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Physical stature of men in eighteenth century Mexico: Evidence from Puebla

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ABSTRACT

We present a first glimpse of the mean height of men in eighteenth century Mexico based on evidence from the Revillagigedo Census of 1791–1792. Mexican men were shorter than those of Europe and North America. For example, contemporary French men were about 165 cm and US men were about 174 cm; in contrast, Mexican men were about 162 cm. Men of higher income were taller than those in the middle and lower income strata. Mestizos (a mix of whites and Indians) were shorter than the rest of the recruits belonging to other ethnic categories.

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1. Introduction

There are few studies on the anthropometric history of Latin America prior to 1950, especially in comparison with the extant literature of other Continents (Komlos, 1998; Steckel, 2009, 1995). The dearth of studies of the region is a reflection of the fact that there are few sources (Baten et al., 2009; Meisel Roca and Acevedo, 2007a,b; Salvatore, 2004a,b; Salvatore and Baten, 1997; Salvatore, 2007). Nonetheless, height data remain a key source on the evolution of living standards prior to the mid-twentieth century. In many countries of Latin America – unlike most

Western European countries – the existence of a large informal economy has been extensive historically and governments have not had the resources to fund efforts for systematic and thorough data collection (Leunig and Voth, 2003). In brief, to study the evolution of living standards in Latin America prior to the 20th century, height data has to be fundamental.

In Mexico, the earliest height information available from official documents is from the late eighteenth century military registers of the Revillagigedo Census conducted between 1791 and 1793.¹ The register is part of a population census. The population census was undertaken by the Bourbon monarchs in the Spanish American

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¹ We refer to this census by the name of the Viceroy of New Spain that had this census made, his name was Juan Vicente Güemes y Horcasitas, second count of Revillagigedo.

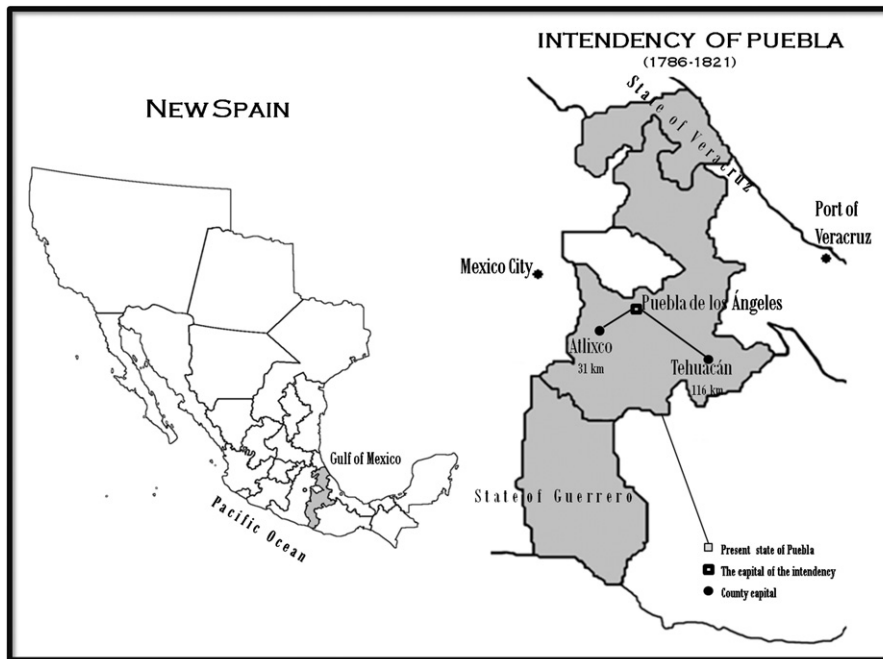


Fig. 1. Atlas. Nuevo atlas porrúa de la república mexicana, 6th ed., by Enriqueta García de Miranda and Zaida Falcón de Gyves, Mexico City, Ed. Porrúa, 1984, pp. 17, 22 and 71. (Alfredo Saldívar, drawer).

colonies to quantify the resources of each colony and to improve and increase taxation. Only recently have the height records contained in the census been analyzed in a systematic way (Archer, 1975; Challú, 2009, 2010).² In this study we analyze the military registry of two localities in the Puebla intendency: Atlixco and Tehuacán, in central Mexico (Fig. 1).³ This study provides a template for researchers working on other former Spanish American colonies where these kinds of military registers might be available.

2. Historical background

The Spanish Crown gave little consideration to the defense of its American colonies until 1762, when British expeditionary forces carried out successful sieges of Havana and Manila. Prior to this date, the Spanish Crown did not want to spend resources on an army for its colonies in America; it expected the colonies to bear the fiscal burden of their own defense given that it was already spending considerable amount of money on defense in other parts of the empire. Defense focused mainly on the coasts at the major entry points into the imperial holdings and, until the mid-eighteenth century, the army of the

Americas throughout the colonies never exceeded fourteen thousand men. The core was drawn from Iberian Peninsula recruits. The great majority of this army (*ejército de dotación*) resided permanently in the Spanish American colonies, a smaller “reinforcement army” remained on call in Spain to be deployed during emergencies (Vinson, 2001).

When the threat of invasion became a tangible reality, the imperial regime realized it had to improve the military defenses of the American colonies. It was particularly important to defend New Spain (today Mexico) because it was Spain’s most profitable colony in the New World. Yet, implementing any defense initiative proved difficult. The Spanish crown had unrealistic expectations of the army it wanted to create. On one hand it wanted to create a militia that would be mainly composed of *euuropeos* (Spaniards), on the other hand the Crown did not want to pay the price of creating one (Archer, 1977).⁴

Despite manpower shortages and the Crown’s desire to keep the defense budget to a minimum, the Spanish royal authorities were not keen on recruiting colonists in the New World for their regular armies: because they feared that such recruits could pose a threat of rebellion against the regime, and there was a widespread prejudice that American subjects were unfit for a military career because of their supposed laziness and lack of discipline (Archer, 1975).

In 1786, the Spanish Crown issued the ordinance that required New Spain to take a population census.⁵ Viceroy

² Challú (2009, pp. 23–26; 2010, p. 27).

³ The military registries are located in the Archivo General de la Nación (www.agn.gob.mx) in the *Padrones* section, and they are part of military registries made in the 1790s for different localities in the colony of New Spain (today Mexico). Military registers and population censuses were considered two different sets of documents hence they are located in two different sections of the *Archivo General de la Nación*. Military registers are located in the *Padrones* section while population censuses are in the *Historia* section. Registers and census were conducted at the same time to minimize the number of men hiding themselves to avoid military service.

⁴ Castas: mestizo (indigenous and Spaniard), castizo (mestizo and Spaniard), pardo (African and Amerindian backgrounds).

⁵ Real Ordenanza para el establecimiento e instrucción de intendentes de ejército y provincia en el reino de Nueva España.

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