public ritual, however, was physically surrounded by the material trappings of colonialism. By entering the grid the individual passed into a colonially-configured space, ostensibly to become part of the Christian community.¹⁵ It is worth considering that the image of the Virgin may in fact be able to do what the city cannot, that is, always frame the mountain as controlled by the Spanish. The colonial city sat in shadow of the mountain, and the grid terminated at the city's edge, dissipating into the surrounding landscape.

The social action of the plaza, and the city at large, was ideologically determined, but was in actuality obstructed (and left unfulfilled). The function of the built environment, read through the actual city and visual depictions such as Poma's examples and *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain*, served the broader ideological goal of reorganizing both the individual's worldview and the indigenous body. The goal of the new spatial order was not only to impose control, but also to develop the indigenous population into Christian or Europeanized individuals and thus full members of the new society. However, the indigenous individual could never fully realize this goal since that same body was always marked as Other. This is akin to what Homi Bhabha described as the operation of "mimicry." According to Bhabha, "colonial mimicry" emerges from the desire for "a reformed and recognizable Other" on the part of the colonizer. What is occurring is a complex system of cultivating individuals who are "almost the same, but not quite."¹⁶ The colonized group is positioned to emulate their colonizers without ever joining their ranks. Therefore, in navigating the new social spaces of the city, the indigenous person was perpetually in a state of incomplete social and political development and was thought to be "naturally" incapable of achieving full, i.e., adult, realization of self.

For European ecclesiastics, the fifteenth century was defined by a sense of apocalyptic crisis.¹⁷ This often took political form such as the Joachite prophecy of the imminent

coming of a world emperor or angelic pope. The Habsburg dynasty was conceptualized in terms of this perceived need for a savior, as Jaime Lara has suggested.¹⁸ The prevailing notion was that, as Europe would fall to the Apocalypse, the Pope and Spanish King would flee to the New World. From this sanctuary, Christ and Catholicism would re-conquer lost lands.¹⁹ The fall of New World empires (the Aztecs in 1521 and the Inca in 1532) was taken as an indication that God had indeed chosen the Spanish to conquer the New World and its peoples in order to bring them into the faith.²⁰

Outside of political propaganda, the religious community actively campaigned in the New World by identifying indigenous practices as diabolical. The religious war to be waged in the Americas was cast as one against the devil. The indigenous populations were portrayed not as inherently evil, but childlike and easily manipulated by Satan who encouraged them to practice idolatry. Much primary documentation exists in which clergy members bemoaned the fact that, although the Gospel had been spread, the Amerindians continued to worship the sacred landscape. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra argues, colonization was justified as an ongoing struggle against Satan, "a biblically sanctioned interpretation of expansion."²¹

Luis de Riaños's mural, *The Road to Heaven and the Road to Hell* (c.1626), located in the Church of San Pedro, Andahuaylillas, exemplifies the parallels drawn between Biblical enemies and the spiritual enemies of the Church in the Americas (Figure 6). The scene on the left of the bifurcated mural is a copy of an engraving by Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619) illustrating Psalm 106, which refers to the idolatrous corruption of the nation of Israel among the Canaanites. The path leading to the gates of Hell is remarkably similar to the mountainside in *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain*; both have the same floral pattern. In addition, this path leads directly to a medieval European-style castle complete with fortifications. This stands in direct visual contrast to the light and orderly space of the colonial grid, represented by contemporary architecture and a paved walkway in *The Road to Heaven* on the right side of the mural.

For the European colonist of the seventeenth century, the overwhelming presence of the demonic in the New World was a philosophical certainty.²² The Virgin was given a central role in the symbolic economy of salvation. In the

¹⁵ Kaufmann, *Towards a Geography of Art*, 294.

¹⁶ Homi Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 85-92.

¹⁷ Jacques LaFaye, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 23.

¹⁸ Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) 53.

¹⁹ David A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe, Image*

and Tradition, 1531-2000 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 34-36.

²⁰ Note that this was not unique to the Spanish, as Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra convincingly argues: there were similar discourses employed by the northern European colonists to impose new political and spiritual orders.

²¹ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 9.

²² As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra notes, "Satan had more than Protestant dissenters to threaten the survival of the New Israelites in the American Canaan, for his true minions were the Amerindians." *Ibid.*, 9-10.

various conquests of major pre-Columbian cities apparitions of the Virgin were credited as divine agents of military victories. Artistic productions of the period included visual cues, such as the crescent moon shape that is often featured beneath the feet of the Virgin, as demonstrated in the c. 1735 painting *Our Lady of the Victory of Málaga* (Figure 7). Art historian Rose Demir argues that such visual elements allowed images of the Virgin Mary to function as not only protagonist and protector, but also as a sign of conquest.²³

This overarching rhetoric justified the conquest and also became an absolution. *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain* is a direct visual invocation of such a narrative. In choosing to depict Charles V in the image, the artist situated the scene within the rhetoric of early colonization. Beyond the Spanish Crown's status as divinely chosen to conquer the New World, the Andean landscape and the city painted within the globe are presented as gifts. The Spanish are thus not mere stewards of the land, but are the blessed recipients of its wealth as their just reward.

In comparison, consider *The Conquest of Peru*, a seventeenth-century example from the Cuzco school of painting currently housed in the Colección Polí in Lima, Peru. As in *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain*, there are three registers of figures. In the upper register: the Archangel Michael, the Virgin, and St. James Mataindios (also known as Santiago). A group of indigenous persons stands in the middle-ground, and there are two groupings of figures in the foreground, one religious (left) and one secular (right). The figures in the foreground represent the legions of this world that will impose colonial and Christian order upon pre-Columbian forces. In the background, visible through the forest of spears held by the conquistadors, stands a fortified city, presumably the site being defended by the Inca. Here one should recall Riaños's *The Road to Hell*. The city's fortifications await the destruction by Spanish forces that is necessary for the subsequent realization as an ordered, sanctified, and Christian colonial city.

This painting is a visual epic of the challenge the Spanish represent to Satan's dominion in the Americas. The figures in the upper register represent the divine forces overseeing this challenge. Along with the Virgin, who gazes with calm beneficence upon the scene, the archangel Michael is depicted in the act of slaying Satan, while on the right St. James rides in to join the battle. Both of these figures represent additional Christian archetypes that were visually appropriated for the conquest of the Americas. The archangel Michael represents the Andean association of angels with heavenly armies.²⁴

Additionally, the specific angelic iconographic type represented here was used as a visual symbol in allusion to divine dominion and the heavenly hierarchy. The figure of St. James on the right is a direct descendent of earlier examples of St. James Matamoros (which literally translates as "Moor killer"). In the Americas, this figure became St. James Mataindios and, like the Virgin, was often an apparition at the fall of major pre-Columbian cities. In *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain*, this figure is not actually present but may be read through a surrogate figure. The *cacique* kneeling directly behind Charles V is wearing a cloak that mimics the costume of St. James as he is typically featured in colonial paintings.

This message of conquest justified by faith served to consistently remind the colonial viewer of the larger ideological system in which colonization was divinely sanctioned and a necessary mission. A colonial situation, no matter the actors, involves unequal power relations in which a dominant group attempts to subdue and subordinate another. The colonial discourse serves to keep the subordinate group in a perpetual state of social incompleteness, a position of dependence. Indigenous people might be able to refute this discourse in some cases, but they certainly have to negotiate it on a daily basis.

In conclusion, colonial literacies address the set of cues, in this case visual, that serves to impose and reaffirm the overarching ideological system. In the painting discussed, these cues are given form through the ordering of the colonial city and the visual markers of conquest and a justified colonization. Within *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain*, the viewer encounters the markers of colonial order and the imposition of a new political and sacred space. In the heterogeneous community in which this painting would have existed, familiarity with visual elements may have been selective. A newly-arrived peninsular Spaniard may have only been able to decipher those elements of European origin, while an indigenous viewer may have read the landscape dominated by the body of the Virgin. Through the integration of these elements the painting demonstrated new inscriptions and the evolving rhetoric of political order. The European appropriation and renegotiation of the terms contained within the visual and built environment of the Americas constituted a conscious manipulation of space and the constant visual retelling of a very specific narrative. *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain* participated in the recasting of a language of colonial subjectivity and a new colonial reality.

Florida State University

²³ Rose Demir, "Redefining the Crescent Moon: Symbolic Resonance in Muslim Spain and Indo-Christian Art" (PhD diss., University of Texas at San Antonio, 2004), 20. Carol Damian points out that in this particular image the crescent shape also denotes Incan sacrificial knives based

upon the crescent's position at the base of a shaft-like pattern on the Virgin's gown. See also, Carol Damian, *The Virgin of the Andes* (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1995).

²⁴ Kaufmann, *Towards a Geography of Art*, 294.

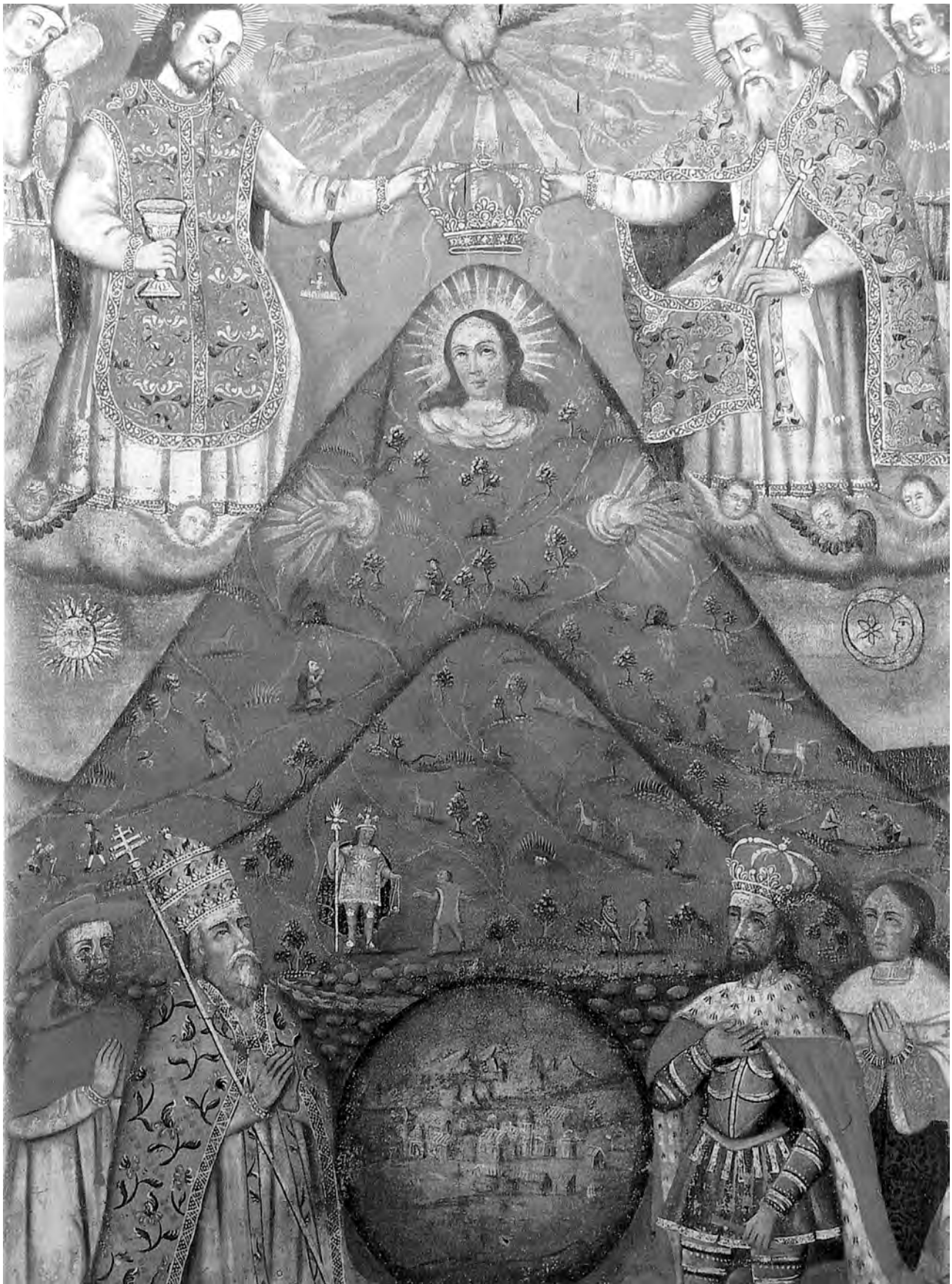


Figure 1. Anonymous, *The Virgin Mary of the Mountain of Potasiama*, before 1720, oil on canvas, 53 x 41 ½ inches. Casa Nacional de Moneda, Potosí, Bolivia. Image from Carol Damian, *The Virgin of the Andes: Art and Ritual in Colonial Cuzco* (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1995), page 52.

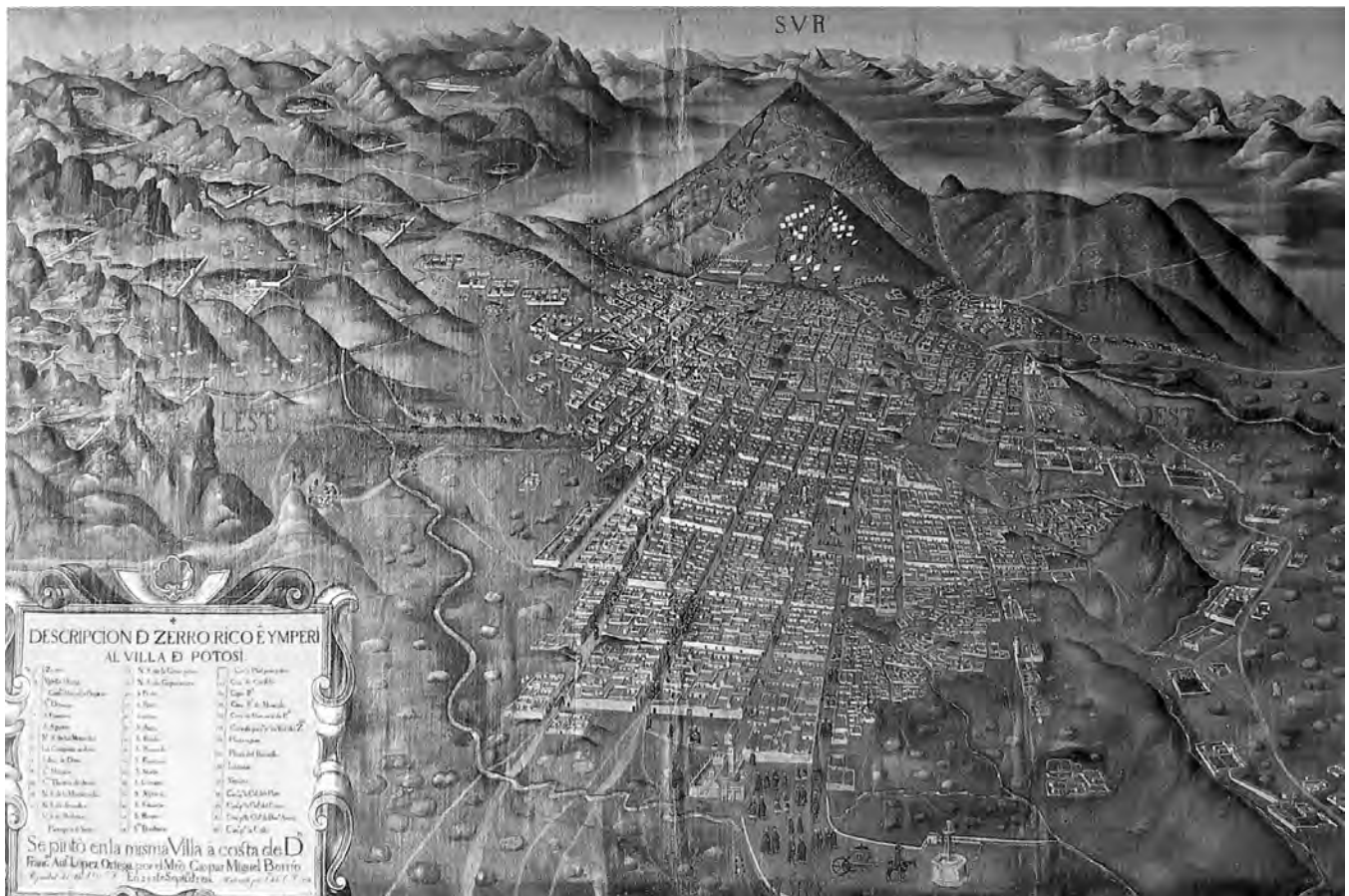


Figure 2. Gaspar Miguel de Berrio, *View of Potosí*, 1758, oil on canvas, n.d. Museo Charcas, Sucre, Bolivia. Image from Richard L. Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), page 193.



Figure 3. Guaman Poma de Ayala, *Ciudad de Los Reyes de Lima*, drawing 362 from Poma, *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, 1615; National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library.



Figure 4. *La villa de Riobamba*, drawing 349 from Poma, *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, 1615; National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library.



Figure 5. *La villa rica en peral de Potocchi*, drawing 375 from Poma, *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, 1615; National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library.



Figure 6. Luis de Riaños, *The Road to Hell and The Road to Heaven*, c.1618-26, fresco. Church of San Pedro, Andahuaylillas, Department of Cuzco, Peru. Image courtesy of Daniel Gianni.



Figure 7. Luis Nino, *Our Lady of the Victory of Málaga*, oil on canvas, region of Potosí, c. 1735. Image from Carol Damian, *The Virgin of the Andes: Art and Ritual in Colonial Cuzco* (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1995), page 64.