

# The Origins of the Mexican Flag

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Michoacán is the name of a state of the United States of Mexico, washed by the waters of the Pacific Ocean to the south, bordered to the north-east by the states of Colima and Jalisco, to the north by the state of Guanajuato, to the east by the state of Mexico, and to the south-east by the state of Guerrero. It covers 60,080 square kilometres. It never belonged to the Aztec Empire, with which it was frequently in a state of war.

The state's present-day capital is the city of Morelia. It was called Valladolid after the Spanish Conquest, a name given to it in 1521 by Viceroy Don Antonio de Mendoza, Count of Tendilla, in honour of the Spanish city of same name, renowned for its ancient university, founded around 1260. On 12th September 1828, after the War of Independence, the city was renamed Morelia, in honour of one of the principal insurgents, José María Morelos y Pavón.

The city can be found in the valley known to the locals as Guayangareo.

This area has been inhabited for a long time, but in the thirteenth century, many people known as Chichimecas or Tarascos settled there. The Tarascan Empire, as it was called in the Aztec language, Náhuatl, covered an area of some 75,000 square kilometres. Its capital was Tzintzuntzan, the 'place of hummingbirds'. This city has always been very attractive to tourists thanks to its geographical position and the number of archaeological sites it retains.

The Tarascan people did not indulge in the cruel practices of the Aztecs, who offered the hearts of their enemies to their gods, and then ate the corpses. The Aztec emperors Axayacatl, Ahuizotl and Moctezuma Xocoyotl (or Moctezuma II, who was on the throne at the time of the Spanish conquest) all wanted to conquer the Tarascan Empire, but were always prevented from doing so by the existence of a fortified frontier between the two nations.

The migration of the Tarascans, known to the Aztecs as Michoagues ('the people from the fish country'), but now called Purépechas after the work of anthropologist Otto Schondube<sup>1</sup>, appears to have begun around 1250, and then rapidly gathered pace. Over the next two hundred years many settlements grew up, particularly around the village of Zacapu and the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro.

Tariacuri, whose name means 'strong wind', was the one of the most important kings, or Cazonci, of the Tarascan (or Purépechas), reigning at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries. He

was the the supreme overlord of the Empire as well the military commander and chief priest of their religion.

After the death of King Tariacuri, the kingdom was divided between the members of his family, as was the custom; the succession was decided between the main members of his family and the most important chiefs. So it was that, after his death, Tariacuri was succeeded by three lords – his son Huiguingare and his nephews Hirípan and Tangáxoan. Huiguingare established himself at Pátzcuaro, by the lake of the same name; Hirípan at Coyuca, a village created in the fourteenth century and now in the state of Guerrero; and Tangáxoan at Tzintzuntzan, a town at this time of twenty or thirty thousand inhabitants.

The Lord of Tzintzuntzan had as his emblem the green feathers of the hummingbird; the Lord of Pátzcuaro, the white feathers of the dove; and the Lord of Coyuca the red feathers from the head of the parrot.

These three emblems were used until the Spanish conquest. When the Aztecs, or 'mexicas' sent an embassy to the Tarascans, seeking an alliance against the Spaniards, the Tarascans refused, even when the Aztecs showed them a captured Spanish crossbow and sword. Despite the presence of captured weapons, the Tarascans refused to ally with their traditional enemy, probably putting their faith in Spanish military superiority and following the example of the Tlaxcatec and Cholultec, who likewise hated the Aztecs, and had therefore chosen to ally themselves with the Spanish, confirming the dictum that the conquest of Mexico was not the work of the Spanish but also of the Indians peoples who supported them.

The lack of armed resistance to the invaders, who under the orders of Nuño de Guzmán, took possession of the Tarascan lands in 1522, allowed the extraordinary Don Vasco de Quiroga to complete the conversion of the area without too many obstacles, arriving in Michoacán in 1533, and taking as his inspiration the book *Utopia* by the recently canonised Thomas More, introduced many industries into the region that were previously unknown to the natives. The memory of this great missionary is still venerated today.

Let us pass on to a more recent era. In 1820, the Royalist colonel Augustin de Yturvide, named General of the South on the 16th November, was given the task of suppressing the rebellion of Vicente Guerrero, who fought for independence from Spain.

Faced with the difficult task of winking out Guerrero

from his stronghold in the western Sierra Madre mountains, Yturbe instead invited him to join together to form an independence movement, to fight for a Mexican Empire of which the King of Spain would be the Emperor.

On 24th February 1821 Yturbe formed what he called his Army of the Three Guarantees, and adopted as his flag the colours green, white and red.

A tailor from Michoacán, José Magdaleno Ocampo, made up the flag with the approval of those two sons of Michoacán, Yturbe and Guerrero (who had been born in Tixtla, in the province of Michoacán). Perhaps some distant memory of the symbols of the ancient lords of the region prompted these two men to choose the colours that they did.

The first colour, the green of the hummingbird, associated with Hope, represented the guarantee of independence; the white of the dove symbolised the purity of the Catholic religion, like Yturbe himself, professed by almost all the people of the new Empire; and the red of the parrot symbolised the equal union of all the peoples of this vast empire, without any discrimination.

The first flag of the Three Guarantees had the three colours arranged diagonally. But soon the flag found its definitive arrangement; when the Army of the Three Guarantees entered Mexico City in triumph, the three colours were arranged vertically, and in the centre of the white stripe could be seen an eagle, its wings spread, wearing an imperial crown, the new Mexican coat of arms.

When King Ferdinand VII was restored to the full exercise of his powers by a French army commanded by the Duke of Angoulême, the son of the Count of Artois, the future Charles X, he issued a decree declaring null and void all laws forced on him by the so-called 'Constitutional Government' between 6th March 1820 and his liberation on 1st October 1823.

Whilst captive of the liberals, the King had been frightened of enjoying the same fate as his uncle Louis XVI. The Viceroy Don Juan Ruiz de Apodaca was appointed on 20th September 1816; then, on 31st May 1820, having been granted full political powers by the *Constitutionalistas*, he proclaimed the re-establishment in Mexico of the 1812 Constitution of Cadix, backed up by units of the Spanish army. The constitution was attacked by the clergy, and prompted a conspiracy, known as the Profesa (after a fine church in Mexico City), led by Canon Monteaugado, with the aim of abolishing the constitution.

Ruiz de Apodaca, Count of Venadito, taking his title from the site of his decisive engagement against the Spanish guerilla turned Mexican revolutionary Francisco Xavier Mina, was deposed by a military coup on 21st July 1820. Before leaving for Mexico in September 1820, his replacement, Don Juan O'Donoju, accepted the Three Guarantees Plan and signed a treaty with Yturbe on

24th August 1821 in the town of Cordoba, in the province of Veracruz, creating a Mexican Empire with Ferdinand VII, or one of his relatives, as Emperor. Yturbe entered Mexico City with Guerrero on 27th September, acclaimed by almost everyone.

O'Donoju had installed himself in the Viceregal Palace on 25th September 1821, and had there received the submission of the rebellious Colonel Francisco Novella, who had toppled Apodaca, and temporarily assumed his powers. The new Viceroy ordered Spanish troops not to oppose the Three Guarantees Army.

The Spanish Government would not permit Ferdinand to accept the Treaty of Cordoba, who they feared would agree to travel to Mexico as Emperor to free himself from his guardians. Faced with Spanish refusal to recognise Mexican independence, the Mexican Congress elected Don Augustin de Yturbe as Emperor of Mexico in May 1822. The new country absorbed the kingdom of Guatemala, and covered 4,500,000 square kilometres

To establish the flag on a firm legal footing, the Regency of the Empire asked the Supreme Governing Junta on 7th October 1821 to resolve the issue of its appearance. On the 9th November, the latter issued an ordinance to the effect that the national flag and the regimental colours of the army were to be tricoloured, green, white and red in vertical stripes, with a crowned eagle on the central stripe in the form shown in an attached drawing.

Thus was approved the arrangement of the flags of the Army of the Three Guarantees as it had been since its entry into the capital city of Mexico. Had the green, white and red been adopted by those who created the flag in remembrance of the ancient colours of Michoacán? Some people think that they were.

1. *Arqueologia* vol. 4, number 19, p.142.