

ARTICLE

Establishing Colonial Rule in a Frontier Encomienda: Chile's Copiapó Valley under Francisco de Aguirre and His Kin, 1549–1580

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Abstract

This article explores how Francisco de Aguirre used the Copiapó Valley encomienda to negotiate political power during the transition from conquest to colonial rule in northern Chile. Simultaneously, we analyze the circumstances of how a native society was incorporated into the Spanish Empire after a decade of fighting and resistance on the fringes of the empire. The strategic use of the fear of native rebellions to close the road from Peru to Chile gave Aguirre enough power to negotiate an important political position, which in the future would clash with the colonial authorities. Copiapó Valley's peripheral location in the southernmost Atacama Desert constituted a political gray zone for the colonial administration. This space contributed to consolidating power for Aguirre and enabled locals some negotiation power within the possibilities afforded by the colonial system.

Keywords: encomienda; Francisco de Aguirre; Copiapó; frontier; Atacama Desert

Resumen

Este artículo explora como Francisco de Aguirre utilizó la encomienda del Valle de Copiapó para negociar poder político durante la transición entre la conquista al dominio colonial en el norte de Chile. Simultáneamente analizamos las circunstancias de como una sociedad indígena fue incorporada dentro del imperio español luego de una década de lucha y resistencia en los márgenes del imperio. El uso estratégico del miedo a que rebeliones indígenas cerrasen el paso del camino de Perú a Chile le dio a Aguirre suficiente poder para negociar una posición política importante, la cual en el futuro entraría en conflicto con las autoridades coloniales. La ubicación periférica del Valle de Copiapó en la parte más austral del desierto de Atacama constituyó una zona gris para la administración colonial. Este espacio ayudó a consolidar el poder de Aguirre y le permitió a las poblaciones locales obtener algún poder de negociación dentro de las posibilidades que entregaba el sistema colonial.

Palabras clave: encomienda; Francisco de Aguirre; Copiapó; frontera; desierto de Atacama

The *encomienda*, or *repartimiento*, was one of the most desirable grants that a conquistador could obtain in the Americas. This granted him economic benefits, social recognition, and the possibility of political participation at local and regional levels (Batchelder and Sánchez 2013; Lafaye 1999; Presta 1997). Formally, the *encomienda* meant that a specific indigenous polity should provide tribute and service in exchange for the *encomendero's* alleged protection and religious instruction (Himmerich y Valencia 1991). The *encomienda* did not include the legal possession of land (Kirkpatrick 1939; Zavala 1935), which enabled the crown to limit the *encomendero's* power because relatives could not inherit the *encomienda* unless granted by the authorities, and the crown could confiscate large *encomiendas* over time (Yeager 1995). However, to a certain degree, the *encomienda* and land concessions known as *merced* also established the foundation for the consolidation of large haciendas (estates) and the creation of a landlord oligarchy over the next centuries (Carlson 2019; Keith 1971; Lockhart 1969). Despite the legal definition of the *encomienda*, during its introduction in Chile, there was not always a clear distinction between land concessions or *merced* (where the crown granted land to specific individuals) and the allocation of indigenous personal service, a situation that gave more power to the *encomenderos* in maximizing the profit obtained from their holdings (Góngora 1970).

As a social group, the *encomenderos* wielded an important amount of power during the first part of the conquest and even challenged the power of the Spanish monarchy during the mid-sixteenth century. Becoming an *encomendero* in the Andes was idealized as a “poor soldier’s paradise” (Covey 2020), and it fostered ideals of social mobility in response to the services rendered in the conquest, which did not depend on one’s noble background or origin. The *encomendero's* power was feared by royal authorities, who were threatened by the emergence of independent feudal lords and the depletion of indigenous labor (Covey 2020; Keith 1971; Thomas 2011). Their ambition and demonstrations against the viceregal administration progressively led the crown to intervene strongly. The revolts initiated by Gonzalo Pizarro (1544–1548) and Francisco Hernández Girón (1553–1554) validated the need to impose the monarchic rule in the colonies, signaling the beginning of a new stage of consolidation of the colonial regime over provincial, local powers. This began in the 1560s and expanded with greater force during the government of Francisco de Toledo as viceroy of Peru in the 1570s (Bakewell 1989; Merluzzi 2014). To this end, the authorities imposed a series of taxes and instructed the local administrative and justice officers, the *corregidores*, to supervise the *encomenderos*, the Indian *curacas*, and church officials (Bakewell 1989; Lohmann 1957).

Although the *encomienda* institution created a strong economic and political base for the *encomenderos*, it also produced extensive and negative transformations for local indigenous communities, given the introduction of mandatory personal service and the requisition of local resources as tribute. Thus, in various cases, the *encomienda* was a threat to *encomenderos'* survival as well as to the continuity of their cultural and political life (Contreras 2017; Lorandi 1988; Newson 1985; Wachtel 1976). Despite the power asymmetries inherent in the expansion of the Spanish Empire in the Americas, such as the fact that native societies were subjected to forced labor, indigenous people were able to participate in more complex and nuanced ways in the initial years of the *encomienda* (Restall 2002). Generally, indigenous societies were able to negotiate better living conditions when they aligned their agendas with the interests of specific *encomenderos* and colonial authorities. In this context, the caciques and indigenous elites had opportunities to bolster their authority and improve their social status

(Claros 2011; Cunill 2014; De la Puente 2017; Leiva 2017; Pérez 2013; Zuloaga 2012).¹ The mediating role of caciques was crucial for the stability of the *encomiendas*. They contributed politically and economically to the reorganization of local indigenous labor (Stern 1986), and also to mitigating the tensions between the crown policies and the interest of Spanish colonists (Deagan 2001).

At the margins of the newly formed Spanish Empire, some native groups were successful in resisting aspects of colonial governance. For example, some groups avoided being subjected to personal service under the figure of the *encomienda*; through negotiations, they were granted independence outside the imperial frontiers. The Mapuche society in southern Chile managed to increase its social complexity and organizational capabilities because of the long-term war against the Spanish Empire. Their success in resistance allowed them to retain their social and political autonomy and led to the establishment of an imperial frontier (Boccarda 1999; Zavala 2005). Similarly, in the Guaraní region, the Chiriguano employed various strategies that helped them resist the conquest. They eventually negotiated peace agreements with the Spaniards that allowed them to maintain their autonomy (Roulet 1993; Saignes 2007). Apart from these cases where indigenous societies kept their political autonomy by remaining outside the political jurisdiction of the Spanish Empire, some indigenous societies that lived in places of geopolitical importance in relation to the empire's internal borders were also able to negotiate for better conditions, despite being subjected to personal service under the *encomienda*. One of these places was Copiapó Valley in northern Chile, far from the geographic centers of colonial power but nonetheless important as a link between the viceroyalty of Peru and the new Reino de Chile.

Copiapó Valley was the entrance to Chile and an important outpost for resources for the Atacama Desert crossing (Figure 1). Between Copiapó and the oases of the Atacama salt marsh to the north, there are 450 kilometers of dry desert without permanent water sources. The Inca Road played a critical role in connecting these territories (Garrido 2016). The expedition of Diego de Almagro entered Copiapó from Argentina in 1536 but returned to Peru using the Inca Road in the Atacama Desert, a shorter route that was open all year round.² A few years later, in 1540, Pedro de Valdivia crossed the desert following the Inca Trail to the south, taking official possession of the territory in Copiapó. The importance of Copiapó as a node in the desert implies that if there were indigenous rebellions there, central Chile would be disconnected from the rest of the Spanish Empire. Copiapó Valley communities fought for over a decade against the Spanish for the control of their labor and resources and threatened to cut all communication between Santiago and Lima (Garrido and González 2020). Even after the beginning of the *encomienda* system in the region, the Atacama Desert crossing continued to be a dangerous enterprise because of the possibility of an unexpected encounter with indigenous rebel groups (Télliz and Silva 1989). As Governor Valdivia stated in a letter to the king in 1549: "I had proposed to bring peace to Copiapó valley and its people, in order to secure passage, and create safety for people who come from Peru to serve His Majesty here. This is the key to the city of Santiago and the door to enter this land, and to avoid its closure, I have done much work and spent a lot to sustain everything, without getting any personal profit" (Medina 1888–1902 8:450).³

Evidently, it was a priority for Governor Valdivia to maintain control over the route. Consequently, Francisco de Aguirre was granted the whole population of Copiapó Valley as his *encomienda* to ensure that the entry point to Chile remained open. However, the

¹ Although native rights were legitimized and the caciques were able to negotiate with the Spanish authorities, during the sixteenth century, indigenous people were assimilated to the legal category of *miserable*, which granted them low levels of autonomy and instilled a strong sense of paternalism (Poloni-Simard 2005; Cunill 2011; López 2012).

² The route across the Andes could not be used in winter because of the snow.

³ For a better presentation of the sources, we have translated all the documentary citations.

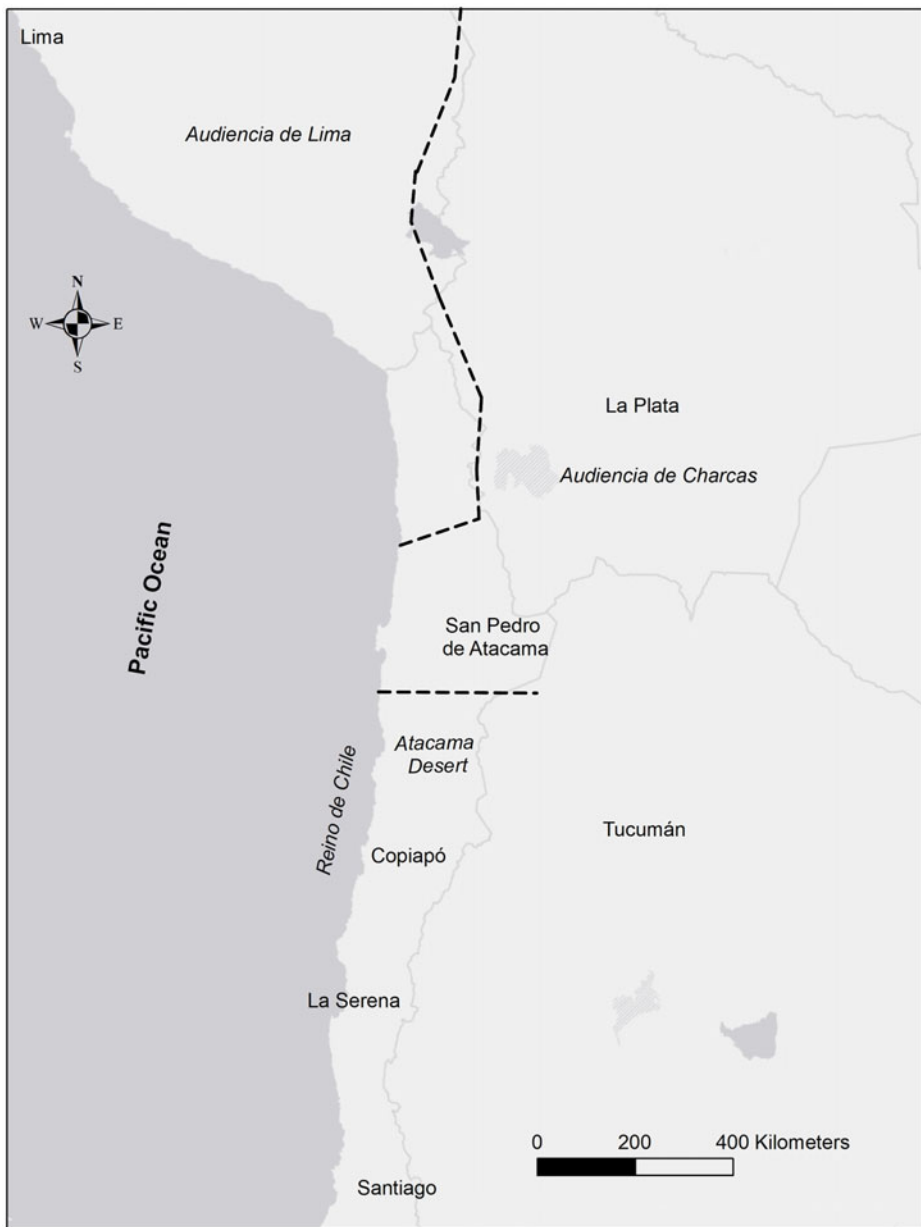


Figure 1. Copiapó and other important sites.

settlement and consolidation of the Spanish presence in Copiapó was a complex process due to its remote location and the constant fear of new indigenous rebellions.

Copiapó Valley, as an internal biogeographical frontier, has not received detailed study of its importance in the consolidation of the colonial order in Chile and the southern Andes. This is partially because this region was disengaged from the main colonial pole of Potosí, which created independent regional economic circuits (Pinto 1990, 30). Local historiography has generally described the northern frontier of Chile as a stable territory in comparison to the southern border, which was in constant battle against the Mapuche

people (Amunátegui 1909; Feliú 1941; Mellafe 1986; Pinto 1990). Additionally, the figure of Francisco Aguirre has not been critically analyzed in contemporary research, where an epic and heroic view of his life still dominates (e.g., Greve 1953; Sayago 1874; Silva 1907). Research on the early *encomienda* in Copiapó started in the nineteenth century with the historian Carlos Sayago (1874), who identified its economic infrastructure, which included vineyards, warehouses, and mills. Later studies about Copiapó have focused on the indigenous society of Copiapó Valley and its chieftaincy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Cortés 2013, 2014, 2015). Apart from the few recent studies about the late sixteenth century (Cortés 2020, 2021), the early beginnings of the *encomienda* in the region are still underexplored.

This article examines the circumstances of how Francisco de Aguirre utilized the Copiapó Valley *encomienda* to negotiate political power in a process that included the incorporation of a native society into the Spanish colonial world after a decade of fighting and resistance. This allowed him and his family to benefit politically and economically. We argue that Copiapó, as a frontier *encomienda*, was critical for the establishment of colonial rule in Chile, in securing Chile's connection to Peru and Charcas. Following Boccara (1999), we distance ourselves from the idea of the frontier uncritically defined in early ethnohistoric studies as the border of civilization. In this case, we refer to an internal transitional social and geographical space in the colonial world that became a gray zone where indigenous and Spanish agents could find nonconventional modes of expression (Lamana 1997, 2001, 2008). We argue that the fear of new indigenous uprisings and the need to maintain open communications within the empire gave Aguirre political power and furthered his ambition to conquer new territories and populations across the Andes. Copiapó Valley was thus functional to Aguirre's agenda as long as he could negotiate with its inhabitants and maintain a certain level of peace in the region.

This study is based on the critical revision of primary and secondary sources from archives in Chile and Spain. The primary sources come from the documents from Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN) in Santiago, Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Sevilla, and the collection of documents collected and published by José Toribio Medina (1888–1902 and 1956–1963).⁴ The primary sources are composed of “probanzas de mérito,” official letters, indigenous land-sale documents, judiciary documents, and the *Relación de las visitas y tasas de Hernando de Santillán*, which was the major census of the indigenous population and labor regulation conducted at the time. Because of the nature of the documents, we focused mainly on the perspective of Aguirre and his kin, the logistical relevance of Copiapó region, and the process of consolidating colonial institutions, as we had comparatively limited evidence regarding Spanish-indigenous socioeconomic relationships.

The end of independence and the beginning of the *encomienda* in Copiapó Valley

Copiapó was the first valley of the Spanish kingdom of Chile after crossing the extremely dry Atacama Desert. Its latitude is 27 degrees south, and it covers about 200 kilometers east to west from the Andes to the coastline. The local pre-Hispanic “Copiapó” society was politically decentralized, with a settlement pattern consisting of various small villages spread along the valley (Castillo 1998). This region was incorporated into the Inca Empire in the early fifteenth century, possibly with the intention of intensifying copper mining and metallurgical production (Garrido and Plaza 2020; Niemeyer 1993). The Inca infrastructure in the valley entailed low investment in terms of architectural quality and size, but most of the *tambos* and administrative centers were connected through the

⁴ We specify the volume used in the in-text citations.

Qhapaq Ñan road network (Garrido 2016). Local villages did not evidence significant intervention by the Incas in terms of architecture, and not all economic activities were controlled by the empire (Garrido and Salazar 2017).

After the collapse of the Inca Empire, Copiapó people underwent social and political reorganization between 1536 to 1549 while resisting and fighting against Spanish dominion. In the last part of this process, they created macroregional interethnic alliances to coordinate fighting actions, which led to substantial victories. These victories threatened to cut off the continuity of the Spanish dominion in northern Chile (Garrido and González 2020). In fact, in their last uprising in 1548, they destroyed the Spanish garrison in Copiapó and the young city of La Serena, killing all their inhabitants. While Peru was still in a delicate political situation after the rebellions of the Pizarro siblings, Spanish authorities in Santiago were struggling to keep the peace with local tribes from central-southern Chile and urgently needed to maintain open communications with the north. Because the rebel Copiapó Valley was a key place on the route to cross the Atacama Desert, pacification of the territory was necessary for the new colony. Various campaigns were carried out to control populations there. Eventually, Captain Francisco de Aguirre suffocated the rebellion, refounded the city of La Serena, and acquired total control of the northern entrance of the Chilean kingdom, thus profiting from that maneuver.

Francisco de Aguirre was the right-hand man of Governor Pedro de Valdivia. His role in the fight against the Atacama Indians (Bibar [1558] 1966, 16), and later in the suppression of the rebellion in northern Chile in 1549, granted him the right to possess large *encomiendas* in Cachapoal Valley, Santiago, La Serena, and Copiapó. Aguirre built his reputation by self-proclaiming his heroism against the Indians. According to the *probanzas* sent to the crown, Francisco de Aguirre stated in 1552 that more than a hundred Spaniards had been killed in Copiapó, but only he, together with eleven Spaniards, was able to bring peace to this valley. This was an accomplishment that Captains Francisco de Villagra, Pedro de Villagra, Juan Jufré, nor Governor Valdivia could achieve with larger numbers of Spanish and Indian troops (Medina 1888–1902 10:8). Similarly, Diego Sánchez, who went with Francisco de Villagra in the first expedition to suppress the rebellion, said that they were not able to break the indigenous resistance, despite having sixty Spanish soldiers and five hundred native auxiliary troops (Medina 1888–1902, 10:93). Juan de Cusio, a Spanish soldier who went with Pedro de Villagra and Juan Jufré in a new expedition against the Copiapó Indians, stated that they were attacked as soon as they arrived there, losing many horses and suffering many casualties (Medina 1888–1902, 10:95). This version was also shared by the soldier Lope de Ayala (Medina 1888–1902, 10:100) and Sebastián de Villanueva, who added that Villagra and Jufré were besieged and attacked in Copiapó for about fifty days (Medina 1888–1902, 15:52–53). In fact, they could escape only because of a temporary truce obtained by Villagra and the main Indian chief of Copiapó named Cateo. This narrative was also stated in 1562 by Alonso de Riberos, Antonio de Torres, Martín de Peñalosa, Juan de Vega, and Tomás Falcón (Medina 1888–1902, 13:78, 106, 225, 268, 328).

Aguirre had always overemphasized his role in suffocating the rebellion in Copiapó. According to him, in 1554, over a period of six months (Medina 1888–1902, 10:81), the infamous Copiapó Indians “served as well as in the place where the Indians serve the best, which is Mexico city.” Soon after, they were able to produce an important quantity of gold for him (Medina 1888–1902, 10:53). His self-proclaimed success obscures the significant role that Pedro de Villagra and Juan Jufré played in negotiating a peace agreement with the people from Huasco Valley, the southern neighbors of Copiapó (Medina 1888–1902, 13:78, 325, 329; 14:177). Thus, when Aguirre arrived, only the Copiapó people were still fighting (Medina 1888–1902, 13:162, 278, 302). After some violent encounters, he managed to negotiate a peace settlement (Medina 1888–1902, 10:66). According to the testimony by Garci Díaz, this peace was obtained only after the capture of chiefs Canimba, Pinel, Guacato, and other local authorities; deals were made with some of them, and others were

killed in revenge (Medina 1888–1902, 18: 30). Thus, the chief Canimba or Cabimba was dismembered (Bibar [1558] 1966, 130), and another of the rebel chiefs was burned at the stake (Medina 1888–1902, 10:57–58). For Alonso de Torres, Aguirre’s success with a small number of Spanish soldiers was because he had brought to Copiapó around three hundred auxiliary Indians armed with bows and arrows (Medina 1888–1902, 18:18).

Thus, after almost a decade of resistance, the end of the rebellion in 1549 marked the beginning of colonial rule in Copiapó (Garrido and González 2020). In this new period, Francisco de Aguirre and his family would determine the destiny of Copiapó people. By profiting from the fear of indigenous rebellions, Aguirre promoted his role as a “bringer of peace” to establish a strong political and economic platform and pursue his ambition in the new colonial world.

Copiapó Valley as Aguirre’s castle

The people from Copiapó Valley were granted as an *encomienda* by Governor Valdivia to Francisco de Aguirre in reward for his services to keep the Atacama Desert route open between Santiago and Perú. However, the initial enforced peace would not last for long; in fact, the hard gold-mining labor imposed on the Indians produced discontent and new rebellion attempts, profiting from Aguirre’s absence during his conquest campaign in Tucumán. In 1552, some Indians assembled forces in a hilltop fortress, or *pucara*, in the mines near the city of La Serena. Despite local efforts, this rebellion was short-lived and cruelly suppressed when the local mayor, Pedro de Cisternas, killed a Copiapó chief blamed for organizing the uprising (Cortés 2020; Medina 1888–1902, 10:193). Although the constant fear of rebellion was a challenge for the Chilean colony, this proved advantageous to Aguirre; it meant that his role was necessary as long as the threat existed.

Besides Aguirre’s role in creating “safety” in the territory, his Copiapó *encomienda* was an important source of income that allowed him to be commissioned by Governor Valdivia in 1552 to conquer the northern regions across the Andes, in the area that is currently northwestern Argentina. Thus, Valdivia could dispute the government of the region to Núñez de Prado, who had just founded the city of El Barco (Silva 1907, 94). During his campaign in Tucumán, Aguirre founded the city of Santiago del Estero “at his own expense” (Medina 1888–1902, 10:82), paid with gold production from mines in Copiapó and La Serena (Silva 1909, 122), which arguably made him the wealthiest man in northern Chile (Mariño de Lobera [1575] 1865, 79).⁵

In 1554, Aguirre returned to Chile after the death of Pedro de Valdivia to claim his supposed rights to govern the kingdom (Bibar [1558] 1979, 183). For Aguirre, this situation opened the possibility of increasing his political influence. However, he clashed with Francisco de Villagra, who had similar political goals. In practical terms, Aguirre controlled all the territory that lay north of Santiago, while Villagra controlled the territory from Santiago to Concepción in the south. Both of them were assembling their factions to fight to govern Chile. Far from the center of power in Lima, Aguirre could exercise his will in Chile and Argentina, backed by his militia and the strategic support of the Indians. However, this created discomfort among the citizenship and the crown representatives, who started using the legal system against his ambitions for power. To regain control of the situation, the viceroy of Perú decided to send his son, García Hurtado de Mendoza, to stop the fight between Aguirre and Villagra. Both men were captured and sent as prisoners to Lima by ship in 1557 (Levillier 1921–1926 1:308; Silva 1907, 153). In the accusation coordinated by the *oidor* of Lima, Hernando de Santillán, Aguirre was charged with trying

⁵ According to the “Nueva Ordenanza de Minas” promulgated in 1546 by Governor Valdivia, the Cabildo of Santiago could give mining concessions to *encomenderos*, but the gold mines belonged to the king, who would receive a fifth of the metal production (Millán 2001).

to become governor without the approval of the royal justice, disobeying the king's authority, and mistreating the indigenous people of the Chilean kingdom.⁶ In the end, Aguirre was forced to set aside his ambitions, and he focused instead on governing Tucumán in Argentina.

Aguirre returned to Copiapó in 1559 and spent almost a year there running his businesses before going back to Tucumán (Medina 1956–1963, 1:240). Francisco de Villagra succeeded in his political struggle and was appointed governor of Chile in 1561. However, Villagra's government was short-lived, as he died of a disease in 1563. This situation led to more chaos and political tension in the Chilean colony because Francisco de Aguirre began, once more, disputing his government aspirations with Pedro de Villagra and Juan Jufré. The *licenciado* Juan de Herrera, worried about this political context, wrote a letter to the king in January 1564, stating that the “only intention” of Francisco de Aguirre “is to govern and disobey the justice” (Medina 1888–1902, 29:310). Juan de Herrera further added that Aguirre was trying to turn the royal soldiers to his side and was recruiting criminals to maintain his control over the people by force. He added that the citizens of La Serena had to be locked up in their houses to protect themselves from the Indians who were out of control and disobeying authority.

The apocalyptic panorama described by Herrera was orchestrated by Aguirre and his people in Copiapó Valley. Here, they controlled the entrance to the Chilean territory from a fort that he built, nicknamed “Montalbán Castle” (Medina 1888–1902, 29:311). This was named after a castle in Toledo, Spain, infamous for hosting criminals and lowlifes. Thus, Copiapó valley was considered a dangerous internal frontier in the Spanish colony, a place where someone could be easily assaulted or robbed, and where Aguirre and his son Hernando cared more about their own political agenda than protecting the entrance of the Kingdom of Chile (Bastida [1563] 1889, 88; Medina 1888–1902, 29:311). To the north of Copiapó, the Atacama Desert continued to be a dangerous place, not just because of the harsh environmental conditions and the lack of water but also because, by the end of the sixteenth century, travelers still experienced occasional attacks by Indians, especially because of the scarce presence of *encomenderos* and Spanish authorities in the oases of San Pedro de Atacama (López de Cepeda [1590] 1922, 15; Téllez and Silva 1989). Keeping this threat alive was not just functional to Aguirre's political project but also advantageous for the local people, as it gave them a chance to negotiate their condition in the *encomienda* system, if they were willing to support Aguirre's ambitions.

Within the precarious institutional order of the Chilean kingdom, Aguirre took advantage of the fear of the native rebellions among the colonists for his own political ambitions, generating an ambivalent panorama between effective dominance and the lack of control. This situation, we propose, granted the Copiapó Indians some negotiation power if they could support Aguirre's family's conspiracies and projects. In the words of Garci Díaz, Aguirre was “feared and loved” by the Indians (Medina 1888–1902, 10:121). This particular duality would be characteristic of how he negotiated with native groups.

The internal control of Copiapó Valley *encomienda*

Montalbán Castle in Copiapó was not just Aguirre's individual project; it was also a family enterprise. Extended family was crucial for *encomenderos* to establish social networks and administer their businesses, in order to avoid the disintegration of their status and privileges (Presta 1997, 2014). Aguirre was no exception. In fact, his relatives played an important role in managing his *encomienda* in Copiapó, particularly during his period as

⁶ Archivo General de Indias (hereafter cited as AGI) Chile 18,R.2,N.6, f.1r. *Cartas de gobernadores. Cabeza de proceso contra Francisco de Aguirre*. La Plata, 1558.

governor in Tucumán, Argentina. Aguirre's son Hernando was one of the main actors who oversaw economic production in Copiapó Valley. Apart from maintaining gold mining, he established a sugarcane mill and vineyards relevant for the creation of an internal colonial market in Chile (Medina 1888–1902, 10:126). In terms of the family's management of and relations with the Indians, Marco Antonio Aguirre, a mestizo son of Francisco, played a critical role in running the local affairs in Copiapó, as we shall see.

Indigenous support, especially from the community leaders, was important to the *encomenderos'* political and economic projects because they needed to maintain a constant flow of native labor (e.g., Stern 1986). At the beginning of the *encomienda* system in Copiapó, the local Indians managed to maintain their chieftaincy. One of the first documents that details the social condition and demography of Copiapó Indians is “Visita y tasa de Santillán.” This was a census conducted by *licenciado* Hernando de Santillán and a labor regulation, or *tasa*, published in 1558, only nine years after the native rebellion ended in the valley.⁷ Although personal service had been legally abolished by 1549 (Bakewell 1989), this practice continued in many parts of the Americas, including Chile, Paraguay, and Venezuela, as a way to provide income to the *encomenderos* (Newson 1985). This *visita* mentions the presence of at least five chiefs—Tiquitiqui, Llina, Francisco, and another two named Alonso—who governed various villages in the valley and ruled almost 1,400 people. Three of the chiefs had Christian names, likely because they were baptized when Francisco de Aguirre set up his *encomienda* (Medina 1888–1902, 18:19). It is worth mentioning that baptism was also an instrument of the local elites to gain recognition and legitimacy as figures of authority in order to enter into dialogue with the colonial system as Christian vassals of the king (Deagan 2001). These caciques had people in the valley and on the coast of the Atacama Desert for fishing activities, thus controlling the territory from the Andes Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. The Santillán *tasa* for personal service established that about 10 percent of the Copiapó population—146 Indians—should be provided to work for Francisco de Aguirre's *repartimiento* in agricultural and household tasks. Notably, this *tasa* explicitly states that the Copiapó Indians should not be compelled to work in mining because “they were more capable than the rest of the Indians of these provinces.”⁸ Instead, they were requested to pay a yearly tribute to Aguirre and were not sent to work at his will. The Santillán *tasa* accounts for around fifty-five *repartimientos* in northern and central Chile. A very unusual fact is that no other Indians were exempted from personal service in gold mining, the principal source of income for the first Spanish settlers in Chile (Contreras 2017).

Considering the enormous pressure for the Indians to produce wealth for the conquistadors, this exemption was a very important achievement for Copiapó Indians, particularly because Aguirre had stated a few years before that they mined gold “as punishment for the betrayals and cruelties that they have committed in the last twelve years” and “because they have nothing else to give to their masters, and without that gold the land of Copiapó could not be sustained” (Medina 1888–1902, 10:53). The exemption from mining service is even more relevant considering that in neighboring areas such as La Serena, colonial authorities had plans to relocate Indians from southern Chile to work in the mines because of the lack of available labor force (Medina 1956–1963, 2:72). It is important to emphasize that Santillán strongly criticized Francisco de Aguirre and Francisco de Villagra for the mistreatment of the indigenous inhabitants of Chile. For Santillán, Aguirre and Villagra fabricated reasons to justify their violence, such as that certain groups did not do enough personal service, did not go to the *mita*, or did not produce enough gold.⁹ The fact that the exemption of the mining *mita* happened during the

⁷ AGI Justicia 473. *Relación* and *tasa* of Hernando de Santillán, 1558.

⁸ AGI Justicia 473, f. 815r.

⁹ AGI Justicia 473, f. 817r.

imprisonment of Francisco de Aguirre in Lima suggests that the local caciques realized that this was an opportunity to negotiate for better terms in their dealings with the Spanish authorities. For Aguirre's family, this determination might have been a trade-off to obtain security and local collaboration. These were necessary because of the isolation of the place and the need to keep the *encomienda* running.

Another event that demonstrates the inclusion of caciques in the colonial system is the land trade made by some Copiapó chiefs in 1561. In this case, the chief couple Francisco Guaynitay and María Achay, accompanied by a group of other Indians, approached Diego de Aguirre, who was Francisco de Aguirre's nephew, to be their legal representative for a land sale.¹⁰ The land was auctioned in La Serena for forty-five "sheeps of Castilla" or European sheep, which were an expensive commodity at that time.¹¹ For the Indians, these sheep were important raw materials for textile production and to promote their independent artisan labor. Their use of Spanish political forms and husbandry practices was not just a simple form of acculturation; it also signified an appropriation of new elements for their own purposes and interests (e.g., Silliman 2009). Furthermore, the land sale by local caciques is part of a broader phenomenon of acknowledging indigenous property in areas of low conflict, which deepened the relationship between locals and colonial society under the use of legal Spanish forms and instruments (Silva Vargas 1962, 78).

From the point of view of Aguirre's family, the sale was functional to their economic interests. In fact, the buyer was Diego de Villaruel, who then sold it to María de Torres, Francisco de Aguirre's wife. Considering that the *encomienda* did not include the legal possession of land, its acquisition can be considered a form of investment, particularly considering Aguirre's complicated political situation. In fact, years later, in 1573, when Aguirre was in prison in Lima, he requested that his son Hernando officially legalize the land acquired in Copiapó in 1561 (Sayago 1874, 75). The relevance of family relations in the management of the Copiapó *encomienda* is evident in another example involving Marco Antonio Aguirre, an illegitimate son of Francisco. Marco Antonio was a mestizo who pivoted between both realities, achieving legitimacy in managing the daily affairs of the *encomienda* in Copiapó. His residence was in Copiapó, and in 1578, as a reward for his services, he received from his father a large portion of land in the lower course of the valley, a *merced* originally given in 1576 to Francisco de Aguirre by Governor Rodrigo de Quiroga (Cortés 2021).¹² Importantly, this land was officially demarcated in 1577, with the participation of the chiefs Francisco Chamisca y Alonso Macayto, as witnesses.¹³ Not only did this participation legitimate the land grant for Aguirre; it also bolstered indigenous authority over colonial affairs in the territory.

Like the aforementioned nephew Diego de Aguirre, Marco Antonio also served as a mediator of land sales between the Indians and the Spaniards. In 1580, Marco Antonio mediated the auction of some land belonging to the female chief Ana Quilimachay, which was sold for fifty-five pesos, delivered in the equivalent of 160 sheep and

¹⁰ Archivo Histórico Nacional (hereafter cited as AHN) Real Audiencia 1335, f. 122v–123r. Information on Indian land auction in Copiapó. La Serena, 1561.

¹¹ Commerce between Indians and Spaniards was legally allowed from 1521, based on the mutual agreement between the parties. This would be later sanctioned in 1571. The Indians could sell their land by public auction just by requesting it to an ordinary judge. (Recopilación de leyes de Indias 1756, 2:190–191). See also AHN, Real Audiencia 1335, f. 124r. Information on Indian land auction in Copiapó. La Serena, 1561.

¹² AHN, Capitanía General 155, f. 7r–7v. Land ownership. Pedro de Aguirre on behalf of Francisco de Aguirre. La Serena, 1580.

¹³ AHN, Capitanía General 155, f. 15r.

3 mares.¹⁴ He raised his family in Copiapó, and later, his son Pedro de Aguirre inherited his land and vineyards.¹⁵ The mestizo descendants of Aguirre were functional to his colonial project (Birckel 1979), as they enabled a closer relationship with the indigenous people by enabling them to deal with kinship-related intermediaries. Thus, this constitutes an example of the fluidity of ethnic and cultural categories within the imperial institutional structure (Deagan 2001). Although it would be relevant to understand the specific details, perceptions and actions of Marco Antonio within the indigenous world, unfortunately, the available sources are scarce.

Moreover, the integration of Copiapó Indians into colonial society generated political competition among their chiefs. Although it is not clear how native authorities expressed their power and internal hierarchy in pre-Hispanic times, during this period, certain events suggest the effort of some chiefs to achieve more power by forging a closer relationship with the Spanish authorities. For example, Francisco Guaynitai, one of the wealthiest chiefs, donated land to build a church next to Francisco de Aguirre's house.¹⁶ This was a political gesture that could help him obtain a favorable position within the new colonial order. During the first decades of colonial rule in Copiapó, the native political power started a process of centralization in one single lineage. In the end, only the Tacquia lineage was validated by the Spanish authorities, keeping the chieftaincy until the beginning of the nineteenth century (Cortés 2013, 2015).

In general, Copiapó Indians had a closer relationship with Francisco de Aguirre's family than with Aguirre himself. The roles of Marco Antonio, Hernando, Diego, and María de Torres are examples of the family network created by Francisco de Aguirre, which helped him consolidate and maintain his economic and political power in Copiapó. This was a convenient scenario for the locals, who were able to keep their political structure and avoid the mining personal service if they occasionally helped Aguirre in his political ambitions, such as defending the fort he had built in the valley. Even in 1564, they also acted as his personal armed militia, accompanying him to the city of La Serena during a moment of political struggle in the Chilean kingdom (Bastida [1563] 1889, 101).

In 1575, Francisco de Aguirre retired from public activity and returned to Chile to settle and manage his *encomiendas* in La Serena and Copiapó. By that time, after a trial facing the Inquisition,¹⁷ he had lost his political capital and the governance of Tucumán. The fort built by Aguirre, the former Montalbán Castle, had been abandoned and dilapidated; the Copiapó Indians had already consolidated their position within the colonial system, and the fear of rebellion had vanished. However, Aguirre persisted in promoting to the colonial authorities the idea that Copiapó was a threat. Therefore, in 1581, he requested funding from the crown to restore the fort, which his son Hernando would manage (Medina 1888–1902, 10:126). Aguirre died the same year, old and indebted, but his family continued possessing the *encomienda*. The small number of Spanish residents in Copiapó Valley, mainly Aguirre's family and his associates, and the long distance from the major colonial settlements left them outside of mechanisms enabling tighter political and economic control. Additionally, by keeping alive the fear of the older rebellions (Garrido and González 2020), both the Indians and Aguirre's family were able to negotiate power within and outside the Copiapó *encomienda*.

¹⁴ AHN, Capitanía General 155, f. 4r. There is evidence that female chieftainship was important within the pre-Hispanic social structure of the Copiapó valley with at least two recorded cases during the first years of the conquest (Cortés 2014).

¹⁵ AHN, Capitanía General 155, f. 17

¹⁶ AHN, Capitanía General 578, f. 161v. Documents presented by *maestre de campo* Don Francisco de Cisternas. La Serena, 1633.

¹⁷ The Inquisition trial was a major event in Aguirre's life and determined his downfall. It comprised two stages: a trial of heresy from 1566 to 1569 by the bishop of Chuquisaca, and a trial under the Inquisition in Lima from 1570 to 1575. The details of both trials and its political motivations are discussed later in the paper.

The institutionalization of colonial rule and the fall of Aguirre's power

Aguirre was an encomendero who desired political power and subverted colonial rules. He constantly used the idea of the indigenous rebellions as a constant threat to gain leverage and strengthen his position in the colonial order. His role in Copiapó is an example of how conquistadors tried to preserve an almost uncontested control of large encomiendas and privileges, which soon conflicted with the interests of the newly appointed colonial authorities (Lafaye 1999).

Aguirre's authoritarian character and political ambition in Chile and Tucumán provoked strong resistance against him and motivated the intervention of the authorities. Apart from being imprisoned by García Hurtado de Mendoza in 1557, Aguirre was accused of heresy in 1566 and underwent a long legal process that resumed in 1570 under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition.

After the civil wars in Perú during the 1560s, particularly during the last five years of Lope García de Castro's government, monarchical control through the viceroyalty gradually increased, which even intervened in the power dynamics of far rural territories (Bakewell 1989). This consolidation of imperial sovereignty intensified even more with the arrival of viceroy Francisco de Toledo. He focused on dealing with internal adversaries, the possible threat imposed by the Inca elites, and the permanent indigenous resistance in the margins. Toledo's policies can be summarized by the following phrase taken from a letter he wrote to the king in 1578: "I am trying to conquer this kingdom again" (Merluzzi 2014, 363).

Francisco de Aguirre had many enemies who wanted him out of power. In 1566 Jerónimo de Holguín led a mutiny in Tucumán that ended with Francisco and Hernando as prisoners. In Santiago del Estero, the priest Julián Martínez started an accusation of heresy against Aguirre while his enemies ransacked his estates and possessions (Silva 1907, 197). The trial was extended until 1569 in La Plata (Chquisaca), before the formal establishment of the Inquisition in the Americas, so the bishops were in charge of prosecuting crimes against the Catholic faith. The process against Aguirre was long and complex, but he had political allies, such as the *oidor* of Real Audiencia de Charcas, licenciado Juan de Matienzo, whose daughter Agustina was married to Francisco de Aguirre's son, Hernando. After four years of incarceration, Aguirre was sentenced to publicly denounce his behavior, to perform some prayers in the church, and to pay a large fine.¹⁸

When Aguirre returned to Tucumán in 1570, his enemies appealed to the viceroy Francisco Toledo, who agreed to resume the process and sent for Aguirre to be moved to Lima in 1571. This was a major blow to Aguirre, who had to face the newly established Inquisition. After spending four years in prison, the Inquisition trial finally ended in 1575. Aguirre was released after being sentenced to repent and permanently exiled from Tucumán (Silva 1907, 240).

In Viceroy Toledo's era, the Inquisition focused on preventive social control, in line with Toledo's centralizing political project (Hampe 1996; Merluzzi 2014, 353; Sartori 2007, 108). Toledo did not want people like Aguirre to represent the colonial government in the provinces. During his tenure, the viceroy suspended Aguirre's appointment as governor and asserted that the marriage between Aguirre's son and the daughter of judge Juan de Matienzo was intended to influence the latter's decisions and to reduce the sentence given by Bishop Santo Tomás in La Plata (Levillier 1921–1926, 3:377, 437, 493; 4:98; 5:327; 6:81).

The Inquisition process was a public example to demonstrate what could happen to troublesome individuals. Toledo's attitude against Aguirre was not unique; something similar happened to Felipe de Cáceres, the governor of Paraguay who was accused of heresy because of his political actions (Sartori 2007, 110). In this regard, the accusations of

¹⁸ AGI, Patronato 188, R.15, f. 13r. *Adjuración de Francisco de Aguirre, gobernador de Tucumán*, La Plata, 1560.

heresy illuminate specific aspects of Aguirre's behavior in how he imposed authority. He was accused of challenging the power of the church officials by saying that going to mass was not necessary and that people could be saved only by faith and not by the priests. He also promoted himself as the main spiritual and temporal leader in Tucumán and said that excommunication was something that worried only little men, not him (Silva 1907, 203). There were other charges regarding the personal relationship that he established with the Indians, specifically his authoritarianism and the practice of establishing direct negotiation that disregarded colonial rules. One charge mentioned that he convinced the Indians to "not trust in anything in heaven or earth but only in his own word."¹⁹ Similarly, Aguirre was accused of saying to the Indians that he could absolve them from guilt so that they could be absent during religious celebrations to work on other things.²⁰ During the second trial, the accusations against Aguirre were similar, in addition to other accusations, such as performing sorcery to heal the injuries of Indians with *ensalmos* or spells (Medina 1887, 164).

Both trials lasted for almost a decade and were a public deterrent and example of dealing with dissidence in the new colonial world. Although Francisco de Aguirre survived the imprisonment, he lost almost all of his political capital. His case shows at a regional scale the rise and fall of *encomenderos* in their early attempts to bypass colonial regulations. In turn, these attempts allowed places such as Copiapó more flexibility in the mutual expectations of the Spanish-indigenous relations within the *encomienda* system.

Conclusions

The gradual construction of the colonial order in Chile, "the Indies of the Indies" (Birckel 1979, 41)—with a small population, low levels of control from colonial authorities, and a prevalent state of warfare—favored special modes of engagement between conquistadors and caciques at the onset of the *encomienda* system. The strategic position of Copiapó Valley as the northern gate to the Chilean kingdom, and its geographical isolation as a crossing point between deserts, favored the political ambitions of Francisco de Aguirre and supported his struggle to govern in Chile and Argentina. Aguirre's fort there and his frontier *encomienda* consolidated Spanish territorial continuity and facilitated the economic exploitation of the area. This marks a relevant contrast to the southern Chilean frontier, where similar infrastructure did not achieve the same results because of the constant state of warfare (De Ramón 1996). In following his individual aspirations, Aguirre did not intend to grant advantage or autonomy to indigenous groups; however, he needed their support to maintain power. This confluence of objectives resulted in an asymmetrical but functional relationship between Aguirre and the local indigenous authorities.

From a conventional point of view, Aguirre was no different from other conquistadors who built an extensive family network to consolidate their economic and political base (e.g., Presta 1997, 2014). A clear example of this is the role of his relatives in the organization and management of the *encomienda*, and the marriage alliance between his son and the daughter of Juan de Matienzo, the influential *licenciado* from Audiencia de Charcas. Regarding the management of internal affairs in Copiapó, mestizo figures such as Marco Antonio would be even more important for maintaining the economic production of the *encomienda* and for dealing with indigenous social and political affairs.

Of all the modes adopted by local societies in the Americas to face and integrate into Spanish colonial society, three were the most common: association with the Spaniards to fight against a common enemy (Baber 2010; Bravo 2003; Matthew and Oudijk 2007;

¹⁹ AGI, Patronato 188,R.15, f.16r. *Adjuración de Francisco de Aguirre, gobernador de Tucumán*, La Plata, 1560.

²⁰ AGI, Patronato 188,R.15, f.14r.

Sheridan 2001; Stern 1986; Ruiz-Esquide 1993), elite individuals who collaborated to save their social status (Lamana 1997, 2001; Medinaceli 2007; Rosas 2009; Saignes 1987), and interethnic marriage alliances (Bauer and Covey 2002; Deagan 2001; Herrera 2007; Vicuña 2015). This case shows a combination of the first two modes, combined with the fear of rebellion at the northern entrance of the kingdom, after almost a decade of indigenous struggle against Spanish rule (Garrido and González 2020). Aguirre profited from this situation and built a fort that justified his political power, although he arguably never intended to keep tight control of the territory. This was a paradoxical scenario: on the one hand, Copiapó Indians remained stigmatized as potentially violent, while on the other hand, Aguirre would claim that they served as well as the Indians from Mexico after his intervention. It is important to mention that even though the local people from Copiapó could obtain some benefits, this largely depended on two main factors: the distant contact with an *encomendero* who did not have enough people to control indigenous affairs in such a large territory and the political justification of Aguirre and his family as the peacekeepers of northern Chile.

Although we have presented relevant evidence regarding Francisco de Aguirre's political ambition in this frontier *encomienda*, there remains more research to be conducted on the role of indigenous agency in Copiapó. In the future, we hope to research in more detail the role of cacique lineages in Copiapó during the sixteenth century, particularly details regarding the economic reconfiguration of the local society during that period. Similarly, we expect to shed more light on the role of mestizo *encomienda* managers and conduct a comparative study with other internal imperial frontiers.

In summary, this case shows how both conquistadors and caciques sought opportunities to participate in the creation of a new cultural and political colonial landscape (Cope 2010; Ferris, Harrison, and Wilcox 2014). However, the specific consequences could widely vary from a tighter integration in the colonial system (e.g., Zuloaga 2012) to a more distant but strategic role, as in the case of Copiapó Valley.

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