Rainer F. Buschmann, Edward R. Slack Jr., and James B. Tueller


In this co-authored volume, Rainer F. Buschmann, Edward R. Slack Jr., and James B. Tueller present a revision of the history of the Spanish Empire’s reach into the Pacific Ocean between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the historiographies of Spanish imperialism and of colonial societies in Mexico and the Philippines, the story of the Spanish Pacific has long been nearly inseparable from that of the Manila Galleon, the yearly voyage that linked Acapulco and Manila between 1571 and 1819. Moreover, in recent decades, economic historians have focused on the great exchange of Asian luxuries for American silver, which linked the American and Asian continents for the first time, as a vital origin story for the history of globalization. The authors of _Navigating the Spanish Lake_ envision this book as a departure from this emphasis on trade, which they refer to as ‘disproportionately economically deterministic evaluations of the galleon trade’s sum and substance’ (p. 23).

Based on research conducted in Spanish, Philippine, and Mexican archives, the authors give priority to the multi-layered cultural histories of the Spanish Pacific World over its economic history, and they argue that this oceanic history can be better understood by placing it in the broader context of the Spanish Empire and the Iberian Atlantic.

In their introduction and first two chapters, the authors begin with a macro-historical analysis of the ‘Spanish Lake’ in its imperial context over four hundred years, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In particular, they divide the chronology of the ‘Spanish Lake’ into three epochs: an early phase of Spanish transpacific expansionism from Mexico and articulation with Asian maritime networks from 1571 to 1662, followed by a period of relative stability until the brief British takeover of Manila in 1762, and a third period of rapid transformations and reorientations in the early nineteenth century. The following two chapters then focus on two micro-scale histories. Chapter Three examines the Chinese Mestizo Real Príncipe regiment in the context of racial politics of late eighteenth-century Manila, while Chapter Four examines the ways in which the Chamorros of the Marianas adapted Spanish, Mexican, and Filipino cultural elements to local life. The authors conclude _Navigating the Spanish Lake_ by analyzing Spanish imperial decline in the nineteenth-century Pacific and the legacies of Hispanization in Guam and the Philippines. The chapters thus range from high imperial politics and early modern cosmography to the details of regimental organization in colonial Manila carefully gleaned.
from local archives. Given the wide range of these chapters, the authors have sought to thread their macro and micro-histories together with two central concepts: the ‘Spanish Lake,’ and ‘Archipelagic Hispanization.’

By employing the concept of the ‘Spanish Lake,’ a term long used by historians of the Spanish Empire to describe Spain’s long-unchallenged but frail transpacific linkages between Mexico and the Philippines, the authors argue that Spanish experiences in the Pacific need to be better contextualized in the broader imperial history of Spain. The authors argue that the extant historiography since the 1920s has tended to examine what they call the ‘literal Spanish Lake.’ This ‘literal lake’ largely consists of the administrative and commercial linkages of the Manila Galleon route between Acapulco and Manila—connections that, the authors claim, have received excessive scholarly attention. Seeking to ‘counter the misconception that cultural matters were primarily material in nature,’ the authors examine what they call the ‘conceptual Spanish Lake,’ the ever-changing Spanish imperial imaginations of the Pacific Ocean (p. 9). Spaniards and their colonial Spanish American counterparts pragmatically viewed the Pacific as an extension of their American possessions, and thus resisted French and British ethnographic conceptualizations of Oceania. In the wake of Cook’s voyages, for example, Spanish authors, scientists, and soldiers were baffled to find that French and British explorers had idealized the indios (Indians) in Polynesian islands— islands that, in Spanish eyes, had been of little material or ethnographic interest for two centuries (pp. 53–55). The authors’ discussion of competing imperial epistemologies in the eighteenth-century Pacific provides a much-needed Spanish perspective to a story long dominated by French and British narratives.

While Spanish officials, missionaries, and soldiers developed their conceptions of the ‘Spanish Lake,’ on the level of everyday life there unfolded multiple and conflicting processes of cultural encounter, conflict and mestizaje in Spanish Pacific colonies. Focusing on indigenous and Asian acculturation to Hispanic elements (both peninsular and American), the authors argue that a process of ‘archipelagic Hispanization’ unfolded in the ‘Spanish Lake’ that was unique in Spanish imperial history (p. 13). The authors seek to encompass a wide range of local acculturation strategies, from the spirited defense of Spanish Manila by a regiment of Chinese mestizos (the descendants of Chinese immigrants and native Tagalogs), to the importation of Mexican corn and foodways in the Marianas islands (p. 101). The authors argue that ‘the literal and conceptual Spanish Lake gave rise to a more tolerant program of cultural assimilation compared to the draconian version imposed on New World inhabitants’ (p. 3). The history of Spanish conquest and colonization in the Philippines certainly provides plenty of counter-evidence to this assertion, such as brutal
tribute regimes or Dominican efforts to repress Chinese religion. Moreover, colonial Latin American historiography has long revealed complex processes of colonial negotiation and cross-cultural influences. Neither the so-called ‘Spanish Lake’ nor Latin America held a monopoly on cultural assimilation or draconian measures.

Overall, *Navigating the Spanish Lake* contributes a series of new macro- and micro-histories to the historiography of Spanish imperial enterprises in the Pacific. The volume will be particularly useful for students and scholars of Spanish imperial cosmography, Chinese mestizo regiments in the Philippines, and the history of the Marianas. Despite the title of this volume, the narratives and evidence suggest that there was little that was ‘Spanish’ about this ‘Lake’ (itself an overworn misnomer for the world’s largest geographical feature). Ultimately, *Navigating the Spanish Lake* provides further evidence that Spain played an important but very limited role, alongside many other cultures, polities, and peoples, in the early modern Pacific world.

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