Introduction

“If I were to pay you, Sancho,” responded Don Quixote, “according to what the greatness and nobility of this remedy deserve, the treasure of Venice and the mines of Potosí would not be enough.”

Sancho Panza was unable to disenchant his master, but he understood the value placed on his services. They were, to paraphrase Don Quixote, “worth a Potosí.” In 1545, barely a decade after the Spanish toppled the Inca Empire, a native Peruvian prospector stumbled onto the world’s richest silver deposit. Diego Gualpa testified in old age that while on an errand for his European master a fierce wind knocked him down. His hands sank into pay dirt and word got out. The “Rich Hill” or Cerro Rico of Potosí, a barren 4,800-meter (15,750-foot)–high mountain in what is today south-central Bolivia, instantly became a global symbol of wealth. By 1573, when Diego Gualpa testified, over 10,000 Andean draftees worked the Rich Hill’s cavernous mines and mercury-soaked refineries, and by 1600 the adjoining city, the Imperial Villa of Potosí, fanning out below the mountain at 4,000 meters (13,200 feet) above sea level, was home to over 100,000 residents, making it one of the largest—and highest—cities in the world.

Native Andean women ran Potosí’s open-air markets. African men staffed its royal mint. Proud Basques squared off against equally proud Extremadurans on the city’s cobbled square. Portuguese, Flemish, and Italian minorities grew in the shadows, as did an increasingly mixed population. Women of rank snubbed rivals as they strutted the streets in platform shoes, sporting the world’s finest jewels, in addition to velvets, laces, and silk brocades. From its inception Potosí was violent, and even in decline it retained
its reputation for mayhem. Vice thrived. By 1600, Potosí had more brothels, taverns, and gambling dens per capita than any other city in the Spanish realm. Desperate for stimulants, the city guzzled wine and maize beer, sipped yerba mate and hot chocolate, chewed coca, and smoked tobacco.

Yet Potosí was also devoutly Catholic, its core a Baroque monument to Christian piety, to the belief in redemption from mortal sin. Some twenty churches and chapels dotted the urban landscape by 1600, growing more opulent with each deathbed bequest. Priests came from as far away as Baghdad to beg alms. Despite its lofty isolation, the Imperial Villa of Potosí was a polyglot and cosmopolitan city, a fountain of fortune, a consumer’s paradise. It was also an environmental disaster, a cradle of technical innovation, a theater of punishment, and a hotbed of corruption and fraud. In short, it was a conflicted and contradictory harbinger of globalized modernity.

Built on mining, Potosí was a long-cycle boomtown. By the early seventeenth century it lurched toward decadence. Though inexhaustible, the Cerro Rico’s ores grew harder to extract and refine. New silver strikes in the hinterland raised hopes, but most were ephemeral, gone bust within a decade. A major mint scandal in the 1640s crippled the town’s already precarious financial sector, and from the wreckage there emerged one of Potosí’s greatest entrepreneurs and richest men. The Galician merchant and mine owner Antonio López de Quiroga flourished after the mint crisis until his death in 1699, seen by some as the exception that proved the rule of Potosí’s inevitable decline. Already by 1690, Mexico’s many scattered silver camps—including the namesake San Luis Potosí—collectively outproduced the Rich Hill, and they continued to do so until Spanish American independence in the 1810s. Despite revival after 1750, Potosí never returned to its glory days.

Decadence was not doom. Cerro Rico silver production bottomed out in the first decades of the eighteenth century, and plague killed a third of Potosí’s inhabitants in 1719, yet the city still shone as a beacon of hope and a center for opulent display. It was in this hard-bitten era that town chronicler Bartolomé Arzás de Orsúa y Vela composed his million-word History of the Imperial Villa of Potosí, a vivid and engrossing narrative that survives in two manuscript copies. Since its publication in 1965, scholars have struggled to parse truth from fiction in Arzás. It was also in these years that Potosí’s most famous painter, Melchor Pérez Holguín, developed his inimitable style, celebrating the arrival of a viceroy on a wall-sized canvas for the new Bourbon king.

There were other forces at work in Potosí and along the coasts of South America in the era of Philip V (1700–45). During and after the 1702–13 War
of the Spanish Succession, emboldened French traders sparked a modest revival in silver mining, much of it apparently untaxed. Contraband trade with the English, who had won the Spanish slave trade concession at war’s end, also thrived through the 1720s and 1730s via Buenos Aires. Hungry for revenue to offset huge new military expenditures, Spain’s Bourbon kings took notice, and soon royal ministers began drafting reforms aimed at reviving the fabled Cerro Rico of Potosí.

The crown halved taxes on gross silver production in 1735 to 10 percent, and although it took time, this and other incentives paid dividends. The mita labor draft was reinforced in the early 1730s despite over a century of criticism, and a savings bank was created in 1747. A huge new mint facility, begun in the 1750s, opened in 1773. This elegant structure remains the pride of the Imperial Villa, a temple to its secular pretentions. After the new mint came a European technical mission led by a Polish baron, but it failed to revive Potosí’s mines and refineries in the 1790s. Throughout the eighteenth century, indigenous miners known as kajchas developed their own parallel silver economy, sometimes paying taxes, sometimes not. When independence struggles began in the 1810s, Potosí was still considered the pearl of the Andes. Rebels from Buenos Aires seized the city and emptied its mint, only to be driven out by equally cash-starved royalists. Simón Bolívar ended his long southward journey of liberation by delivering a speech from the wind-swept summit of the Cerro Rico in 1825.

This book offers a concise history of Potosí from its discovery in 1545 to the arrival of South America’s Liberator in 1825, the year the Republic of Bolivia took his name. An epilogue describes what has happened to the Rich Hill and former Imperial Villa since then. The chapters work chronologically but also thematically, each one centering on a debate or controversy, as Potosí was always debated and always controversial. Not long after its discovery, the city and its mines were held up as an extreme example of Spanish greed and cruelty, an iconic emblem of what became known as the Black Legend.

Controversy continues. Potosí has been described variously as a marvel of Renaissance technology, an environmental hellhole, a hub of regional development, and a worst-case example of an export enclave. Others have described it as a space for native self-fashioning and social mobility, a stage for outbursts of pathological violence, a surprisingly normal Spanish city in a high desert setting, and a baroque dystopia. Scholars of the eighteenth century have alternately called Potosí a rare Bourbon reform success story and a blatant Bourbon failure. Bourbon excesses helped spark the greatest rebellion in all
of colonial Latin America. After independence, the Cerro Rico was an ungraspable object of foreign desires, a monetary base for a new nation, and a nightmare colonial inheritance for a weak republic. In all these contradictory views of Potosí, in every polemic or encomium, one sees how a mountain of silver inflated imperial dreams and distilled colonial nightmares. In the end, most agreed that the Cerro Rico was a mirage, and devotion to its exploitation led only to disenchantment and poverty. It was an object lesson in human weakness, meanness, and folly.

All was not darkness, however, and views from the outside could be deceiving. From the start, the city of Potosí was famous for its diverse, dynamic, and generous society. Thus, this book emphasizes the lives of native workers, market women, enslaved African laborers, mule drivers, and other ordinary folks, alongside the lives of elite merchants, mine and refinery owners, wealthy widows, cross-dressed swashbucklers, priests, soldiers, and crown officials. The city’s terrible work conditions and contamination plus its notoriously high murder rate and numerous executions are also placed in the context of the times. Early modern life was often nasty, brutish, and short. But bonanza also prompted surprising innovations, and made fortunes for entrepreneurs at all social levels. Some of them gave as profligately as they gained.

It is thus important to remember that although Potosí was a site of considerable suffering and mischief, it was also a platform for personal reinvention, and not just for elites. Poor men and women gained wealth and status with surprising speed if they were clever and lucky, and many cooperated with one another even as they competed. Factions and clans proliferated, enabling some stars to rise while snuffing out others. At their worst, Potosí’s factions fought like Guelphs and Ghibellines, but just as often they made pacts and alliances to defend themselves against crown and critics. Family dynasties could appear or disappear almost overnight, saved by a lucky match or doomed by a prodigal son. Potosí silver enabled second acts in life despite rigid social hierarchies.

Just as significantly, this book emphasizes the environmental consequences of Potosí’s discovery and development, detailing what we know of deforestation, fouling of streams, waste mismanagement, and pollution with mercury, lead, zinc, and other toxic metals and chemical byproducts. Potosí’s history in this period is nothing if not a cautionary tale, and the environmental legacy of its early modern bonanza remains evident in the city’s air, water, and soil today.
Last, this book does not treat Potosí or its inhabitants in isolation, but rather links them to the rest of the world, both as exporters of a large portion of the globe’s silver supply and also as voracious consumers of raw and manufactured products from as nearby as the Pilcomayo basin and as far away as the pepper groves of southwest India. Most slaves in Potosí were African, or of African ancestry; this book stresses their importance as workers and bearers of culture. The number of Africans arriving in Potosí each year both before and after the era of Spanish-Portuguese union (1580–1640) was higher than most historians realize, shaping the city’s culture alongside tens of thousands of native Andeans who were either drafted or chose to call the Imperial Villa home.

Potosí was, in its heyday, a major player on the stage of world history. It was known not only to all the monarchs of Europe but also to the sovereigns of the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, Ming, and Qing empires. Many such monarchs envied Spain’s great Andean fountain of fortune, and several, including Louis XIV of France, pondered capturing it. Like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, envious kings knew what it meant to be “worth a Potosí.” They could not help but covet what the Emperor Charles V had rightly labeled the “Treasury of the World.”

A WORLD HUNGRY FOR SILVER

At the time of Potosí’s discovery in 1545 both Europe and Asia were undergoing what economists call a bullion famine. Population growth and commercial expansion in the centuries after the Black Death of the 1340s drove up demand for specie, the hard cash that crossed cultural and political boundaries. In Eurasia, along with North and East Africa, only gold and silver fit the bill. With some exceptions in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, copper, bronze, and iron currencies were not accepted outside a prince’s domain. Paper money was even less transferable, handled mostly by big traders who could enforce contracts.

Foreign exchange demanded precious metals, raw or coined. Similarly, soldiers demanded pay in specie. Many were mercenaries. Globally, gold was scarce, silver somewhat less so—yet far more so than today. Because of its relative abundance compared with gold, silver was used for most international or inter-imperial money transfers. The ever-shifting exchange rate between gold and silver, or bimetallic ratio, was key in directing global trade flows. Royal decrees usually did little to change this, but imperial demand for
silver in China after 1570 was enough to reset the clock of the world’s commercial economy just as Potosí was hitting its stride.

In order to understand silver, one must take a brief look at gold. In Antiquity, gold was associated with the hot tropics, cooked by the sun and thus most abundant in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. The Portuguese tapped into the gold of sub-Saharan Africa by way of the Atlantic coast beginning in the mid-fifteenth century and in southeast Africa about a century later. Tellingly, the Portuguese gold trade in Africa remained more valuable than the slave trade until about 1650. West African gold, most of it alluvial or scattered in streams and riverbeds, was mined with great effort, and not year-round. West African gold flowed mostly in the agricultural offseason, sometimes interrupted by wars.

As much as they desired it, Europeans never managed to monopolize West African gold or even to get close to its sources due to the power of local rulers and the prevalence of malaria and other tropical maladies. The gold of southeast Africa, partly tied to the Great Zimbabwe and the legendary kingdom of Monomotapa, remained almost as unreachable, at least at the source, although the Portuguese eventually tapped in at the edge. In sum, without African middlemen willing to deal with Europeans, gold from the African interior would have continued to flow mostly into the Muslim world, either across the Sahara or through the ports of the Swahili coast.

Native peoples of the larger Caribbean islands also used gold, as Columbus discovered in 1492 to the delight of his Spanish sponsors. Conquest followed. Although the Spanish quickly seized mines on Hispaniola and elsewhere in the Caribbean basin, the goldfields of the early Spanish Indies soon played out. Even in Columbus’s day, Spanish migrants forced native Americans and enslaved Africans to wash gold for them. This was not the world of the grizzled European prospector, but rather something more like ancient Rome: mining was the work of slaves and convicts. As would happen in Potosí, early American prospecting and mining were activities delegated to coerced dependents, most of them non-Europeans. As one result, the true discoverers of America’s great gold and silver mines were almost invariably native Americans, Africans, and mixed people of color.

The Spanish conquests of Aztec Mexico (1519–21), Inca Peru (1532–34), and Muisca Colombia, or New Granada (1538), also yielded considerable gold, but as in the Caribbean islands the most obvious alluvial sources were spotty and prone to quick exhaustion. Alluvial gold deposits not already worked by native peoples were rare, although some hard-rock deposits
remained untouched. Gold-bearing veins were followed underground with newly introduced iron tools in places like Chisquío, Colombia, and Zaruma, Ecuador, but this kind of excavation required big investments. Worse, Spanish masters mistreated and exposed indigenous workers to disease such that the conquistadors’ gold mines were virtual death camps. Indigenous complaints went largely unheard, but Spanish priests such as the Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas howled in protest. Seeing Spain’s American bonanza and the moral failings that followed, many in Europe used the writings of Las Casas and other internal critics of conquest to malign the Spanish as innately greedy, cruel, and intolerant. The Black Legend was born.

Sub-Saharan Africans suffered likewise. Clerical pleading led Spanish monarchs from the time of Isabella and Ferdinand to decree gold panning a job fit only for enslaved Africans, and thus in many gold-producing regions of Spanish America, particularly in lowland Colombia, Africans and their offspring became a majority. Gold production cycles tended toward quick peaks and precipitous declines, sometimes connected to the ups and downs of the slave trade. By 1600, abandoned gold camps dotted the Spanish American landscape from western Mexico to southern Chile. Only New Granada continued to produce substantial gold up through independence, yet even here the trend was for gold camps to flash and fade as new frontiers were opened, conquered, and exploited.

It was the discovery of massive silver deposits that sustained the core Spanish colonies of Mexico and Peru after conquest, and that also ended Eurasia’s bullion famine after 1550. Potosí was not the beginning, nor would it be the end. The first major silver strikes were in Mexico, at camps such as Sultepec, Taxco, and Pachuca, but none of these deposits, first developed in the 1530s, were easily exploited. Flooding and refractory ores were common. More northerly mining districts such as Zacatecas and Guanajuato, discovered in the 1540s and 1550s, proved far more promising, but they were distant from indigenous population centers. Only the wealthiest or most creditworthy Mexican mine owners could afford African slaves and the Spanish crown was loath to subsidize the slave trade. Indigenous workers were drafted but most had to be recruited and retained. As a result, Mexican silver mining lurched and stuttered before beginning a long climb to world dominance around 1690, peaking shortly before independence in 1810.

Before Mexico’s great age of silver came the heyday of Potosí. In the high Andes of South America, Spanish conquistadors in the late 1530s followed the Incas to their remote gold mines at Carabaya, in the hot lowlands
southeast of Cuzco, and to their silver mines at Porco, in what is today south-central Bolivia. Porco quickly became a bone of contention among conquistador factions, including men faithful to Gonzalo Pizarro, who rebelled against Charles V in 1544 to protest curbs on access to native subjects and their surpluses. In the midst of the fighting between royalists and rebels, indigenous mineworkers based in Porco, following the lead of Diego Gualpa, discovered the massive silver lodes of nearby Potosí. Within a few years, the word Potosí became a global byword for limitless wealth, and the Cerro Rico, or Rich Hill, a triangular icon of the Spanish Empire to match Charles V’s Pillars of Hercules.

To get a quick sense of its quantitative importance, Potosí produced more silver, according to official tax records, than all of Mexico combined before 1650. In its first century, Potosí produced nearly half the world’s silver. In the longer term, the amount of silver taxed between 1545 and 1810—again trusting official records and ignoring contraband—was 875.4 million pesos, each peso weighing about an ounce. This constituted nearly 20 percent of all the known silver produced in the world across 265 years. It was also more than twice the total silver production registered at Zacatecas, Mexico (401.4 million pesos), Potosí’s closest competitor in the pre-industrial era. Despite an early bonanza, most of Zacatecas’s silver was extracted in the eighteenth century, when Potosí was already in decline. The Mexican mining town of San Luis Potosí was founded in 1592 in hopes that it would live up to its namesake in faraway “Upper Peru.” Notwithstanding a respectable output that also included gold, it never did.3

The kings of Spain, along with their enemies (who were legion), believed right up to the age of Latin American independence in the 1810s and 1820s
that their fortunes were necessarily tied to the Cerro Rico. We now know that most of the Rich Hill’s readily accessible silver had been extracted well before 1650, but even in decline Potosí was believed to be miraculous, unique, even capable of generating new metal deep within its own bowels. It was an inexhaustible fountain of fortune that only needed priming, a new invention, another divine blessing.

GLOBAL VISIONS OF POTOSÍ

Potosí was world famous soon after its discovery in 1545. After a 1553 woodcut was published in Seville, the Cerro Rico or Rich Hill became a secular icon. The image was made from a drawing by Pedro de Cieza de León, an early postconquest traveler in Spanish Peru who visited the bustling mining camp in 1549. Within a few decades, descriptions of Potosí by Cieza de León and Agustín de Zárate, another early Spanish visitor, were translated into French, German, Dutch, English, and Italian. Cieza’s description was the most detailed, and his 1553 woodcut was widely copied. As printers and other artists followed, the mountain’s image grew more fantastic.

The 1553 woodcut depicts the Cerro Rico with five named silver veins near the summit, from left to right: the Mendieta, Rica, Centeno, Estaño, and Oñate. Two men, an apparently indigenous laborer with a pack on the left, and a Spaniard on the right with a hat and staff, make their way up the mountain on steep trails. In front of the Cerro Rico is the lesser hill of Huayna Potosí, and beneath it spreads the city—not yet known as the Villa Imperial—divided by a gulch, known as La Ribera. This creek seems to emerge from a circular lake or spring in the hills on the upper left side of the picture. Another smaller spring flows out from the right side of the Cerro Rico.

Cieza’s woodcut depicts two churches: San Francisco and Santa Barbara, the first mistakenly set on the far side of the river, and both of them large given the early date. In the foreground is a haphazard-looking main square with a few human figures, including a clutch of helmeted soldiers with lances just beyond a severed head on a pike. This suggestion of deadly violence or rather, royal justice, is important. In the text, Cieza de León describes the key role Potosí played in the wars between Spanish conquistador factions that culminated in the execution of the rebel Gonzalo Pizarro in 1548.

After narrating Potosí’s discovery, Cieza describes the widespread use of an indigenous wind furnace, or guayra, for silver smelting, the Castilian
bellows furnace having failed. These ingenious native ovens were so numerous in the hills around Potosí that at night, “they seem like luminaries.” To smelt silver, Cieza said, wind was as important here as for sailors at sea. Cieza then suggests that because Potosí’s mining and refining remained almost entirely in native Andean hands: “it is believed that many have become rich, and carried off to their lands a great quantity of this silver. And it was for this reason that Indians from many parts of this kingdom have come to this site of Potosí, to take advantage.” To trust Cieza de León, early Potosí was as much a land of opportunity for native entrepreneurs as it was for Spaniards. A mining town paradox was already evident: Potosí would be a pit of forced labor and mass suffering as well as a staging ground for personal gain.

Word of Potosí quickly reached the Near East, and by 1580 or so an Ottoman version of the iconic image of the Cerro Rico appeared in a compendium of writings on the Spanish Indies. Known as the Tarih-I Hind-I Garbi, this digest was reproduced in many versions over the centuries. One of the earliest ones includes a fanciful colored miniature of the Cerro Rico derived from the Cieza woodcut, or perhaps from an Italian copy. The most striking difference is that the Cerro Rico has been rendered green by the
Ottoman illustrator, with lush vegetation in the foreground and spiked Mediterranean cypress dotting the lavishly built city. Ottoman-style architecture predominates, some buildings appearing to have lead roofs, and the city is surrounded by crenellated stone walls like those of Istanbul. The walls are on either side of the river, which originates in a circular lake or spring as in Cieza’s original. Instead of soldiers, the Ottoman artist places two individuals in the extramural foreground, one white and one black, dressed in flowing garments and apparently standing among shrines or graves. The image is small but lovingly colored, evoking a “silver spring” in an earthly paradise.

The *Tarih-I Hind-I Garbi* text on Potosí is largely borrowed from Agustín de Zárate’s 1555 *The Discovery and Conquest of Peru*, but the translation is not literal. The Ottoman scribes refer to the rebel Gonzalo Pizarro’s lieutenant who took over Potosí during the civil wars, Capt. Francisco de Carvajal:

During the course of the campaign the afore-mentioned Carvajal saw on the skirt of a great mountain a prosperous city named Potosí by whose side a river flows. On whatever side they dug, if they fired the earth from one *kantar* [hundredweight] of it, fifteen *okkas* [19.2 kg or 42.3 lbs.] of pure silver flowed forth. (It seems that the afore-mentioned river was the source of the previously mentioned Silver River [the Río de la Plata].) Then Carvajal collected in the afore-mentioned place seven thousand Indians and laid down this rule: “Everyone is to deliver each week four gold [pieces] worth of silver and he is to keep the rest for himself.”

The Ottoman authors describe a city that precedes the mines. And they blend coercion and incentive, a departure from the free hand for enterprising native Andeans suggested by Cieza. Global tales of Potosí were already spinning, but one thing was clear: the Cerro Rico, as Cieza de León described it, was unique: “And from this, one may take as a great truth that in no other part of the world has there been discovered a hill so rich.”

In 1580, the Ottomans faced a powerful enemy in Habsburg Spain and its self-described Holy League of allies. Despite occasional victories, the memory of Lepanto, in which Ottoman naval forces collapsed in 1571, was still fresh. Stretched thin, the Ottoman Empire faced hard times under Sultan Murad II (1574–95) to whom this version of the *Tarih-I Hind-I Garbi* was dedicated. Spanish precious metals won by trade, plunder, and ransom had proved a blessing, then a curse, driving up prices throughout the Mediterranean and especially within the Ottoman realms. Yet Spanish American silver remained
The Cerro Rico of Potosí, Tarib-I Hind-I Garbi manuscript, ca. 1582. Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.
MAP 1: Global maritime trade routes in the age of Potosí silver.
the lifeblood of trade and the sinews of war, the only means of assembling and sustaining great armies and navies. Potosí, so lovingly rendered as an Ottoman city, could be imagined as a sultan’s long-range objective or as a stubborn infidel’s pièce de résistance.

By the time this illustrated dream of American treasure was floated before the Ottoman sultan, the streams emanating from the world’s “fountain of fortune” in the high Andes flowed in all directions. Galleons laded Potosí silver by the ton at Arica, Nombre de Dios, Acapulco, Manila, and Seville. Production at the Cerro Rico grew rapidly, peaking in 1592. More than twice as much silver was shipped annually across the Atlantic to Europe than was sent across the Pacific to East and Southeast Asia, yet much of this “Atlantic” bullion and coin still ended up in India or China, often by way of the ports and caravanserais of the Near East and Central Asia.

Japan’s silver, substantial but often forgotten in the shadow of Potosí, also flowed mostly into imperial China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Demand for silver in China has in turn masked the significance of India, which had a dense population, a diverse manufacturing sector, and a vibrant commercial economy. The Mughals and their neighbors soon joined the Ottomans and Safavids, using Potosí silver to finance their wars of conquest. In a world of only about 500 million people, half of them in Asia, the arrival of several million ounces of Potosí silver each year went a long way. The “piece of eight,” the world’s first truly global currency, crossed all frontiers, financing trade, war, and religious proselytization.

**Potosí in the World and the World in Potosí**

As we have seen, news of Potosí’s 1545 discovery spread quickly, spurring migration first from other parts of Spanish America, including greater Peru, Mexico, and the Caribbean, and then from Spain and other parts of Europe. Going the other direction, European merchants and priests announced the bonanza as they traveled to Amsterdam, Moscow, Istanbul, Cairo, Goa, and Melaka. Within a few short decades Potosí was known in India, China, and Southeast Asia. By 1602, the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci and his assistant Li Zhizou marked “Potosí Mountain” (Bei Du Xi Shan) on their huge world map for China’s Wanli Emperor.11

Under Wanli, China had suddenly turned to the outside world for silver, pumping out huge quantities of silk, porcelain, and other luxury
commodities in exchange. The word “Potosí” was quickly displacing “Peru,” made famous by the Inca Atawallpa’s huge ransom of 1533, as the world synonym for imponderable wealth.

Just as Potosí entered world consciousness, worldly goods entered Potosí. As in gold-rush California, merchants selling tools, clothing, food, and stimulants were close on the heels of fortune-seeking miners. Necessities of all sorts poured in from Andean suppliers anxious to lay hands on silver, but Spanish wine, olive oil, iron, and luxury textiles arrived quickly, too. Newly rich mine owners’ lavish consumption habits stunned early visitors, including Cieza de León, but he was equally impressed by native Andean market activity. Based on his 1549 visit, he called Potosí’s marketplace the greatest in all of Peru:

And I believe that no fair in the world would equal the trade of this market. I made a note of it several times, and once I saw stretched out along a plain towards the main square of this town site a long string of baskets of coca, so much that it was the greatest wealth of these parts; and on another side heaps of blankets and richly decorated shirts both thin and wide; in another part were great piles of maize and dried potatoes and other foods of theirs; not even mentioning that there were a great number of quarters of beef of the best sort available in the kingdom. And as they extracted silver every day, and these Indians are great eaters and drinkers, especially those who trade with the Spaniards, everything brought for sale was consumed.¹²

Competition was fierce, according to Cieza: “And as for the cost of things, there was so much merchandise that they sold Rouen woolens, broadcloth, and Dutch linens almost as cheaply as in Spain.”¹³ Potosí’s early notary records back up these claims.

Ostentation grew over time, and by 1580 it was not uncommon for even poorer potosinos to sport garments blending the finest European woolens with the best Chinese silks. Spices and gems from all over the world were available in abundance, as were high-quality artisan goods such as eyeglasses, scissors, and even Venetian glassware. A barren alpine slope in 1545, the Imperial Villa of Potosí soon joined the world’s cosmopolitan cities in terms of consumer goods and sheer diversity of inhabitants.

One of the Cerro Rico’s most successful mine owners in the 1570s was Nicolao del Benino, a native of Florence and, according to his own testimony, a relative of the Medicis. Benino was one of several Italian immigrants. A Potosí homebuyer in 1549 was listed as Jácome Ginovés (Giacomo the Genoese), and in the same year one Francisco Caravaggio claimed a mine. In 1559, Flemish miners exchanged portions of their namesake vein on the Cerro

INTRODUCTION • 15
Rico, the “Veta de los Flamencos.” Among the partners: “Juan of Brussels,” “Levin of Antwerp,” “Andrés of Louvain,” and “Dionisio of Holland.” In addition to thousands of Europeans from all over the continent, and tens of thousands of multilingual native Andeans, Potosí was home to a rising number of sub-Saharan Africans. There were even a few Asians after 1570, brought in as slaves or servants via Acapulco and Lima.

Potosí thus joined a select group of early modern “world cities,” its growth and development reliant on sustained connections to the rest of the globe.
Potosí was unusual in that it was not a port or administrative capital but rather a completely new mining town, a lofty outpost that supplied the world with ready money. There was no place on earth quite like it, possessing a kind of alter ego, almost another city, adjacent to it and underground. As such, and with its iconic red hill towering above, Potosí seemed destined to become a symbol of a new global economic and political order.

Although several outspoken priests bemoaned the moral hazards brought on by bonanza, most Spanish commentators gushed at the good fortune of
their Habsburg rulers to possess such unheard-of wealth. It seemed to bode well for the faith, which for the Spanish meant the Roman Catholic faith as they interpreted it. Potosí silver would fund far-flung missions and pay vast armies to "beat back the infidel" or "crush the heretic." Such providential explanations only fueled the myth of Potosí’s inexhaustibility, tying its woes to human sin rather than to geology or the failings of early modern chemistry.

With the discovery of mercury in the mountains east of Lima at Huancavelica by 1563, Spain seemed to possess the necessary ingredients needed to support global empire. Mercury was used to refine Potosí’s silver ores on a grand scale beginning in 1572, and some contemporaries wondered if God had not chosen Castile among all kingdoms and the Habsburgs among all dynasties as his most favored servants. What cures also kills, however, and it would not be long before commentators, including insiders, began calling Potosí silver a curse, the worst temptation ever placed before Christians. Huancavelica’s deadly mercury mines, Potosí’s Peruvian handmaiden, only drove home the point.

It is this moral ambivalence toward Potosí that has persisted, and yet the city’s role as global silver supplier and significant market for global goods—and destiny of so many thousands of migrants—remains undisputed. Potosí was a site of technical innovation and industrial development in an age not thought of as industrial or particularly innovative. It was a site of enormous capital concentration and complex financial exchanges in an age not thought of as truly capitalist or financially sophisticated. It was an enduring battleground between private entrepreneurs and an increasingly absolutist state with mercantilist or monopolist pretensions. The following chapters aim to address some of these seeming contradictions or riddles of Potosí’s early modern history, not losing sight of silver, but searching hard for the novelty of human experience in such a forbidding place, both above and underground.

Chapter 1 examines the disputed circumstances of Potosí’s discovery and the importance of pre-Columbian mining and metallurgy. Why had the Incas not mined the Red Mountain? Chapter 2 treats the city’s first boom, when Andean artisans dominated mining and refining. Why weren’t the Spanish in control from the start? Chapter 3 details the revolutionary changes made by Peru’s fifth viceroy, Francisco de Toledo, in the 1570s. Was Toledo’s project an early attempt at state-managed economy? Chapter 4 examines the many marvels and miseries produced by Toledo’s reforms. Who won and who lost out in the great bonanza? Chapter 5 relates a string of calamities that nearly destroyed Potosí between the 1620s and the 1650s. How did
potosinos and outsiders reckon with natural and human-caused disasters? Chapter 6 treats Potosí’s extended decline under the last Habsburg king, Charles II, and its partial recovery under the first Bourbon one, Philip V. Did indigenous miners and refiners again take over? Chapter 7 probes the great changes that occurred in Potosí after about 1750, when state intervention reached new heights. Would Enlightenment science revive the mines? The conclusion, “Summing Up,” returns to the disputed significance of Potosí’s early modern history, and an epilogue treats the city’s fortunes since 1825. Despite nearly five centuries spent choking on its own dust, Potosí breathes eternal.