America, started to lose the importance it had enjoyed so far.21

Towards the middle of the XVIIth century it is possible to detect a ruling group of mixed origins. Research done by Mario Góngora has demonstrated that a large proportion (65%) of the élite of the time corresponds to "hombres nuevos" arising from families newly arrived during the XVIIth century or who have risen socially during this same century by way of encomienda grants. A lower but still significant percentage (36%) descends from either older encomenderos of the XVIth century or royal officials. Both sectors enjoyed an equally prominent social status. And in both we can find the character of encomenderos, large landowners, owners of chacras, vineyards and estancias. They all possess a house in the city, trade in the products of their estates and entertain local political aspirations.22

Summing up, we can say that the possession of an encomienda during the XVIIth century by itself did not guarantee any one member of this high stratum the social power already acquired. Rather, it was a combination of factors, which henceforth conferred rank and social prestige. Social seniority or lineage continued to be relevant factors; however, they became less and less decisive. During this century social rank depended on a number of diverse means or mechanisms of

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21 On the decline of encomiendas in America and Chile, see: VICENS VIVES (1982), III, pp 342-343, 468; GONGORA (1975b) pp 430-431; MAC BRIDE (1973) pp 75, 77; VILLALOBOS et al (1974), II, p 165; GONGORA (1971) pp 67, 74, 103; D. AMUNATEGUI SOLAR, Las Encomiendas de Indígenas en Chile (1908-1910).

22 See GONGORA (1971) and (1975b).