

FORTRESS MONASTERIES ?

BY

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DESPITE the military appearance of the monasteries which has caused Mexican churches of the sixteenth century so often to be called "fortress-churches",¹ there is suspiciously little evidence that the seemingly defensive features were ever meant for much real defense. The supposed attackers would have been unconverted Indians, most commonly the Chichimecas of the north and west frontiers, and although the Chichimecas were undeniably ferocious, they would not have been able to attack with anything heavier and faster than arrows: they had no weapons more menacing than the bow and atl-atl. The Indians of Central Mexico, far and away the most important, most populous and most profitable part of the Spanish Colony, never really revolted nor even threatened serious revolt, not even when the abuses and butchery of Nuño de Guzmán made the provocation greatest at the very moment when the chances for successful revolt were greatest — just when Cortés was off in Honduras with the better part of the army. Later in the sixteenth century there were other provocations, some very strong, but there were no real Indian uprisings, with the single exception of the Mixtón War of 1541, and that was confined to the frontier, and was the clear result of the earlier irresponsible violence of Nuño de Guzmán there; his ravaging of

¹ Apparently originated by Baxter, in *Spanish Colonial Architecture in Mexico*, (Boston, 1901).

Western Mexico was so thoroughgoing that much of the region never recovered in the sixteenth century, and it took a man as exceptionally wise and kind as Vasco de Quiroga to coax the frightened Indians out of the sierras to come and live in towns.

One begins to wonder whether, except under the scandalous First Audiencia, the lot of the great majority of the native population was any worse under the Spaniards than it had been under their own hard lords. They relinquished their grim religion and were converted to Christianity with astonishing speed, and remained docilely converted, without any major resistance. The masses were, of course, inarticulate, and our written records represent not their opinion but that of religious and government officials. Most of it is highly partisan —none more so than the pro-Indian and anti-spanish fulminations of impetuous Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas— and even what is not partisan is still written from the necessarily limited european point of view. We know what happened to the Indians and what their outward reactions were; we do not know how they felt. Their outward reactions, for a conquered people, were not very hostile to the tiny Spanish majority in power. They do not seem more hostile than what had been the reactions of many towards the Aztec minority in power just a few years before, the many who joined Cortés in order to throw off the Aztec yoke. At least, under the spaniards, the Indians had some one who would listen to their complaints: the friars — the friars who did try to defend them and to teach them a religion which, unlike the old one, offered solace and hope.

The chroniclers writing at the time that the surviving "fortress-churches" were being built scarcely mention their military character, though once in a while they do describe raids, which are always on the Chichimeca border. In these exceptional events, it seems to have been the church which served as the stronghold, but one wonders whether it can have been planned as such. For example, the establishment at Yuriria, which is unsurpassed even by the luxurious Augustinians in its scale, its profusion of carved ornament and general air of magnificence, is one of the churches cited as serving for a fortress against the Chichimecas, and an early one, begun in 1550. In their one attack, the Chichimecas gained the atrio but did not manage to get into the church itself. Supposedly mistaking the statue of St. Nicholas on the upper part of the facade for a living person, they shot at it until an arrow lodged in the stone. They were able to do very little harm, as their arrows could

not even reach the upper part of the tower,² which is not very high, hardly higher than the facade. This does not sound like the kind of attack (it is the *only* one recorded here) which would demand the building of a fortress, and the arrogantly splendid church does not look like one. Its elegantly festooned plateresque columns and hundred square meters of carved garlands and ribands do not seem to have been conceived nor executed for something considered a stronghold. The walls are very thick, it is true, but they have to be thick to sustain the heavy vaults, whether there were Chichimecas in the vicinity or not.

When the defensive character of a church is mentioned by old writers, still it is necessary to be suspicious. One of the few cases where it is clearly mentioned is in reference to the monastery church at Alfajayucan in Hidalgo, which was covered with simple vaults "because the country is hot, and perilous with Chichimecas"³ but it has no features to distinguish it in any way from dozens of other second-class small monastery churches built in peaceful territory far from the terrible Chichimecas. Nor do the considerable remains at Etzatlán, a frontier outpost west of Guadalajara "made for a fortress"⁴; its walls are thick, but so are most other sixteenth-century walls of any height, and furthermore, Etzatlán was built in notorious earthquake country where any wall not thick might prove as dangerous as the Chichimecas. Father Ponce said that the church at Xichú was used by the Christian Indians there to house their women and possessions during attacks by the neighboring heathen Chichimecas, and that a garrison of four (!) Spanish soldiers was kept there, but he also noted that it was built of adobe and thatch,⁵ materials hardly very resistant for a fortress. It cannot have been a very massive stronghold, and it has disappeared from the town without leaving any tangible trace or even a definite memory, for no one there now knows even where it stood. One wonders who would have been in charge of a "fortress-church" were there was no garrison of soldiers: surely not the friars.

One establishment said to be among the hardest pressed was Xilitla, again on the Chichimeca frontier, in the green Huasteca Potosina in the

2 Grijalva, p. 243. Basalenque, I, p. 253.

3 Ponce, I, p. 221.

4 Tello, IV, p. 29.

5 Ponce, I, p. 223.

last of the mountains beyond Xichú. (Has anyone visited this town to see what remains?) "In the year of '87 the Chichimecas tried to destroy the house and town. They entered the lower cloister, looted the sacristy and burned all of the monastery that was not vaulted, which was a good part. The friars, with some Indians who had withdrawn into the monastery, defended the entrance to the second story of the cloister with such valor that they escaped with their lives." ⁶ This does not sound like the storming of any fortress, but more like a petty raid on a non-military building. The main defense was at an upstairs doorway in an open cloister, which is one of the last places the defenders would have chosen if they had a building with any proper defensive features at all.

It does not seem possible to find serious military features in any of the monasteries which are recorded as having to defend themselves and which we can still examine.

Some of the churches with military features which *look* as though they might be practical are in regions where such precautions were not needed, if indeed they were needed anywhere except along the Chichimeca frontier. For example, the heavy and closely-spaced merlons running around the top of the handsome Franciscan church at Tecamachalco in Puebla were surely not needed against the local Popolacas, who were never dangerously numerous and who had been very successfully converted—despite the obstacle of their all-but-unlearnable language—over twenty years before the battlements were put up in the late 1550's. Nor do the *chemins-de-ronde* girdling the upper parts of such churches as Tepeaca or Cuautinchán seem to have been needed in those regions. They would have been worse than useless if they had been needed: being without parapets, they would have trapped any supposed defenders into becoming ideally unprotected and almost immobile targets, as conveniently placed as the ducks in a shooting gallery.

Nor did the atrio afford much protection. We are told by modern writers that in times of emergency when unconverted or backsliding Indians threatened attack, the whole town would move, with its domestic animals, into the security afforded by the atrio.⁷ But this would seem to have been an extreme and rare expedient. The principal evidence for it comes from Matías de la Mota Padilla who, when writing of the monastery at Zapotlán in Jalisco (now Ciudad Guzmán) in 1742, noted

6 Grijalva, p. 274.

7 Ricard, p. 199.

that its atrio had "a strong crenellated wall of masonry, adorned on the inside with six steps all the way around, where separate groups of Indian men and women were taught their catechism by the Franciscans; and also it served as breastworks or a wall for defense against the assaults of the mountain Indians..."⁸ He was probably guessing that it was a fortification from its looks, because atrio walls were not described as defensible stockades by sixteenth-century nor seventeenth-century writers. Father Ponce, for example, visited Zapotlán in 1587 and wrote nothing about the breastwork-wall, and Tello, there in 1653, noted the wall and its unusual steps, observing that they were used for teaching the Indians and saying nothing about their military possibilities.⁹ (A similar wall with steps now surrounds the plaza at Actopan, not to defend the townspeople but to give them someplace to sit during band concerts.) De la Mota Padilla, writing about it two centuries after it had been built—it was as remote to him as *he* is to *us*—assumed that it had had a military purpose in the beginning. This is the main evidence that the atrio was used as a stronghold, and the evidence is not very defensible — no more than the atrio itself! The walls of the atrios of the monasteries on the Chichimeca frontier are no more military. For example the walls at Alfajayucan, which was so "perilous with Chichimecas", are very thick, it is true, but they are made of rubble which could not have been built much thinner and still stand up.

The battlements which punctuate the tops of these and so many other atrio walls (like those crowning the churches) are made up of merlons usually either so toy-like in scale, so far apart, or both, that they would be useless for serious defense. Even if the merlons were usable in themselves (which they rarely are), they would still be useless *where* they are, for there is no ledge below them on which a defender could walk around the inside of the wall at a level where he would be shielded from hostile arrows by the merlons and be easily able to return fire from the interstices. These merlons are usually square with pyramidal tops, a decorative mudéjar form and not a functional military one. Such merlons are used frankly as decoration all over the monasteries, animating the silhouette edge of almost anything whether it be an objective to be defended or not: they even appear on the bases of crosses in

⁸ De la Mota Padilla, I, chap xix, p. 134.

⁹ Ponce, II, pp. 115-16. Tello, IV, p. 24.

the middle of the atrio, or on stair-rails inside the monastery, certainly not places planned for defensive engagements.

The typical atrio gateway shows no provision for doors, bars or anything else to shut out an enemy: most are so made that they can never have been intended to have any doors at all. The most commonly encountered main entrance to an atrio is through three arches, springing from the ends of the front wall and supported in between on two columns, to which no doors of course can ever have been fastened: such gateways as those at Calpan, Chalco, Chimalhuacán-Atenco, San Andrés Chiautla, Coatlinchán, Huejotzingo, Tepeapulco, Tepexpan, Tultitlán, Zempoala and dozens of others can never have been closed against anything at all. Even when instead of columns there are rectangular piers with straight jambs to which doors *could* have been fastened, there are no cuttings in them to show that any doors were ever there, as can be seen by examining such gates as those at Acatzingo, Totimehuacán, Tepeaca, Tecali or Tepeyanco de las Flores.

Though atrios raised above the plaza and the rest of the town might be hard to climb into and thus seem to repel attackers, there are many atrios which are more accessible on level ground, and those cut into hill-sides, like Calpan, Tecamachalco, Tepeji del Río, Tepeyanco or Tepoztlán, would be much too accessible to defend: in fact they seem to invite jumping into; they cannot be considered as practical fortresses.

Thus for many reasons the atrio cannot be considered to have been an even passably fortified area, and it is hard to believe that any of those we can still see today were so planned. The friars cannot have been so very apprehensive as to whether their conversion of neighboring Indians had "taken" or not, and indeed once-converted Indians did not show signs of rebellion against the friars. Time and money were spent on the seemingly military features of the atrio, but surely not for military reasons.

Why then do these atrios and churches look so military, so much so that distinguished scholars have taken their military import seriously? Largely because their walls sprout so many battlements. At Totolapan and Yecapixtla, merlons have become an obsession. And why so many battlements? Perhaps as weakened routine echoes of some of the earliest but now-destroyed monasteries of effective military character built during the very first years but only perhaps: there is no real evidence. We know that the seigniorial houses built early in Mexico City looked fort-

ress-like, and it is possible that some of the lost churches may have looked fortress-like too. Or, more likely, the military character might be a memory of military-looking churches in Spain, of which there are still a few striking examples standing. Or, still more probably, it may have been an ornamental aesthetic preference. The battlements do not make defensive sense but they usually do make excellent decorative sense. Merlons are very telling decoration for the long sweeps of plain atrio walls, as much as they are effective staccato rhythmical accents atop the ponderous mass of monastery churches. And they are so easy and inexpensive to build! People kept on building them for over three hundred years, from Bolivia to New Mexico, long after the Chichimecas and their like had forgotten that they had ever been enemies, long after there can have been any functional reason for fortified churches or churchyard walls.

There are occasionally, however, sixteenth-century notices about the desirability of building fortresses in some towns. For example, Father Motolinia shows some apprehension in his long letter to the Emperor (against Las Casas), written in 1555, in which he suggests that Indians be not allowed to ride horses, because horses and firearms are necessary for the small minority of spaniards in order to maintain sway over the large majority of Indians; he is equally concerned about the possibility of an uprising of Negroes, and suggests as a safeguard that a fortress should be built in Puebla, because it could be done cheaply there “y sería seguridad para toda la tierra”.¹⁰ Conditions cannot have been very threatening if one fortress in Puebla would make everything safe, and the authorities cannot have found them threatening because the suggestion was not followed. Nowhere did the authorities think the Indians threatening enough to spend money, materials and time in building fortifications for any town. They cannot have been so simple as to have thought that the monasteries would serve as fortresses instead, because most of them, if examined, quite obviously will not.

Maybe there never really were any ‘fortress-monasteries’ in Mexico. If there were any, they were very few. After all, south of the Chichimeca frontier there were no military garrisons in monastery towns in the last two-thirds of the sixteenth century, the period with which we are concerned here, when most of the remaining so-called “fortress-chur-

¹⁰ Motolinia, *Carta al Emperador*, (México, 1949, Ed. Jus), pp. 76-77.

ches" were built. There was no one to be defended from, for since the Mixtón War of 1541, which had been restricted to the frontier, the Indians had not given any trouble of that kind except for border skirmishes. The friars did not have to ask the civil authorities for soldiers to protect the monasteries: the "spiritual conquest" had been astonishingly thoroughgoing, and in its quieter way, as successful, as rapid and as enduring as the much more spectacular military conquest.