



Shaky COLONIALISM

THE 1746 EARTHQUAKE-TSUNAMI IN LIMA, PERU,
AND ITS LONG AFTERMATH

CHARLES F. WALKER

Shaky Colonialism

A John Hope Franklin Center Book

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Lima, Peru, and Its Long Aftermath*

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Charles F. Walker

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For Three Cool Guys,
My dear friend, Arnold Bauer
My brother, John Walker
My son, Samuel Eduardo Mendoza Walker

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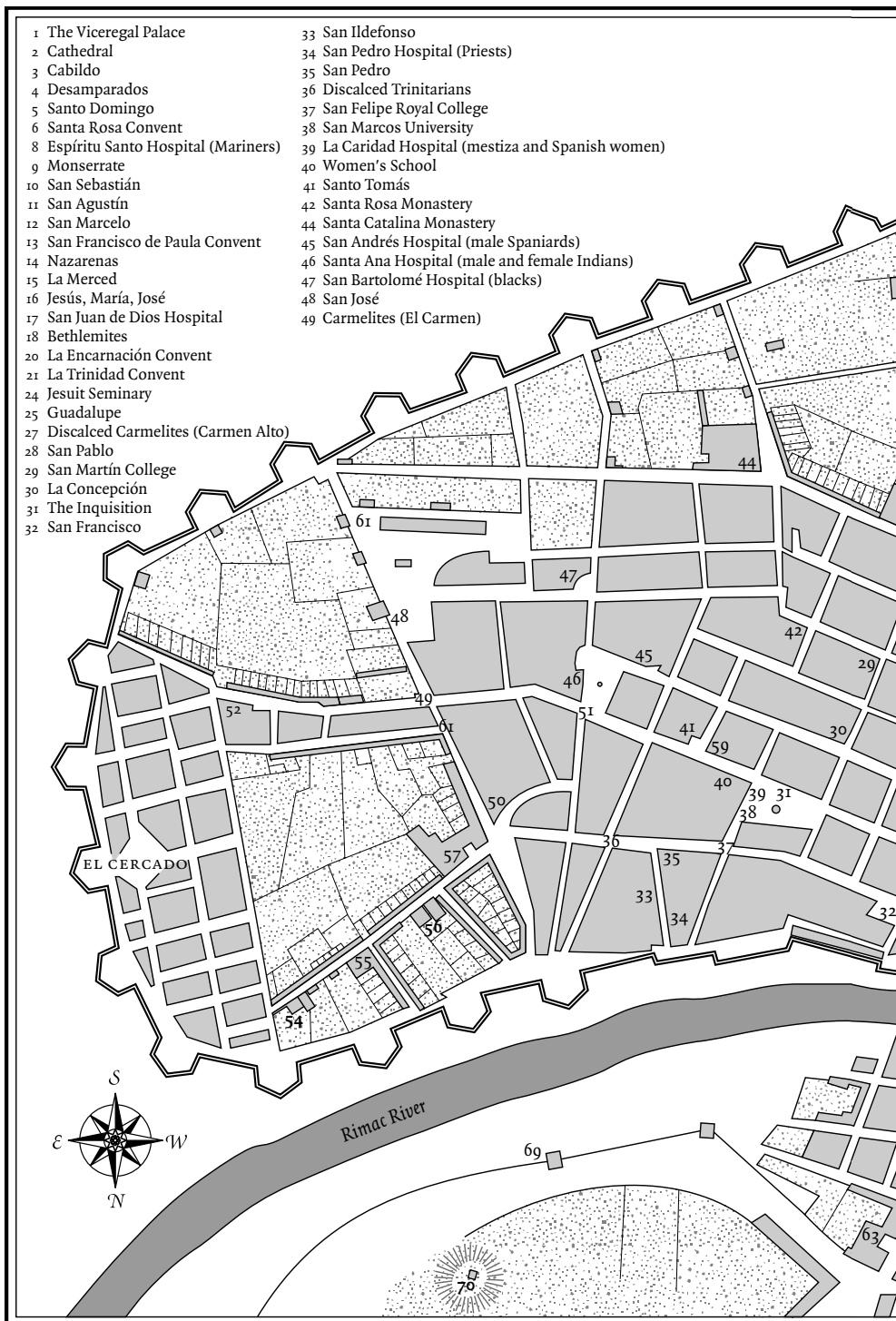
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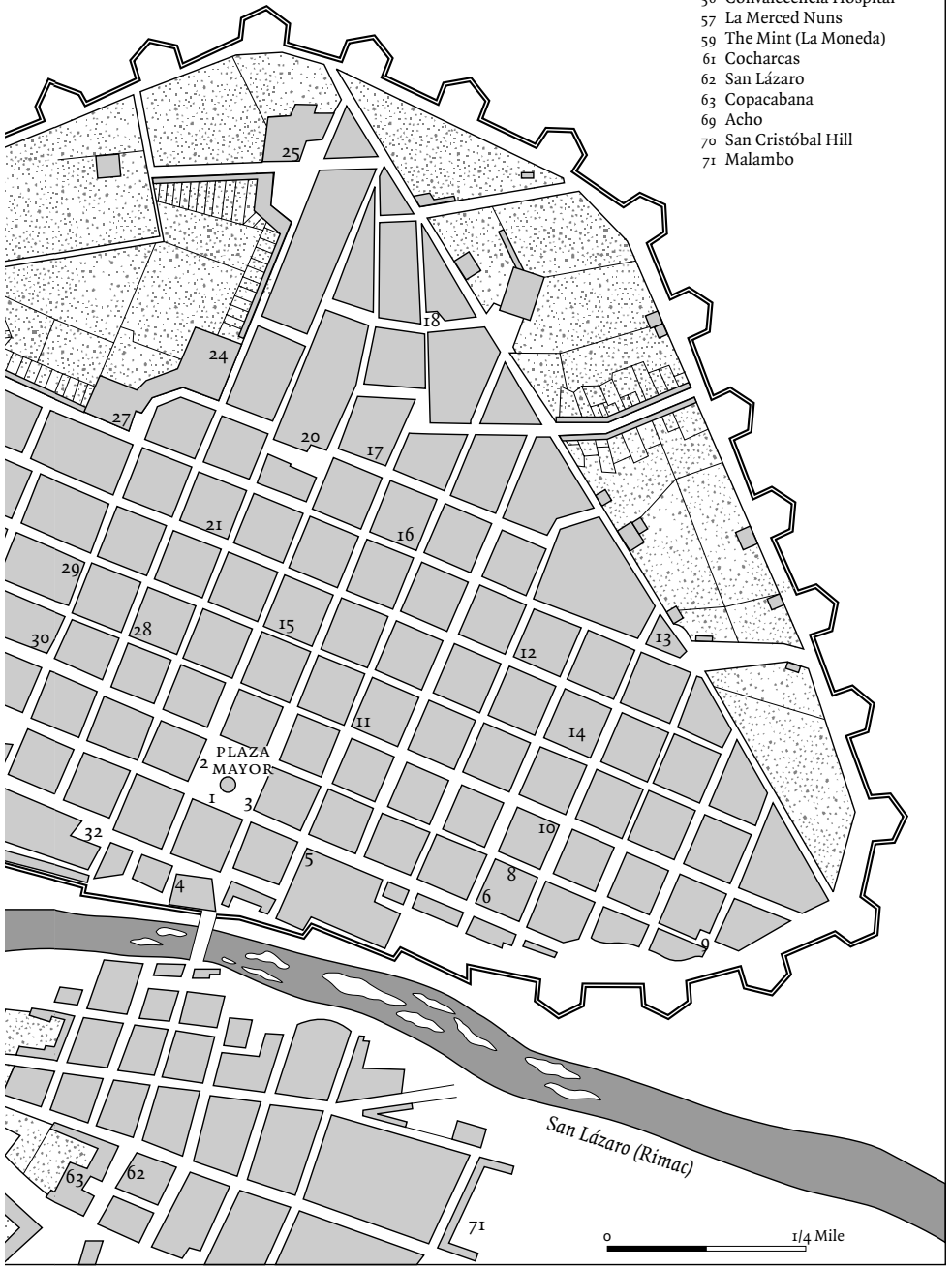
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18th Century Lima

- 50 Santa Clara
- 51 Discalced Nuns
- 52 Nra. Señora Del Prado Nuns
- 54 San Pedro de Alcantará
- 55 Incurables Hospital
- 56 Convalecencia Hospital
- 57 La Merced Nuns
- 59 The Mint (La Moneda)
- 61 Cocharcas
- 62 San Lázaro
- 63 Copacabana
- 69 Acho
- 70 San Cristóbal Hill
- 71 Malambo



THIS IS A
NOVEL
BY
H. M. L. S.

Earthquakes, Tsunamis, Absolutism, and Lima

What man can remain steady when the mountains tremble? If the earth shakes, what will hearts do?—ANONYMOUS, *El Día de Lima*, 61

Dogs, hunched next to cadavers and with their eyes to the sky, gave such great howls that even the most insensitive broke into tears.

—JOSÉ EUSEBIO LLANO ZAPATA, “Observación diaria,” 146–47

One

On October 28, 1746, at 10:30 P.M., a 220-mile stretch of the Nazca tectonic plate lurched under the continental plate about 100 miles off the coast of Peru, causing a massive earthquake that ripped open the city of Lima, capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru.¹ Like all earthquakes, this one struck with a one-two punch. Danger came from below and above. The shaking earth knocked people to the ground, and the intense but irregular tremors kept many lying there and terrified everyone. The quake shattered walls, roofs, facades, and furniture, hurtling them down upon victims. Heavy adobes crushed many people who did not make it out of their residence. Others were trapped inside and were not rescued. Danger also awaited those who made it outside, as they were threatened by tumbling balconies, beams, the walls that surrounded the city, and the heavy bells that graced churches. Some people who rushed back inside to save family members or retrieve

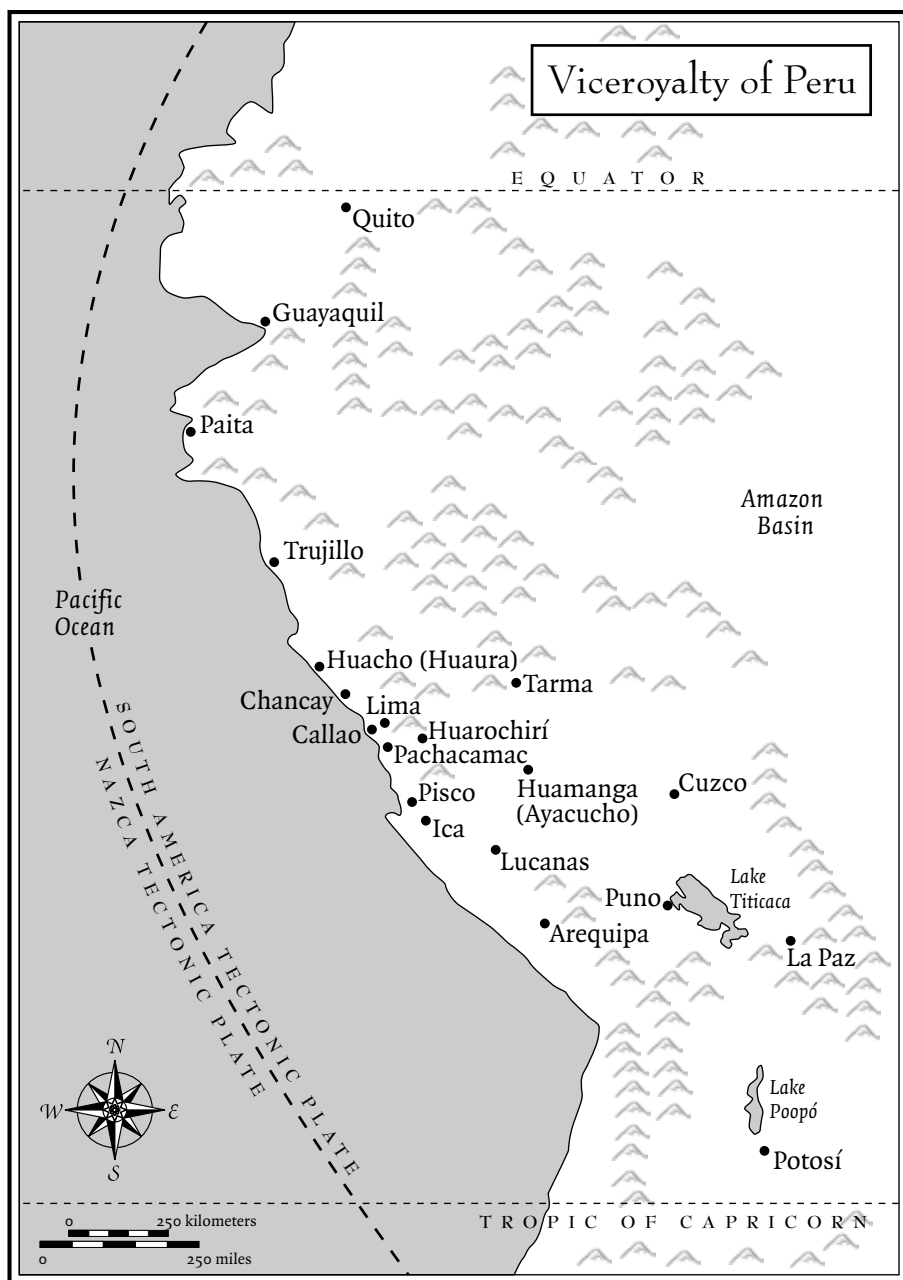
2 valuables died when a beam or adobe toppled over on top of them. Those who survived suffered with uncertainty about their loved ones as well as with the horrible sight of the devastated city and the sounds of wailing victims and collapsing structures.

As the underwater fault surged, it not only sent shockwaves into the ground but also abruptly pushed up parts of the sea floor. This motion generated waves that moved across the Pacific at the speed of a jet airplane. The waves appeared small in the depths of the sea, then became magnified in power and height as they reached shore. Multiple waves merged in a looming, destructive tower of water. At 11 P.M., half an hour after the earthquake, eerie sounds of receding water indicated imminent horrors just before the wave, a tsunami, hit. Some claimed that the largest wave that struck Callao, Lima's port, was over eighty feet high, although most put it at fifty feet.²

The earthquake and tsunami wrecked much of central Peru, its swath of destruction stretching from Trujillo in the north to Pisco and Ica in the south. It was felt over six hundred miles to the northwest in Guayaquil and about four hundred miles south in Cuzco. It destroyed buildings in the Amazon, shook the mines of Huancavelica, knocked down churches in Huarochirí, and coincided with a volcanic eruption in Lucanas, to the south of Huamanga. The massive tsunami shattered the port of Callao and struck areas up and down the coast, from what is today southern Ecuador to central Chile. Though harmless, large waves reached even Acapulco, Mexico, some two thousand miles away. In Callao, the waterline suddenly rose twenty-four feet, and the water reached three miles inland.³

Lima, located six miles inland from Callao, quickly became "a frightening place, like a war scene put to the sword and set to fire, its beautiful buildings turned into piles of dirt and stones."⁴ The bustling, multiracial city of fifty thousand, the heart of Spain's territories in South America, lay in ruins. José Eusebio Llano Zapata, the best chronicler of the Lima disaster (and a fascinating self-taught Renaissance man whose accounts enliven this book), noted that a city that had taken 211 years to build was destroyed in a little over three minutes. He glumly predicted that Lima could not be rebuilt in two centuries or with two hundred million pesos.⁵

Don Francisco José de Ovando y Solís (the Marquis of Ovando), the commander of the Spanish navy's Pacific fleet, had just sat down to dinner when the earth began to rumble. He fled to an inner patio that contained a hut made out of reeds designed to withstand earthquakes. Ovando had

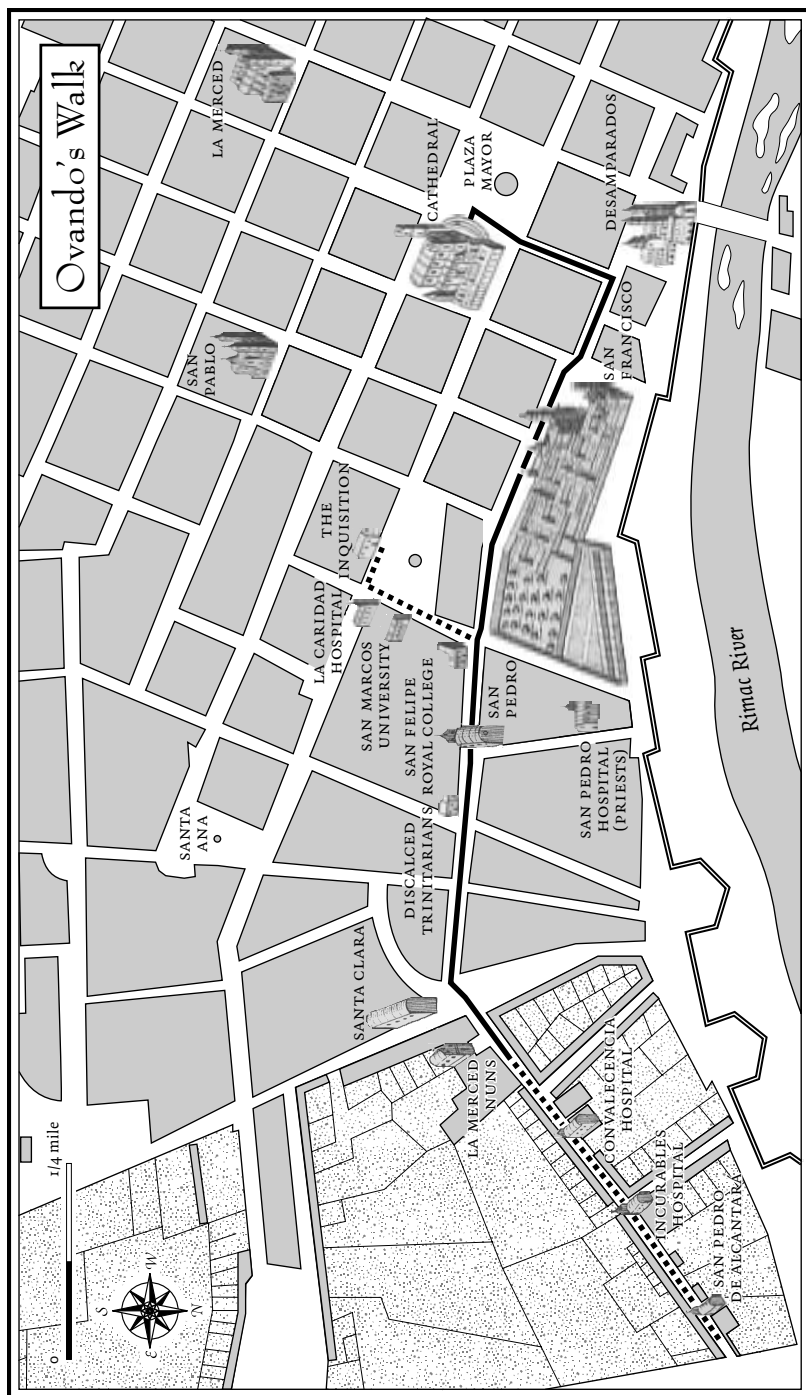


Map 2 Map of Peru. Credit: Chris Brest.

4 just made it out the door when much of his house collapsed. The earth, “a robust beast shaking the dust off itself,” shook so hard that he could not remain on his feet. Expecting the worst, he gathered his family from among the ruins and found that only one young black man, probably a slave, had minor injuries. The rest were unharmed. They prayed in the garden patio, realizing from the eerie screams they could hear, the din of collapsing buildings, and the clouds of dust that swirled about them that the city had been devastated. Despite objections and his own misgivings, he ordered his family to go back inside the house to gather food and water, recognizing—as a smart sailor would—that difficult times lay ahead.

Ovando lived in the northeast corner of the city, in the Santa Ana parish, next to the Indian quarters of El Cercado. He gathered three members of his family to aid the nuns in the neighboring Discalced Mercedarian convent. Although no one there would open the doors, the sacristan told him that all had survived. The rescue party then proceeded to the vast Santa Clara convent, which housed almost a thousand people, nuns, servants, and seculars. He was not allowed in there either and so returned to his house, where he saddled up a horse and a mule and proceeded to the Viceroy’s Palace in the Plaza Mayor. His passage through Lima’s streets, strewn with “roofs, doors, balconies, and furniture,” underlines the physical presence of the Catholic Church in Lima. If he had headed east, down Maravillas street and toward the Indian neighborhood, he would have passed the Mercedarian convent, the Santa Toribio hospital run by the Bethlehemites, also called the Refugio de Incurables, and the San Pedro de Alcántara *casa de convalecencia*, none of which are standing today.⁶ But instead he proceeded west toward the Plaza Mayor. On this walk of approximately nine blocks he would have passed the Discalced Trinitarian convent (what had been the Beaterio de Neries), the San Pedro church and hospital for priests, and, with a slight detour to the Inquisition Plaza, the La Caridad hospital as well as the Inquisition office itself. He would have then passed the majestic San Francisco church, which consists of San Francisco el Grande, larger in the eighteenth century than it is today, as well as the Los Milagros (Miracles) and La Soledad (Solitude) chapels. From there he would have proceeded two blocks to the Plaza Mayor, where the Cathedral, now with a gaping hole in its nave where its towers had fallen, stood.

After a long wait, Ovando visited the viceroy, José Manso de Velasco, and also checked in with other dignitaries, helping them select areas where the survivors might take refuge. He described the confusion and fear of



Map 3 Map of Ovando's walk. Credit: Chris Brest.

6 more destruction and social mayhem, especially at the hands of “the plebe, thrown together in packs.” The marquis was overjoyed to find his friends and associates, members of the Lima patriarchy, alive. This changed when he reached the Conde de Villanueva del Soto residence. The mother, father, and sister of Pablo Olavide, who in years to come would be a figure in the Spanish Enlightenment, were visiting that evening. They had made it to the doorway but were killed when the house collapsed on them. Two of Olavide’s sisters were dragged out of the ruins, one with a broken leg. The marquis gave them the water he carried and went in search of what was most needed, doctors and confessors. He found neither—they were all overwhelmed with incessant pleas for help.⁷

The sun soon rose, and the marquis recognized his own good fortune and the terrible state of Lima: “No hyperbole can evoke so much tragedy in such a short time. The pleas for divine mercy and the sobs and cries for help alternated with the aftershocks, muddling the pained cries of the wounded and the appeals for help from those trapped under the debris, like prisoners in caves, begging for aid with their last cries. Many died this way.” He compared Lima to Troy after the Greek war.⁸ Chroniclers of the catastrophe emphasized the disturbing mix of noises and the heightened fear when the ground shook again. Aftershocks would torment Lima for months.⁹

Father Pedro Lozano, a Jesuit who was not in Lima at the time of the earthquake but received several reports, wrote a letter about the tragedy, a document that would be widely quoted by succeeding generations. It led generations of scholars to attribute to him incorrectly the more detailed and much-translated *True and Particular Relation of the Dreadful Earthquake*, which he did not write.¹⁰ While Lozano’s report, a summary rather than an eyewitness account, provides more general information than personal experience might have, he struggled to find suitable terms or metaphors to portray the gravity and magnitude of the disaster. After summarizing the basic information and reporting exaggeratedly that only twenty-five houses remained standing, he began his second paragraph by claiming that “few examples in history can be found of such a pitiful event; and it is difficult for even the liveliest imagination to depict such a calamity.”¹¹ He described the damage in Lima’s sixty-four churches, including the destruction caused when the Cathedral’s two towers toppled. Lozano depicted the distressing sight, reiterated by many other observers, of dazed nuns forced out of their monastic seclusion walking the rubble-strewn streets of Lima in

search of food and shelter. Curiously, this, rather than the thousands of dead and wounded or the legions of traumatized survivors, would become the major rhetorical symbol of the unthinkable horrors of the earthquake. Lozano also tallied the damage to principal buildings, including the Viceroy's Palace, the Inquisition, and the Royal University, all reduced to a "sad reminder of what they had been."¹² The frequent aftershocks, the cries of help from people buried inside their houses, and the uncertainty about the extent of the damage and what would follow nourished people's fears. The panic that gripped the city on the day of the earthquake continued for weeks.

Viceroy Manso de Velasco toured the city on horseback, returning periodically to his camp in the Plaza Mayor to coordinate emergency efforts. He moved quickly to restore the city's water and bread supply. Workers fixed the channels that ran from the Rimac River to different plazas as well as to flour mills and adobe ovens. The viceroy ordered that wheat and other basic supplies be brought in from neighboring towns. Before dawn, he gave orders to shoot or hang looters. He worried that the architectural damage—the destruction of so many houses, churches, and public buildings—would lead to a complete breakdown of social codes and ensuing chaos. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish had laid out the city in such a way as to reinforce its order and hierarchy. Yet after the earthquake, not only had many elite and lower-class residences shared the same fate, destruction, but distinguishing among the classes became difficult. It pained the viceroy to see nuns and patriarchs in rags, his own palace as well as the Cathedral in shambles, and the checkerboard layout converted into serpentine paths of rubble.

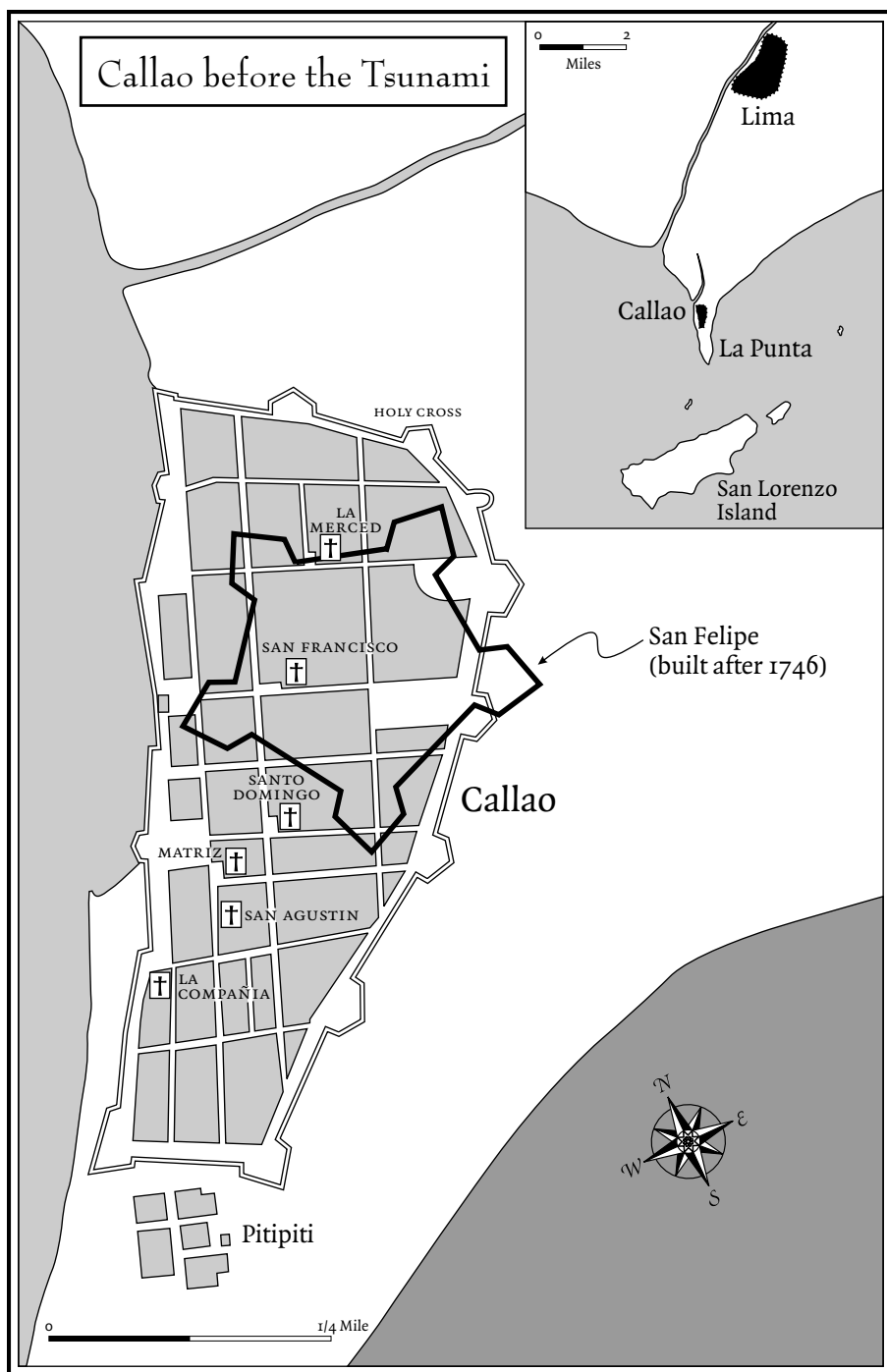
The earthquake damaged Callao more than Lima. That area's softer, sandier soil increased the intensity of the shaking ground, and fewer houses there had wood frames.¹³ This mattered little, however, as it was the massive tsunami that killed most of the port's population and devastated its buildings and ships. The wave exploded along the shore and pushed inland, rushing over the city's walls. Warned by the rumble or sight of the growing wave, some people attempted to flee toward Lima or sought refuge in one of the nine bastions of the city's outer walls. Others desperately grabbed wood or simply panicked, unable to get keys into locks or move their legs. Many of the sailors, aboard their vessels for the evening, survived the first crushing wave but were then knocked overboard by the ensuing rush of

water back toward the ocean and by subsequent waves. Boat parts, lumber, and debris from the city finished off many of those thrown overboard, dragged into the sea, or engulfed by the surging water. Some had no inkling of their fate until the deadly surge crushed them.

The wave sunk nineteen ships and, having snapped their anchors, hurtled four into and beyond the walled city, “farther than a cannon shot” in the words of the mariner Ovando. The warships *Fermín* and *San Antonio* landed almost a mile inland, the *Michelot* on the grounds where a hospital, now flattened, had stood, and the *Socorro* closest to shore, behind willow trees just beyond the Indian fishing village of Pitipiti.¹⁴ The *Socorro* (meaning Help or Aid) provided a bit of good news and sustenance, as the wheat and lard it had just brought from Chile remained on board and helped feed the population in the following days. The Augustinian Church was reportedly carried virtually intact out to sea onto an island.

Fewer than two hundred of Callao’s five thousand to six thousand residents survived. Most of the survivors resided outside the port city’s walls, including fishermen and twenty-two prisoners sentenced to hard labor on the rock pile on San Lorenzo Island. One fervent believer in Saint Joseph grasped ahold of a large painting of him and floated to safety hours later. Others made their way on driftwood to San Lorenzo Island or to the beaches south of Lima. Two men and a woman washed up in Miraflores almost twenty-four hours after the wave had struck, exhausted yet wishing to take confession after their harrowing experience. Twenty-two people reached the top of the Holy Cross bastion of the walls and, partially shielded by a large painting, hung on. One man climbed the flagpole atop one of the bastions and threw himself into a canoe as the water surged. He reported hearing many pleas for mercy, but once the wave had struck “all the cries were immediately silenced, and it was then that all the inhabitants suddenly perished.”¹⁵ Other tragic stories were told. A Jesuit priest, Father Iguaño, reached a ship, the aptly named *Asombro* (astonishment), but at four A.M., five hours after the tsunami had struck, another wave broke its anchor line. The boat capsized and the priest drowned. Another priest reportedly could have fled but refused to leave. On October 30, two days after the disaster, survivors spotted four exhausted men floating on a piece of wood. The rough current and dangerous driftwood prevented a rescue. A priest dolefully read them their last rites from the cliffs. The few miraculous happy endings paled next to the deaths of thousands.¹⁶

The Lima population had turned to Callao in hopes of finding solace



Map 4 Map of Callao. Credit: Chris Brest.

10 and perhaps some much-needed supplies, but it found only greater tragedy and a bit of food. Lozano was probably exaggerating when he contended that the site of the former town could not even be distinguished amidst the devastation, but Ovando noted more precisely his difficulties in finding the property where his second house had stood. He described stepping over cadavers of both sexes “in the most violent scene that a rational person can imagine.”¹⁷ Viceroy Manso de Velasco observed bitterly that only some remnants of the wall’s towers remained, such as the Holy Cross bastion and two gates; the walls themselves had been flattened.¹⁸ The tsunami shattered the battery of bronze and steel cannons that defended Callao and Lima, and for months people salvaged military goods up and down the coast and inland. The catastrophe devastated the port’s important warehouses, which meant the loss of “wheat, lard, wine, brandy, cables, timber, iron, tin, copper and the like.”¹⁹

Bodies washed up on shore for weeks. In his “Desolation of Lima,” written just weeks after the calamity, Victorino Montero del Aguila commented that the bodies of the dead served as “birdfeed.”²⁰ Another commentator wrote, “The sea vomited bodies for months, the naked cadavers half eaten by fish.”²¹ The floating cadavers included not only those killed by the tsunami, but the remains of the dead unearthed from the shallow graves in churches by the impact of the wave. Less morbid remains also washed ashore. The day after the earthquake people lined up at nearby beaches to gather valuables such as wood furniture and framed pictures and searched through the wreckage for goods. Some claimed that thieves were stripping the dead of jewelry and clothing.²²

Limeños’ fervent religiosity was on full display after the earthquake. Barefoot members of the Mercedarians brought out the image of the Virgin Mary and the Virgin de las Mercedes from their church two blocks from the plaza. One priest exhorted the crowd, “Lima, Lima, your sins are your ruin.” In the following days worshipers carried images of the Virgin of the Rosary, Nuestra Señora del Aviso, Santo Cristo de Burgos, el Jesús Nazareno, and the very limeño Señor de los Milagros. The urns of three Peruvian saints, Santo Toribio, San Francisco Solano, and Santa Rosa, each of whom had some earthquake miracle story, were also displayed.²³ Guilty penitence gripped the city, and dozens of processions snaked through Lima’s streets. One prelate received lashes on his bare back from a lay brother who shouted, “This is the Lord’s justice for this vile sinner.”²⁴ The Franciscans sold thousands of shrouds to cover the dead.²⁵ Members of this order,

whose numbers in Peru had been increasing in the early eighteenth century, practiced a particularly public, physical form of devotion. Observers lauded their zeal as they led “blood processions” and preached seemingly nonstop in the days after the earthquake. Friars Thomas de Cañas, Juan Matheos, and Joseph de San Antonio, Franciscans who emulated Christ by walking barefoot, donning thorned crowns, and dangling ropes around their necks, called for mass penitence and emphasized God’s obvious desire that Lima give up its sinful ways. They preached in the streets for months.²⁶

Stories were told about religious people who had foreseen the catastrophe. A Franciscan account mentioned that the abbess of the Carmelite convent postponed 7 P.M. choir until 9. When the nuns entered, she gave them the opportunity to turn around and save themselves from the impending punishment that she foresaw. Seven or eight stayed, waiting for God’s will to be done. They died. A Dominican friar, Alonso del Río, was taken to be crazy when he walked the streets of Callao that same evening warning of the calamity. He, too, perished.²⁷ In the aftermath, reports of miracles improved people’s spirits. Both Llano Zapata and Ovando told the story of a woman and her nursing baby who survived after four days trapped under rubble. Even the far from pious Llano Zapata exclaimed that divine providence “at the same time that it extends its punishments, propagates its pity.”²⁸ The less holy also were lucky. A ruptured channel flooded the Inquisition dungeon, and only the efforts of Inquisitor Inspector Pedro Antonio Arenaza saved the prisoners from drowning.²⁹

In the following days and months, epidemics, hundreds of aftershocks, and the gruesome discoveries of buried bodies added to the anguish. The stench from rotting human and animal flesh, a crime wave, and the shortage of food and water made life miserable. Alarming reports about the destruction of the heart of Spanish South America crossed the Atlantic, entering Enlightenment debates about nature and power, particularly after the Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755. The disaster also sparked much discussion in the City of Kings, as Lima was also known in this period, and in Madrid about urbanism and Spanish rule.

Panic and Opposition

The earthquake and ensuing tsunami cracked open Lima and provided a snapshot, albeit a dreadful one, of the city at 10:30 P.M. on October 28, 1746. This book builds on a trend among historians of homing in on a par-