Rethinking the Andes–Amazonia Divide

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5.3 Colonial coda: The Andes–Amazonia frontier under Spanish rule
Adrian J. Pearce

Introduction

This chapter is framed as a ‘colonial coda’, since the majority of contributions to this book focus on the pre-Columbian period. Most authors, of whatever discipline, are concerned with relations between Andes and Amazonia in pre-history, rather than in the centuries subsequent to the European invasions of South America in the early 1500s. By focusing on the three centuries that followed those invasions, I hope to demonstrate that study of the colonial period can make valuable contributions to the broader debates addressed in this volume. On the one hand, I argue that the nature of the Andes–Amazonia frontier during colonial times can shed intriguing light on its precedents in the pre-European era. On the other, pre-historians will recognize the need to take into account the ways their own source materials (particularly modern genetic or linguistic data) might have been disturbed or transformed by the dramatic demographic processes inherent to colonial times.

To these ends, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first is devoted to the character of the frontier between Spanish Peru and Amazonia, with an emphasis on its relative substance or ‘firmness’. Second, the nature of the Spanish presence in the Amazonian lowlands is discussed, based primarily on the presence of evangelizing missions. And third, demographic trends and population movements, both on either side of and across the frontier, are set out in brief summary. The conclusions then emphasize what seem to be the parallels between Spanish and Inca relations with Amazonia and ponder what these parallels might mean. Finally, this chapter provides a broad theoretical and thematic framework, which is illustrated through the case study presented in its companion, Chapter 5.4; both should be read alongside each other.
A firm frontier

The first point to emphasize is that whatever the picture in prehistory – and other chapters in this book suggest just how complex that picture was – the frontier between the Andes and Amazonia was real enough under Spanish rule. It is possible to trace the eastern border of effective Spanish occupation and control in Peru with some precision, since for the main, it followed the line of the upper montaña – the easternmost slopes of the Andes, steep, wet and heavily forested. That is to say, Spain’s writ ran as far as the upper montaña, with the highlands and coast to the west considered the colonial heartlands. Beyond, the European presence was often either limited, or indeed negligible, in lowland territories that were in no sense regarded as core to the colony (see Figures 5.3.1 and 5.3.2). This frontier was taken as a fact, even when not too much should be made of the ‘de la Frontera’ suffixed to the formal names of Chachapoyas or Huamanga (in the latter case with specific reference to the ‘Neo-Inca state’ at Vilcabamba: Stern 1993, 28). The Spanish colonial frontier is the more easily recognized because the eastern boundaries of Spanish Peru matched those of the Inca Empire quite closely. That is to say, the Spanish inherited the empire of the Incas, up to its own established frontiers, and they seem to have faced similar ecological and/or sociological obstacles in extending their rule beyond them. Even where European influence did extend beyond the montaña, it did so in regions where the Incas too seem to have established some presence; whether through relatively easy access from the highlands (as in the case of Moyobamba and Maynas in the north), or some specific stimulus such as gold deposits (as possibly in the Llanos de Moxos in the south: D’Altroy 2002, 260–1; though see Chapter 4.3).

The question, however, is why Spanish Peru remained for the most part within a frontier set to the east by the upper montaña, with little presence in the lowlands beyond. Traditional explanations tend towards the general or vague, even when they contain much that is of substance: the obstacles to intensive agriculture or animal husbandry of the kind practiced in the highlands, the impact of tropical diseases, or even the difficulty of movement through the Amazonian forests. Ultimately, it may be helpful to emphasize that Spanish settlement in the Americas was a rational and not a random phenomenon, one that responded to specific incentives and stimuli. The presence, absence, or combination of these incentives directly determined the course and chronology of the Spanish expansion. The key factors, in roughly descending order of importance, were: abundant native populations capable of providing a labour force and tax base, deposits of precious metals, the inherent quality of the land for agricultural and livestock production, and strategic considerations (of control and defence of key territories) (Elliott 1987b; Restall and Lane 2011, part 2; Livi Bacci 2008). In what became the colonial heartlands, most of these factors operated simultaneously; but where even one of them was present, it could draw the Spaniards into regions that lay outside the areas of dense native settlement or which had been neglected by the great indigenous empires. Thus, the north of Mexico, beyond the Mesoamerican...
frontier, was settled because a string of silver strikes was made there from the 1540s onwards (Knight 2002, 62–72). Such regions might include lowland forest lands not dissimilar to the upper Amazon; the Chocó on the Pacific coast of modern Colombia was conquered and settled for its gold fields, the richest in Spanish America (Williams 2004). But most of Amazonia, certainly after the mid-1500s, offered none of these incentives, while also presenting major disincentives, in the powerful armed resistance of its indigenous inhabitants, or the presence of lowland diseases and especially of leishmaniasis (for which see Chapter 3.1)
This, then, is what established and maintained the colonial frontier between Andes and Amazonia, which changed little throughout the colonial centuries (or indeed until the late nineteenth century). In 1573, the most powerful of the Spanish monarchs, Philip II, actually prohibited further conquests by his subjects in the Americas – ‘from now on, Spain recognized a frontier to its American domains’ (Kamen 1997, 150; Lorandi 2005, 104–5) – and decreed that further expansion would only be permitted at the hands of missionaries. This decree rather crowned the process of imperial expansion than put a halt to it, since it recognized implicitly that by this date, Spain had already occupied all the American territory that was truly of interest to it – as Amazonia was not. All of this, of course, has little to do with the border between Spanish Peru and Portuguese Brazil, which is a separate question entirely. That border had been set before 1500 in far eastern South America,
by the Treaty of Tordesillas. Over the centuries, the Portuguese pushed westwards, deep into the Amazon basin, until they approached the Spanish lands (Hemming 1995, 2008). Even so, the formal border between Spanish and Portuguese America was not redrawn until after 1750 (Herzog 2015, part 1), while the modern borders between Brazil and the Andean republics were fixed only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even today, those borders lie far to the east of the colonial (and geographical) Andes–Amazonia frontier. It may nevertheless be relevant to underline that the major push towards that frontier during colonial times came not from the Andean polity (Spanish Peru) but from the ‘Amazonian’ one (Portuguese Brazil). The Portuguese did have an incentive for such expansion – first native slave labour for coastal plantations, later precious metals – and during colonial times they acquired long experience of travel and subsistence in the forests.

Missionary marchlands

In this context, the primary Spanish presence in Amazonia beyond the upper montaña was a religious one, in the form of missions. The nature of missions as frontier institutions in Spanish America may not be widely understood, though it has been the subject of historical research for more than a century. A pioneering article by Herbert Bolton set out the essential aspects: missions were ‘characteristically and definedly frontier institutions’; their primary purpose was religious, but they served the needs of both church and state; they might be supported financially by Spain, but were expected to be largely self-sustaining; and they provided a defensive cordon at the very limits of the empire (Bolton 1917). Bolton’s conclusions have stood the test of time, so that missions are regarded in the literature as ‘one of Spain’s most effective colonial institutions along the fringes of empire’ (Elliott 1987a, 73).

Missions were founded and run not by the mainstream church with its episcopal hierarchy (counter-intuitively termed the ‘secular’ church), but rather by the ‘regular’ orders (that obeyed a monastic rule or regula). There were many such orders, but those most active in the upper Amazon were the Franciscans and especially the Jesuits. East of the Peruvian Andes, three main missionary fields were established: the central region around the Cerro de la Sal, east of Tarma, administered by Franciscans, and Maynas in the north and Moxos and Chiquitos in the south, which were Jesuit. These mission regions were established relatively late: for example, the Jesuits entered Maynas in the 1630s and Moxos half a century later. Missions consisted of settlements centred on a church with an adjoining open space and housing and agricultural land clustered around. They were typically founded on the banks of the major rivers, with a native population often brought together from different ethnic groups scattered throughout wide hinterlands. Due to this concentration of population, they were sometimes referred to as reducciones, though it should be emphasized that they were very different in socio-economic structure and demographic impact to the homonymous institution in the highlands.
The concentration of native peoples in missions was at once a pragmatic response to indigenous population collapse and dispersion, a strategic impediment to resistance, and a tool for ethnogenesis. Native peoples agreed to live in missions for different reasons at different times, although key motives included protection from Spanish colonists or Portuguese slavers, and access to trade goods (for the Moxos missions, see Radding 2005). Mission populations could be large – by 1700, the Jesuit missions in Maynas had a nominal population of 160,000, spread among several dozen settlements – though they tended to decline sharply as a result of repeated epidemics. The demographic and linguistic impact of the missions is discussed in the following section, but it should be emphasized that numbers of Europeans were never more than miniscule for such vast regions. In 1680, there were just four Jesuits in the whole of the Maynas territory; a century later, only a dozen Franciscans served the same region (Weber 2005, 118). The non-indigenous demographic input was higher, however, when Andean auxiliaries and occasional Spanish troops are factored in.

Missionary objectives stood in an awkward relation to those of the colonial state. Thus, ‘Jesuit colonization in Paraguay and Moxos stood aside from the Spanish colonial state and its Church ally, and this was deliberate’ (Lynch 2012, 48). The orders were the most wayward branch of the church, with their own organization and ethos, and relations between them and both the state and the secular church were often tense. The result was that the real initiative behind missions came from the orders rather than the state, and that the support of the state for the missions was limited and, to some extent, contingent. The state certainly seconded the purely evangelizing goals of the orders, and it provided financial subsidies for missions such as those of the Franciscans at the Cerro de la Sal. It also sometimes provided a military escort to missionaries, regarding the missions (with good reason) as a marchland: an outer frontier of influence between the colonial heartlands and the ‘wild’ Indians and encroaching Portuguese beyond. Nevertheless, the real stake of the Spanish state in Amazonia beyond the upper montaña remained weak, and its support might be tempered or withdrawn altogether if circumstances so dictated. Detailed illustration of just such a withdrawal may be found in Chapter 5.4 of this book; but the most dramatic example was the outright expulsion of the Jesuits from Spain and its empire in 1767, when their ultramontanism (primary loyalty to the Pope) was perceived to outweigh the benefits of their presence in both colonies and metropolis. The expulsion of the Jesuits was ‘a great setback for missionary expansion’; the missions were reassigned either to the secular clergy or to other orders, and in many cases the initiative was lost altogether (Lynch 2012, 94; Weber 2005, 109–16). The peremptory expulsion in this way of the most important Spanish presence in the upper Amazon only emphasizes the limited nature of colonial interest in the region.

The small numbers of missions and the limited support they received should nevertheless not obscure their major cultural as well as demographic impact, particularly in Maynas where they were strongest. This lasting impact was evident
in the spatial and residential organization of indigenous settlements, or in kinship and demographic structures (including the abandonment of polygyny and adoption of early male marriage). Even in native communities in the region today, ‘some politico-ritual institutions ... are directly inherited from the mission’, which also brought about changes in dress, so that ‘by the end of the eighteenth century, there were almost no longer any naked Indians in the upper Amazon region’ (for these questions, see A.-C. Taylor 1999, 225–6). The cultivation of new crops and the prevalence of some kinds of specialized production (of curare or salt) are also Jesuit legacies. A specific impact of interest to linguists was the introduction of Quechua, again particularly in Maynas. Quechua was adopted by the Jesuits as a vehicle for evangelization and a lingua franca for the different groups coexisting in the missions, and as a result, it took root outside its homeland, along the Napo, the Marañón, the lower Huallaga, and the Ucayali. In this way, a quintessentially highland, Andean language entered Amazonia, with the missions providing the mechanism that left Quechua’s only meaningful presence there (see also Chapter 3.4). The Jesuits used the Moxo language in a similar way in the Llanos de Moxos (A.-C. Taylor 1999, 225–9; Santos-Granero 1992, 161–2, 170–2), though since Moxo is an Arawak language, this brought no disturbance of the linguistic Andes–Amazonia frontier, in the way that the introduction of Quechua in Maynas did.

Missions were intended to be self-sufficient in agricultural and broader economic terms, and they produced all the food and almost all the basic goods they required. With the introduction of new crops and livestock and of European processes for their production, they also brought innovative economic practices to Amazonia. They were dependent on Spanish Peru only for a limited range of material and religious goods they could not themselves produce, including iron tools, wine or paper. To procure these goods, they depended either on subsidies from their orders or their own surplus production of lowland produce, such as wax or palm products. Small expeditions led by friars accompanied by native auxiliaries left the missions annually by canoe and on foot for the highlands, taking many months to complete the round trip (Santos-Granero 1992, 171–2). These expeditions constituted a rare and modest mechanism for regular communication and material exchange between the highlands and the tropical lowlands, whose significance far outweighed their limited scale. Iron tools in particular were key to this exchange, since native Amazonians recognized the great utility of such implements and made every effort to acquire them. Access to metal goods was one motive why indigenous peoples went to the missions at all, and groups downstream with the easiest access to them gained a mercantile (and occasionally military) ascendancy over peoples more distant from the sources of supply, that might transform their status and conditions (Santos-Granero 1992, 162). The missions thus constituted a bridge to deeper Amazonia, as well as a barrier to it, compensating in part for the loss of the more fluid relations across the frontier that, as we shall see, colonial rule may have come to disrupt.
Demographic transformations: The Andes, Amazonia and the frontier

Throughout eastern South America, Spanish rule brought about sweeping and catastrophic demographic change. The most comprehensive study is that of Noble David Cook, who estimates a total indigenous population for Peru of perhaps 9,000,000 c. 1520, on the eve of the conquest era. By 1620, just a century later, this figure had fallen to 670,000, a collapse of more than 90 per cent (Cook 1981, 111–14, 246). The estimate of 9,000,000 c. 1520 is based on the meticulous comparison of different kinds of evidence, from ecological carrying capacity, to archaeology, depopulation ratios, post-contact disease mortality models, and census projections, among others. The fall over the century to 1620 came about primarily due to the impact of Old World diseases, though also because of chronic and generalized violence (for which see Assadourian 1994). In contrast to other regions, including Mexico, Peru’s native population then long remained depressed, due primarily to repeated epidemics, and began to recover only from c. 1730 (Pearce 2001). The post-conquest population bottleneck in the Andes, then, lasted for more than a century. Within these overarching figures, there was naturally considerable regional variation. On the Peruvian coast, native populations all but disappeared in the south and centre, but remained dense in the north, in Lambayeque or Piura, presumably as the result of different patterns of Spanish settlement and perhaps regional ecologies. In the sierra, the lower and more accessible northern highlands were particularly hard-hit, while the centre and south proved more resilient. Cook’s estimates have proven accurate when tested by archaeological survey, for example in the Mantaro valley (Terence N. D’Altroy, personal communication, 2014). Despite the severity of the collapse, however, it should be emphasized that indigenous people remained a majority in Peru throughout the period of Spanish rule, at least in the formal (and primarily fiscal) classification of the colonial state. Indeed, on these terms, the country’s native population only finally dropped below 50 per cent at some point between 1900 and 1920 (Thurner 1997, 91, n. 59).

Some recent genetics papers appear to indicate a much lower decline in Andean populations after the conquest. One such study, for example, inferring population declines in the highlands from ancient and modern DNA, ‘found the decline in effective population size to be 27% ... We also simulated DNA sequence data immediately before the collapse between the Rio Uncallane and the Aymara using a truncated model and found a reduction in average heterozygosity of 23%’. The authors further explicitly note that ‘this is a modest decline compared to archaeological and historical estimates, which reached upward of 90% of the total population’ (Lindo et al. 2018, 6). It should be emphasized, however, that historical evidence for a larger collapse, while by no means uncontroversial, is reasonably robust and has accumulated over many years. Spanish colonial census records become much more abundant from the mid-sixteenth century, by which point they trace a steep decline that had clearly already been in progress for some decades.
Moreover, there is of course no straightforward correlation between effective population \((Ne)\) and the census population. The former in particular is affected by migration, and as we shall see, mass migration transformed indigenous populations in the Andes during colonial times. The recent evidence from genetics is intriguing, then, but it does not as yet necessarily challenge traditional estimates of a catastrophic decline.

For Amazonia, traditional models suggest an impact that was again drastic, albeit not quite to the same degree as in the Andes. Thus, lower population densities, the absence of major urban centres, and lesser contact with Europeans would have mitigated the spread of disease. William Denevan, for example, indicated an overall population decline of a little over 70 per cent for floodplains, lowland savannahs (including the Llanos de Moxos) and upland forests (such as the central montaña), primarily in the first hundred years (Denevan 1992a, 212, 218, 222); significantly lower than Cook’s estimates for the highlands and coast. Demographic trends in the region following the conquest are much less well-known than for the Andes, however, precisely because the European presence there was so limited. The scale of any decline would necessarily reflect the population of Amazonia at first contact, which many specialists now argue was far higher than traditional models allow (Chapters 1.1 and 1.4). For the present purposes, I would emphasize that any model for Amazonian population densities must account for the lack of Spanish interest in permanent colonization and settlement there, for which large native populations elsewhere constituted the primary motive. Three alternatives suggest themselves: Amazonian populations were indeed lower than Andean ones, as traditionally thought; those populations were higher than has been supposed, but the demographic collapse and wider impact of the conquest there was of the same order as or even stronger than in the highlands, for reasons as yet undetected; or, socio-economic organization in Amazonia was somehow fundamentally different and, together with different ecological and immunological conditions, deterred Spanish settlement even despite large populations overall. Whatever the true picture, the demographic impact is still likely to have been enormous. Other regions of the Americas besides Amazonia experienced sharp demographic declines even in the absence of significant European populations (the Mississippi valley is a further major example).

The demographic impact of European colonization naturally went far beyond collapse; in both Andes and Amazonia, it also entailed the wholesale reconfiguration of population distributions and settlement patterns. Two processes are observable: the concentration of populations into smaller numbers of larger settlements internally to regions, and the movement of populations across much greater distances (from one region to others). In the Andes, the primary example of the former process was the forced resettlement of some 1,400,000 Indians into new European-style towns or reducciones, a process at its peak in the 1570s. Reducción, then, sought to concentrate the dispersed rural population of Inca times into a small number of urban centres established within each region (Mumford 2012; Zuloaga...
The movement of populations entirely from one region to another, meanwhile, began with the turbulence of the conquest era and the ensuing ‘Spanish civil wars’, when Indians were conscripted en masse into rival armies, and yanaconaje – the personal service of natives deracinated from home communities – expanded exponentially. It continued into the mature colonial period, notably through the great forced labour drafts or mitas, particularly those that served the mining towns of Potosí and Huancavelica. At its peak, mita brought some 13,000 forced labourers to Potosí per year, from provinces up to several hundred miles distant, a figure that excludes the families that accompanied many migrants (Cole 1985; Bakewell 1984, chap. 3). Over three centuries, the mining mitas contributed to large-scale migrations, perhaps sufficient in the case of Huancavelica to change permanently the variant of Quechua spoken in the province (Pearce and Heggarty 2011; Itier 2016). They also swelled the so-called forastero population, of Indians no longer native to their communities of residence, as Indians sought exemption from mita by migrating to provinces not subject to the draft. By the mid-eighteenth century, half the population of highland Bolivia was forastero (Sánchez-Albornoz 1978, 51–2; Wightman 1990). Colonial rule, then, transformed population distributions in the Andes almost beyond pre-Columbian recognition.

In Amazonia, the concentration of populations internally to regions came about primarily at the hands of the missions. It differed from the comparable process in the highlands, firstly in that the populations gathered together came from much larger hinterlands, and secondly in that the peoples relocated to missions were drawn from different ethno-linguistic groups. Hence, lowland missions played a role in ethnogenesis and linguistic change that was less apparent in the reducciones of the highlands. The role of missions in facilitating the spread of disease among native populations was either comparable to that of reducciones, or perhaps greater, depending on estimates for pre-colonial population densities. Meanwhile, the process whereby European colonization provoked long-distance migrations, from one region to another, operated in Amazonia primarily through ‘flight migration’, as peoples in closer proximity and more subject to European depredations fled the contact zone and migrated toward more isolated refugia. Flight migration brought about major changes in pre-Columbian population distributions in Amazonia. Since missions were established primarily along riverbanks, a specific process was that by which non-mission populations retreated into inter-fluvial regions, often regarded as less favourable territories for human settlement and subsistence.

The picture on the Andes–Amazonia frontier itself is complex. In some important work on this topic, Anne-Christine Taylor has argued that the ‘physical continuities and economic links’ that had prevailed across the frontier in Inca times were destroyed under the impact of early European raiding, settlement, and diseases. As a result, ‘the old Inka limes turned into a sort of no-man’s land … in the context of a parasitic frontier economy oscillating between peaceful trade and mutual plundering’. The frontier itself ‘shrivelled and fossilized’, as there developed a ‘widening
gap between the highlands and lowlands, and the expansion of the no-man’s-land between them’ (A.-C. Taylor 1999, 209, 216–17). This process developed more rapidly in some regions than others, and in Ecuador and the far north of Peru its onset was delayed until as late as c. 1600 by more extensive European settlement and colonization. By the latter period, nevertheless, there prevailed from north to south what Taylor presents essentially as a new frontier (the relevant sub-section of her essay is in part titled ‘The Birth of a Frontier’: A.-C. Taylor 1999, 208–19). Given the kinds of cultural attitudes towards Amazonians described by ethno-historians for the Incas, based on oppositions between civilization and savagery (Chapters 5.1 and 5.2), Taylor nevertheless also endorses the prevalence of essential continuities across Inca and Spanish times, such that the ‘spatial, social, and economic split between highland and lowland peoples exacerbated an ethnic and cultural polarization that had already begun in the Inka period’ (A.-C. Taylor 1999, 217). And while, in the north, her work perhaps shifts the establishment of the colonial frontier forward by several decades, it necessarily also supports the ‘big picture’ of a firm frontier prevailing between Andes and Amazonia during colonial times.

Taylor’s arguments are also relevant to the question of the movement of people and goods between Andes and Amazonia during colonial times. Given the sharp decline and dispersal of the indigenous population, and the impact of the missions as outliers of Spanish Peru, it seems likely that such movement became less everyday after the Conquest. It also seems probable that communications across the frontier came to be based more on long-distance travel and less on mediated, down-the-line exchange. After the establishment of the missions, and excepting brief moments of peculiarly intense Andes–Amazonia interaction occurring during incidents such as the Juan Santos Atahualpa rebellion (for which see Chapter 5.4), cross-frontier population movements depended mainly on the incursions of friars, native auxiliaries, troops and also fugitives of different kinds from the highlands, while the transfer of goods rested on a limited exchange of tropical produce for highland imports. Lastly, the implication is that the latter exchanges took place more from Andes to Amazonia than in the reverse direction, motivated primarily by lowland demand for some specialized highland products. Native Amazonians themselves, meanwhile, had still less motive than Europeans or indigenous Andeans to cross the frontier, whether for trade, conquest or refuge, and to do so carried greater risks for them.

Conclusions

Virtually throughout the colonial period, the Andes–Amazonia frontier was a firm phenomenon. Spanish Peru – the dominant Andean polity to prevail during the three centuries following the European invasions – showed little interest and generated only a tenuous demographic and administrative presence in adjacent Amazonia. Even to the degree that it did maintain such a presence, this came about
through limited support for the actions of partially autonomous, religiously moti-
vated groups: the religious orders and their missionaries. And this support itself
had its limits and might be withdrawn if circumstances so dictated, even at the risk
of the missionizing endeavour itself.

From a historical perspective, what seems striking is that the relations of
Spanish Peru with Amazonia and its peoples should have proven so similar, broadly
speaking, to those of the Inca Empire – the immediately preceding hegemonic
Andean polity. Though population densities and ethnic territories along the fron-
tier may have undergone huge changes, relations between Andes and Amazonia
(in particular the modest projection of power and population from the former to
the latter) changed relatively little across the Conquest era. This seems clearly to
suggest, then, that it was the Andean nature of both polities that determined the
persistence and character of the frontier. Although as other chapters in this book
make quite clear, debate remains vigorous as to the nature of the frontier during
prehistory, there seems to be some consensus that it became firmer over time –
starting from scant evidence for any significant divide in earliest prehistory, to
much firmer evidence in late prehistory and the earliest historical centuries (see
the Conclusion to this volume). The package of Andean civilization – intensive,
temperate agriculture and animal husbandry, very high population densities, and
urban civilization – coalesced only slowly, but it was already firmly established
long before Europeans inherited and reshaped it. It was surely this package that
differentiated Andes from Amazonia, and that thus sustained a relatively firm fron-
tier, for several centuries after the arrival of Europeans in the New World.